

In the Shadow of the Beast: Violence and Dignity along the Central American Migrant Trail

by

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DEDICATION

For Emily

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication	ii
Acknowledgements	iii
List of Images	vii
Abstract	ix
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Shelter Vision	44
Chapter 3: Evidencing Violence and Care in Transit	83
Chapter 4: Bullet Wounds and the Politics of Hospitality	108
Chapter 5: A Chutes and Ladders Interlude	146
Chapter 6: Fabricating Fragile Futures in the Near North	153
Chapter 7: The Afterlife of Participatory Photography	183
Chapter 8: Conclusion	212
Bibliography	236

LIST OF IMAGES¹

Figure 1.1	A View of the tracks and the infirmary at La Casita	3
Figure 1.2	Railway guard with Uzi	5
Figure 1.3	Map of migrants shelters across Mexico, created by Medicins san Frontieres	23
Figure 2.1	Migrants watching the train pass by through a tunnel of concrete posts	47
Figure 2.2	Railway guard rides past La Casita	48
Figure 2.3	Migrants waiting for La Casita to open	56
Figure 2.4	Ever’s Tricycle	57
Figure 2.5	“Dozens organize to empty railway containers”	61
Figure 2.6	Migrants lined up for a meal at La Casita	68
Figure 2.7	Santos cutting hair at La Casita	76
Figure 2.8	Migrants dialoguing with railway guards outside La Casita	80
Figure 3.1	A baby doll photographed while conducting intake at La Casita	88
Figure 3.2	Searching through bags of donated clothing at La Casita	93
Figure 3.3	Merlin showing off his pack	99
Figure 3.4	Merlin’s Coke-can speaker	100
Figure 4.1	“Migration is not a crime; it is a right”	116
Figure 4.2	Malintzín: migrant guide, Retrieved from Facebook, August 15, 2019	118
Figure 4.3	Resting on La Casita’s concrete patio	124
Figure 4.4	Railway guards passing by La Casita	126
Figure 4.5	Gustavo out on the tracks	130
Figure 4.6	Gustavo and Raul during a break in filming	137
Figure 4.7	Gustavo at my apartment	139
Figure 5.1	Gustavo working concrete in Huixtla, Chiapas	149
Figure 6.1	Women’s work	156
Figure 6.2	Window grates on an apartment complex in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon	170
Figure 6.3	Gustavo welding at Chava’s workshop	175
Figure 6.4	Rosa cooking lunch over a fire	180
Figure 7.1	Blisters, photo by Ezequiel	189
Figure 7.2	Rolando mapping gang territories	196
Figure 7.3	Dinner with Chava, photos by Rolando	198

¹ All photos by author unless noted otherwise.

Figure 7.4	A surplus of beds, photos by Rolando	200
Figure 7.5	Working metal, photos by Roalndo	204
Figure 8.1	Watching <i>Border South</i> at Rosa's family compound	213
Figure 8.2	Gustavo preparing his worksite, southwest Guatemala	217
Figure 8.3	Gustavo, Rosa, and Raul on the banks of the Río Suchiate	220

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the social and material dimensions of undocumented migration through Mexico along freight railways commonly known as *La Bestia*, or “The Beast.” I draw on mobile ethnographic fieldwork in and around migrant shelters across Mexico between 2014 and 2016. Echoing “prevention through deterrence” tactics along the U.S.-Mexico border, this period was characterized by intensified policing along railways that pushed people away from well-trodden railway corridors and into more circuitous and uncertain routes—in other words, into the “shadow of the beast.” I show how, in addition to these policing operations, humanitarian mechanisms have also reconfigured migrant pathways as practitioners and migrants negotiate intersecting understandings of dignity in the face of pervasive violence. Migrant shelters proliferate what I refer to as *shelter vision*, the uncomfortable and often paradoxical practice of working to sustain clandestine pathways while also striving to remedy the route’s indignities by making them visible to state bureaucracies. This combination of secrecy and publicity, which is evident in the most mundane aspects of shelter work, illuminates the organizational and interpersonal dilemmas that unfold when people who are shot or beaten while hopping freight trains face a decision: heal and keep moving, try to hire a smuggler, or seek formal humanitarian recognition, something that tends to involve dialoguing with presumably corrupt bureaucrats. I also consider how these negotiations reverberate beyond shelter spaces by following a group of men and women as they come to live and work alongside each other in northern Mexico. Based on time spent in unassuming boarding houses and off-books welding workshops, I outline shifting dynamics of hospitality and camaraderie between citizens and non-citizens as Mexico increasingly becomes not only a space of transit for Central Americans, but also a space of tentative settlement. In this way, I show how tensions of mutuality and mistrust that are evident in migrant shelters also pervade migrants’ journeys well beyond these spaces as migrants who receive formal humanitarian recognition come to rely on the very networks of organized crime from which they flee. Ultimately, this dissertation examines how shelter workers and migrants strive to align seemingly incommensurate moral economies—humanitarianism and human smuggling—amid a transnational immigration enforcement apparatus that churns people through displacement, detention, and deportation. I argue that constructing dignified pathways for people migrating without authorization requires a pragmatic approach to idealized frameworks, one that is attentive to the implicit exclusions that underlie inclusive rhetoric.

Chapter 1

Introduction

It is May 2016 and yet another group of witnesses has squeezed into the shelter's tiny infirmary, which takes up one half of a repurposed intermodal container. "A *ver muchachos*, what can you tell me about what happened?" Ramón begins.² If I didn't know how exhausted he is, I would think from the way he's standing there, leaning lazily against a bookshelf sparsely stocked with medication, that he could care less about what happened. Ramón is tired because he spent most of last night trying to get information about Edwin, a Honduran man who was shot in the leg last night while hopping "The Beast," as the network of railways that many migrants rely on to cross Mexico is known. Ramón, the director of this small migrant shelter in Central Mexico that I will refer to as La Casita, has been up all night trying to figure out what happened, but these men don't know that.³

² Names of migrants, shelter workers, residents, and public officials are pseudonyms with the exception of those who specifically requested that I use their names. All translations into English are my own.

³ Throughout, I refer to aid spaces as 'migrant shelters' and I refer to the people who access them as 'migrants' because that is how people referred to themselves and to the places where they sought sanctuary during my fieldwork. At different moments and in different contexts, people

The six others crammed into the infirmary were also on the train when it happened. Everyone makes do with finding a place to sit. An older man perches on a black plastic trash bag full of expired medications donated by the hospital where Edwin is being cared for. It is mostly filled with pills for high blood pressure, medication that is of little use to the shelter. Most migrants are looking for relief from sore muscles and sinus congestion, not hypertension. The medications are an almost comical reminder of the blend of compassion and disdain that many shelters workers feel when interacting with other agencies purportedly tasked with aiding migrants. For example, one of the hospital's staff social workers, wary of retribution from state agencies, has been known to call immigration agents before informing the team at La Casita when injured migrants like Edwin are dropped off.

The air is thick with the odor of iodine and sweat. This room is where we drain and bandage blisters that migrants develop from trudging along the rough gravel of railway embankments. Sometimes, like when we're hiding from the afternoon rains, or when we just need a break, it is also where I sit with my fellow shelter workers and chop up bars of soap into individual servings, the size you get in a hotel room. Today, it is a quiet space where we are taking down the testimony of the six people who witnessed the shooting. The infirmary is one of the few spaces where Ramón

used more precise descriptors as well. People on the move are also referred to as 'displaced persons,' 'asylum-seekers,' 'refugees,' 'citizens,' 'non-citizens,' 'visa over-stayers,' 'smugglers,' 'gang members,' 'gang victims,' 'deportees,' 'mothers,' 'brothers,' 'friends,' and just 'people.' Similarly, spaces that house migrants for varying periods of time are also 'refuges,' 'sanctuaries,' 'refugee camps,' 'detention centers,' 'camps' 'hotels,' 'apartments,' 'safe houses,' 'settlements,' 'barrios,' 'colonias,' and 'homes.' As Naomi Millner argues (2011), the vocabulary that writers use to refer to people on the move and the spaces that house them along the way speaks to the shifting politics of how migrants, activists, and governmental officials rationalize, legitimize, contest, and re-frame various organizational, institutional, and governmental projects that interpellate migrants according to different ethical frameworks. Along these lines, I use of the terms 'migrant' and 'migrant shelter' while recognizing that these terms by no means capture the complex dynamics of structure and agency that people navigate as they make their way.



Figure 1.1: A View of the tracks and the infirmary at La Casita

can speak privately with those who have witnessed firsthand what has become sickeningly routine: migrants being shot at by privately-contracted security guards who have been tasked with closing Mexico's freight railways to the business of undocumented migration.

Three teenagers with different stages of peach fuzz on their upper lips dangle their legs over a bulky medical exam table that takes up most of the small room. Everyone in the room is traveling as a group, but technically these three are unaccompanied minors, the young people whose suffering has been central to justifying intensified policing along railways in this region, policing that has forced migrants to walk the stretches of track they once passed by from atop La Bestia. Hence the blisters.

A middle-aged man with graying stubble and bright blue eyes sits on an overturned bucket with his six-year-old son balancing on his lap. He tells us he is Edwin's uncle. "We know it and

you know it,” he begins, shifting his weight with a plastic rustle where he sits on the bag full of pills,

“We are Central Americans. We emigrated from our homes because, well, in my case, they no longer give me work at my age. As I have been through a lot, made friends, well, I know how to reach this point rather easily in spite of how we are treated. The assaults. The way they take what little we carry to be able to eat. The raids. Like how after Tenosique, arriving there at the place that they call La Aceitera, the migration agents chase us into the swamps where the water comes up to our hips. The way you walk until your shoes fall apart, until you are walking barefoot on the hot pavement. From all that suffering we have arrived here. All countries have to have their migration agents, you understand as well as me, because it is their duty, but not like this.”

From the exam table, one of the teenagers interjects, “The railway guards rob us. They force us from the train, make us lie face down in the gravel, and aim their guns at us while they look through our bags and search our bodies.” From where he squats next to me on the floor, a third man adds, “Then they leave you in the middle of nowhere. We walked four hours in the middle of the night until we came to a station. We waited until the next night then boarded the train. We got on when the train left but then a white truck pulled up alongside it. That is when they shot him. The train was still moving.”

Ramón lets out a deep sigh and I watch all of the eyes in the room follow along as he opens a small notebook, clicks his pen, and asks, “Did you notice any identifying features? Squad numbers? License plates? Badges?” He asks as if he already knows the answer. Everyone in the room, having witnessed the shooting, is eligible for a humanitarian visa. Like the U-Visa in the United States, the humanitarian visa, or *visa por razones humanitarias*, was designed for victims of “grave” offenses to regularize their status for a year as an incentive for cooperation in ongoing investigations. From his experience with prior cases, Ramón knows that officials in this area are unlikely to help these men seek formal justice. Ramón presumes that many of the officials who handle these cases are in cahoots with those committing the abuses, as do the men in the infirmary.



Figure 1.2: Railway guard with Uzi

One of the men on the couch, whose beard is flecked with gray, speaks up, “I don’t think you want us to talk about those things.” He nods his head in the direction of the hand-held voice recorder that I set on the floor after explaining myself as a researcher. “What he’s doing is fine. It is good that people like him are noticing the suffering of us migrants but talking about these ‘identifying features’ is dangerous for all of us. We have to care for each other, right?”

Tucked away at the end of a dead-end residential street, La Casita sits on a small piece of land sandwiched between the railway tracks and a red-domed neighborhood parish. Three hundred sixty five days a year, the small team at La Casita provides warm meals, basic first aid, and a place to sleep for a night or two to people who are fleeing pervasive violence and poverty across Central

America's Northern Triangle.⁴ The shelter is part of a grass-roots web of humanitarian organizations running along transit corridors between Mexico's southern and northern borders that, to put it bluntly, facilitate unauthorized migration. This dissertation takes migrant shelters as a looking glass to illuminate the consequences of two interrelated trends: the US-backed intensification of policing along migrant routes and a surge in Central Americans pursuing formal humanitarian recognition in Mexico.

Between the time I began formulating this project in 2012 and the conclusion of my fieldwork in late 2016, the number of individuals deported by Mexican authorities grew from less than 80,000 a year to almost 160,000.⁵ Central Americans make up more than 95% of Mexico's annual deportations. Since 2015, Mexico has consistently deported more Central Americans each year than the United States.⁶ At the same time, the number of Central Americans receiving formal humanitarian recognition has skyrocketed. Between 2013 and 2016, the number of humanitarian visas issued each year increased from 277 to 3,971.⁷ The number of Central Americans pursuing asylum in Mexico has also ballooned, increasing 311% between 2014 and 2016.⁸ Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork at La Casita, within similar shelters across Mexico, and in other places

⁴ People leave Central America because of a variety of intersecting and historically entrenched forms of violence, including political violence, gang violence, poverty, gender violence, and ecological injustices. People also leave Central America in search of a variety of desires, including family reunification, love, hope for a better future, and curiosity. These motivations permeate the stories that make up this dissertation, but I do not focus my analysis on the conditions that produce displacement. For studies that examine these factors, see Burrell (2013), Pine (2008), Abrego (2014), Reichman (2011), and Yarris (2017).

⁵ SEGOB 2018.

⁶ Meléndez 2018.

⁷ SEGOB 2017.

⁸ COMAR 2017.

people stay while migrating through Mexico, this dissertation examines how shelter workers like Ramón and people like Edwin’s uncle have “cared for each other” amid these shifts.

Stories we hear about undocumented migration through Mexico are typically accompanied by violent spectacles of kidnapping, disappearance, and dismemberment.⁹ We hear stories about cold-hearted guides who abandon children in the desert, the “train of death” that mercilessly devours migrants’ limbs, and sinister webs of organized crime that control smuggling routes. Shelters, which are often described as “safe spaces,” offer an opportunity to examine these intersecting trends from a different angle. Like most migrant shelters in Mexico, La Casita is a Catholic organization that extends Abrahamic traditions of sanctuary, offering a temporary safe haven to those who are forced to move along at the margins of society—people whose stories evoke age-old tales of the pauper, the fugitive, and the exiled, often racialized other. In this sense, migrant shelters are projects of civil disobedience that transgress state infrastructures aiming to detain and deport undocumented immigrants. But La Casita is not an outlaw endeavor. While the work of shelter resonates with the ante-bellum underground railroad in the United States and the Sanctuary Movement of the 1970s and 80s, there are no whispered codes, no hidden passageways, and no secret compartments. Indeed, shelter workers at La Casita and other migrant shelters are legally exempted from being punished as smugglers. As humanitarian spaces, shelters often partake in the same human rights talk that,¹⁰ in the name of protecting unaccompanied minors from

⁹ I intend this “we” to be a broad one. I have tried write this dissertation so that it speaks to a variety of audiences: academic communities concerned with immigration and humanitarianism; legal, faith-based, and social service practitioner communities whose efforts might benefit from an ethnographic account of how dignity is assembled across borders; and my students, friends, and family, all of whom share histories that are rooted in migration across borders and the occupation of native lands, and many of whom still seem unclear about what I’ve been up to for the past seven years.

¹⁰ Merry 2003.

smugglers, has been used to justify intensified policing along transit corridors throughout Mexico. That being said, to characterize migrant shelters as a kind of benevolent extension of state governance would be a mistake. While migrant shelters are not *of* the underground world of smuggling where migrants are secreted into tractor trailers, hidden away in safe houses, and shuttled past government checkpoints, they *do* exist alongside it.

Migrant shelters like La Casita simultaneously operate within state frameworks and outside of them. They provide care at the margins of the licit and the illicit. On the one hand, they deal in bureaucratic systems of recognition, documentation, and the enforcement of territorial lines, and, on the other hand, informal economies of concealment, false documents, and nomadic ways of life.¹¹ They are places where the hidden world of undocumented migration comes into view, and they are also spaces where the secrets of the route are pushed further into the shadows. Migrant shelters proliferate what I refer to as *shelter vision*, the uncomfortable and often paradoxical practice of working to sustain clandestine pathways while also striving to remedy the route's indignities by making them visible to state bureaucracies.

This dissertation bears witness to the sense of unease that people feel as they provide and receive aid in the middle of journeys that are characterized as much by compassion as they are by mistrust. I describe the physical and emotional labor involved for a shelter worker in preparing a pot of rice for fifty people in less than fifteen minutes while silently sussing out who is traveling with a guide and with what degree of consent. This combination of mutuality and suspicion, which is evident in the most mundane aspects of shelter work, illuminates the organizational and interpersonal dilemmas that unfold when people who are shot or beaten while hopping freight

¹¹ Deleuze and Guattari 1987.

trains face a decision: heal and keep moving, try to hire a smuggler, or seek formal humanitarian recognition, something that tends to involve dialoguing with presumably corrupt bureaucrats.

However, this is more than a dissertation about shelter work. The first half of this dissertation examines how, in responding to extrajudicial violence committed against migrants hopping freight trains, human rights frameworks intersect with alternative logics of dignity and care. The latter chapters turn to how these tensions reverberate as migrants who receive forms of state recognition find work and make do in less formal sanctuary spaces. These two halves hinge on the story of Gustavo, a Nicaraguan man who spent four months pursuing a humanitarian visa at La Casita after being shot through the chest by railway guards in the fall of 2015. Actually, the question of who fired the shots—railway guards, train bandits, gang members, the police—remains officially unanswered as of this writing in early 2019. Gustavo’s experience illuminates the seemingly insurmountable gap between justice and dignity in a context of rampant impunity and corruption. According to a 2016 report by the Global Center for Impunity and Injustice Studies, 99% of crimes committed in Mexico go unpunished.¹² 93% go entirely unreported. What good is legal justice in this context?

I heard various permutations of this question throughout my fieldwork, both from advocates like Ramón and from migrants like those gathered in the infirmary who were ostensibly eligible for formal humanitarian recognition. Shelters workers face a paradox in which they increasingly rely on human rights frameworks to claim protections for migrants from the very state agencies that are using a rhetoric of human rights to justify the violent policing that migrants suffer from, policing that often leads migrants to rely even more heavily on smugglers. A few days after listening to the testimonies of the men gathered in the infirmary on that spring day in May of 2016,

¹² Bargent 2016.

seven months since the shooting the nearly killed Gustavo, Ramón and I meet at a café not far from the shelter for an interview. As we approach the two-hour mark, I begin to wonder how I will ever be able to transcribe such a long conversation. “Maybe we should cut things off here for now,” I tell him, “You know, let’s save some questions for next time.” Ramón responds,

I also still have lots of questions about what this whole thing is about. Why don’t people care about accessing justice? Or why *do* they? What does it mean for a migrant to achieve a humanitarian visa? Is it just a piece of paper? What risks does it imply? I’ve seen plenty of cases where someone ends up being a smuggler or begging. So, then what is our responsibility when we decide to take on a case? Are we taking on cases with the possibility that someone becomes a smuggler? Do we have a responsibility in that sense? No, right? I mean, it’s a personal decision. I’d like to follow up, if only from afar, about these kinds of cases. What happens next?

Following Gustavo after he receives a humanitarian visa, the second half of this dissertation explores these questions in unassuming boarding houses and off-book welding workshops. Through Gustavo’s experience, I outline shifting dynamics of hospitality and camaraderie between citizens and non-citizens as Mexico increasingly becomes not only a space of transit for Central Americans, but also a space of tentative settlement. Ultimately, this dissertation shows how undocumented migration through Mexico is increasingly characterized by the work of striving to align seemingly incommensurate moral economies, humanitarianism and human smuggling, and to sustain interlinked spaces of dignity in the face of a transnational immigration enforcement apparatus that churns people through displacement, detention, and deportation.

The Spectacle

The conversation between Ramón and those who witnessed the shooting on the train introduces a key theme: the politics of witnessing, documenting, and making visible what many of us have become numb to. Even if you haven’t heard it described in such terms, you have likely seen images of the immigration enforcement apparatus I just mentioned, what Nicholas De Genova refers to as

the “spectacle” of border policing and immigration law enforcement.¹³ You may remember photos from 2014 of Central American adolescents napping under shiny space blankets in chain-link cages, or of kids watching Sponge-Bob in detention centers across the southwestern United States.¹⁴ Looking towards Europe, the photo of the Syrian toddler Alan Kurdi, whose body washed up face down on a Turkish beach in September of 2015 may be seared into your memory, as it is in mine.¹⁵ You probably saw headlines announcing 2016 as the deadliest year on record for migrants crossing the Mediterranean. That headline might have been accompanied by a photo of a capsized fishing boat with dozens of migrants splashing their way to the safety of a nearby boat from where the photograph is being taken.¹⁶ Year after year, if you are like me, you are at risk of becoming inured to these spectacles, like the tourists photographed in 2017 strolling along a sandy stretch of shoreline in southern Spain as a group of migrants struggle to beach an inflatable raft further down the shoreline.¹⁷

A broad intellectual tradition moving through social theorists like Hannah Arendt,¹⁸ Michel Foucault,¹⁹ Giorgio Agamben,²⁰ and Achille Mbembe²¹ argues that the continual reproduction of such exceptional moments reveals a central conceit of contemporary citizenship: that the freedoms so often celebrated by Western democracies are rooted in the violent delineation of a constitutive outside, in allowing groups that are deemed a threat to the well-being of the citizenry to die, often

¹³ De Genova 2013.

¹⁴ AZ Central 2014.

¹⁵ Walsh 2015.

¹⁶ Greene 2016.

¹⁷ BBC News 2017.

¹⁸ Arendt 1973.

¹⁹ Foucault 1977.

²⁰ Agamben 1998.

²¹ Mbembe 2003.

under the pretense of “crisis” and “emergency.” While the scholars listed above have tended to frame their work around the particularly egregious example of the Holocaust, a broad and interdisciplinary body of empirical research shows how similar logics operate in the context of immigration enforcement initiatives. I reference several of these studies in what follows, but this dissertation is linked most closely to the work of Jason De León and the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP).²²

De León describes the U.S.-Mexico border as an “unspoken *space of exception* where human and constitutional rights are suspended in the name of security.”²³ By cataloguing the objects that migrants leave behind while crossing into Southern Arizona, De León and fellow collaborators of the Undocumented Migration Project link this logic of legal exclusion in the United States—a country that professes to defend the dignity of all human life—to a “prevention through deterrence” strategy that outsources the work of border enforcement to desolate and inhospitable desert environments. Pressured to cross in less-populated areas, people disappear with alarming regularity as vultures, ants, and the pet dogs of retirees who winter in the warmth of the Sonoran Desert pick apart and scatter migrants’ corpses, rendering them unidentifiable.²⁴

As I drafted this introduction in December of 2018, the spectacle returned to the US-Mexico border. Photos of Jakelin Caal Maquin and Felipe Gomez Alonzo, Guatemalan children who died while in Border Patrol custody, were flooding my social media feeds; yet more moments of exceptional violence sandwiched between ads for holiday gifts and a video my mother-in-law posted on how to giftwrap a cat.²⁵ This blurring of the exceptional and the everyday, year after

²² De León 2015.

²³ De León 2015, 68: emphasis in original.

²⁴ Beck et al. 2015.

²⁵ Brice-Saddler 2018.

year, should not be surprising. It is a clear analogue to the gruesome beatings of the enslaved that Frederick Douglass describes as the “terrible spectacle” and the “horrible exhibition.”²⁶ In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman asks how one can “give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle[?]”²⁷ For Hartman, the answer lies in the “scenes in which terror can hardly be discerned—slaves dancing in the quarters, the outrageous darky antics of the minstrel stage, the constitution of humanity in slave law, and the fashioning of the self-possessed individual.”²⁸ Inspired by Hartman’s work, the chapters that follow aim to expose the systematic indignities that Central Americans face while crossing Mexico by tracing moments of dignity, humor, and love, not by dwelling on spectacles of violence.

The Paradox of Human Rights in the Shadow of the Beast

Protecting migrant’s human rights, particularly those of unaccompanied minors, has been central to justifying initiatives that bear a striking resemblance to prevention through deterrence tactics along the U.S.-Mexico border. I visited La Casita for the first time over the summer of 2014, just as the border spectacle of the moment, the so-called “unaccompanied minors crisis,” was reaching its apex.²⁹ In late June, a month into that first stint of preliminary fieldwork, Barack Obama announced an “urgent humanitarian crisis” along the U.S.-Mexico border. He addressed Central American parents directly, telling them, “Don’t send your children unaccompanied, on trains or

²⁶ Douglass 1968[1945], 25-26.

²⁷ Hartman 1997, 3.

²⁸ Hartman 1997, 4.

²⁹ Doering-White 2018.

through a bunch of smugglers.”³⁰ Two weeks later, former Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto announced what has come to be known as *Programa Frontera Sur*—the Southern Border Program, which is perhaps the most widely publicized initiative in a broader effort to secure trade corridors throughout Central America, Mexico, and the United States.³¹ In his remarks, Peña Nieto communicated his intentions to close La Bestia to the business of undocumented migration, framing the Southern Border Program as a way to “bring order to migration in Mexico’s southern region while protecting the human rights of migrants who enter and travel through the country.”³² Of course, the Southern Border Program has only exacerbated human rights abuses.³³ Echoing “prevention through deterrence” tactics along the U.S.-Mexico border, intensified policing along railways has pushed people away from well-trodden railway corridors and into more circuitous and uncertain routes where they are increasingly vulnerable to a continually evolving “gauntlet of organized crime that migrants run as they move through Mexico”³⁴—in other words, into the “shadow of the beast.”

³⁰ Hennessey 2014.

³¹ At various points over the past twenty years, state officials and policymakers in Mexico and the United States have been clear about collaborating to regulate the flow of people and things by cracking down on smuggling economies. In 2001, *Plan Sur* “established a series of internal control belts to intercept Central American migrants far north of the Guatemalan border” (Brigden 2018, 12). In 2008, over \$1.6 billion in “training, equipment, and technical assistance” was funneled from the United States to Mexico to “combat drug trafficking and transnational crime and to secure Mexico’s borders” in the name of “creating a twenty-first-century-border” (Galemba 2017, 13-14). Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Homeland Security Alan Bersin put it bluntly in 2012, “The Guatemalan border with Chiapas is now our southern border” (Isacson and Meyer 2014.)

³² Boggs 2015.

³³ Suárez Enriquez, Knippen, and Meyer 2016.

³⁴ Brigden 2018, 52. Several excellent publications describe in detail the various groups that seek to profit off of migrants along their journeys. See, for example, Martínez (2013) and Vogt (2013).

The Southern Border Program and the increasing salience of mechanisms like the humanitarian visa are a clear analogue to what scholars like Maurizio Albahari refer to as a “morally imbued borders.”³⁵ Didier Fassin (2012), for example, has argued that beginning in the latter decades of the 20th century, we have been experiencing a shift in which government is increasingly couched in humanitarian terms. Writing particularly about the French context, which is so often touted as the birthplace of Enlightenment-era ideas of universal human dignity,³⁶ Fassin describes the emergence of humanitarian forms of governance in which a politics of compassion reproduces a politics of inequality. In Mexico, those who suffer abuses in the wake of policing initiatives that purport to protect them increasingly pursue humanitarian visas. Available to those who suffer or witness particularly “grave” abuses while migrating without authorization through Mexico, these judicial mechanisms offer what some describe as a “precarious legality.”³⁷ While humanitarian visas offer a year of legal status, they are not always accompanied by work permits, and renewal is often impractical given bureaucratic roadblocks. Scholars like Miriam Ticktin and Damani Partridge examine how similar mechanisms in France and Germany function to integrate immigrants into the political community, but only with significant caveats, a dynamic that Partridge has called “exclusionary incorporation.”³⁸

While Fassin, Ticktin, and Partridge write in relation to countries that are typically described as immigrant destinations, I consider how the transit context reshapes this muddle of inclusion and exclusion. For the most part, Mexico has been described as a space of transit for Central Americans. However, Central Americans also increasingly view Mexico as a space of

³⁵ Albahari 2015.

³⁶ For an analysis of how these ideals, which imply European nations as the fount of universality, emerged historically out of colonized territories, see Buck-Morss (2000).

³⁷ Basok and Rojas Wiesner 2017.

³⁸ Partridge 2012, 21.

tentative settlement; a temporary “plan B” for people hoping to eventually make it into the United States. In this context, mechanisms like the humanitarian visa represent a beguiling paradox for shelter workers and migrants alike. If, as Agamben argues, rights-based mechanisms like the humanitarian visa simply re-inscribe us into particular forms of exclusionary governance, it isn’t hard to see why shelter workers like Ramón are disheartened.³⁹

A central aim of this dissertation is to explore both the promise and limitations of rights-based social work practice. Social work has asserted itself internationally as a discipline committed to human rights.⁴⁰ As the situation that Central Americans face in crossing Mexico reveals, however, there is good reason to be skeptical of human rights as an unalloyed good. I do not intend this dissertation to be a critique of human rights, *per se*. I do, however, argue for a more pragmatic understanding of human rights, especially when working with people who rely on criminalized economies as a means of survival. In the context of undocumented migration, this means appreciating that human smuggling is not uniformly exploitative; it is also a morally complex means of seeking a more dignified life in spite of global inequalities. That is, just as pursuing human rights can feel undignified, so too can smuggling appear dignified.

A robust literature examines how marginalized communities rely on smuggling to resist social exclusion and global inequalities. Several studies focus on the affective blend of violence and care between migrants and smugglers as a corrective to studies that focus on the state’s monopolization of the legitimate means of movement while portraying migrants as defenseless victims and smugglers as heartless predators (Sanchez 2017). David Spener (2009), for example, analyzes relations of reciprocity between smugglers and their clients to describe “resistencia

³⁹ Agamben 1998.

⁴⁰ Ife 2001; Ife 2012; Healy 2008; Lundy and van Wormer 2007; Androff 2015.

hormiga” (18-25). Translated literally, “resistencia hormiga” is “ant resistance,” an everyday defiance that is akin to what James Scott (1989) describes as “weapons of the weak”. Gabriella Sanchez (2015) describes how working in smuggling “constitutes an opportunity for marginalized individuals to achieve a sense of independence and personal advancement within the very socio-legal system that works at limiting their social, economic, and legal mobility” (6). Stephanie Maher (2018) examines how in Senegal “social proximity” structures relations of reciprocity between migrants and their handlers, complicating rationalist portrayals of “smuggling as business” (38). Ali Ahmad (2011), meanwhile, writes about how moral ideas about masculinity and responsibility are negotiated in encounters between Pakistanis and their guides along journeys to Europe. In all of these studies, informal smuggling economies are not the uniformly coercive and exploitative business that they are made out to be; instead, they are a collective strategy that people who are systematically excluded from formal inclusion rely on to support their families amid persistent global inequality.

Extending the insights of anthropologists who examine how ideas like universal human dignity are implemented, contested, and reconfigured in particular contexts,⁴¹ this dissertation traces how shelter workers and migrants work to harmonize different senses of dignity as humanitarian logics coincide and collide with moral economies of clandestine migration in the face of intensified policing.⁴² For example, moral economies of corruption and religious ideologies of sanctuary intersect to shape the pursuit of formal humanitarian recognition. And in workspaces

⁴¹ Keane 2015; Fischer 2014; Nading 2017; Tsing 2004; Bourgois 2003; de Oliveira 2013.

⁴² I do not take as a given the idea of dignity as a transcendental characteristic of each individual, nor do I mean to dismiss it as merely an ideological mechanism that structures people’s lives. Instead, I approach dignity, building on Webb Keane’s work, as relational and communicative. Keane writes, “Dignity [...] is an ethical quality that cannot be understood just in reference to the individual to whom it pertains: there must be someone else who respects it” (Keane 2015, 113).

where asylees and humanitarian visa recipients labor alongside Mexican citizens who have returned from living in the United States, ideas about masculinity intertwine with shifting moral geographies of migration as men weigh how to both make do in the present moment and keep open the possibility of crossing over into the United States. Whereas scholarly narratives surrounding undocumented migration tend to frame undocumented migration in terms of exclusion from and within destination countries like the United States, I call for greater attention to pragmatics of mobility in order to highlight how diverse moral frameworks blur as people seek dignity along otherwise violent pathways.

My understanding of the ways that “formal” frameworks like human rights and citizenship and “informal” frameworks like dignity and masculinity mesh together is informed in large part by the work of Kathleen Millar.⁴³ Extending foundational analyses of “moral economies”⁴⁴ and the “informal economy,”⁴⁵ Millar argues for doing away with the formal/informal dichotomy given its tendency to define labor negatively as exclusion from the formal economy. Likewise, rather than thinking about smuggling and moral economies of masculinity negatively as a last resort survival strategy for those who are excluded from more “formal” forms of recognition (citizenship, human rights),⁴⁶ the chapters that follow instead focus on how human rights frameworks, moral

⁴³ Millar 2018.

⁴⁴ Thompson 1963.

⁴⁵ Hart 1985.

⁴⁶ In terms of human rights, the question of access often references Hannah Arendt phrase, “the right to have rights” (Arendt 1973; see also Moyn 2018). Arendt’s classic critique has been taken up by both academics and practitioners as a call to narrow the gap between an idealistic discourse of human rights and the practical ability to actually enforce them (See, for example, Grace 2014, Merry 2009, Donnelly 2013, Ife 2012, and Ife 2001). The movement to secure legal protections for non-citizens has spawned a global humanitarian industry led by organizations like Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International that, in working towards narrowing the gap between universal ideals and the persistent reality of exclusion, have also supported many of the shelters and advocacy organizations that assist migrants throughout Mexico.

economies of humanitarianism, and informal economies of human smuggling intertwine to *produce* mobility.

This involves a way of seeing—what I have referred to as ‘shelter vision’—that differs from the tendency within social work research to discuss undocumented status as a barrier to accessing public benefits and other social services that can facilitate settlement and integration. Isolation is a key theme in this literature. Undocumented communities are often described as a “hard-to-reach” population⁴⁷ and a growing body of scholarship associates negative physical and mental health consequences with living day in and day out under the threat of detention and deportation.⁴⁸ Some social work scholars outline strategies that immigrant-serving organizations are implementing to address these barriers, such as hiring staff from immigrant backgrounds and partnering with immigrant-led churches to cultivate relationships with cultural and organizational liaisons,⁴⁹ particularly in states where anti-immigrant bills increasingly put practitioners in a position of choosing between obeying the law and adhering to professional values.⁵⁰ These are valuable interventions that nonetheless focus on improving access to formal social service frameworks while assuming that immigrant communities are more or less geographically situated.

While a broad body of scholarship examines how family care networks extend transnationally across borders,⁵¹ studies in this vein overlook undocumented journeys themselves, let alone the role of organizations like migrant shelters, especially post-deportation as family

⁴⁷ Auerswald et al. 2004; Coady et al. 2008.

⁴⁸ For studies that focus on stress and isolation within undocumented communities, see Negi (2013), Ding and Hargraves (2009), Lopez et al. (2018), Delva et al. (2013), Novak, Geronimus, and Martinez-Cardoso (2017); Grace, Bais, and Roth (2018); Gurrola and Ayón (2018).

⁴⁹ Roth and Grace 2018.

⁵⁰ Furman et al. 2012; Park and Bhuyan 2012; Ayón 2018.

⁵¹ Yarris 2017; Heidbrink 2014; Yeates 2004; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003.

networks organize to migrate without authorization once again. When undocumented journeys *are* discussed, it is usually in reference to helping undocumented communities to recover from traumas that people experience, either in their home countries or while en route, once they have reached their destination.⁵² While more internationally-oriented social work scholars examine organization-based efforts to mitigate displacement in countries of origin,⁵³ a push-pull theoretical framework that portrays undocumented journeys as relatively linear and exceptional moments of travel between home and destination remains persistent. Such a perspective tends to ignore the “regimes of mobility”⁵⁴ that keep family networks in motion, “blurring the boundaries between home, transit and destination.”⁵⁵

Social work researchers, then, have largely examined undocumented journeys in terms of how their secondary effects frustrate the ability of organizations to facilitate settlement and integration into destinations, often while underplaying how families remain implicated in undocumented journeys, even after putting down roots in destination countries. Anthropologists and others, meanwhile, have documented the moral dimensions of undocumented journeys while underplaying the role of organizations like migrant shelters. Two recently published ethnographies focus on the moral dimensions of illicit mobility throughout Mexico, relying as I have mainly on fieldwork conducted within migrant shelters. Wendy Vogt, for example, refers to migrant shelters as “spaces of intimacy” that often serve as locations where people form strategic relationships that “defy simple binaries of exploitation/altruism, victim/perpetrator, smuggler/migrant.”⁵⁶ Noelle

⁵² Weaver and Burns 2001; Bokore 2013.

⁵³ Roth and Hartnett 2018; Anastario et al. 2015.

⁵⁴ Schiller and Salazar 2013.

⁵⁵ Brigden 2018, 181.

⁵⁶ Vogt 2018, 15-17, 134-135.

Brigden, meanwhile, draws on feminist theories of performance to describe what she calls migrants' "survival plays," the ways "women and men play with femininity and masculinity to gain sympathy, exude charisma, or hide their intentions, thereby facilitating migration."⁵⁷ Vogt and Brigden illuminate nuanced dynamics of agency of exploitation that surround economies of undocumented migration through Mexico. These incisive ethnographies lay the groundwork for this dissertation; however, Vogt and Brigden discuss migrant shelters primarily as access points for analyzing moral economies of undocumented mobility. Differently, I argue that migrant shelters and other hospitality spaces are a key node for understanding how, as undocumented journeys become increasingly circuitous, formal and informal migration frameworks blur both within and beyond the space of shelter itself. In other words, migrant shelters like La Casita are more than just a space where the otherwise secret world of undocumented migration is rendered visible, they are also spaces where the terms of visibility are negotiated in conversation with a diverse cast of characters ranging from ethnographers and migrants to priests and elected officials.

Sanctuary between the Shadows and the Spotlight

The first time I heard about migrant shelters in Mexico, I was an AmeriCorps VISTA organizer working with immigrant communities that staffed slaughterhouses in rural Illinois. I remember my jaw dropping when Berta, a woman from El Salvador recalled a small handheld map listing the locations of migrant shelters that she carried with her as she journeyed through Mexico.⁵⁸ Like most Central Americans in town, Berta worked the graveyard sanitation shift, the bottom rung of

⁵⁷ Brigden 2018, 102-14.

⁵⁸ For discussions of migration and meatpacking in the Midwest, see Grey, Devlin, and Goldsmith 2009; (Waldman and Mehrota 2017; Reynolds 2013; Sittig and González 2016; Grey, Devlin, and Goldsmith 2009; Novak, Geronimus, and Martinez-Cardoso 2017; Fink 1998). See Ribas 2015 for a discussion of similar dynamics in the southern United States.

an industry known for exposing workers to harsh chemicals, high injury rates, and high-profile immigration raids. Though her temporary protected status allowed her to work day-time shifts, shifts that tended to require people to have papers,⁵⁹ Berta worked third-shift sanitation in those days because she had developed severe carpal tunnel after processing pork ribs for five years, ten hours a day, six days a week. Mopping the kill floor was gruesome work, but it was also a break from the debilitating vibrations of an electronic whiz knife. As I helped her apply for public benefits while she fought with the company for workman's compensation, I remember asking naively how it is that such shelters could even exist. "It's not like here how no one talks about the fact that half the town is undocumented," she explained.

The image of Berta hopping freight trains through Mexico, stopping along the way at humanitarian spaces that openly facilitate undocumented migration, intrigued me. The most gripping part was learning that Mexico's shelter workers are legally off-limits to persecution as smugglers, even though their work essentially facilitates undocumented migration. Like churches providing sanctuary to non-citizens in the United States, migrant shelters rely on the long-standing tradition that considers religious spaces as off-limits to law enforcement. But Mexico's sanctuary infrastructure is also legally protected. Little did I know that around the same time I met Berta in 2011, Mexico had recently begun enacting reforms to its immigration law that protect those providing humanitarian aid to undocumented migrants. Article 159 of Mexico's Immigration Law states, "Punishment shall not be imposed upon persons of recognized moral solvency who, for

⁵⁹ Temporary protected status, or TPS, allows individuals from certain countries that are affected by armed conflict or natural disaster to live and work in the United States for a limited period of time. Some Hondurans and Nicaraguans were awarded TPS following Hurricane Mitch in 2005. Some Salvadorans were awarded TPS in 2001 following a string of devastating earthquakes. For an examination of Salvadorans and Hondurans living with TPS status in the United States, see Menjívar (2017).

strictly humanitarian reasons and without seeking benefit, lend aid to someone who has entered the country in an irregular manner, even if that person receives donations or resources for the continuation of their humanitarian labor.”⁶⁰

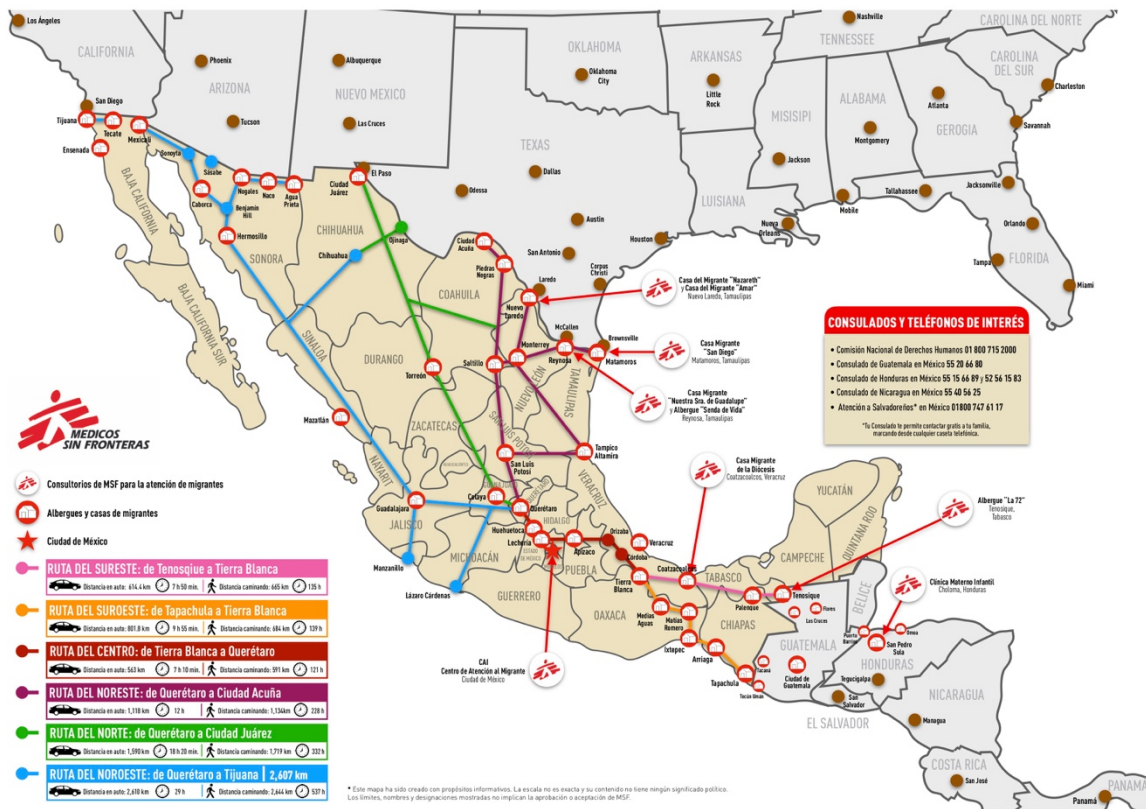


Figure 1.3: Map of migrant shelters across Mexico, created by Medicins san Frontieres ⁶¹

For many, the idea of a web of legally sanctioned sanctuary spaces like migrant shelters is surprising. As the historian of sanctuary John Noonan writes, “Sanctuary is shocking to the secular mind. How can there be any place within the confines of a nation that the law does not operate?”

⁶⁰ SEGOB 2012, 30. While the legal standing of shelters as *organizations* was never contested during my research, it bears noting that Article 159 refers explicitly to people, not organizations.

⁶¹ <https://www.msf.mx/MigrantesyRefugiados>

How can religion claim a privilege to say it is beyond the law? How can the law stultify itself by acknowledging that in certain places the law ceases to hold sway?”⁶² The fact of the matter is that the precedent of sanctuary runs deep. Most discussions of sanctuary revolve around asylum law and they are generally framed in relation to the 1951 United Nations Refugee Convention. As the legal scholar Simon Behrman argues, this reference point provides a rather myopic line of sight for approaching a tradition with such a rich historical tradition.⁶³ Philip Marfleet, for example, describes the Greco-Roman institution of *asylon*, whereby “fugitives, outcasts, and runaway slaves [...] found security by sitting near a statue or altar.”⁶⁴ In the case of medieval England, Marfleet writes, fugitives could remain within sanctuary for thirty to forty days while pursuing a pardon from alleged crimes.⁶⁵ In some ways, the issue of sanctuary, which is linked to the establishment of “settlements” where laymen were provided with work and taught to read and write, lies at the root of contemporary social welfare policy as authority transitioned from the pastoral power of the church to the legal authority of the burgeoning welfare state.⁶⁶

Sanctuary clearly remains relevant as a point of contention between the moral authority of the church and state sovereignty. An expansive literature discusses the work of US-based congregations during the Sanctuary Movement of the 1970s and 1980s when progressive religious congregations organized to guide Central Americans across the US-Mexico border.⁶⁷ Sanctuary is evident in an Obama-era memo signed by John Morton, the former director of US Immigration

⁶² Noonan 1985, 2.

⁶³ Behrman 2018.

⁶⁴ Marfleet 2011, 443.

⁶⁵ Marfleet 2011, 446.

⁶⁶ See, for example, Walters (2010).

⁶⁷ See, for example, Bau (1985), Coutin (1993), Crittenden (1988), García (2006), Nepstad (2004).

and Customs Enforcement (ICE), which ensured that immigration enforcement operations would not occur at certain “sensitive location such as schools and churches.”⁶⁸ It has also reemerged in recent years as a tactic for congregations and community groups looking to block deportations, as well as for local governments and public institutions seeking to block federal agencies intent on persecuting immigrant communities.⁶⁹ However, with some exceptions, including the work of historian Victor Uribe-Uran, who traces the tradition of churches serving as a safe haven for criminalized groups within the Iberian Kingdoms and their American colonies,⁷⁰ scholarship on sanctuary has tended to overlook its continued salience within Latin America.⁷¹ Congregations like the Southside Presbyterian Church in Tucson and the East Bay Sanctuary Covenant in San Francisco are prominent in the academic literature surrounding the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s while the frontline work of sanctuary during the same period in Mexico tends to be either overlooked entirely or described as clandestine and secretive. One of the few pieces of writing that discusses sanctuary in Mexico in any detail during this period describes it as the work of the “clandestine church” standing in opposition to the “institutional church” and its elite allies.⁷² This framing fits with the vocabulary that tends to accompany the topic of undocumented migration, phrases like “living in the shadows,” “clandestine mobility,” and “underground economy.” It also,

⁶⁸ Wadhia 2011.

⁶⁹ See Yarris (2018) on sanctuary campuses and Yukich (2013) on the anti-deportation actions within the New Sanctuary Movement.

⁷⁰ As Uribe-Uran (2007) writes, criminals who uttered the phrase “iglesia me llamo” (“church is my name”) “received shelter at local churches and thereby felt entitled not to disclose any information to justice officials about their conduct” (446).

⁷¹ This speaks to what Paolo Carroza (2003) describes as the broader tendency for scholars to obscure the role of Latin America in the development of the contemporary human rights frameworks.

⁷² Golden and McConnell 1986, 111.

in line with how social work research tends to underemphasize the journey itself, generally omits organizing dynamics south of the US-Mexico border where organized crime looms large.

The following chapters examine how, beyond the typical variables that make up sanctuary—the moral legitimacy of the church and the legal authority of the state—shelter workers also negotiate para-state fugitive economies that migrants both suffer from and rely on: gangs and cartels. I focus in particular on the work of shelter and sanctuary beyond the typical spotlight. Scholars, journalists, and allied international agencies have tended to focus on a small number of relatively well-known and comparatively public-facing shelters and advocacy organizations. These include civil society groups like Sin Fronteras (Without Borders) and the Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericana (Mesoamerican Migration Movement) that have played a crucial role in advocating for key aspects of the 2011 reform,⁷³ as well as a few prominent shelter organizers like Alejandro Solalinde, who was nominated for a Nobel Peace Prize for his work with the Hermanos En El Camino (Brethren on the Trail) shelter in 2017.⁷⁴ Many of these more well-known figures face regular death threats after denouncing the impunity with which abuses are committed against migrants, both by organized crime groups and police forces. La 72, a shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco led by Tomás González exemplifies this ethic. The shelter's name, which honors the 72 migrants massacred outside of San Fernando Tamaulipas in 2010, intentionally breaks with a culture of silence around disappearance in Mexico. Such outspoken advocacy elicits blowback, but it also provides a degree of protection that comes along with international notoriety. Both Solalinde and González are accompanied day and night by armed guards, as mandated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights.⁷⁵

⁷³ González-Murphy 2013.

⁷⁴ Proceso 2017.

⁷⁵ Frank-Vitale 2016.

In general, these are particularly public-facing exceptions within a complex and diverse sanctuary infrastructure. Shelters across Mexico are motivated by diverse political and theological philosophies, ranging from rather paternalistic, charity-based approaches to more confrontational, solidarity-based traditions that are rooted in liberation theology.⁷⁶ While human rights tends to be a widespread common language among shelters across Mexico, the vast majority of Mexico's migrant shelters operate away from the international spotlight and their sphere of legitimacy is largely regional. They rely on a complex and sometimes contradictory blend of publicity and secrecy as they weigh how best to engage with Kafkaesque government institutions that maintain a progressive human rights discourse in spite of pervasive human rights abuses.⁷⁷ By focusing on everyday aspects of shelter work at a less prominent shelter like La Casita, the chapters that follow are an attempt to understand the blend of shadow and spotlight involved in maintaining spaces of sanctuary.

Shelters are spaces where these dynamics are particularly visible and explicit. However, the politics of sanctuary that I describe in the first half of this dissertation resonate in important ways with the politics of hospitality and camaraderie in more out-of-the-way spaces that I turn to in the latter chapters, like the welding workshop where Gustavo lands in Monterrey. As I write in Chapter Four, the chapter that serves as a pivot for these two parts, cultural tropes that speak to the tensions of Mexico's colonial history, 20th century tensions of modernization and dependency, and

⁷⁶ Wilde 2016.

⁷⁷ For a discussion of how government agencies in Mexico have relied on human rights discourse to deny, reinterpret, and even justify serious human rights violations in the context of the War on Drugs, see Trevino-Rangel (2018)

contemporary struggles related to the imposition of US anti-drug and anti-terrorist militarism inflect these intersecting politics of sanctuary and hospitality.

As crossing Mexico increasingly becomes akin to a game of chutes and ladders that is full of false starts, back-tracking, and a sense of being stuck in motion, I found that moving between different spaces and different positionalities was crucial for understanding the promises and pitfalls of rights-based approaches to supporting Central Americans in the context in this broader historical context. In what follows, I outline my methodological approach to circulating in and out of these different spaces, paying particular attention to politics of visualizing the work of shelter as I moved between documenting, witnessing, and collaborating with the team at La Casita in the context of Gustavo being shot.

Visualizing a Sheltered Ethnography

In early October of 2015 migration agents stop me as I am walking back to La Casita after taking some time to write up field notes in the center of town. The exchange begins more or less amicably. They ask me for identification, and I ask for theirs. One of the agents, a tall and stocky man, promptly shows me his ID card and I take down his name in my notebook. When I ask the other agent for his name, he tells me “*ya basta con eso*”—enough playing around. Before I can say anything, the other agent asks why I’m so nervous. I hold my hands together to stop them from shaking but a tremble enters my voice anyway, “I’m nervous because I’ve heard I have reason to be afraid.”

“Why?” he asks, incredulously.

I don’t answer.

“What are you doing here?” they ask me.

“I’m collaborating with the shelter,”

“Oh, really? So how many are there right now?”

I grin at him, “Oh, you know.”

They check my student visa and tell me that I can be on my way. The whole stomach-turning encounter takes less than a minute. When I get to the shelter, five migrants are getting their things together to go *charolear*, to stick out a pot as it were, to panhandle. I tell them to be extra careful, that I just got stopped by migration agents in the center of town. They ask who the hell I am, and we do the typical exchange. “I’m from the United States. Michigan. No, not Michoacán, Michigan. No, I’m not a missionary, I’m an anthropologist and a social worker, kind of like a writer, kind of like a shelter worker. I’m here documenting stories from the migrant trail and helping out with the shelter.” They plan to come back to spend the night and debate whether to take their backpacks or not. A bigger guy wearing a Mexico soccer jersey tells them that people won’t give them anything if they don’t wear backpacks, that they won’t look like migrants. One of the men jokes facetiously that at least they’ll have all their valuable things if they are deported. Then they pass by me on their way out of the shelter. Hand slap, fist bump. Five times, five guys.

Two minutes later there is an urgent banging on the door. When I open it only four guys return. La Casita sits at the end of a small residential lane. They say migration was at the end of the street where it opens out onto the main road, that they grabbed the fifth guy, threw him to the ground by his hair, kicked him a few times, and then tossed him into the *perrera* head-first, using the word for “dogcatcher” to refer to the unmarked vans used by migration agents. I follow Paula, the other shelter worker on duty at the time, and rush down the lane towards the main road. When we get there, we see the van speeding away down the street. There are a few folks from nearby stores gathered at the end of the block, eerily unphased about what has just happened. “Why do

they have to do it so violently?” someone comments. One man who has stopped his car yells from across the street, “Aren’t migrants able to travel freely through Mexico?” Paula nearly laughs out loud. After things have calmed down, I tell her about my exchange with the migration agents. “I know that you can kind of walk around without too much concern because you’re an American citizen,” she responds after a couple of beats of weighted silence, “but you should consider what kinds of situations you might be putting other people in.”

This is an ethnography of undocumented migration, but moments like these early in my fieldwork reinforced my decision to avoid encountering those clandestine movements first hand beyond the sanctuary of migrant shelters. I always encountered actual acts of smuggling and clandestine movement second-hand. I did not hop freight trains and I did not hang out with smugglers. I did, of course, come to know people who fell into the work of smuggling. I felt the emotional weight of witnessing blood drip down from the small holes that buckshot has bored into someone’s arm, but, unlike the migrants I spent time with, I didn’t feel my heart race at the crack of a gun or feel freight cars rumbling beneath me.

There is no shortage of exposés that claim to reveal the hidden world of human smuggling and organized crime. Valiant journalists have risked their lives or sacrificed them altogether while providing nuanced glimpses into shadow economies whose tentacles slither through everyday life across Mexico and across Latin America. This is not that kind of project. I am not that kind of ethnographer. I consciously avoided the underworld of unauthorized migration out of respect for the fact that remaining clandestine can be a key resource for migrants, one that my privilege had the potential to endanger. Jason De León has written about the perils of participant observation and unauthorized border crossings, noting that documenting undocumented journeys first-hand in such fraught, high-stakes situations has the tendency to highlight the experiences of the person

writing. He also notes how when things go wrong the outcomes tend to have much higher stakes for the researcher than the people that are the topic of the research.⁷⁸ If I were to have been caught hopping freight trains, I might have been deported north to the United States, which is very different than being deported south to San Pedro Sula.⁷⁹

My decision also reflected my commitment to understanding how shelter workers sustain the public-facing facilitation of undocumented migration. This is an important problem to consider as aiding undocumented migrants is increasingly criminalized.⁸⁰ Recent legal actions against humanitarian efforts have revealed that the slogan, “humanitarian aid is never a crime” is, as Maria Lorena Cook has argued, contested and aspirational. In her analysis of prior entanglements between U.S. Border Patrol and No More Deaths, Cook shows how humanitarian aid workers strategically “evade and engage” the law alongside those they aim to assist.⁸¹ In the context of shelter work throughout Mexico, the stakes of this legal cat and mouse game are even higher. As I have mentioned, providing humanitarian aid to migrants was officially decriminalized following reforms to Mexico’s migration law in 2008 and 2011. Nonetheless, human rights activists, environmentalists, and journalists have been murdered or simply disappeared with alarming regularity in Mexico. These disappearances are part of a broader trend of impunity. So, I confined myself to the space of shelter, only venturing out (at least research-wise) when those putting their

⁷⁸ De León 2015, 11-14.

⁷⁹ Stillman 2018.

⁸⁰ Recently, Scott Daniel Warren, a volunteer with No More Deaths, a humanitarian group that leaves food and water to people migrating into southern Arizona, was arrested and charged with harboring undocumented immigrants (Ingram 2018). The Proactiva Open Arms, a humanitarian rescue boat that aims to safely guide migrants to shore who find themselves stranded in the Mediterranean, has been impounded as it faces challenges from Italian officials who argue that their efforts have “violated Italy’s sovereignty and permitted illegal migration” (Benderev 2018).

⁸¹ Cook 2011, 503.

lives on the line, those who wouldn't be able to catch a quick flight back north, decided to stick their necks out as well.

Between 2014 and late 2016, I conducted 18 total months of ethnographic fieldwork in and around migrant shelters across Mexico. Most of that time was spent at La Casita, which is a relatively small migrant shelter in Central Mexico. I also visited ten different shelters spanning Mexico's northern and southern borders from Nogales, Sonora to Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas. Visiting different shelters gave me a sense of commonalities across migrant shelters and an idea of how they differ. A migrant shelter located in a rural area just a few hours north of Mexico City lacks a means for housing migrants. Kidnappings are common there. Organizers hung a sign out in front of the shelter advising those arriving at night to sleep as close to the building as possible so that they would be in view of a security camera. On the other hand, La 72, a migrant shelter near the Guatemala border, houses dozens of migrants long-term as they pursue refugee status in Mexico. It might be better described as a refugee camp, if it didn't also regularly aid over one hundred migrants each night who were just passing through. Visiting these shelters allowed me to see how the organizational dilemmas that La Casita faces as migrants increasingly pursue formal humanitarian recognition in addition to basic humanitarian aid are both unique and commonplace in different ways.

The final months of my fieldwork were spent in Monterrey, Mexico's north-eastern metropolis. While I made regular visits to one of the migrant shelters there, I spent the majority of my time with Gustavo in the welding workshop where he had found work. Just as immersing myself into the daily routine of shelter work was crucial for understanding the organizational dilemmas of humanitarian spaces like La Casita, spending days working with Gustavo allowed me to consider how workplaces are also a kind of sanctuary space where similar hospitality politics

play out. Monterrey was not the first place I reunited with Gustavo after he left La Casita, and it was also not the last. In Chapter Five, I refer to the convoluted journey that Gustavo made between receiving his humanitarian visa and his arrival in Monterrey as a game of chutes and ladders. Ultimately, I aimed in my fieldwork to strike a balance between immersion and mobility, reflecting the fact that for many people migration through Mexico is a mix of mobility and confinement where, as in Gustavo's case, the destination is often unexpected and almost always temporary.

Throughout my fieldwork, I usually had a camera hanging from my neck. When I began this project, I intended for photography to be a central methodological tool. I was particularly interested in decentering the way undocumented migration is typically portrayed by integrating both participatory methods and a close attention to the things that people carry, pick up, and leave behind along their journeys. I imagined focusing on these objects as unobtrusive "material probes," a means of visually illustrating the shifting terrain of immigration enforcement in Mexico. I was also anticipating that many people staying at a shelter for no more than a day or two would be wary of sharing their experiences with a relative stranger in the form of a one-on-one interview.⁸² I hoped that asking people to share their belongings would provide them with more control over what they shared with me while avoiding the kind of decontextualized 'violence and suffering porn' that so often accompanies stories about undocumented migration through Mexico.

As I discuss in Chapters Three and Eight, most of my attempts at integrating photography, and participatory photography in particular, led to unexpected findings. For example, focusing on the things people carry allowed people to subtly communicate that they wanted nothing to with me. This led me to consider how shelters workers implicitly accommodated suspected smugglers in an ostensibly "no smugglers allowed" space. The tension between documenting the work of

⁸² De León and Cohen 2005.

shelter and understanding the nuances of *doing* the work of shelter permeates the first half of this dissertation. What I see this project working towards is putting words to this tension between making things visible and surviving the daily grind of humanitarian aid work. As I became part of the *equipo*, “the team” of collaborators that keeps the place running, I focused on what ethnographers of social service work have called a “street-level analysis,”⁸³ the “negotiations that occur within the deeply structured routines of work on the front lines, where providers use their discretion to navigate policy uncertainties that fail to resolve in the formal sphere.”⁸⁴ Often, this meant going several days without making recordings or taking photographs. I would sink into what I’ve called shelter vision, working my way through the daily chores of helping to keep the shelter running with my head down, not really paying attention to what I was doing *as ethnography*.

Eventually, I picked up on the importance of carrying my camera around even if I was not actively taking photographs. I came to appreciate my camera, a relatively compact digital mirrorless one, as a conversation starter that helped to clarify my role as both an ethnographer and someone contributing to the everyday work of shelter. Most people passing through La Casita assumed that I was on some kind of mission trip. International volunteers are commonplace in migrant shelters across Mexico. Many are affiliated with religious service organizations. Others make brief trips to help out and maybe see some archaeological sites along the way. They fall into the “voluntourist” bucket and I’ll leave an analysis of the intriguing politics of tourism and activism to others.⁸⁵ The broader point I want to make is that migrants and shelter workers were generally accustomed to the idea that shelters are places where the spectacle of undocumented migration is documented, filmed, and photographed.

⁸³ Lipsky 1980; Brodtkin 2015.

⁸⁴ Spitzmueller 2014.

⁸⁵ McGloin and Georgeou 2016.

That being said, I generally prioritized *doing* the work of shelter over documenting it. I limited myself to writing scratch notes while at the shelter and I expanded on them back at my apartment, mainly because there wasn't time. The persistent flow of people passing through and the pressing need to accomplish all the tasks associated with keeping a shelter running made stopping to set up an interview feel insignificant. This was as much a limitation as it was a choice to embrace an ethnographic stance oriented to the feel of shelter work. I took on scheduled shifts and I filled in where I was needed. I cooked meals, sorted donated clothing, conducted intake interviews, recorded testimonies of abuse, and collected food donations from the local market. I shared cigarettes in quiet moments, joined in pickup soccer games, grabbed post-shift beers and tacos, and lovingly smashed faces into birthday cakes. Most of the photographs that I have included focus on these more mundane moments. These are images of people lined up as they wait to be served lunch, a group of men sorting through bags of donated clothing, or a man giving haircuts to his fellow migrants. They are part of my aim to avoid reifying the "terrible spectacle" of immigration enforcement. That being said, documenting violent abuses was also an aspect of my role as a shelter worker. Shelter workers at La Casita often asked me to take photos of migrants' injuries and migrants often called on me to record what they had experienced, though I have chosen to mainly represent these encounters in words.

Ultimately, the camera offered a window into how people strategically manage visibility and publicity while navigating a process that tends to be thought of as clandestine. This included my collaboration with Raul Paz Pastrana, a documentary filmmaker who began documenting the work of the Undocumented Migration Project around the same time I started preliminary fieldwork. I first met Raul during a UMP field school in Pakal-Na, Chiapas over the summer of 2015. Raul entered the project with the idea of following Jason as he searched for evidence of a

young man from Ecuador, José Tacuri, who remained missing after having crossed the Sonoran Desert into southern Arizona. Over the summer of 2015, his project shifted. The film went from being about the US-Mexico border to looking at how similar politics extended throughout Mexico. “Border South” is the name we would eventually settle on.⁸⁶ The kinds of stories that I was following became the stories that Raul was following. His film went from being about the UMP to being about people who are migrating. The relationships that I had been carefully developing were all of a sudden Raul’s relationships as well. I worried about how the film would compromise my ability to sustain the confidentiality of the people I was spending time with. I also kicked myself for feeling protective. Raul was piggybacking onto my access and was filming people with the express intent of making these stories as public as possible. Who was I to be shielding these stories?

Raul is an immigrant filmmaker who wants to make a film that portrays people beautifully, three-dimensionally. Raul came to filmmaking through punk rock and union organizing. I have what still feels like an irrational dream of a career in academia, where “public scholarship” is supported but also stigmatized. I think about the university presses that might publish a book. Raul thinks about the streaming platforms that might pick up the film. Raul has been willing to stick his neck out there. I am learning how to drop the academese.

I worried somewhat about what my colleagues at La Casita would think about being filmed, but whether in film or in the papers, they were accustomed to being in the public eye long before I ever arrived. Really, I was most concerned about Gustavo. “You have to be protective of your sources,” one of my mentors told me at one point. I contemplated asking Raul to focus on other stories. In early November of 2015, two weeks before Raul was set to visit for the first time, I

⁸⁶ www.bordersouthfilm.com

talked to Gustavo about the film. I told him, “It’s up to you whether you want to talk with Raul. Maybe this film goes nowhere, maybe it blows up. I don’t know. Raul is likely to find your story important, but I just want you to know that I understand if you don’t want to go on camera.” Gustavo nodded along, his brow somewhat furrowed, and then responded, “Don’t be such a wuss! (*¡No seas mamá!*) I’ve already talked to reporters. I’ve already been on camera. We need to let the people *en el norte* know what is happening to us down here.”

The two products coming from our collaboration—this dissertation and the documentary—embody what Michel-Rolph Trouillot describes as a broader ambivalence in how we gather and tell stories, the difference between “what happened” and “what is said to have happened” – the “facts of the matter and a narrative of those facts.”⁸⁷ Raul’s interviews were efficient. “What is happening? What happened to you? Who did this to you?” Like Ramón, he wanted to know the identifying details. I had a tendency to let conversations meander. My recordings were an uninterrupted hour, or two, or three. I tried to be attentive to the poetics of how an interview unfolded and the things that remained unsaid. I focused little on sound quality, though all the little background sounds still drive me crazy when I go back and listen to the tapes—the birds chirping, the truck without a muffler, the conversation going on at the next table over. Raul prioritized the aesthetics. He needed interviewees’ words to stand on their own without the aid of an accompanying text. We filmed a series of short testimonials with men passing through La Casita. Raul asked people to repeat themselves, to restate the question they are responding to, to speak up, to quiet down, to shift a foot to the right so that the light hits just right. He asked for full sentences, brevity, punch lines. “Let’s start with you telling us your name, where you are from, and a little about your journey,” Raul begins. “Ok, well it’s, um, Milton Alvarado, Puerto Barrios. It’s been

⁸⁷ Trouillot 1995, 2.

three weeks for me so far. And it's been tough, a lot harder than before, I tell you. And um—" Raul interrupts, "Can you start over?" He asks Milton, "This time start with "My name is Milton Alvarado. I was born in Puerto Barrios, Guatemala, and then talk about how it is harder. You can say something like, 'I was robbed three days ago.' You mentioned that earlier, right? Oh, and shift just a little to your right so you are in the sun."

Raul sensed my discomfort about how particular he is. Some might call him controlling. When we talked things through one night, talking to each other over our laptop screens, he told me how tired he is of people making documentaries that spend more time narrating what is going on than they do letting people tell their own stories, even if that means taking more time on the front end to edit the shot on the fly. "People are always telling stories for these people. I want to make a film where their voices stand alone, without the compensation of some expert." He was tired of people feeling like they can sacrifice filmmaking aesthetics when they are working with people in 'underground' spaces. "Man, I want to make a film that people find beautiful. I want to make a film where people laugh as much as they cry."

The chapters that follow are an attempt to translate these tensions onto the written page. Along with Noelle Brigden, I think of these interviews, ethnographic vignettes, and photographs contained within as a blend of witnessing, performance, and testimony.⁸⁸ Shelters are spaces where clandestine pathways come partially into view and interviews are an opportunity for migrants and shelter workers to share and gather information strategically, to communicate with each other as much they are a means for people to share information with me, the researcher, and you, the reader.

Overview of Chapters

⁸⁸ Brigden 2018.

After this introductory chapter, Chapter Two (Shelter Vision) compiles shelter work snapshots to describe a typical day at La Casita. Beginning with a migrants' near-death encounter with the train that nearly goes unnoticed by shelter workers, this chapter asks what can be seen from within a shelter's walls. I describe how as shelter workers juggle documentation, sustenance, and publicity amid a constant churn of people passing through, La Casita becomes a space where the public secret of undocumented migration is both revealed and concealed. As shelter workers churn through intake procedures, meal preparation, and the struggle to maintain a clean space for migrants, I show how shelter workers develop "shelter vision" as they become inured to the border spectacle at the same time that they work to cultivate sympathy and solidarity.

Chapter Three (Evidencing Violence and Care in Transit) focuses on how shelter workers at La Casita rely on objects like backpacks, donated clothing, and portable speakers to implicitly navigate the troubled intersections of humanitarianism and human smuggling. One way that shelters foster legitimacy in the eyes of the state is by maintaining an explicit "no smugglers allowed" stance. In doing so, shelter work appears to align itself with state initiatives that justify intensified policing along transit corridors in the name of protecting defenseless victims from exploitative smugglers. In practice, however, shelter workers recognize that encounters between smugglers and migrants are not uniformly exploitative. They also involve intimacy, solidarity, and mutuality. While shelter workers are well aware of how some smugglers take advantage of migrants, they also acknowledge that many migrants view traveling with a guide as more viable, even more desirable. Therefore, drawing a firm line between migrants and smugglers is dubious, especially as the Southern Border Program increasingly leads people who are stuck in transit to turn to the work of smuggling as means of getting by and making do. I examine how shelter workers rely on the things that migrants pick up, carry, and leave behind to interpret and respond

to these ambiguities of violence and care. I argue that in addition to the lengthiness and uncertainty of bureaucratic processes, these practices may contribute to migrants foregoing opportunities for formal humanitarian recognition in favor of continuing dangerous undocumented journeys. I also suggest that this situation has broader implications for social service work where talking explicitly about certain forms of evidence may further endanger people who are in vulnerable situations.

Chapter Four (Bullet Wounds and the Politics of Hospitality) explores how, in addition to a “no smugglers allowed” stance, shelters also rely on religious traditions of hospitality to align their work with state humanitarian frameworks while simultaneously distancing themselves from economies of corruption that permeate politics in Mexico, where 99% of crimes go unprosecuted. I draw on scholarship that examines hospitality as both an ethical imperative and a calculated political performance to show how pursuing humanitarian recognition goes beyond the idealized defense of migrants’ human rights. I also consider how shelters understand the risks and rewards associated with broader notoriety as the funding ecology surrounding Mexico’s shelter assemblage shifts from local support for short-term aid to international support for more professionalized forms of humanitarianism. This chapter examines how shelter workers at La Casita seek to maintain a single moral face while dialoguing with duplicitous state functionaries whom shelter workers presume to be complicit in sustaining widespread impunity. I examine this catch-22 by following shelter workers as they pursue formal humanitarian recognition over the course of four months with Gustavo, a Nicaraguan man who is shot through the chest while riding the train. I argue that shelter workers’ attempts to appear morally unsullied illuminates the limitations of human rights frameworks in places where the line between organized crime and authorized crime is unclear. I also suggest that these dynamics have broader implications for practitioners assisting people who are fleeing countries, communities, and situations where corruption is the norm.

Chapter Five (A Chutes and Ladders Interlude) traces Gustavo's circuitous journey after having received the humanitarian visa at La Casita. The journey takes him north to the resort town of Cabo San Lucas on the Baja Peninsula, and then south to Huixtla, Chiapas, a town known for robberies and kidnappings that is infamous among migrants. This chapter is an inflection point where I turn the focus to how people who receive formal humanitarian recognition in Mexico navigate intersecting moral economies after leaving the "exceptional" space of shelters. The gap between human rights rhetoric and the violent reality of immigration enforcement is particularly stark within migrant shelters; however, focusing on the exceptional aspect of shelters runs the risk of overlooking how humanitarian labors are interlinked with the much more routine and everyday struggles that undocumented communities face beyond the transit context. With that in mind, this chapter and those that make up the second half of the dissertation focus on the ways that people like Gustavo and Rolando, a Salvadoran migrant, depend on each other to make do as the process of crossing Mexico comes to look less like a straight line and more like a game of Chutes and Ladders.

Guided by shelter workers' doubts about the long-term efficacy of formal humanitarian recognition, I follow Gustavo in Chapter Six (Fabricating Fragile Futures in the Near North) to a welding job he finds on the outskirts of Monterrey, Mexico's northern metropolis. Six months after receiving his humanitarian visa, Gustavo is working for a man named Chava who has recently returned home after becoming fed up with the stress and isolation of working undocumented in Denver. Gustavo finds the job through Rolando, a Salvadoran whom he met at a shelter in Southern Mexico before being shot. Rolando has been recently recognized as an asylee in Mexico after fleeing death threats from MS-13 gang members. I show how sexually suggestive playful insults, or *mamadas*, are central to how men like Gustavo, Rolando, and Kique recalibrate ideas about

masculinity as they joke about whether someone has had the opportunity to “get screwed over” in the United States. I argue that these dynamics are emblematic of what I refer to as an ethic of tentative settlement as Mexico shifts from being known solely as a space of transit to also being known as a place of settlement. Just as long-term aid shifts hospitality dynamics within migrant shelters, tentative settlement reformulates moral framings of domination and dependence as different migrant communities cross paths. Mexicans and Central Americans go from sharing in being screwed over by the United States to also screwing each other over in Mexico as they struggle to make do in the here and now, provide for family members back home, and plan for the possibility of crossing over the U.S.-Mexico border.

Chapter Seven (The Afterlife of Participatory Photography) explores participatory photo elicitation with people who are on the move along criminalized pathways. This chapter is based on a single interview with Rolando that took place days after Donald Trump took the U.S. presidency. The interview revolves around a series of seemingly innocuous photos that he took of his surroundings in Monterrey in the context of my research; photos of a bare mattress, a hot plate, and a sparsely furnished room. These images speak to migration as a process of recovery, especially for someone like Rolando who is fleeing the traumas of gang violence and pursuing sobriety, but they also speak to how asylees sometimes rely on the people from whom they are fleeing. Throughout the interview, Rolando reveals that he has been using the photographs to convince his brothers, both of whom are active MS-13 gang members, that he is now trustworthy enough that they should front him money to pay a smuggler who can get him across the U.S.-Mexico border. Aware that having a place to stay in the United States can be just as important as making it across the border, Rolando also uses the photos to negotiate immunity from extortion for a friend who he hopes to stay with in New York if he is able to make it across the border. These

negotiations further exemplify how an ethic of tentative settlement is being formulated as the threat of deportation and displacement reverberates through transborder social networks.

Each of following chapters offers a window into how policing along Mexico's transit corridors has not only exacerbated the violence and suffering as Central Americans are pushed into the "shadow of the beast," but also how these shifts are reconfiguring the diverse care networks that migrants rely on as they pursue dignified lifeways. Beginning within migrant shelters like La Casita and moving to places where migrants tentatively settle, these chapters describe how undocumented pathways are being constructed, sustained, and reformulated in ways that complicate distinctions between the formal and the informal, human rights and human dignity, violence and care. As I discuss in the concluding chapter, this is an ongoing process. In many ways, this dissertation foreshadows what has come to be known as "Remain in Mexico," a still amoebic policy that requires Central American asylum seekers to wait in Mexico while their applications for refugee status are determined in the U.S. As neo-fascist figures take political seats across the globe, it is important that we as academics, social service providers, family members, and neighbors think seriously about how to maneuver in this context. In raising the specter of fascism, I am not trying to be hyperbolic, but I also don't think that we as practitioners can get away with framing these issues as we so often do, in terms of an ethical dilemma or by limiting our field of vision to how we can help undocumented people overcome barriers to public benefits and other social services in the United States. The fact of the matter is that the very people we are working with here in the United States often have friends and family members who are en route, people sitting in a musty shelter infirmary who have just been shot at while hopping freight trains, people who are hoping that someone like Berta who is working in a midwestern meatpacking plant can wire them money so that they can connect with a smuggler to take them the rest of the way.

CHAPTER 2

Shelter Vision

Paula:

When I arrived, really there were few who passed through, two or three a day, sometimes nobody at all. So, shelter work was actually really tranquil. Then in 2014 it started to pick up. We started having ten, fifteen, thirty every day. But this year it's like, 'wow!' Now we're having days with sixty or seventy on a regular basis. And suddenly you're like, 'What do I do?!' You start getting angry at everyone because you start to lose control. And that stress provokes you. Do I give out clothing donations, do I focus on preparing the meals, or do I hand out soap and toilet paper? And you're like, 'Who is here to help me?' You're completely alone with sixty strangers who are even more stressed out and you just say, 'What do I do?!' So, yea, sometimes things get away from you because of the feeling of 'I can do something to help.' At the same time that you try to close yourself off emotionally to an extent, you still get carried away. Often, I've felt myself becoming numb to what people are going through. I don't think it's good to be like that. You lose that bravery that it takes to really help someone. But it's also necessary to be a little insensitive.

Sandra:

There are five of us on the team doing what in other organizations it takes 20 people to do. Your day starts at 8:00 A.M. when you arrive to open the shelter. By 8:30 A.M. you need to have breakfast ready for thirty people. Then you divide your time coordinating cleaning and registration because by 11:00 A.M. you need to start preparing the next meal, except now it's for 50 people because twenty more have arrived throughout the morning. Then you clean your kitchen again and all of a sudden, it's 3:00 P.M. Then you take some time to write up notes, maintain contact with potential funders, and search for new volunteers. So, in the end, a person that works with the shelter ends up being a chef, a psychologist, a social worker, a political scientist, and an

accountant. And on top of it all, you try to figure out how to cover your own expenses. This work isn't seen as "work." Even amongst ourselves, we talk about "collaborating," not working. I'm constantly confronting people in my own family who tell me, "that's not work." We really need to revalorize this kind of work. For better or worse, what we are doing just takes over everything in your mind. But it also means that you're constantly on edge. It's like there is this little voice telling you to stay alert because some pollero might show up, or 100 people might pass through in a single day, or someone has their foot chopped off by the train and you have to rush to the hospital.

I get off the bus to the shelter a quarter mile or so from my normal stop. Four men I served lunch to yesterday are walking along the road. "You're still here, huh?" I ask as they approach. It is 7:00 A.M. and the sun is just cresting the hills in the distance. The bus driver's eyes inquire from the rearview mirror when I call for the stop, 'Here? Do you know what you're doing?'

His look of concern doesn't surprise me. Folks in town see people they presume to be migrants—people trudging along with their ad hoc wardrobes and brimming backpacks—and they tend to keep their heads down. Even people I know well, people who are supportive of migrants and who otherwise have no problem telling me what they think about all kinds of things, avoid interactions with people they think are Central Americans. Take Mario, for example, the owner of a convenience store not far from the tracks who regularly donates food to the shelter. "What do I think about migrants?" he tells me during an interview, "Oh, I don't know. I'm glad that shelter is there so I don't have people asking for free food all hours of the day. If they don't mess with me, I don't mess with them."

I climb the embankment and sit down on the rails. A hearty aroma wafts down from where a vendor is selling tamales up the street. Once they catch up to me, I notice that one of the men is wearing a faded purple shirt wrapped around his head. I recognize it from the pile of donated clothing I was sorting through yesterday at La Casita. When he hitches his pack, a soot-covered sky-blue sweater that is a couple of sizes too small rides up on his waist, revealing three layers of pants. He answers my question before I can ask it, "Every damn train that went by last night was

headed south,” he says, “We talked to one of the workers in the railway yard and he said we could probably sleep in that abandoned house back there.”

Another man points down the road to the decaying structure that I’ve passed countless times on my daily commute. The faux-leather material on his jacket is peeling off and a piece of wire wrapped around his forefoot holds the sole of his right shoe in place. The other man, who has luminous green eyes, remains silent. I tell them that I’m familiar with the ostentatious shell of a house. My landlord Raul has told me that Cesar, the man who had it built, lives in Chicago. Like Raul, the majority of people in this area have a family member who has migrated to the United States. Many have migrated themselves. Most homes in the area have been built with remittances, and like Cesar’s, most of these houses sit empty.⁸⁹ I tell the men about Cesar and Raul. “Maybe one day I too will be lucky enough to abandon a house in my home country,” the man with the purple shirt wrapped around his head comments wryly.

When we hear a train whistle sound in the distance, the man with the green eyes runs down the tracks heading south in the direction of the approaching train. “This guy’s crazy,” the man with the tattered jacket murmurs. Repurposed concrete railway ties that are planted vertically like fence-posts line either side of the tracks in ten-foot increments. The railway company installed what members of the shelter team call *postes*, or posts, in 2011, the same year the shelter opened its doors. Similar barriers have been installed in other towns across Mexico, supposedly to deter piracy. Here, the posts have taken several limbs and lives over the past five years. I want to know his name in case something happens, but the other men don’t know his actual name. “We call him Gato.” the man with the purple head-wrap tells me, “For his eyes.”

⁸⁹ For a discussion of what she calls “remittance houses,” see Lopez (2010).



Figure 2.1: Migrants watching the train pass by through a tunnel of concrete posts

Gato—Cat Man—stops at a break in the posts where a small street crosses the tracks. A few moments later, a rush of air follows the northbound engine as it rumbles by us, air brakes screaming. Most of the cars are grain hoppers, the best cars to ride. Cutouts designed to funnel material such as corn, beans, plastic pellets, or fertilizer to chutes located on the bottom of each car create a small covered area on either end of the car. The cutouts are the perfect spot to hunker down, out of the wind and out of sight. “You can’t see what’s coming down when you sit down there, but they can’t see you either,” a veteran of the crossing tells me. At this point, it’s unclear whether the train will stop altogether or just slow down a bit while cruising through town. The rail cars are moving just slow enough so that Gato can take a few steps, grab onto a rail car ladder, and plant his feet on the bottom rung. But the train isn’t moving slowly enough to allow him the half-second he needs to climb further up the ladder and clear the oncoming posts. In a flash, he hooks



Figure 2.2: Railway guard rides past the La Casita

his arm into a ladder rung at the elbow, jams his feet in extra tight along the lower rungs, and tries to squeeze his body into the space between the posts and the train. Then Gato's backpack slaps into the first concrete post. He's thrown off balance and as he goes to readjust the second post slams into his hips. My stomach sinks when I hear the grunt he makes on impact and I watch him lose his grip with one hand after the third post hits. As the fourth post approaches, he flings himself away from the train and down the embankment before the next post can reach him.

By the time we catch up to him, the train is coming to a full stop. Wide-eyed and just about hyperventilating, he pulls his pants down over his thigh to look at the sickly bruise that is already starting to form. "You land on your back like that and you expect us to call you Gato," says the man with the purple head-wrap. The joke eases some of the tension in the air. We all know how bad what just happened could have gone. When the train clears the tracks, we scramble up the embankment and look down into the shelter. A boy around eight or nine chases after the shelter's

mascot, a dog named Pulga, or Flea. The boy's mother looks on from where she sits nursing her infant daughter. They are oblivious to what has just happened.

Shelter Vision

Near-traumas like Gato's are exceptional, heart-stopping moments. Witnessing them firsthand is rare. Accidents tend to happen at night when everyone is asleep. Shelter workers usually find out about them the next morning after the victim has been carted away by a Red Cross ambulance. After a stint in the hospital, most people who lose limbs are "removed," to use the state's euphemistic term for deportation.⁹⁰ Sometimes La Casita is able to facilitate connections with shelters in southern Mexico that specialize in assisting amputees.⁹¹ Other times, the only evidence that something has occurred is a bloody shoe lying between the tracks. On a broad level, the deadliness of the journey across Mexico is staggering.⁹² In the context of everyday shelter work, however, the violence of the route is concealed in routine efforts to keep the shelter running smoothly. As I shuttle back and forth between the pot of rice cooking on the stove and the thirty intakes we need to complete in the next half hour, I close myself off somewhat to the deadly gauntlet that awaits people beyond the shelter's walls.

At La Casita, I integrate myself into the shelter's daily routine, taking shifts when the shelter can most use my help. At first, I am an extra hand for shelter workers in charge. Later, I

⁹⁰ See De Genova (2018) for a discussion of how the punitive and violent reality of deportation is often sanitized through banal procedural euphemisms like "return," "reunification," "transfer."

⁹¹ For a discussion of how migrants navigate amputation, see Vogt's chapter on "embodied mobilities" (2018, 105).

⁹² Various reports estimate that tens of thousands of Central Americans who have attempted the journey remain unaccounted for. It is likely that these estimates are significant undercounts. See, for example, Doering-White, Frank-Vitale, and De León (2017).

become the one in charge for certain shifts. Participant observation is a hallmark of ethnography, but I often feel insecure that I am focusing too much on participating in the work of shelter and too little on observing the work of shelter.⁹³ At certain points, especially when the number of migrants passing through the shelter escalates suddenly, a pang of anxiety hits me as I realize I have been so physically and emotionally drained by consecutive twelve-hour shifts that I have gone days without writing fieldnotes or recording a single interview. Taking time to write it all down while the rest of the crew keeps grinding feels like an injustice. I keep my head down and keep working. After a while, the posts simply fade into the background. I develop shelter vision.

Several months into my fieldwork, a colleague from the U.S. visits La Casita and shadows me through a typical day. She helps serve and prepare lunch, listens in on a few intake interviews, and helps sort through bags of donated clothing before we start the process all over again in preparation for dinner. After my shift, which feels entirely routine, we head to a café for dinner. We talk about her recent move from Detroit to Chicago, what she should do during her visit to Mexico City, and then she pauses as if something has been bothering her and asks, “You do that every day? Are you O.K.? And what the *fuck* is with those posts?!”

This chapter is a composite⁹⁴ of multiple days and people that juxtaposes the routinization of shelter work with the tendency to portray undocumented migration through what De Genova refers to as the “spectacle of immigration enforcement.”⁹⁵ Whether through walls,⁹⁶ checkpoints,⁹⁷

⁹³ A broad body of scholarship around “engaged” or “activist” anthropology examines these tensions. See, for example, Kirsch 2018; Low and Merry 2010; Clarke 2010; Hale 2006.

⁹⁴ For a discussion of the limits and benefits of composite narratives in ethnographic writing, see Humphreys and Watson 2005; De León 2015; Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, and Le 2014.

⁹⁵ De Genova 2013.

⁹⁶ Brown 2010.

⁹⁷ Coleman 2012.

deserts,⁹⁸ detention centers,⁹⁹ or the unmarked squad cars that pull up in the wee hours to raid apartment buildings where undocumented families live,¹⁰⁰ scholars of undocumented migration have tended to focus on scenes of interdiction. De Genova argues that this tendency to focus on policing reinforces an association of immigration with illegality and “conceals [...] the public secret of a sustained recruitment of ‘illegal’ migrants as undocumented labor.”¹⁰¹ Differently, shelters are places where the public secret of undocumented migration is rendered disconcertingly commonplace. As I discuss in the following chapters, more and more migrants are seeking long-term aid within shelters as immigration enforcement has intensified, a phenomenon that raises several organizational and ethical challenges for shelter workers. However, in spite of these shifts, the vast majority of migrants still pass through shelters like La Casita rather quickly before continuing on their way. Most migrants stay no longer than a single night, sometimes two. I argue that the endless work of attending to so many people passing through shelters like La Casita leads shelter workers to develop shelter vision, a way of seeing without recognition, one that takes in as much as possible without attributing a sense of identity or intentionality to people passing through the space of shelter.

Many of the vignettes that make up this chapter revolve around the materiality of shelter work, ranging from piles of donated clothing to the ways that money transfers are implicated in everyday tensions of visibility and concealment. Shelter workers at La Casita take down the names of everyone that passes through the shelter, but people do not always share their real names. Like the “survival plays” that Brigden describes, nicknames are not only a term of endearment, they are

⁹⁸ De León 2013.

⁹⁹ Bosworth 2014.

¹⁰⁰ Lopez 2016.

¹⁰¹ De Genova 2013, 1185.

also a safety measure.¹⁰² Kidnappings are notoriously commonplace along the route and those who have survived them often recount their names being used, often via Facebook, to contact family members and close acquaintances who might be coerced into paying a ransom fee.¹⁰³ In this context, migrants and shelter workers often refer to each other by their physical traits, like the fact that they have curly hair, *pelo chino* as many Hondurans say, or that someone is *chele*, light-skinned. As in the opening vignette recounting Gato's near accident, I refer to people by their names,¹⁰⁴ but also by nicknames or the clothes they are wearing. I do this not to objectify, but to communicate the tensions of empathy and anonymity that characterize the shelter's daily grind. Spend enough time amid the incessant churn of people whose lives are on the line and you become anesthetized to the border spectacle slapping you across the face at every turn. Shelter workers find themselves, as Paula explains in the interview excerpt that I have included in this chapter's epigraph, "[B]ecoming numb to what people are going through." The grotesque comes to feel routine.

Sensational moments can shock us into a more critical awareness of what others are suffering, but they also run the risk of normalizing problematic associations. In her work in Brazil with people who earn a living by collecting and selling recyclables that they pick from open-air trash dumps, Kathleen Millar writes about the tendency for people's precarious livelihoods to become associated with the discarded objects that they sort through. Millar describes how well-intentioned scholarly discourses that aim to highlight how institutions produce suffering, like referring to homeless people in Russia as the "excrement of the state,"¹⁰⁵ or asylums as "zones of

¹⁰² Brigden 2017.

¹⁰³ For a discussion of kidnapping and disappearance in the context of undocumented migration through Mexico, see Doering-White, Frank-Vitale, and De León (2017).

¹⁰⁴ Still pseudonyms, of course.

¹⁰⁵ Højdestrand 2009, 20.

social abandonment,”¹⁰⁶ can “reinforce the notion of human disposability.”¹⁰⁷ “[To] repeatedly invoke images of waste, abandonment, excrement, exhaust, dumping, garbage, and disposal in contemporary ethnography,” writes Millar, “can lead us to imagine that they really are disposable people.”¹⁰⁸ Like the trash that people collect in Brazil, the piles of life-jackets that line the beaches of southern Europe and the mounds of backpacks abandoned by migrants crossing through the desert of southern Arizona are easily redeployed to support racially-inflected claims that immigrants are “trashing” the United States and Europe. “Migrant ‘trash,’” writes Jason De León, “has become the physical evidence used by anti-immigrant activists to demonstrate that Latino border crossers are destroying America.”¹⁰⁹ This chapter shows how shelter workers navigate these politics of association and stigmatization, both noticing and overlooking different kinds of evidence in order to keep La Casita running smoothly day in and day out.

I want to be careful to tease my understanding of shelter vision apart from compassion fatigue. Compassion fatigue is often linked with the work of Charles Figley, a mental health practitioner and social work scholar who defines the terms as a “more user-friendly term for secondary traumatic stress disorder” in which a person has “experienced indirectly the primary traumatic stressors through helping those who had experienced these traumas: helping in such roles as nurse, social workers, rape counselor, or other roles and activities.”¹¹⁰ This idea is clearly salient for shelter workers and for social workers more broadly.¹¹¹ Just as Paula describes “becoming numb,” a key symptom of compassion fatigue according to Figley is “persistent avoidance of

¹⁰⁶ Biehl 2013.

¹⁰⁷ Millar 2018, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Millar 2018, 7.

¹⁰⁹ De León 2015, 170.

¹¹⁰ Figley 2002, 3.

¹¹¹ See, for example, Bride and Figley 2007.

stimuli associated with the trauma and numbing of general responsiveness.”¹¹² However, compassion fatigue tends to assume a politics of care that is distinct from my own understanding of shelter vision. Figley describes compassion fatigue as a popularized version of more clinical terms like ‘secondary victimization,’ ‘secondary traumatic stress.’ and ‘emotional contagion.’ Understood in terms of the transference of distress from client to practitioner, compassion fatigue evokes associations that are similar to De Genova’s critique of the “spectacle,” Millar’s critique of terms that link informal labor with disposability, and the way De León links migrant artifacts and the idea that migrants are “trashing” the United States.

What is seen within shelters is only a small slice of the broader social process of undocumented migration through Mexico. Not all migrants access shelters while crossing Mexico. Many see them as a last resort reserved for those who cannot afford a smuggler or the exorbitant fees that migrants are often charged by innkeepers, taxi drivers, and shop attendants.¹¹³ Nonetheless, shelters have been central to how the social and political process of undocumented migration through Mexico has been represented. Most portrayals of the Central American migrant trail rely on shelters as a point of access. If shelters are acknowledged at all in these accounts, they tend to be portrayed as ‘safe spaces’ for accessing ‘hard-to-reach’ populations.¹¹⁴ This perspective risks overlooking the fact that migrants may be wary of saying how they *really* feel about the aid

¹¹² Figley 2002, 4.

¹¹³ See Vogt (2018, 161) for a discussion of these surcharges as evidence of what she refers to as the “everyday discrimination” that migrants often face while traveling through Mexico.

¹¹⁴ Even ethnographers who provide a nuanced look at the everyday encounters that underlie the border spectacle tend to pass over more mundane interactions between shelter workers and migrants. Wendy Vogt, for example, who describes her fieldwork within shelters as “ethnography at the depot,” describes how “situated, long-term fieldwork observing daily realities” was key for developing long-term relationships with migrants (24). Vogt mentions participating in the daily work of keeping a shelter running, but mainly as a means of developing relationships with migrants with whom she may have only have a few hours to interact.

they are receiving, people may feel pressured to overstate or understate what they have seen along the way in order to elicit sympathy or please the researcher,¹¹⁵ and people who say they are migrants may not be.

I want to distinguish shelter vision from compassion fatigue in order to avoid a sense that migrant shelters are safe spaces at risk of contagion. While compassion fatigue is often discussed as if it is something that you catch, like a cold, I see shelter vision as something that you develop; it is a way of strategically not seeing certain things. What Paula describes as “numbing” is not only a coping mechanism in the face of a seemingly incessant flow of people experiencing acute traumas, it is also indicative of a more affirmative and nuanced politics of concealment in which not asking too many questions is central to maintaining and managing the space of shelter. Shelter vision is a sideways glance that allows you to listen in on someone’s story about being robbed by railway guards just outside the kitchen door while making sure that you don’t burn the rice. Shelter vision is wondering if you are reading too much into the way someone blinks their eyes as they tell you what they have suffered with what feels like a little too much enthusiasm. Shelter vision is troubling, but as Paula explains, “it’s also necessary to be a little insensitive.”

7:30 A.M.

As we scramble down the embankment along a trail of loose gravel, the hobbling Gato holds on to my shoulder for support until I slip on a loose rock and fall flat on my ass. When I left the shelter around five yesterday afternoon, there were ten people planning to spend the night. Now, around thirty men and women are sleeping just outside the shelter door. Some lay side by side covered from head to toe in thin blankets or black trash bags cut open along the sides to form a make-shift

¹¹⁵ For a discussion of this dynamic, see De León 2015, 314 fn. 30.

tarp. Others who are already awake huddle around a pile of burning trash that they've built up against an old railway tie. They chuckle at my fall.

A man whose wide smile reveals three gold teeth says to the man with the tattered leather jacket, "So you found a new guide, huh? He doesn't look too sure on his feet. Does he know how to get us into this shelter? The Guatemalan in there that thinks he runs the place won't let us in. We spent the whole night out here freezing. Heh! Typical, right? It's always our own Central American brothers that screw us over the most. Good thing you found a white boy to show you the way."

The man with the gold teeth is referring to La Casita's *velador*, the night guard, a man named Ever. Four years ago, railway guards beat Ever and his brother Pepe after they refused to



Figure 2.3: Migrants waiting for La Casita to open

pay a bribe to ride the train. Pepe returned home to a fishing village near Puerto Barrios on Guatemala's Atlantic coast while Ever stayed at the shelter to recuperate. Three years on, Ever is resigned to the idea that the injury has ruled out both returning to fishing work back home and the roofing jobs he'd worked farther up the coast line in New Orleans after hurricane Katrina. Now he cobbles together enough of a living to send twenty dollars home each month and rent a room a few blocks from the shelter. In the mornings, he loads up his utility tricycle and sells tamales, sweet breads, and instant coffee to workers at a nearby Coca-Cola bottling factory. The tricycle then becomes his scrap collector in the afternoons as he gathers recyclables from shops around town. At 7:00 P.M., when the shelter closes its door to new arrivals, Ever returns to the shelter and begins his night shift. Often, he picks up a pirated DVD while making his scrap metal rounds and puts it



Figure 2.4: Ever's tricycle

on in the men's dormitory. Then, around 10:00 P.M., he lays out his mattress on the floor of the small room where extra supplies are stored, disconnects the door bell, and—much to the chagrin of those who arrive in the middle of the night and are left out in the cold—he sleeps.

For the next few minutes, I sit with the men I've walked up with. The smell of smoldering plastic and the creosote-coated railway tie is noxious, but also sweet. "I assume you want an interview," the man with the gold teeth comments before I can ask. I lay my recorder down on the tracks where others who are lingering around us can see it. "Reporter, student, or academic?" He asks, letting me know he is already familiar with my kind from shelters farther south. Then he turns to Gato, who is trying to get his attention.

Gato: You guys got on with us in Medias Aguas, right? At night, no?

Gold Teeth: *Sí ombé*—yea man—at night.

Gato: Heading towards Tierra Blanca, right? And up ahead there were guards inspecting the train with flashlights, so we stopped the train and ran ahead.

Gold Teeth: It was you guys that disconnected the brake lines. That's when I joined up with these guys. And from there the train took us to Orizaba.

Gato: It's not like it used to be, *berdá'mano*? Right brother?

Gold Teeth: It's almost all on foot these days.

A few minutes later, the interview is interrupted when Paula's brother drops her off at the corner and stands there watching, arms crossed, as she tiptoes around those still sleeping on the concrete walkway up to the shelter. She has been a member of the shelter team for three years now and is still trying to convince her family that the work isn't as dangerous as it seems. "We'll be right with you," Paula tells the disgruntled crowd as we slip into the shelter. It is late September of 2015 and a little over a year has passed since the Southern Border Program was announced. After crossing into Mexico from Guatemala, many migrants are walking for days along rural highways,

diving through barbed wire fences into the cover of jungle undergrowth when oncoming traffic comes into view. Steaming hot pavement melts the glue that holds shoe soles together and half-dollar-sized blisters blossom on people's feet. Mosquitos feast where migrants lay, exhausted, waiting to continue their journeys under the somewhat cooler cover of darkness. These are just the first few days of what, for people who don't currently have money for a smuggler, can become a months-long journey of hopping from shelter to shelter. Once migrants reach towns like Tenosique, Palenque, and Arriaga where access to railways begins, traveling by train occurs in fits and starts as migrants play a game of cat and mouse with the various groups of people looking to make a dime off of them. This includes immigration agents, railway workers, police and military forces at all levels of government. Groups of people loosely affiliated with organized crime outfits—many of whom are Central Americans themselves—charge migrants a fee or “cuota” to ride the train.¹¹⁶

The Southern Border Program was announced as an effort to “bring order” to the flow of commerce through Mexico, largely by closing the train to the informal economies that surround it, like the *cuota system* and the systematic theft of goods transported via railway, which is often referred to as the *huachicol*. Railway robberies are especially common along the stretch of tracks south of La Casita.¹¹⁷ Tracing the landscape's shift from the petroleum-rich coastal jungle of Veracruz into the high desert of Mexico's central plateau, the train ascends slowly through

¹¹⁶ De León n.d.

¹¹⁷ In September of 2017, for example, a grain collective in the nearby state of Puebla reported 25 million pesos (about 1.3 million dollars) in losses after 5 tons of soy and corn were stolen from rail cars (<http://www.eluniversal.com.mx/cartera/economia/avicultores-sufren-perdidas-por-inseguridad-en-trenes>). In a more recent news report, police video shows a group of 20-30 individuals loading materials from an open intermodal container into waiting truck beds while Mexican soldiers who clearly outnumber the thieves stand by.

(https://newsstand.google.com/articles/CAIiED8ryVSIDbtH_tREZaANLS4qGQgEKhAIACoHC AowwbjvCjCB3bYCMNm6gwM).

switchbacks and tunnels, providing ample opportunity for thieves to board the train, release the air brakes, and pop open containers before filling waiting truck-beds with flat-screen TVs and pumping portable cisterns full of crude petroleum. These robberies form part of the border spectacle. A 2017 newspaper article from the nearby state of Puebla begins with the headline, “Largest Train Robbery in the History of Puebla Committed!” then goes on to list off an almost unbelievable amount of purloined goods: “They took 5 million pesos, they extracted 900 tons of grain, they lifted 20 vehicles, and they did it like in a movie (*peliculoso*).”¹¹⁸

In 2014, migrants I spoke with largely saw themselves as more or less peripheral to these economies of piracy. Most migrants saw railway guards as concerned with the goods within intermodal containers, not the people riding them. Organized crime networks were able to maintain effective control of the train. “They’re as afraid of them as we are,” one man explained to me in July of 2014, referring to the guards’ attitudes toward the Zetas, the cartel known to control the train in the region. When I returned for long-term fieldwork a year later, however, this dynamic had shifted. “The last time I came through here, the *garroteros* weren’t like they are now,” a man named José lamented as he helped me prepare the afternoon meal in La Casita’s kitchen in September of 2015, “They even kept the *mareros* away from us. You know, if you gave them a little money for a soda. I mean, they were screwing us over, but they also protected us from the *mareros*. It was a *trato digno*.” A dignified treatment.

The development of Mexico’s railway system was central to the consolidation of institutionalized dictatorship when steel tracks were laid nationwide in the second half of the 19th

¹¹⁸ <https://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2017/09/07/1186601>



Figure 2.5: “Dozens organize to empty railway containers”¹¹⁹

century.¹²⁰ “Though fashioned strictly in practical terms of railroad transportation,” Teresa Van Hoy writes, “this elaborate edifice was undergirded by a new definition of the rights of citizenship” (5). Railways became fertile ground for debates about dependency and sovereignty as epitomized the promises of integrating, but they also portended its pitfalls. A century later, the privatization of Mexico’s railways in 1995 has set the stage for the country’s railways to become a key site in the battle between formal and informal economies in the broader context of “drug war capitalism.”¹²¹ These days, railways are front and center over the battle between cartels and corporations for control of commodity pathways.

¹¹⁹ Video still from Excelsior TV report posted on Youtube (Excelsior TV 2017).

¹²⁰ Van Hoy 2008, 5. For more on the historical development of Mexico’s railways, see also Lewis (2007).

¹²¹ Paley 2014.

The Southern Border program and the string of similar initiatives that precede it are emblematic of neoliberal restructurings in the final decades of the 20th century that, in the name of cultivating market environments that are amenable to corporate investment, have exacerbated reliance on the very informal economies they aim to interdict.¹²² In this context, formal and informal economies are so intertwined as to become indistinguishable. As Kathleen Millar argues, the term “informal economy” is increasingly inadequate as a way of distinguishing “real work.”¹²³ Millar focuses on people who see their work sorting recyclables at a trash dump in Brazil not as an illegitimate and stigmatized form of labor, but as a means of living a dignified life in spite of an exploitative wage labor system. Smuggling, drug dealing, and even humanitarian aid work are similarly stigmatized forms of labor that do not fit neatly into a formal/informal economic dichotomy.

Many of the people I spend time with view intensified policing along railways not as eradicating the *cuota* system, but as simply shifting economies of corruption in Central Mexico. Those who extort migrants to ride the train near La Casita, formerly gangs and cartels, are now semi-private police forces known as *garroteros*.¹²⁴ Paula explains the change accordingly:

When I first started, it was all Zetas. They were the ones kidnapping, killing, harvesting organs, “recruiting” people to work for them as spies (*halcones*), you know, hiring someone to get phone numbers out of people or to find someone who would be good to kidnap. That was around like 2012. In 2013 you started hearing more about gangs working the tracks (*pandilleros trabajando las vías*). Since last year, 2014, the main enemies are the railway guards (*garroteros*) that are contracted by the railway company. That’s what’s happening here in Central Mexico at least. Guards have always messed with migrants, but now they’re shooting to kill. We’ve taken on some cases, but we know from migrants’

¹²² Galemba 2008.

¹²³ Millar 2018, 9-16.

¹²⁴ In Mexico, the term *garrotero* has historically referred to a train’s “brake man,” the person tasked with manipulating track switches and the coupling and decoupling of cars.¹²⁴ As in the past, contemporary *garroteros* are supposed to keep the flow of goods running smoothly. But while *garroteros* of the past did so by controlling the train’s brakes, modern *garroteros* tend to do so by using their assault rifles to deter groups that pilfer goods and materials from railway cars.

testimonies that there are many more who are killed, and we never have any evidence other than what people say they've seen. And we see this as part of the Southern Border Program. I mean, we also hear about migration agents attacking migrants. They say they have a human rights approach, that they are "rescuing" migrants, but it's not really a rescue, it's arbitrary detention that is anti-constitutional, anti-human rights. They kick them and beat them, sometimes just outside the door of the shelter, which is completely illegal. So, migration agents and railway guards have the same aim: hunting migrants. They're doing your dirty work, making sure that only the people you want in the United States arrive, people that are willing to do anything to work for nothing.

Shelter workers at La Casita struggle to come to terms with these shifts. Paula's brother watches to make sure she makes it from the car to the shelter door because he remembers the crew of *cobra-cuotas* (fee collectors) who spent most of their days relaxing on pieces of cardboard, sipping on cane liquor, and monitoring the shelter. "Things are much calmer now," Paula tells me during an interview, "Two years ago there was a group of *cobra-cuotas* that controlled things around here. They would just sit there on the tracks all day, watching people come and go from the shelter so they knew who to charge on the train. They knew all of our names, what time we got to work, and what time we left. Actually, they were kind of nice. They would usually let me bum a cigarette." Paula's laid-back recounting belies a persistent concern about violence among shelter workers. When I ask Pablo how the work of the shelter has changed, he says, "Look, there has always been violence surrounding the shelter, but the situation is getting more complicated." Pablo helped found the shelter five years ago and serves on the board, though he no longer takes on shifts at La Casita. "Before, it wasn't a crude kind of violence. You know, that kind of violence that literally assassinates, that kills. Before, you just heard about extortions and your life would go on. Now? You don't cooperate and you die." For Pablo, the shift from *mareros* charging the *cuota* to semi-private *garroteros*—a shift that the prominent migrant rights activists Alejandro Solalinde has described as a change from "organized crime to authorized crime"—is more sinister.¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Martínez 2013.

“It’s been five years since San Fernando and we still don’t know what really happened,” he continues, referring to the 72 migrants who were found massacred in an abandoned warehouse outside the town of San Fernando, Tamaulipas in 2010.¹²⁶ Investigations into the case have revealed a high likelihood of complicity from local officials. For Pablo, this situation requires the maintenance of an exacting combination of vigilance and empathy, or perhaps a combination of opening oneself up to what others have experienced while maintaining, as he puts it, a professional distance,

That uncertainty is incredibly demanding, emotionally, psychologically, and physically. It’s interminable. You daily confront faces that are utterly exhausted and traumatized. You can see the violence on their faces, right? That includes the violence of nature because they have to pass through extreme climate changes. Aggressions. It’s a big contradiction because every day you have to be very open. You have to have a spirit of help and even the ability to encourage. You have to know how to communicate, how to connect; joke a little and respect it when somebody doesn’t want to say anything at all. The person is there because migrating is a human act. And because it’s a human act, it requires a degree of professionalism.

As is common in the interviews that I conduct, Pablo is careful to use impersonal pronouns. He collapses multiple stances into a single monologue, shifting fluidly between telling his own story, saying how he thinks things should be done, and how others have been doing things.¹²⁷ In one sense, this is a matter of creating some distance from the work of shelter. At the time of the interview, he has just started a new job as a middle school civics teacher, his first formal employment since leaving the shelter. He seems to still feel a sense of shame about leaving the work that burned him out. Talking like this also allows him to not name any names, at least while the recorder is rolling, while also allowing himself some emotional distance as well.

¹²⁶ For a close examination of the San Fernando massacre, see Martínez (2016).

¹²⁷ For analysis of the impersonal you as a form a stance taking in interviews, see Myers and Lampropoulou (2012).

Pablo is especially hesitant because two weeks ago one of the shelter's most veteran team members, a semi-retired electrician named Diego was asked by the advisory board to take a break from the shelter. Migrants had started arriving at La Casita joking about the *viejo enojón*, the angry old man who has allegedly been pilfering the best items from bags of clothing donated to the shelter and insinuating that he can help connect people with a guide, so they don't have to continue on the train. Shelter work does not pay, per se. Shelter workers do receive a small *cooperación*, a stipend that covers bus fare and some incidentals, but nobody is able to support themselves solely through their shelter work, at least at La Casita. Considering that the shelter is dependent on people who are willing to do a little bit, but really quite a lot, of everything for next to nothing, the crew of dedicated *colaboradores*, or collaborators, is surprisingly consistent throughout my fieldwork.

“Collaboration” exemplifies the tension between vigilance and empathy that Pablo describes as shelter workers work to facilitate undocumented migration while remaining apart from its stigma. Without saying so directly, Pablo communicates that he can empathize with Diego. He understands how amid the perpetual stress of shelter work, it is easy for someone who is struggling to pay his bills with the shelter's *cooperación* to forget that he as an individual plays an integral role in maintaining not only La Casita, but the broader legitimacy of shelters across Mexico,

A lot of people arrive in desperate situations, people who are willing to try and ‘Do business’ with you. They’ll put money on the table or offer you something. They say, ‘You know what, I’ll give you this much and you work for me.’ Your ethics and values have to be incredibly strong to form part of a shelter. You don’t just represent the shelter. You represent an institution. You represent all the labor that came before this. You might be the face of the shelter right now, but you can’t lose sight of all the other people, from the activists in Mexico City dialoguing with senators to the guy down the street who donates a kilo of rice every couple of months. If we lose sight of that, we lose it all, all the confidence of the people that maintain this space because what we do is not only what is happening now. It’s all the other people surrounding us who are looking at what we are doing. That’s what matters.

Pablo describes the spectrum of what I am referring to as shelter vision. Shelter vision involves, as he describes it in the earlier quote, receiving whoever arrives with a radical openness and humanizing empathy. This openness, however, is double-sided. “It is a big contradiction,” as he puts it. Shelter vision, according to Pablo, is a constant struggle to “not lose sight of all the other people,” the way even mundane acts associated with shelter work are wrapped up in a political and cultural milieu that requires, as Pablo explains, “the confidence of the people who maintain this space.” Of course, not losing sight of the bigger picture is a challenge when you are trying to feed dozens of people three meals each day.

8:15 A.M.

I follow Paula into the shelter and head to the kitchen to start heating up breakfast. It’s a Monday, which means the lone refrigerator is brimming. For food, the La Casita relies almost entirely on donations from vendors at the market every Saturday. *La chingona*, as we lovingly refer to Clarita, is the compact elderly woman with sun-weathered skin who collects the food from vendors each Saturday. I like to accompany her to witness the respect that she commands and to help haul the bags of donations between the stalls. At each stall she stands silently with her bag held out until the vendor dumps in a kilo of tomatoes or a few bundles of cilantro. When she deems that one vendor has contributed enough, she nods and moves silently to the next stall until the bags are heavy and overflowing. Now the refrigerator is so full that we have to leave the leftovers out on the stovetop and hope that the night-time chill will keep things fresh until the morning. Plastic bins along the floor are full of potatoes, chayote, and tomatillos. By Friday, the food in the fridge and the bins will all have been eaten. To make do until Clarita’s next trip to the market, we’ll pass

around an empty yogurt container among the migrants and ask for spare change to buy eggs, a few tomatoes, and onions, something to doctor up the one constant: rice and beans.

Today, the leftovers haven't made it through the night. They don't quite smell right so Paula dumps them and begins roughly chopping onions and jalapeño peppers while two pounds of rice brown in oil on the stove. I start opening cans of beans and pouring them into a pot on another burner. Paula fills another pot with water and sets it to boil, covers the rice with a mixture of tomato puree and water, and lowers the heat on the pot of beans. Then she turns to me. "Ready to meet our distinguished guests?"

Paula opens the shelter's main door, apologizes for the delay, and lets everyone know what is going to happen, fluidly, confidently. She explains that she will let in four people at a time, that all belongings will be searched. Backpacks, while accessible, will be stored in a locked room. Phones, she explains, will be labeled with names written on a piece of masking tape and stored in a locked filing cabinet drawer (they cause tension when they go missing and they can also be used to pass along information about who is staying at the shelter). Smoking, Paula continues, is not allowed in the dormitory. People can come and go as they please any time before seven P.M., which is when the shelter closes for the night. She concludes, as always, by explaining that the shelter limits its hospitality to two nights. "Our resources are minimal," she tells the crowd gathered just outside the door, "We have to respect that more people are coming up behind you. This is your house. Please respect the space and each other." For the next half hour, as Paula returns to the kitchen to finish up breakfast, I welcome groups of four in through the door. I ask them to lay any bags out onto a large wooden table then I pick through their belongings as respectfully as possible. Some people carry more than they can handle. Others carry almost nothing at all:

1. A draw string back pack with a photo of Bob Marley on it. Inside are seven tortillas wrapped in paper, four packets of powdered electrolytes, a pocket-sized copy of the New Testament, a travel sized bottle of lotion, and a disposable razor.
2. A bright red duffel bag. The shoulder strap is bailing twine. Inside are a pair of flip flops, two pairs of jeans (turned inside out and carefully rolled up), a fleece blanket, and a flattened roll of toilet paper.
3. A piece of heavy black plastic folded up neatly into a bundle and tied with a piece of string so it can be worn across the back.
4. A green camouflage back pack. Inside is a pair of nail clippers, six bruised bananas, hair gel, a hooded sweater that says *Peoria Youth Basketball* in red lettering, and a cell phone with its charger.



Figure 2.6: Migrants lined up for a meal at La Casita

9 A.M.

¡A comer! Let's eat! The line of forty men and women scattered across the patio line up for breakfast. The queue reaches from the kitchen door to the back wall and curls around. Standing at the door of the kitchen, Paula instructs those gathered that after eating they should wash their dishes using the spigot at the back of the shelter and that using soap is crucial to get the grease off the bowls. She explains that intakes will take place after breakfast, and that each person should line up after they are done eating. "I've cooked you breakfast, but I'm not your mother. This house belongs to all of us, so we need to work together to keep it clean. Do I have any volunteers to sweep the patio after breakfast?" Finally, she asks if anybody would like to lead a prayer. Unlike some shelter workers who quietly insist on praying to 'María full of grace' before each meal, Paula leaves the prayer up to the guests who, as is common across Central America, tend to be Evangelical Christians, not Catholics. One of the older guests is pushed gently out of line and forty heads bow. He gathers his hands, fingers interlaced and at chest level, then spends the next three minutes asking his God to forgive his sins and the sins of his compatriots, to grant sustenance for the journey ahead, and to bless those with good hearts he encounters along the way. Many of the men are engrossed. Eyes squeezed shut, they echo the prayer in earnest whispers. For some of those who are lined up here, religion is not only a pathway to salvation, it is one of the only ways out of gang life.¹²⁸ After the amen, each person is handed a bowl of rice and beans and three tortillas. Other than the tapping of spoons and shuffling feet, a hush falls over the shelter as a plastic tub of pickled jalapeños makes it was among the crowd.

¹²⁸ For an analysis of religion as a pathway out of gang life, see O'Neill (2015).

10 A.M.

In the small office where the intake procedure takes place, there is just enough room for a small desk and two folding chairs. The only other piece of furniture is a bookshelf covered in outdated pamphlets from various human rights organizations with titles like “Yes! You as a Migrant Have Rights Too!” and “Trafficking: The Invisible Threat.” Pinned to one wall is an enlarged map of Mexico made by Medicines Sans Frontieres. It shows the locations of shelters linked together like a game of connect the dots. A chart at the bottom estimates travel times via train between each shelter. The man with the gold teeth plops down on the chair opposite Paula as she opens up a spreadsheet on the computer. I stand behind her chopping up bars of soap into small pieces that we’ll hand out, along with some toilet paper, to each new guest. The air is a mix of soapy aromatics and body odor. Similar procedures are commonplace across most shelters, so Paula starts the intake without any kind of introduction. She blazes through the questions methodically, leaving little time for the person being questioned to elaborate.

Paula: Are you carrying ID?

Gold teeth: No, no ID. I don’t carry ID anymore. What’s the point? They take everything away.

Paula: What is your name?

Gold teeth: Selvin Molina Canales.

Paula: Age?

Selvin: Thirty-three.

Paula: Country?

Selvin: Honduras.

Paula: County?

Selvin: Comayagua.

Paula: Occupation?

Selvin: Farmer. Coffee.

Paula: Why did you leave home?

Selvin: Because of the criminals. The gangs want to charge farmers *la renta* now.¹²⁹ With the drought, you can barely get by on coffee anyway and now they want us to pay their extortion fee too. I used to work construction in Houston, but they deported me three years ago. I've been trying to get back over the border ever since.

Paula: How have you been traveling?

Selvin: Mainly train. Some bus.

Paula: How many times have you made the trip?

Selvin: This is the fifth time.

Paula: How has your trip been so far?

Selvin: Honestly, it's been bad with all the new migration and raids and assaults. This trip I've already been traveling for two months and I'm barely here. Two months since I left my home in Honduras. I'm not even halfway. I'm just going little by little. I haven't been able to send anything to my family. Nothing at all. Sometimes I can't even talk with them because, I don't know, what do I tell them? Other times I've found good jobs in Mexico, working a week here, a week there. Now it seems like nobody wants to lend a hand to us migrants. I imagine they've run out of money back home.

Paula: When is the last time you spoke with your family?

Selvin: A month ago.

Paula: Ok. I'm just going to take a quick photo.... [click]. And here is some soap and toilet paper.

Selvin: Do you have any razors?

Paula: Sorry, we just ran out. Who's next!?

¹²⁹ *La renta*, or the “the “rent,” refers to extortion fees that gangs charge small businesses. Elsewhere in this dissertation, extortion fees are also referred to as *impuesto de guerra*, or the “the war tax.”

Paula will go through this routine with each individual, fitting all the pain and exhilaration of what it has taken to get this far into a few cells on a spreadsheet.

11:30 A.M.

In the kitchen, chopping up carrots and tomatoes. A twenty-year-old named Wilmer whom the others have been referring to as *Dientes*—Teeth—appears in the doorway:

Wilmer: Excuse me, can I ask you a question?

John: Sure, go ahead.

Wilmer: One of the people in charge last night, a Mexican, said he was going to receive some money from Western Union for me. I gave him the information, but he never came back. I need to know where he went and what he did with my money.

John: A guy? The person in charge last night was a woman.

Wilmer: Yea, but there was a guy here in the kitchen helping her with dinner. That guy from Tijuana with the little pieces of paper.

I know who he is talking about. A man arrived yesterday carrying a stack of prayer cards. I gave him ten pesos for one that depicted the last supper. He had been in Tijuana and said he was heading south, back home to Oaxaca. Today, he is nowhere to be seen. The prayer cards sit in a neat stack on top of the refrigerator in the kitchen. The shelter generally limits its assistance to Central Americans, but on rare occasions folks migrating to and from states with large indigenous populations and high poverty rates like Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Tabasco are in need of assistance as well. “I’ll have to talk with the director,” Paula tells him.

Until recently, one of the services that the shelter provided involved coordinating money transfers. Wary of traveling with large sums of money and losing it all in a single robbery, many migrants arrange for family members to send cash transfers at various points along the journey.

Companies like Western Union and MoneyGram require individuals with a Mexican ID card to receive wire transfers so migrants often ask if a shelter worker would be willing to fill that role. Fitting in time to receive wire transfers is logistically complicated and ethically fraught. It requires connect with family or friends in the US or Central America to share the names of sender and receiver. This means carving out time to retrieve a cell phone from where it is locked up in the office. It involves waiting for the call confirming that the transfer had been made, then taking a bus or cab to a department store in the center of town. It means waiting in line and waiting for a bus back. Sometimes it involves repeating the process because of a misspelled name or because someone flipped the order of numbers in the transfer's seven-digit code.

Two weeks ago, at the same time that Diego was asked to take a break, the board of directors informed shelter workers that they should stop retrieving money transfers from migrants. Sandra, who bounced around clerical jobs with different human rights organizations in the area before landing at La Casita, where she fell in love with the hands-on work, is troubled by the change. "People need money to travel just like you and I do," she tells me, "Besides, the *compañeros* often give a piece of what they receive back to the shelter. I mean, you should never ask for payment, but you say, 'Would you be willing to make a donation to the shelter?' – after they've received the money, of course. We all have to help each other out to keep this place running." Unable to rely on shelter workers, migrants bet on Mexican citizens they encounter who appear trustful and seem likely to not run off with the money. Dientes turns his back to us as he walks out onto the patio and lets his feeling be known to those in earshot, "I can't believe this shit. I've never been in a *casa de migrante* where the people in charge have stolen from me like this. They need to take responsibility for what happened yesterday. That dude walked around this place like he owned it. In and out of the office with the key and everything."

1:30 P.M.

Wilmer is traveling with a sixteen-year-old named Sara, whose face is covered in acne. Later in the day, after he has calmed down some, we sit in the infirmary and Sara explains that they met at the shelter in Tenosique. Sara is from the Copan district of Honduras. She hopes to study medicine one day. Her father was killed when she was eight. When I ask if she remembers him, Sara tells me that she was there when they shot him. “Who shot him?” I ask. “*Quien sabe.*” Who knows?

Sitting in the kitchen, Sara helps me roll out toilet paper. We make little mini-rolls to hand out on an as-needed basis. She asks if I know where she can get birth control. “I just started my period.” She has broad shoulders and a big gap-toothed smile. I tell her that Paula, who is at the back of the shelter wrangling a volunteer to wash dishes, might know about contraceptives. I wonder why she is telling me this story so openly, but I am not shocked that she is so forthright. That women frequently experience rape while in transit is well-known and well-documented.¹³⁰ Oscar Martínez uses the term “*cuerpomatic*,” or bodymatic to describe the way women’s bodies are used like currency to buy safety in exchange for sexual favors.¹³¹ Many women who hope to avoid sexual assault and rape nonetheless prepare for it prior to and during the journey by taking birth control pills. Working with shelter vision involves being attuned and open to revelations like these and making sure to react minimally as you pivot back to routine things like rolling toilet paper while watching a few guys pass a soccer ball around out on the patio.

¹³⁰ For a discussion of sexual violence and reproductive health along the Central American migrant trail, see Vogt (2018, 115-119).

¹³¹ Martínez 2013, xv.

After a few moments of silent folding, she continues, unprompted, “I’m just trying to get away from where I came from, maybe find some work to send money home to my mom. I ran away from her two months ago. First, I went to stay with a cousin in Yoro, but the situation there wasn’t great.” Then she seems to cut herself off, as if she has said too much. Paula comes in with the tin full of clean dishes. Sara explains that she is looking for birth control and Paula tells her that she’ll talk with her in just a minute. Sara walks out onto the patio where Wilmer is kicking a soccer ball around with a few other men. He rifles the ball right at her face. Before she can block it with her hand, the ball smashes into her head and she drops to her knees. “¡Hijo de la gran puta!” Son of a bitch! She is fierce. She is vulnerable. She is smiling. An hour later they are gone.

3:00 p.m.

Shift change. After a morning of grant writing in the office on the other side of town, Sandra arrives with a group of college students who will be completing a class project with the shelter over the next two months. Just as shelter vision involves numbing oneself to the suffering of others, it also involves attuning others to that pain by opening up the space of shelter to student groups, volunteers, journalists, and academics. The students roam around, clip-boards in hand, asking migrants questions from a survey protocol. It’s like they are doing a scavenger hunt, trying to find someone willing to answer their questions as quickly as possible. They come into the kitchen and ask Paula about the worst condition migrants arrive in. “Bullet wounds,” she tells them without missing a beat, then returns to peeling potatoes. They pause, then write down the answer before moving on to the next victim of their questioning. Some of the students ask Sandra to gather the men around so that they can pass out gift bags. The teenagers walk up to each migrant, shake hands, and give out a bag. Inside are candies, hand-knit scarves, and second-hand clothing. Once

the students are out of ear-shot, an older man chuckles, “What do they think this is? A third grader’s birthday party?” he holds up a women’s sweater with an oversized collar. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with this?” A portly Guatemalan man gestures for him to hand over the sweater. “I’ll take it if you don’t want it.” Then he stretches the collar out with his hands, places it over his head like a scarf, stands up, and poses dramatically, “I’ll kill you all with my beauty.”

4:00 p.m.

We are sitting on concrete blocks, shielding our eyes from the low afternoon sun. One of the guys I met this morning, Santos, told me earlier in the day that he recognizes me from the last time he took the trip four years ago. It is 2015. The first time I visited the shelter was a little over a year



Figure 2.7: Santos cutting hair at La Casita

ago in 2014. Migrants are not the only people who flow through shelters. Volun-tourists, priests in training, journalists, and academics visit as well. At the shelter in Tenosique, volunteers agree to stay at least three months and sleep in a separate bunk room. At La Casita, a Lutheran services organization has started sending a full-time volunteer for nine months each year. After the first volunteer, a recent college graduate, arrived in November of 2015, people started calling us ‘*Guero Uno*’ and ‘*Guero Dos*’ — ‘White Boy 1’ and ‘White Boy 2’ — so it is not surprising that Santos would confuse me with another *gringo* volunteer.

Santos is using a pair of hair clippers donated to the shelter two weeks ago by a Swedish journalist to cut the hair of those staying at the shelter. I set the voice recorder down on a stool and Santos’ client sits down, requesting a Mohawk like the one he sports. I ask Santos how his trip has been so far and his response is an hour-long, uninterrupted monologue.

You never know who you can trust, *loco*. You know, sometimes you’re like, ‘I’ve already done this, I know what’s up,’ and you start talking to people about what’s next. But being there in places like La Cementera and Salto de Agua, you can be talking about these kinds of things and not want to tell another person that’s there with you about what’s happening up ahead because you never know if someone you’re talking to or someone who is listening is one of them. Because they’re just like us. They’re Salvadorans and Hondurans, the folks that work in those organizations. Sometimes you see a person and you hold back instead of telling them what’s up ahead and where to walk to get around a checkpoint. They might start wondering how you know about what’s up ahead. They might say, ‘Hey, is this guy a guide or something?’ So, you know, you stand the chance of losing if you start giving people advice. If I tell someone not to go a certain way, I don’t have any idea who I’m talking to. There’s a lot of people farther south that have phones and all kinds of nice stuff, right? I had my phone, right? But when we got past La Cementera, you know, after Palenque, we had taken a taxi to get past the checkpoints outside of Palenque. And when we get back to the tracks, four guys come out. But it seemed suspicious to me because they weren’t dirty or anything. You know, they were dressed in just normal clothes, with a silver chain on and everything. And they yell over to us, ‘What’s up? Heading north? Us too. But watch out. The law is two hours north. You might want to take a bus.’ And I’m thinking to myself, ‘Look at the guys’ face. Not messed up or anything, clean-shaven, all trimmed up. He’s got a chain on and tattoos. What are these guys doing out in the woods?’ And they are walking up and talking with us? And so my friend whispers to me, ‘Should we go?’ And I tell him, ‘Hold on. Let’s not leave so fast. We don’t want to make it look like we’re running away.’ And they stayed there. They were just leaning against one of the cars, just chatting amongst themselves. And then an older guy comes up onto the tracks that had

been in the town. And he's got a big machete. And my friend says, 'Come on, let's walk on the other side of this guy.' And so we walk with this machete between us and them. We use him like a shield. And they shout over, 'So what, you're not going to go or what?' 'No, *pues* no. You said the police are up ahead.' So we pass by them and up ahead where the town is there's a fat guy who is always keeping an eye on the tracks. He's there smoking a joint. And I tell the fat guy, you know, he also recognized me from before. He goes, 'Hey, I saw you last time.' 'Yea,' I tell him, 'I passed through here, but they grabbed me up ahead.' And then I ask him, 'Hey, do you know those guys down there?' And he tells me that he's seen one of them with people. Like maybe they're guides. '*N'ombre*,' I tell him, 'those guys aren't moving people. Look what they're wearing. If they were moving people, they'd be all dirty and musty. Those guys give me a bad feeling.' And then he tells me, 'It's that some bad stuff is happening. They've been kidnapping around here. Ahead of La Cementera there's a little town that they call El Santuario. Supposedly those guys are from around there. I'm gonna tell you but don't let anybody know that I told you. You know you get in trouble if you start talking too much.' But some groups have been getting up on the train and causing problems. Maybe it's these guys. And then there's another group up around Chontalpa. I don't know if they're connected.'

And so we're standing there talking with the *gordo* smoking *mota* and the four guys start walking up to us. And I see the *gordo* look into my bag and he sees that I have a phone with me. A pretty nice one, too. Samsung. And the *gordo* tells me, 'Right now I'm going to tell you if they're kidnappers or not.' Because his eyesight is real bad from far away, he couldn't actually see who I was talking about, right? And the guy walks past and the *gordo* says real low, 'Oh shit, those are the guys that have been fucking with people.' And, you know, you have that sense that something bad is about to happen. And I just stay there trying to look as big as possible. And they come up to where we are and they tell the *gordo*, 'What's up?'

'Nothing here, güey.'

'And you guys?' they ask us.

'Just on our way.'

Then they turn to the *gordo* and ask, 'You from here?'

'Yea, I live here.'

'Then you already know who moves people around here.'

'Yea, more or less.'

'The thing is, we're with the *Mara Salvatrucha* and we're here checking to see who's using our name to move people and to make sure that we fix that problem.'

And then they turn to us and ask, 'Who are you with?'

'No, we're on our own.' But we were already freaked out. You know, these guys had surrounded us, and one guy put his hand on his back so that we knew that he was carrying a gun. But luckily, they didn't do anything. But later the *gordo* asks us if we're carrying a phone, like he hadn't already seen mine, and he tell us that we should sell it, that if they catch us with a phone they're going to think that we're waiting on people, you know, like we're guides, that we're in the same business as they are. Man, I went straight to the store and sold my phone. And we stayed off the tracks after that, went and grabbed a combi instead and took the highway. If something is going to happen, I'd rather have migration grab. That happened last time, but sometimes you're foolish. And sometimes there's also such a big necessity that you have to take those risks. Seriously.

The doorbell rings and I reach over to let four more men through the shelter's door. I ask Santos if we can pause the interview and pick it up later. I check the bags of these new arrivals and conduct the intake interview.

5:00 p.m.

Just as I am finishing with the intakes, a north-bound train chugs slowly past the shelter. There is a flurry of grabbing bags, retrieving cell phones, and packing up belongings. I have what feels like a million follow-up questions, but Santos and his crew are ready to head out, along with half of those who arrived in the morning. One of the college students whips out his camera, a chunky DSLR, and heads out the door, scrambling up the railway embankment with a group of four guys around his age who have been chatting together since they abandoned their survey. From the doorway, I watch a railway guard shout down from on top of one of the rail cars

Get the fuck away from my train. I don't get into your business, why are you getting into mine? I'm tired of you journalists talking shit about us in the newspapers. You don't know what it's like to do this job. If you want to have a conversation, go down to the station and make a fucking appointment. Until then, go back to your little shelter."

They stand there, as mortified as I am, until Sandra yells from behind me. "Perdón, señor! They don't mean any harm. They're students doing research." The college students and most of the migrants who had hoped to get on the train before they noticed that there are guards on the train rush back into the shelter. Some don't come back in and start walking down the tracks. As Santos and his crew are making their way back in, he gestures back over his shoulder towards the guard, "I recognize that one guard. He stole thirty dollars from me two nights ago."

6 P.M.

Serving dinner to the fifteen people who remain is a quiet affair. Rain clouds are circling, so we gather in the men’s dormitory to eat. As the high desert cold sets in and rain starts to pound on the tin roof, a group of guys sits around watching the “Cartel Land” on mute. The documentary tells the story of two seemingly distinct militias, the *autodefensas* of Michoacán and the Minutemen along the US-Mexico border. The men banter back and forth about the quality of the different rifles carried by the two groups. The militia men who are hunting for border crossers along the U.S.-Mexico border carry camouflaged AR-15s while the militia in Michoacán looking to defend their communities from cartel violence carry aging Kalashnikovs. Once I am done eating, I take my plate to the kitchen to rinse it off and gather my bag. When I return to the men’s dormitory to say goodbye to those spending the night, Gato peeks his head out from where he has been sleeping most of the day. “Con cuidado, Güero,” he tells me, “Be careful, Güero, it’s a war out there.”



Figure 2.8: Migrants dialoguing with railway guards outside of La Casita

Conclusion

In his ethnography of people staying at a homeless shelter in Boston, Robert Desjarlais writes about how residents “struggle along.”¹³² He describes this idea as a “double-edged process” that consists of “carrying on with difficulty” while also “trying to block out everything in seeking a ‘degree-zero’ way of being.”¹³³ Many of the people Desjarlais writes about are experiencing some form of mental illness and he describes pacing as a way for residents to find balance between sensory overflow on the one hand and walking around in a drugged stupor on the other. Shelter workers like Paula and Sandra are by no means experiencing a similar battle with mental illness, though anyone who has spent a significant amount of time working in a migrant shelter in Mexico would likely show symptoms of secondary traumatic stress disorder if they were analyzed by a mental health practitioner like Charles Figley. Indeed, La Casita’s daily routine can certainly feel maddening. Recall Paula’s distress in this chapter’s epigraph, “You start getting angry at everyone because you start to lose control,” she explains, “And that stress provokes you. Do I give out clothing donations, do I focus on preparing the meals, or do I hand out soap and toilet paper? And you’re like, ‘Who is here to help me?’ You’re completely alone with sixty strangers who are even more stressed out and you just say, ‘What do I do?!’” In this sense, “struggling along” and “shelter vision” share a similar sense of strategically blocking out everything but what is absolutely necessary to be able to carry on with the work.

Hour by hour, this chapter has compiled snapshots of a typical day at La Casita to both set the scene for the chapters that follow and to demonstrate how the persistent flow of people passing through La Casita forces shelter workers to describe what I have referred to as shelter vision. Like

¹³² Desjarlais 2007, 17.

¹³³ Desjarlais 2007, 19.

Desjarlais' understanding of "struggling along," my analysis of shelter vision draws attention to how shelter workers actively navigate a space that is overflowing with evidence of violence and suffering. While shelter workers most certainly experience something like compassion fatigue, my attempt to communicate the everyday feel of shelter is also an attempt to avoid a form of analysis that associates migrants with 'emotional contagion.' As opposed to a politics of care in which shelter workers are healthy practitioners working to either heal suffering clients or to empower morally compromised people to heal themselves, shelter vision draws attention to a strategic way of seeing that avoids associating different kinds of evidence with identity or intentionality. Instead, shelter vision is grounded in what it takes to collaborate with people who are navigating criminalized pathways without labeling those people as criminals. In the next chapter, I will discuss how the politics of care that I have described through the idea of shelter vision is wrapped up in a politics that has intensified immigration enforcement in the name of protecting migrants from the very smuggling networks that many rely on. As will become more evident in the pages that follow, shelter vision is at once a way of coping with all the mundane tasks that spectacular portrayals of undocumented migration tend to overlook *and* a way of collaborating with people for whom concealment and invisibility is a key resource.

CHAPTER 3

Evidencing Violence and Care in Transit

Sandra:

When someone arrives you welcome the person, explain the rules, and in that moment feel out what is up with that person (sondear como viene la persona). Can you smell alcohol? Are there signs the person has been smoking weed or another illegal substance? Those are the first and most obvious signs that you look for to decide whether a person can come in or if you say, “You know what, I can help you with some food, medicine, a little clothing, but I can’t let you come in.” Once we’ve seen how someone reacts to hearing the rules, which is admittedly biased because there’s no way that is one hundred percent effective, you can see that someone is suitable (que la persona es apta). It’s guesswork (es a ojo de buen cubero) and you get better at it as you spend more time working at the shelter. When I started, I remember a smuggler infiltrating and I got all freaked out. But as you get more comfortable with the work day by day you start developing that ability.

As we say in Mexico, “you don’t want to measure the water that the tamales are cooking in” (no hay que medirle el agua a los tamales), because you’re not going to get up in the face of a migrant who is behaving aggressively. Right? You’re not going to tell that migrant, “You know what? Get out of here” (llégale). You do it in private in the kitchen or in the infirmary and you do it indirectly. You explain that there are rules, that you’ve explained those rules already, and that the shelter staff is asking, or rather that the directors ‘suggest’ that you continue on your way. If that migrant resists and says, ‘Ah, well, I don’t want to leave yet,’ then there comes the next level. Now you say, ‘I talked with my boss and she has given me approval to say that we can no longer accommodate you here (ya no te podemos hospedar aquí).’ What we can do is give you some food, medicine, and clothing, but you need to leave. I’ve only done that a couple of times, mainly when I first started. It scared me because you don’t know what that person is going to do afterwards. This one guy started yelling at me from outside the shelter about how he was friends with maras, that he knew my work schedule, that he could find me once I left. And the other migrants back you up, too. They tell you, ‘Don’t worry, we won’t let him get at you.’ Or other times we get word from other shelters farther south to watch out for somebody heading towards La Casita.

But those kinds of things don't happen much anymore. Or at least we don't really confront people that we suspect of being smugglers so explicitly very much. Before it was different because the Zetas were more present. That was in like 2012 when kidnappings were more common around here. The zetas would infiltrate us, making themselves look like migrants to try and "recruit" people. But as the shelter grew, the migrants themselves began spreading the word that this shelter or that shelter exists; this one or that one is laid back or strict. And so, the issue of shelter security is as much about what we do as how migrants take care of us as they're taking care of themselves.

It's kind of funny and seems unreal but it's true: people arrive already knowing who you are. It's due to the fact that people usually pass through more than once. Someone doesn't make it to the U.S., or someone was deported. Those people end up creating like an oral history of the shelters. 'In this shelter you'll find this person, he's cool or not' (buena onda o mala onda). And so yea, in effect they know you before you meet them. Often, they have a false idea about your personality, but other times it's like they've already met you. And sometimes people change their perceptions of you in the blink of an eye. It has a lot to do with how many people are at the shelter, but also with how things have been changing outside of the shelter.

Everyone who arrives at La Casita passes through a relatively standard intake procedure. First, a shelter worker asks new guests to empty their bags onto a table near the shelter's entrance. While looking through these belongings, the shelter worker in charge of intake goes over a list of rules posted on a vinyl banner that hangs in the shelter's tin roof portico. Paula tends to ask for one of the new arrivals to read the rules out loud. Sandra, on the other, likes to paraphrase the rules herself,

Welcome to La Casita. If you want to stay, please put your bag on the table so that John can inspect it. While you are here, we store backpacks in a locked room. Use of cell phones is not allowed in the shelter. If you are carrying a phone, please remove it from your pack. John will put a sticker with your name on it and store the phone for safe keeping. Here, the limit is two nights. Our resources are minimal and, as you know, more people are coming up behind you. Please respect the space and each other. We ask you to help us to keep the shelter clean and to not smoke in the dormitories. You can come and go as you please, but we don't recommend it. Migration agents are in the area and we have to do our best to not upset the neighbors. If you plan to spend the night, you need to be back in the shelter by 7 PM. Understood? Ok, we'll start with you four.

As she goes over the script, Sandra usually points silently to the "no smugglers allowed" rule, which is caricatured visually with a picture of a gang member wearing baggy clothing and a flat-brim hat that is crossed out like a no-smoking sign.

La Casita is one of the many migrant shelters in Mexico that maintains a “no smugglers allowed” stance. Publicly distinguishing themselves from economies of smuggling is central to how migrant shelters have gained legitimacy vis-a-vis the state. *Just* addressing migrants’ physical suffering allow shelters to stay somewhat outside of the political fray. Of course, this “antipolitics” is immensely political.¹³⁴ Prior research examines orienting aid around physical well-being as a form of “biopolitics.”¹³⁵ It draws idealized lines of distinction around deserving and undeserving groups based on their physical suffering, often in ways that make deservingness seem like the “choice” of those seeking aid. During my early fieldwork, I see a “no smugglers allowed” stance fitting with such an analysis.¹³⁶ At the same time that migrant shelters subvert state sovereignty by aiding undocumented mobility, they also reproduce logics of state sovereignty by drawing lines of legitimacy between people who are *just* migrants and those who are presumed to be guides. This logic is also aligned with the Southern Border Program, which intensifies policing along railways in the name of protecting migrants from presumably exploitative smuggling networks.

Throughout the first months of my fieldwork I am fixated on peoples’ belongings. I want to understand how the things people carry can illuminate Mexico’s shifting immigration enforcement apparatus, so I volunteer to help with intake as much as possible while at La Casita. The idea is that use-wear patterns index a politics of immigration enforcement that has focused on keeping people away from freight trains, leading people to walk along hot asphalt that melts shoe-soles or to trudge along damp, skin-rotting foot paths that line highways.¹³⁷ I watch a man carefully patch the peeling soles of his tennis shoes with superglue. Others carefully cultivate their looks to

¹³⁴ Ferguson 1990.

¹³⁵ Foucault 1997.

¹³⁶ Foucault 1991.

¹³⁷ See also De León 2013.

blend in with commuters as they risk it in other ways on public transportation. They hope that donning a Mexican national team soccer jersey or the white rubber boots that sugar cane field workers wear will lead immigration agents and other officials to overlook them at the checkpoints that increasingly dot Mexico's rural highways.¹³⁸

People arriving at shelters are used to having their bags searched as a condition for being allowed into shelters. They are less accustomed to someone asking if it might be ok to take a picture of the soggy roll of toilet paper they have been carrying around, or the baby doll that they have tucked away in their backpack as a reminder of their kids back home. In this context, commenting nonchalantly on the kinds of shoes someone is wearing or the scar that runs along their face function as material probes.¹³⁹ My questions about what people are carrying provide an unassuming ground for easing into or out of difficult and uncomfortable conversations in an environment where people have good reason to withhold information. For some, their shoes are just shoes, a clue that they are not all that interested in sharing more. Others use these shoes to trace their steps backward through Mexico in detail.¹⁴⁰

I begin to notice that this approach to introducing my research in the context of intake procedures is also helpful for understanding how shelter workers are responding to the

¹³⁸ For a discussion of how migrants perform certain “scripts” as they travel, see Brigden (2017).

¹³⁹ De León and Cohen 2005.

¹⁴⁰ People have good reason to be shifty about what they see and reveal within shelters. People connected to smuggling and kidnapping economies are known to pose as migrants and enter shelters to “recruit” potential clients or victims. Shelters are places where, as Noelle Brigden (2018) states, people are following different scripts — what she refers to as “survival plays” (117) — to accentuate or conceal certain aspects of what they have experienced as they move across Mexico. These scripts are often gendered and by no means surprising. As Brigden writes, femininity and masculinity can be both risks and resources. Women selectively perform vulnerability, attempt to “pass” as men, bluff about their unavailability, and enter into strategic relationships with men at different moments along their journeys. Similarly, men perform charisma, heteronormativity, and gang affiliations to both draw and avoid attention (131-138).

consequences of the Southern Border Program. As my fieldwork progresses and I realize that suspected smugglers are almost never asked to actually leave—the “no smugglers allowed” stance is just that, a stance—I develop a somewhat different interpretation. As opposed to protecting people on the move, the Southern Border Program renders the route more dangerous by disrupting economies of corruption. While abuses committed against migrants by organized crime groups are real and horrifying, smuggling economies are not uniformly exploitative. As various scholars have written, relationships between migrants and guides often involve a complicated blend of mutuality and intimacy.¹⁴¹ Not all smugglers are the heartless criminals they are made out to be.¹⁴² Often, people fall into smuggling out of desperation. For many, smuggling is a kind of survival strategy, work that people take up temporarily in order to get by, work that is illegal but not necessarily unethical. While state humanitarian frameworks employ a rhetoric of protecting migrants from presumably exploitative smuggling networks, shelter workers become more attuned to the fact that for many migrants, collaborating with smugglers can come to seem like a more dignified means of reaching one’s goals.

This chapter examines how shelter workers and those who access their services speculate with both compassion and mistrust about smuggling in a hectic and risky context where migrants rely on economies of corruption even as they suffer from them. How, I ask, do shelter workers pragmatically negotiate within the limits of humanitarianism and the promise of human smuggling? While prior work on how power operates within care settings prioritizes verbal communication as the locus of intervention, I argue that shelter workers rely just as often on nonverbal material signs to align social structures that tend to be seen as diametrically opposed:

¹⁴¹ Vogt 2016.

¹⁴² Sanchez 2017b; De Léon 2017.

humanitarianism and human smuggling. To demonstrate this, I describe how shelter workers at La Casita relied on intake procedures to enact a logic of care that views agency as distributed materially between individuals, thus complicating state frameworks that rely on drawing a firm line between victims and victimizers while framing where one falls in that dichotomy as a choice. Through things the people pick up, carry, and leave behind — things like toilet paper, second-hand clothing, knives, cell phones, even baby dolls— shelter workers develop tentative interpretations regarding dynamics of care and coercion among the individuals they assist. I focus in particular on a small portable speaker to show how seemingly mundane objects serve as tenuous evidence in situations in which the need for secrecy and discretion limits the availability of language in care work. More broadly, focusing on the materiality of undocumented migration complicates ideas



Figure 3.1: A baby doll photographed while conducting intake at La Casita

about agency and intentionality that surround criminalized populations for whom secrecy is both a blessing and a curse.

Facts and Values, Evidence and Agency

How shelter workers make interpretations based on the “objective” evidence of how someone is dressed raises long-standing questions about the kinds of evidence that social workers rely on to make practice decisions. The merits of practice knowledge that is based either on objective, evidence-based research or more subjective, time-tested values has been a steady subject of debate among social work researchers.¹⁴³ Several recent studies illustrate how seemingly objective norms and ideals are often produced and reproduced in the context of decidedly subjective, value-based encounters between social workers and clients.¹⁴⁴ Along these lines, to the extent that shelters maintained a “no smugglers allowed” stance, shelter work might be seen as reproducing the ideological distinction between victims and presumed criminals that has been used to rationalize intensified policing along the U.S.-Mexico border. However, as I will discuss in more detail, shelter workers rarely enforced the “no smugglers allowed” stance in practice. This calls for a line of questioning that asks not only how norms and ideals are reproduced through verbal communication, but also how practitioners maneuver within them nonverbally.

Practitioners in social service settings tend to prioritize talk as both the object of intervention and evidence of an intervention’s efficacy.¹⁴⁵ This tendency, as Chin and colleagues discuss in their study of arts-based methods in community-based research, reflects particular

¹⁴³ Klein and Bloom 1995; Fook, Ryan, and Hawkins 1997; Gambrill 1999; Reisch and Jani 2012.

¹⁴⁴ Hardesty 2015; Smith 2014.

¹⁴⁵ Desjarlais 2007; Ochs and Capps 2009.

“language ideologies,” which they define as “[assumptions] about how language operates and mediates social relations.”¹⁴⁶ Building on the work of linguistic anthropologists like Kathryn Woolard,¹⁴⁷ as well as Richard Bauman and Charles Briggs,¹⁴⁸ they describe how social workers often think of language not only as following a referential language ideology, “the idea that language is separate from the world and its function is simply to describe it” (260), but also a pragmatic one that views language “as capable of acting in the social world” (268). Language, in this view, references a client’s beliefs while also serving as a kind of technology for pragmatically negotiating the limits and possibilities of social service frameworks.¹⁴⁹

Looking at how scholars have analyzed objects as both referents and technologies is helpful for understanding the role of things in a place like La Casita where explicit verbal communication was often seen as unreliable. Bruno Latour, for example, argues that objects are not only referents; they are also what he refers to as “mediators—that is, actors endowed with the capacity to translate what they transport, to redefine it, redeploy it, and also to betray it.”¹⁵⁰ This semiotic flexibility is associated with how material signs, as Webb Keane writes, “bundle” multiple qualities as they move through different social contexts.¹⁵¹ For example, a hooded sweatshirt might index coldness, warmth, suspicion, blackness, racism, and protest at different moments and in different social contexts.¹⁵² The semiotic flexibility of objects allows shelter workers to navigate seemingly

¹⁴⁶ Chin, Sakamoto, and Bleuer 2014, 259.

¹⁴⁷ Woolard 1998.

¹⁴⁸ Bauman and Briggs 1990.

¹⁴⁹ See also Carr (2010).

¹⁵⁰ Latour 1993, 81.

¹⁵¹ Keane 2003, 414.

¹⁵² Yancy and Jones 2013.

objective evidence of involvement with smugglers while recognizing and accommodating ambiguities of care and coercion within a “no smugglers allowed” space.

Technologies of Legitimacy and Transgression

On a sun-soaked morning in July of 2014, Sandra explains the shelter’s rules to a group of 20 men waiting to be let into the shelter. One man unties a make-shift shoulder strap made of bailing twine from a bright red duffel bag, then dumps the bag’s contents onto the table. Inside are a pair of flip flops, two pairs of jeans, a fleece blanket, and a flattened roll of toilet paper. Another man is only carrying a piece of heavy black plastic, folded up neatly into a bundle and tied with a piece of string so it can be slung across his back. The third person carries nothing at all, and the fourth person carries only a battered flip phone and a charger. I write down the fourth person’s name on a piece of masking tape, stick the tape on the back of the cell phone, wrap the charger around it, and put it in a plastic bag that I will store in the office. The men whose belongings I have just inspected shuffle past, pull plastic chairs from a stack along the far wall, carry them to a sunny corner of the shelter’s concrete patio, and pass around a cigarette. Then four more enter and the process repeats.

Intake procedures like these communicate to new arrivals that the shelter aims to draw a firm line between migrants and smugglers, similar to how Robert Fairbanks describes daily schedules as “setting out a coherent framework with clearly defined boundaries of legitimacy and transgression” in his study of informal recovery houses in Philadelphia.¹⁵³ Backpack inspections align shelter work with the logic of compassion and repression that surrounds the implementation of the Southern Border Program to the extent that they rely on an appearance of innocence that is

¹⁵³ Fairbanks II 2009, 116.

disentangled from broader social and political contexts.¹⁵⁴ Intake protocols and security measures vary across shelters that I visited. Not all shelters have a list of rules printed like La Casita does. Really, these dynamics are not only a matter of shelter workers enforcing rules. Instead, material and embodied signs, as referential objects, become what Foucault might have called “technologies of self-governance” that induce migrants to self-enforce the boundaries of legitimacy and transgression that logics of state sovereignty rely on.¹⁵⁵

Most people accessing the shelter when I first begin fieldwork at La Casita in 2014 are still traveling by train. Similar to black water bottles that migrants use while crossing through the Sonoran Desert into Arizona, they seek the darkest clothing possible in the hopes that it will reflect less light.¹⁵⁶ On a cold day in September, a few men banter back and forth about how to blend in on their proposed means of travel as they rifle through bags of donated clothing. Most of the clothing that gets donated to the shelter is women’s clothing. Since 95% of those who pass through La Casita are men, the storage room fills up with trash bags full of women’s blouses and high-heeled shoes, so when a new bag of donations arrives, the men rush to explore what is inside. A man named Wilson holds up a pair of slacks that could fit two of him. “I have a belly,” he jokes, “but not that kind of belly.” His traveling companion, Darwin, tells him that he should wear slacks even if they don’t fit him well. “They make you look more ‘Mexican,’” he says, echoing Noelle Brigden’s analysis of how migrants rely on different kinds of clothing to perform urban and rural class scripts along the route.¹⁵⁷ The men are desperate to find long-sleeve shirts to ward off the cold, but when I point to a rack of white collared shirts that no one has touched, they laugh

¹⁵⁴ Ticktin 2017.

¹⁵⁵ Foucault 1991.

¹⁵⁶ De León 2013.

¹⁵⁷ Brigden 2017.

incredulously, “What, are you trying to get us caught? You can’t wear white on the train like that!” A few hours later, these men look on as I show a new arrival the piles of donated clothing. When he heads straight to the rack of white collared shirts, I watch them raise their eyebrows at each other. Either he is foolish, or he has the money to travel by bus.

Through interactions like these in the early days of my fieldwork, I learn to interpret the attire and belongings of new arrivals referentially. Freshly shaved faces and clean changes of clothing signal that someone is traveling by bus or car. These costlier options are hints that someone is collaborating with smugglers, or that they might have the money for bribes to pass through security checkpoints without proper identification. Jeans covered in soot, odd clothing combinations like dress shoes paired with sweat pants, obliterated shoe soles, and odors of



Figure 3.2: Searching through bags of donated clothing at La Casita

campfire, by comparison, hint that a person has been navigating the route without a smuggler, trekking around checkpoints and through muddy fields, sleeping outside at night, and donning the random assortment of clothing donated to shelters.

These practices map on to how shelter workers like Sandra frame entry into the shelter as a choice—“*If you want to stay*, please put your bag on the table so that John can inspect it” (my emphasis)—thereby reifying a logic of compassion and repression that renders migrants deserving of care only to the extent that they are willing to demonstrate that they are traveling independently of smugglers. While the anti-smuggler stance was articulated more explicitly in some places more than in others, all of the migrant shelters that I visited maintained a rhetoric, enacted materially through intake procedures, in which it was up to migrants to travel with smugglers or not. I speak with Oscar from El Salvador outside of a migrant shelter with particularly strict security protocols, “I thought [shelters] were supposed to be here to help protect us from the criminals, not search our belongings like *we’re* the criminals. I’d rather just sleep outside than deal with that shit.” Not everyone is like Oscar. Others appreciate that intake procedures provide a rare opportunity to document their otherwise clandestine journeys. Hector, a middle-aged man from Honduras, for example, explains the importance of being as forthright as possible, “I want a paper trail. You never know where your last known location will be if something happens. And if that means that I can’t travel with a knife or anything to defend myself, that’s fine.” Given how commonplace it is for people to disappear while migrating through Mexico, the importance of this documentation cannot be overstated.

Of the 20 men gathered outside that morning, only 13 actually enter. I look out from behind the metal door and begin to ask if anybody else would like to come in. As I do so, Sandra peeks her head out from the kitchen and calls me over, then whispers, “Don’t worry about them.” I turn

my head to take a closer look and notice that two of the men who have stayed back are wearing clothing that is much less soiled than the rest. One man wears a dark gray jacket, a pair of crisp black jeans, and well-worn hiking boots. The other man sports a white flat-brim baseball hat that is spotless, a baggy pair of jeans, and a black polo shirt. Then Sandra turns to me and, referring to their clothing, lets me know she suspects that the men are more than just migrants, “They’re probably staying outside for a reason. You understand what I’m saying? You see how they’re dressed?”

Technologies of Mutuality and Mistrust

Hopping freight trains through Mexico has long been dangerous and uncertain, replete with the possibility of dismemberment and death.¹⁵⁸ However, in the wake of the Southern Border Program, people like Eliseo, a sinewy coffee farmer from Honduras who has made the journey six different times over the last 15 years, explains how the journey had become more difficult,

It is 100 percent worse than when I came the first time. In the past when I tried to make it to the US, there were times when, at most, I was in Laredo [Texas] in 20 days, no problem. I didn’t suffer threats or assaults or anything. It was just a matter of bringing money for food along the way. You could take the train the whole way. No, now it’s hard. From the first train you grab they’re assaulting. And the police too. This time they raided the train two times just between Tenosique and Palenque [a distance of 50 miles along roadways]. Two times! In Palenque we got another train heading to Villahermosa and there were two more attacks on that stretch. Then we just gave up and started walking.

In the past, crossing Mexico was a comparatively linear process. By the time I begin long-term fieldwork in 2015, the journey through Mexico has become characterized as much by immobility as mobility.¹⁵⁹ People suffer injuries and need to spend time recovering. They become separated

¹⁵⁸ Casillas 2008; Martínez 2013; Nazario 2006; Casillas 1996.

¹⁵⁹ For a discussion of im/mobility along migration routes, see Schapendonk and Steel (2014) and Brigden and Mainwaring (2016).

from smugglers and wait to see if they can reconnect. Others simply run out of money and need to work for a week or two to make it a little farther. Throughout my fieldwork, a growing number of migrants who become stuck in transit pursue humanitarian visas, seeking long-term aid within the relative safety and comfort of migrant shelters while they figure out their next steps. Shelters have become a kind of non-governmental alternative to detention. Not everybody plans to actually follow through with the humanitarian visa. Some initiate applications for humanitarian recognition to bide their time while making other arrangements for travel, often with smugglers.¹⁶⁰ This is not a matter of “bogus” asylum seekers exploiting humanitarian frameworks.¹⁶¹ Instead, it reflects the route’s fragmentation and what various analysts describe as an opaque, overburdened, and underfunded humanitarian bureaucracy.¹⁶²

Between 2013 and 2016, the number of humanitarian visas issued each year increases from 277 to 3,971.¹⁶³ This statistic is almost certainly an undercount. The bureaucratic burden of seeking formal humanitarian recognition often dissuades applicants from concluding the application process.¹⁶⁴ Raul, the director of La Casita, describes various factors that delay the process:

First, before the migrant can even begin the application, he or she has to show proof of nationality. An up-to-date photo ID. That’s the first problem, because generally, in the midst of the journey, the migrant loses that documentation. It goes missing, someone takes it, etc. And what should last five or six days ends up lasting a month or two depending on the availability of the consular office. And that process of waiting has psychological effects on the migrant because he or she gets desperate. Plus, it has an economic impact because we have to pay for all the trips to Mexico City where the consular office is, because they refuse to send us the documents directly. So that’s the first obstacle.

¹⁶⁰ For a discussion of shelters as an alternative to detention for unaccompanied minors, see Doering-White (2018).

¹⁶¹ For a discussion of “bogus” asylum seekers in the European context, see Neumayer 2005.

¹⁶² Basok and Rojas Wiesner 2017; Burgi-Palomino and Buckhout 2017.

¹⁶³ Isacson, Meyer, and Smith 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Human Rights Watch 2016; Juarez et al. 2017.

Often, migrants' safety strategies such as not traveling with identification documents in case of being kidnapped further complicate this process.¹⁶⁵ A young man who had been shot in the foot by railway guards waits at La Casita for two months while the Honduran consulate corroborates his identity before he can even begin applying for a humanitarian visa. In these periods of immobility, what many describe as “desperation” to pay debts back home—to attend a daughter's college graduation, or to earn enough money so that your mother can move out of a gang-controlled neighborhood—also leads people to serve as brokers who connect fellow migrants to smugglers, for a fee.¹⁶⁶ The need for long-term aid that I outline here intensifies the balancing act in which shelters help people navigate state humanitarian bureaucracies while respecting that collaboration with smugglers is often seen as an equally plausible means of reaching one's destination. As Raul continues to explain, overcoming that first consular hurdle is only step one,

The second one is gaining recognition that the migrant was the victim of a grave offense. And it's been unclear who exactly is responsible for making that determination. Migration? The police? A judge? With our first cases, we asked migration. What document do you need to show that the *compañero* was victimized? “Bring us the declaration,” they respond. So, we showed them the police report where the migrant makes a statement about having been victimized. And they tell us that the document isn't sufficient because it's just the migrant's declaration. “Just because he says he's a victim, doesn't mean he's a victim. That's not enough. Bring us the entire case file.” The hook is that, at least here in Mexico, while an investigation is ongoing, you can't access case files. You can go and look at the file as the victim, but you can't take it with you. You can make copies. And you can take photos of it. But they won't give you a certified copy, which is what migration wants. And at the same time, the police tell us that, by law, they can't give certified copies to individuals; only to institutions, and only if they can justify the reason for seeking that document. So, we go back to migration and ask them to make the request. And migration says, “It's not in our interest nor is it our responsibility to make such requests.” So, we're trapped, right?

¹⁶⁵ De León, Gokee, and Schubert (2015) similarly examine how carrying ID can be both help and harm people who are migrating undocumented.

¹⁶⁶ González 2018.

Intensified policing and the bureaucratic lacunae of formal humanitarian recognition disrupt comparatively linear journeys through Mexico and complicate the idea that the shelters are a pass-through sanctuary for “legitimate” migrants. In these moments, implicit concerns about collaboration between migrants and smugglers become somewhat more explicit. Shelter workers continue to rely on referential interpretations of people’s belongings to make tentative judgements in the context of intake procedures. However, this apparent clarity does not lead to a more stringent enforcement of the “no smugglers allowed” rule. Instead, an increase in the number of individuals seeking long-term aid provides a greater awareness of the plethora of factors outside of the control of people migrating.

Merlin, for example, arrives at the shelter carrying a meticulously-curated backpack full of train-hopping essentials like electrolyte powder, cans of sardines, and a blanket that he wrapped up carefully in a piece of heavy plastic. After I explain my study to him, we find a quiet corner of the shelter and sit down to talk over coffee and cigarettes. Merlin is making the return journey to Long Island, New York after being deported a few months earlier. It is his first time back in nearly 20 years and he explains how things have changed, both in Honduras and along the route,

Yea man, the first time I did this when I was like 19. It was crazy riding on trains, but it was more or less tranquil, too. You know, the nature is cool and you’re with all these people you don’t know making the same trip. After they [deported me], I spent a month with family I hadn’t seen in a long time, but [the gangs] control the neighborhood now. If you’re deported, you’re like fresh meat for them, so I left.

When I ask him how he has decided what to bring with him, he tells me that this is his third attempt at crossing Mexico since being deported. “You realize that you just need a couple of things,” he explains, “Things that you don’t mind losing, that don’t weigh too much, nothing that attracts attention, right? We’ll see what happens on this trip,” he continues, “I’m starting to wonder if you can make it on your own these days. You know, without someone helping you.”



Figure 3.3: Merlin showing off his pack

Merlin leaves the shelter to catch a train after our interview, only to return the next morning, carrying nothing but a bloody rag that he uses to dab at a laceration on his head. He walks with a stilted hobble from what turns out to be several bruised ribs. We sit in the infirmary and he recounts being pistol-whipped then thrown by railway guards from a moving train just as the sun was rising, losing all his belongings in the process. With the help of the shelter's director, Ramón, he files a police report and reaches out to the Honduran consulate to begin the process of applying for a humanitarian visa.

A month into his stay, Merlin purchases a portable speaker designed to look like a can of Coca Cola and fills its memory card with early 2000s hip-hop songs that remind him of cruising around Long Island before being deported. When a fellow migrant gives him a Honduran Lempira

as a good luck token,¹⁶⁷ Merlin tapes it around the cylindrical device. During his six-week stay at the shelter, songs by Biggie, DMX, and Ginuwine become the unexpected soundtrack to shelter life, much to the chagrin of some of the shelter workers who prefer a mix of banda and reggaetón. During a later interview, Merlin describes himself as increasingly desperate to return to Long Island, the place he considers to be his true home. “I’ve just been trying to survive for the past year,” he explains, “I haven’t had time to think. Now, all I do is sit here and watch other guys pass through. I have time to think about my wife and kids back home. They’re ok, right? They’re with



Figure 3.4: Merlin’s Coke-can speaker

¹⁶⁷ A Lempira is the smallest denomination of paper money in Honduras, akin to the dollar bill in the United States.

her family. And it's like, do I try to get this humanitarian visa and stay in Mexico? You know, rebuild my life here? But these songs take me back, you know? Back to Long Island.”

Merlin's nostalgia for Long Island concerns shelter workers. They worry that he might fall into collaborating with smugglers, using access to the flow of migrants passing continuously through the shelter to recruit potential clients or to lure kidnapping victims. This concern is not unwarranted, though it remains hypothetical. During his stay at the shelter, Merlin often jokes with Sandra about how easy it would be for the shelter, which regularly struggles just to pay the electrical bill, to make quick money by connecting migrants to smugglers. Sandra plays along, dreaming up elaborate amenities that the shelter would be able to put in place with the money that would presumably flow in. Merlin's humor exposes otherwise implicit power dynamics in which migrants tend to be seen as either passive victims or heartless criminals. As opposed to being the idealized victim in need of protection from the shelter or the state, joking about collaboration with smugglers allows Merlin to position himself as someone who can help out the shelter.

Encounters like these show how shelter workers and migrants alike rely on more implicit mechanisms to pragmatically navigate mutuality and mistrust in encounters with those suspected of collaborating with smugglers, a dynamic that is especially clear after Merlin leaves the shelter on a Monday, six weeks after arriving. The next day, a Tuesday, Paula ushers three men into the entryway of La Casita as a light rain drums on the tin roof above. The men stand there trembling breathlessly in the damp cold as Paula works her way through the welcome protocol. The first two men carry little more than a rolled-up blanket and a two-liter pop bottle filled with water that they have tied a string to for easy carrying. The third man, Elmer, carries a backpack with busted zippers held together with safety pins. Inside is a change of carefully folded clothes, two packets of powdered electrolytes, a flattened roll of toilet paper, a cell phone, and what appears to be Merlin's

Coca Cola can speaker, decorative Lempira and all. Paula turns and catches my eye for a moment, then says to Elmer, “Cool speaker,” before continuing as if nothing is out of order. “I just need to keep your phone locked up to make sure it doesn’t go missing while you’re here. You can keep the speaker if you’d like.” Then, she continues with the intake procedure.

When it is Elmer’s turn for the intake interview, Paula works nonchalantly through the series of questions, only to bring up the speaker at the end. “I’ve never seen a speaker like that,” she lies. Then, explaining that I am conducting research that involves documenting the things people carry with them while migrating, she asks Elmer if he would be ok with me photographing such a unique piece of migrant material culture. “You can *have* it! It doesn’t even work anymore,” Elmer laughs. As I snap a picture of the speaker, Paula thanks Elmer for his time and cooperation and asks me to take over so that she can conduct more backpack inspections and serve breakfast.

The return of the Coke can speaker, now in Elmer’s hands, provides a rare opportunity to witness how a shelter worker like Paula responds to seemingly clear evidence of smuggling. After 11 hours spent preparing three meals and conducting 70 intakes, we walk to a nearby pub to wind down over a beer. Between sips, Paula explains her rationale behind not confronting Elmer about the speaker. “The thing about trying to keep someone like him out of the shelter,” she says, “is that I don’t know how he’s going to react. I don’t know what kind of arrangement he has with those other guys. And I don’t really know where he got that speaker. If I try to say something to him directly, he might blame the other guys that he’s traveling with of trying to get away from him. But,” she continues, “that’s if the other guys want to get away from him. Maybe nothing’s wrong. Maybe they just got side-tracked from whatever connect they had to get through this stretch.” As opposed to viewing evidence of Elmer’s possible collaboration with smugglers as primarily his responsibility as an individual, Paula recognizes that the speaker “bundles” any number of

commitments and obligations that she is not aware of. Maybe Elmer is the smuggler with whom Merlin is suspected of collaborating. The Lempira-decorated speaker is certainly the same device. Or maybe Merlin dropped the speaker while attempting to board a moving train and Elmer simply picked it up from the railway embankment.

The flexibility of the speaker is emblematic of how shelter workers rely on material objects to interpret multiple possibilities and nonverbally communicate their awareness of them. Rather than expelling Elmer from the shelter, suspicious evidence such as the speaker instead results in Elmer being treated with extra care. As Paula states, treating Elmer in this way was in large part a matter of avoiding unintended consequences that might emerge from explicit verbal communication. Through encounters like these, shelter workers learn to approach intake procedures as “unruly technologies.” They are more than just a reference to shifting immigration enforcement trends, they are also windows into otherwise silent economies of undocumented migration where the line between victim and victimizer is unclear. To an extent, backpack inspections clearly reify a politics of compassion and repression. They displace responsibility for collaboration with smugglers, and also exploitation at the hands of smugglers, onto those migrating. This interpretation follows a referential approach to interpreting material objects in which certain kinds of clothing, possessions, and embodied signs signal whether someone was a legitimate migrant or not. Through more extended interactions with migrants like Elmer, however, shelter workers also empathize with the viability of collaboration with smugglers. Potential smugglers are not called out. Paradoxically, they are treated with extra care. And material signs are not just a means of distinguishing between those deserving or undeserving of care as state humanitarian frameworks tend to do. Instead, the things people carry become tenuous mediators that allow both shelter workers and migrants to rely on policy frameworks that construct migrants

as either victims or victimizers while challenging that very dichotomy. Paula's discreet attention to the materiality of migration accommodates a more bearable, albeit implicit, coexistence of human smuggling and state humanitarian bureaucracies.

Conclusion

Focusing on the materiality of shelter work has important implications for how we think about the relationship between agency and objectivity in the context of care work. In her work on diabetes treatment in the Netherlands, Annemarie Mol argues that our ability to make objective decisions or choices is limited not only by the ideals that we carry as practitioners, like whether smuggling can be both illegal and ethical, but also by the very materiality of our care work.¹⁶⁸ Mol distinguishes between two interwoven logics of choice and care that guide decision-making. According to a logic of choice, practitioners and patients negotiate rational decisions, or choices, by “properly balancing the advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action.”¹⁶⁹ This logic assumes that individuals can rationally weigh neutral facts and initiate interventions in relation to established norms. A logic of care, by comparison, recognizes that the seemingly objective things —or mediators— that we rely on to care for others often complicate our ability to meet such ideals. Mol describes how in the hospital where she conducted fieldwork, doctors, researchers, and graduate students debated what level of blood glucose constituted hypoglycemia and how to make practice decisions based on that level given inconsistent outcomes between different patients. In this way, they came to see what level of blood glucose constituted hypoglycemia as “unruly.” This unruliness, which Latour might call betrayal, emanated not only

¹⁶⁸ Mol 2008.

¹⁶⁹ Mol 2008, 61.

from the limits of scientific knowledge, but also from the fact that measures of blood glucose are located within patients' bodies and emerge in the context of their broader lives. This multiplicity of potential variables influencing blood glucose levels thus complicates the ability of patients and doctors to cure disease through rational and explicit deliberation. Glucose values, then, are not just objective facts. They are instead normative facts, which Mol calls "fact-values."¹⁷⁰ Approaching illness through a logic of care, therefore, is not just about implementing technologies in relation to facts in a particular moment. Instead, a logic of care attempts to anticipate the unexpected social and material contingencies that surround the patients' broader and ongoing lives.

A study focused on doctors and diabetes patients in the Netherlands is clearly different from my focus on humanitarian aid amid smuggling in Mexico. I am wary of medicalizing undocumented migration,¹⁷¹ though it is important to recognize how traumas associated with deportation have been linked to negative physical and mental health consequences.¹⁷² I do, however, take seriously the poet Warsan Shire's assertion that "no one puts their children in a boat unless the water is safer than the land."¹⁷³ We must not only view undocumented migration and collaboration with smugglers as something that people choose, per se, but also as something that migrants and shelter workers do their best to manage, much like a chronic disease. Along these lines, Mol's analysis offers several helpful ways for understanding the apparent contradiction that undergirds this chapter: how shelter workers accommodate individuals who collaborate with

¹⁷⁰ Mol 2008, 53.

¹⁷¹ A large body of research explores the medicalization of behaviors that are deemed deviant (Conrad 1992), as well as how illnesses have been associated with immigrant populations in the interest of social control (Bivins 2015).

¹⁷² Lopez et al. 2017; Lopez et al. 2018; Novak, Geronimus, and Martinez-Cardoso 2017.

¹⁷³ Shire 2013, xi.

human smuggling networks while also advocating for humanitarian policies that purport to protect migrants from those very networks.

By taking embodied and physical signs as a central methodological and analytical framework, this chapter builds on discussions of materiality and agency to engage conversations about how practitioners interpret evidence to make decisions. Humanitarian workers at La Casita rely on the things that migrants pick up, carry, and leave behind to grapple with the murky politics of victimhood and criminality along the Central American migrant trail through Mexico. Backpacks and bandages offer a way for shelter workers to assemble multiple co-existing narratives at the intersection of humanitarianism and human smuggling. Through practices that accommodate ambiguities of victimhood and victimization, shelter workers approximate a “logic of care” that views choices as emerging out of complex and evolving situations, that complicate our ability to tease out decisions as a reflection one individual reason.

A logic of care helps us broaden how we think about choice. At various points along their journeys, people like Elmer and Merlin are often both victims and victimizers. Sometimes they occupy both positionalities simultaneously. Shelter workers like Paula seem to understand that while migrants come to rely on human smuggling networks, that choice does not encompass their entire being. Instead, they see the choices people make while migrating as resulting from a complex configuration of immigration enforcement policies, humanitarian frameworks, and international economic inequalities.

A logic of care also helps us to consider how material signs operate as evidence in social work practice. To the extent that we view signs as bundling multiple qualities, our decision to prioritize one or another quality illustrates that our interpretation of evidence is always value-laden. Shelter workers rely on objects to both interpret multiple possibilities and to nonverbally

communicate their awareness of those possibilities. In doing so, they treat these contentious objects with care, wary of the unintended consequences that more explicit verbal communication might have. Approaching evidence of injury according to a logic of care involves recognizing that material and embodied signs are contingent on the ambiguities of agency discussed above, especially in settings where limited verbal communication complicates how people interpret intentionality.

In the context of shelter practice, objects are crucial to such maneuvering between mutuality and mistrust in ways that multiply possibilities rather than defining limits. Theories of materiality are useful here and, I would suggest, across social work research and practice more broadly, to the extent that they raise questions of contingency, creativity, and pragmatics, in addition to how social inequities are reproduced. They help us consider how the unruliness of things, technologies, and policies facilitates alternative configurations of agency that do not fit neatly into dichotomies of victim and victimizer, or subject and object. In shelters across Mexico, things like Coke can speakers, backpacks, and blankets do not displace human agency so much as they help illuminate how otherwise marginalized people express agency, albeit quietly. Of course, these negotiations of mutuality and mistrust are not always so subtle. As I discuss in the next chapter, intensified policing has also forced shelters into more public-facing encounters with state institutions that are tasked with both policing and protecting migrants who suffer violent abuses while migrating.

CHAPTER 4

Bullet Wounds and the Politics of Hospitality

Sandra:

We barely scrape by in terms of covering day to day operating costs. And that makes it so that we struggle to do things consistently, you know, with routine protocols. Part of that has to do with being located in the center of the country. We don't get the kind of recognition and support that shelters in the north and south receive. We don't have the attention of international press outlets like they do either. Often, we've had to take a step back in terms of taking on cases so that we can continue with our most fundamental work: receive migrants, provide shelter, food, and rest. We are starting to institutionalize a little more how we take on cases of human rights abuses. Before, a migrant would tell you they have been abused by organized crime, you know, "it was a Zeta," but there wasn't any real motivation to lodge a formal police report because people were afraid that they were exposing themselves even more to organized crime. That has to do—or at least it's my intuition, which is something very personal—that it has to do with the government that was in power at the time. Before, people talked about a pact between organized crime and the government, that there was a shadow government. And the pact was that the government wouldn't mess with migrants because organized crime made money off of them. That began to change in 2010 with the 72 people killed in Tamaulipas. That made civil society, organizations, defenders—we started to pay more attention to what was going on and so organized crime stopped operating so openly. And, well, then comes Programa Frontera Sur, no? And there's this idea about 'rescuing' again, but really, it's all about deporting: massive detentions and routine human rights violations. What comes along with that are long administrative processes, poor sanitary conditions in detention centers, etc. So, we are seeking justice through the same institutions that are likely connected with the injustices. That's the challenge, to stick with it even though the situation is bleak (desolador) because we know that in Mexico you can't necessarily tell organized crime and government apart (en México el crimen organizado es igual a pacto con el gobierno). You as a

citizen can't trust the police and you can't trust public officials because in one way or another, they are connected to narcos.

Paula:

I got involved here the same way I got involved in the other organization, through the church. That connection is what has drawn me to this work. It is what gives you that sense that this is about something more. You can't just go around living just to live, without thinking about what is happening around you. At first, with the other organization I was really excited about the idea of a human rights organization that is connected with the church. I was like, "Oh, this is perfect!" The other organization I was in was supposedly about human rights too, but really it was just a bunch of desk work and some workshops in schools. You would talk and talk about human rights, but you never were actually 'helping the other,' right? Here it's the same, a human rights organization connected to the church. But here you're more involved with the people you're helping. So, I've really enjoyed that part, feeling like you're actually doing something concrete for someone else. In an office you talk a lot about human rights, defending, promotion, outreach, and who knows what else, but it stays there. And you're doing work, but it's different when you live it directly. It's like, now I don't just talk, I know, I lived it, and I can put more into it. Or it's like I told you earlier, your work becomes more transcendent. It goes beyond just the material. The thing is that human rights has become this really institutional thing. I think we need to talk more about the humanity of people, not just their rights. The idea of human rights is useful in some institutional contexts, but there's something else that transcends all of that.

The bulk of the shelter team sits awkwardly on the bunk beds in the otherwise unoccupied women's dormitory, craning our necks out from beyond the lower-bunks. A tarpaulin poster hanging over the window serves as a make-shift blind that darkens the room just enough to see the slides projected onto the white-washed wall. Lettering on the repurposed poster reads, "Migrants have human rights too." Having exceeded their own caseload capacity, two reps from a Mexico City-based legal aid organization—a lawyer and a social worker—have come to share best practices when advocating for migrants who have suffered abuses that would qualify them for a humanitarian visa. They are here to teach the shelter how to fish, so to speak.

The lawyer outlines a linear pathway to formal humanitarian recognition. Step one: accompany the aggrieved person to file a formal police report. Step two: communicate with consular officers to confirm the person's identity. Step three: submit documentation to INM that an investigation into the offense is underway. Step four: wait for the humanitarian visa

determination. “It’s a lot of paperwork, but it’s nothing extraordinary,” she says. Next, the social worker pulls up a Venn diagram with intersecting circles labeled ‘home,’ ‘transit,’ and ‘destination.’ “We have to be particularly dignified in how we approach this work,” he explains, “You never really know who you’re dealing with when you first take on a case; where they are headed, where they are coming from. This is not just a legal process. We are working with people at a crucial moment in their life journeys (*proyectos de vida*). We have to be empathic, but we also have to be professional when getting involved in this kind of violence.” At this, I look over and watch Marcela roll her eyes, smirk, and shake her head with a gentle exasperation.

Marcela is a veteran member of the *equipo*. Her work focuses on keeping the shelter afloat financially, managing the more bureaucratic components of shelter work, like communicating with funding agencies and state functionaries. She is exasperated because being told that winning a humanitarian visa is *just* about some extra paperwork feels out of touch with what it takes just to keep the shelter’s doors open. Beyond the personal circumstances that lead migrants who suffer abuses to abandon cases, an equally sticky set of barriers marks the path between a poster that promises human rights and what it means to actually access them. In addition to several humanitarian visa efforts fizzling, the shelter has also been part of an unsuccessful five-year effort to get a state-level migration law passed. Pablo, one of the team members leading the effort explains in an interview that the idea behind such a law is to ease the way for migrants to access federal mechanisms like the humanitarian visa—mechanisms that, as he puts it, “have yet to land here (*atterizarse aquí*) at the state level.” Many of the team members at La Casita suspect that their efforts to “promote the idea that migration is not just about supporting humanitarian aid but this whole idea of legal inclusion,” to again use Pablo’s words, have been stymied not only by how long it takes to navigate Mexico’s humanitarian bureaucracies, or the fact that the shelter does not

have the money for consistent legal representation. Just as important is the team's wariness when it comes to playing politics. How, this chapter asks, do shelter workers and migrants juggle this slurry of intersecting professional, personal, and political economies? How do shelters negotiate what dignified care looks like as they navigate whether to prioritize keeping their doors open via legal inclusion or through moral, local forms of support? And how do shelter workers' senses of dignity relate with that of migrants who suffer abuses that would qualify them for humanitarian recognition?

Campaigning politicians visit La Casita regularly during my fieldwork, often arriving with a donation and a photographer ready to snap a heart-warming photo with one of the shelter's guests. These donations—bags full of used clothing, 50-kilo bags of rice, and cases of vegetable oil—keep the organization afloat. The team welcomes these gifts, but they are careful to stay out of photos, wary of the shelter becoming unintentionally associated with any one political party. As Pablo explains during an interview:

Human rights work means interacting with different state functionaries, right? But we also know that in Mexico there is so much impunity that you can't explain the climate of violence that we have experienced for more than a decade without the collusion of those functionaries. You show up at the police station to file a police report and you don't really know if you're talking to the police or to the criminals. You're always uncertain, afraid. The problem is how to approach cases in collaboration with the various authorities who use migration for party politics. We've seen that when elections are upcoming, politicians visit us to donate clothes, food, maybe a little money, but really for the photo op. We, as a policy, maintain a position of openness to all forms of aid as long as that aid isn't linked to political obligations. We're careful to make sure that we don't associate ourselves with any one political party. That's crucial for our ability to maintain a sort of ethical legitimacy in the eyes of the community, because they see that there is no profit motive for us. That's why we stay at the margins of any interactions with politicians. We would put the credibility of the shelter at risk.

This decision to remain politically neutral stems from the widespread assumption that state functionaries tasked with upholding justice are hand-picked by organized crime groups presumed

to be responsible for those injustices. Pablo sums it up bluntly later in the interview, “You don’t get elected here without narco approval.”

Unbeknownst to us as we sit through the workshop, these quiet performances are about to become much more public. We are about to find out that there was a shooting on the train last night. An eighteen-year old from Honduras named Daniel is dead after having bled out almost immediately, his body dangling over a freight car’s ladder rungs. Gustavo, a Nicaraguan in his early thirties, is in a medically induced coma at the local hospital. Ten other men who witnessed the incident are about to be dropped off at the shelter after being questioned by police investigators. The question of who fired the shots—railway guards, bandits, gang members, the police—remains unanswered as of this writing in early 2019. Gustavo will later recall how Juan Carlos, a congressman who visited him in the hospital the day he emerged from the coma, was one of the first people to sow doubt as to who was responsible for the incident. “Who did this to you?” Gustavo remembers the congressman asking, “Are you sure it was the railway guards? You can never really know in Mexico if the person in uniform is actually supposed to be wearing the uniform.”

For shelters workers and migrants alike, this subtle undermining of the pursuit of justice is symptomatic of nearly complete impunity across Mexico. In 2016, 99% of crimes reported in Mexico went unprosecuted.¹⁷⁴ An estimated 93% were not reported at all. The situation is even worse for people who are migrating without authorization. According to a 2017 report published by the Washington Office on Latin America, of nearly 6,000 formally reported abuses committed against migrants between 2014 and 2016, only 49 cases resulted in some form of criminal

¹⁷⁴ Bargent, 2016.

prosecution.¹⁷⁵ That is .9% and only counts criminal reports in five states (out of the 26 states that make up Mexico) abuses against migrants is disaggregated from total abuses. The numbers around humanitarian visas, available in theory to migrants who suffer “grave” abuses while in transit are equally disconcerting. Between 2014 and 2016, 3,355 humanitarian visas were approved in Mexico. For scale, Mexico deported 500,000 individuals in those three years.¹⁷⁶

In previous chapters, I have focused on factors that keep people from pursuing formal humanitarian recognition. I discussed how the idea of formally documenting and denouncing all the abuses committed against migrants was simply unfeasible given the daily grind of providing basic humanitarian aid. I also examined how many people viewed collaboration with human smugglers as a more viable option than navigating sluggish and opaque bureaucracies, despite the associated risks. This chapter takes a different angle, asking how Gustavo was able to beat the odds and win a humanitarian visa. I argue that shelter workers struggled to harmonize conflicting senses of dignity in order to reach this bittersweet accomplishment. To do so, I trace how struggle of shelter workers to maintain a single moral face while welcoming people for whom duplicity was a key survival strategy into the space of shelter, including migrants and state functionaries.

To support this argument, I build on scholarship surrounding the politics of hospitality and corruption. Hospitality is a lens that is well-attuned to understanding what Andrew Shryock describes as the fault-lines between informal negotiations of welcome and trespass between host and guest, and the formal negotiations of inclusion and exclusion between non-citizens and nations.¹⁷⁷ I explore these fault-lines in the context of a growing rift in Mexico’s shelter infrastructure. As the economies that legitimize and facilitate aid work increasingly incentivize the

¹⁷⁵ Isacson, Meyer, & Smith, 2017.

¹⁷⁶ SEGOB, 2017.

¹⁷⁷ Shryock, 2012.

judicialized pursuit of human rights, the kinds of morally ambiguous local-level politics that surround Gustavo's case become increasingly problematic for shelters like La Casita. Corruption suspicions inflect these hospitality politics, revealing shifting expectations about what constitutes "proper" humanitarian work, what "good hospitality" looks like, and the potential consequences of transgressing these expectations. Corruption suspicions, as Ilana Feldman writes, are central to how humanitarian aid with displaced populations is legitimized and contested. "In humanitarian contexts, corruption suspicions and accusations serve as a lens through which providers and refugees understand each other, a terrain on which they interact, and a vector for the forwarding of claims and complaints among multiple actors."¹⁷⁸ Tracing similar dynamics through Gustavo's four-month recovery process, from the day after he was shot to the day he received his humanitarian visa, I argue that looking closely at how the licit and the illicit hold together carries lessons for how we as practitioners and organizers think about the relationship between human rights as an ideal and the everyday pragmatics of providing humanitarian aid amid widespread corruption. Ultimately, I suggest that we must tread carefully as social workers so as not to uncritically dismiss corruption as immoral in our pursuit of human rights ideals.

Hospitality and Human Rights

Mexico's migrant shelters are hospitality spaces where strangers are welcomed as guests and nurtured for a short period of time. Together, they make up what we might think of as a "hospitality assemblage" composed of physical spaces, moral discourses, and legal frameworks. My use of the term hospitality assemblage builds on Shryock's, who focuses on how discourses and practices of welcome are mediated materially, a theme that is especially evident in the preceding chapter. As

¹⁷⁸ Feldman, 2018, S160.

Shryock writes, the “spaces necessary to take [guests] in” and “the material needed to prepare food and drink” are indispensable for understanding how hospitality assemblages hold together and fall apart.¹⁷⁹

This chapter brings together Shryock’s materially-oriented analysis with a different, albeit related application of the term assemblage: Collier and Ong’s more amorphous term “global assemblages.” According to Collier and Ong, global assemblages are the intersecting institutions, technologies, and forms of knowledge that mediate what they refer to as “global forms” like human rights and the “actual global,” or the “infrastructural conditions that allow global forms to function.”¹⁸⁰ Catholicism and human rights rhetoric, for example, are global forms that materialize in different ways across different contexts, and they are a key component of Mexico’s shelter assemblage, in addition to things like sleeping spaces and food. In bringing together these intersecting understandings of assemblage, my aim is to show how, in the wake of brutal acts of violence against migrants, the micro-politics of gift exchange that surround a 50-kilo bag of rice collide and coincide with the shifting politics of Mexico’s shelter assemblage nationally.

Most migrant shelters are led by priests and nuns. Others like La Casita, which is led in name by a priest named Nelson but in practice by a small group of dedicated lay collaborators, are affiliated to churches in other ways. As Jaqueline Hagan has written,¹⁸¹ linkages to Abrahamic ideologies of sanctuary have been central to legitimizing the work of shelter despite its associations with the criminalized world of human smuggling and organized crime, drawing on long standing traditions of churches as protected spaces for criminalized groups.¹⁸² Images that link the plight of

¹⁷⁹ Shryock 2012, S31.

¹⁸⁰ Ong & Collier, 2008: 9-13.

¹⁸¹ Hagan 2012.

¹⁸² Uribe-Uran, 2007.

migrants with Catholic iconography are commonplace, both within migrant shelters and beyond. A mural painted on the wall of a shelter in northern Mexico depicts Jesus riding on top of a freight train together with a group of migrants. In a piece by Kelly Latimore that has gone viral several times over, a man wearing a backpack guides a woman and child through the desert. Golden halos that float behind their heads evoke Jesus, Mary, and Joseph on their journey to Bethlehem. These kinds of images situate work of shelter in biblical verse: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”¹⁸³ As religious hospitality spaces, migrant shelters are imbued with ethical clarity, but they are also spaces pregnant with what Elana Zilberg describes as the political and cultural folklore of *doble cara*—



Figure 4.1: “Migration is not a crime; it is a right”

¹⁸³ Hebrews 13:1.

being two-faced.¹⁸⁴ Implicit in the call to see that of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph in people seeking shelter is also the understanding that people are not always who they appear to be. In his classic article on the Law of Hospitality, Julian Pitt Rivers writes that hospitality is “founded on ambivalence” (2012 [1977]: 513), what Michael Herzfeld has more recently described as the relationship between “courtesy and threat” (2012, S212).

Histories of colonial and neo-colonial intervention underlie this ambivalence - or to frame it in a different register, this duplicity. Just as Zilberg traces *doble cara* in El Salvador, duplicity is at the center of Mexican national ideologies of welcome and betrayal. Malintzín, or La Malinche, the indigenous translator and mistress of Hernan Cortés who has been glorified as the matriarch of Mexican mestizaje and vilified as a traitorous facilitator of Spanish conquest, is emblematic of *doble cara* in the Mexican context.¹⁸⁵ Malintzín herself is a central figure in a cartoon video featuring La Casita that was released in 2018 by the State Human Rights Commission (CEDH - Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos). The video, which begins as two migrants riding the train realize that they are being pursued by two police vehicles, evokes similarly ambiguous sentiments of courtesy and threat. Malintzín appears suddenly, flying through the air alongside the tracks as the train barrels past a cartoon countryside, reassuring the two migrants and drawing their attention to two orange SUVs from Grupos Beta that pull up alongside the train. Grupos Beta is the humanitarian wing of Mexico’s migration institute. Their orange-uniformed agents are known for handing out bottled water and cans of tuna to migrants waiting along the railway tracks. Together,

¹⁸⁴ Zilberg, 2007.

¹⁸⁵ Mestizaje refers to the syncretism of European and indigenous cultural systems. There is a vast literature on mestizaje in Mexico. For an anthropological overview of how Mexican mestizaje relates more broadly to ideas about hybridity and creolization across Latin America, see Alonso, 2012. For an analysis focused specifically on Malintzín, see Romero, 2014.

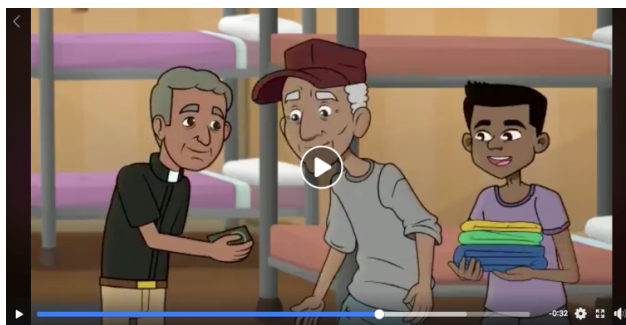
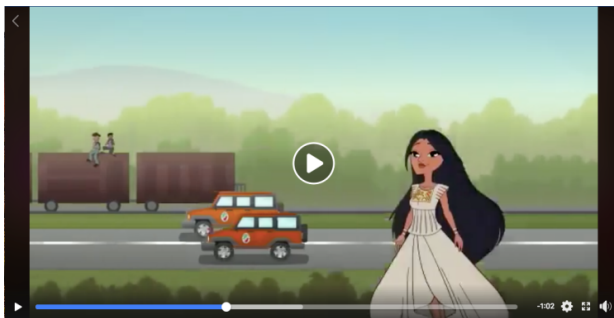
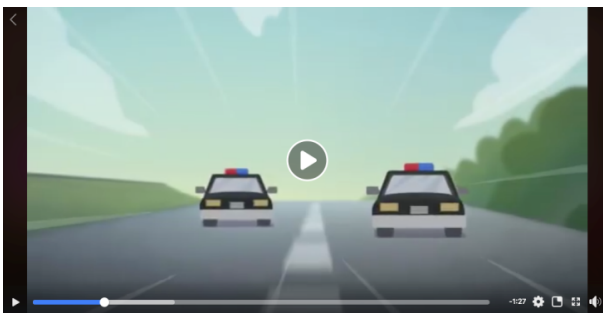
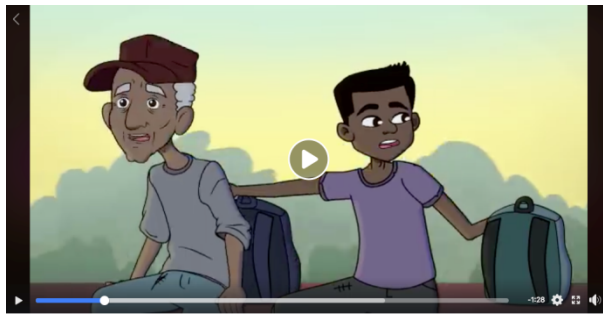


Figure 4.2: Malintzín: migrant guide, Retrieved from Facebook, August 15, 2018

Malintzín and the Grupos Beta agents guide the men into the welcoming embrace of Father Nelson at La Casita.

Seeing Grupos Beta in the video surprised me and made me realize that this video was likely more about La Casita appeasing state agencies that were hoping to appear benevolent. The closest Grupos Beta outpost is in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, a full day's drive from La Casita, so I saw little of the orange-uniformed agents during my fieldwork at La Casita. As the montage shifts from suspenseful chase to hospitable welcome, Malintzín affirms that undocumented migration is “not a crime, but a life circumstance,” and that “the State Human Rights Commission is available to orient you in case your rights are infringed upon.” Unlike Grupos Beta, CEDH representatives did regularly visit the shelter. Wearing vests emblazoned with the agency's logo, the reps would gather everyone around for a “workshop” and explain that even people migrating without authorization have human rights. Migrants staying at La Casita tended to slyly roll their eyes during these visits. If those leading these workshops (which were more like lectures) brought up Grupos Beta, migrants in the audience tended to react with more candor. “You know what Grupos Beta does?” a man with a scar down his face who called himself Chucky interrupted sardonically during one of these presentations, “They show up along the tracks and ten minutes later, there is a raid. Beta passes out bottles of water and cans of tuna, then they call their buddies wearing the other color uniform and tell them how many of us there are. Besides, you think I can feed my family with a can of tuna?”

Chucky's cynicism echoes scholarly critiques that have examined the “emptiness” of human rights frameworks for people who do not have access to basic needs such as education, health care, and food security, regardless of whether they have been granted formal humanitarian recognition. Samuel Moyn, for example, describes how for many people human rights is akin to a

set of “pleasant normative assertions [that come to] feel something like offering a detailed inventory of the courses of a lengthy meal in the presence of the starving.”¹⁸⁶ Scholars have increasingly linked this sentiment to a shift toward market citizenship, the idea that the “right to have rights,” to use Hannah Arendt’s famous phrase,¹⁸⁷ is increasingly determined by one’s access to capital.¹⁸⁸ As the number of people seeking formal humanitarian recognition increases amid intensified immigration enforcement, market citizenship has materialized not only for migrants, but also for the organizations that they rely on.

Gustavo’s case highlights what many shelter workers view as a growing rift in Mexico’s shelter assemblage. On the one hand, there are financially stable migrant shelters with a reputation for successfully navigating Mexico’s humanitarian bureaucracy, often as a result of their affiliation with international aid agencies. And then there are financially precarious shelters that are less likely to have success helping migrants to access formal humanitarian recognition because their funding and broader legitimacy is rooted primarily in more localized relationships. While organizations like La Casita receive some attention from international humanitarian organizations and larger shelters also rely heavily on local forms of support, shelter workers and people migrating generally divide Mexico’s shelters into two categories. “There are the visa shelters that have the kind of international support and money that you need to take on cases,” Paula explains during one of our interviews, “and then there are the rest of us that struggle just to get by with enough rice and beans, let alone some money to pay ourselves a little for rent.”

This divide between “visa shelters” and comparatively grass-roots “transit shelters” resonates with what various scholars describe as a tension between the “noble sentiment” of

¹⁸⁶ Cited in Gessen, 2018. See also Moyn, 2018.

¹⁸⁷ Arendt 1973 [1951].

¹⁸⁸ Brodie, 1997; Grace, Nawyn, & Okwako, 2018; Nawyn, 2011.

humanitarian ideals and the way those ideals become a kind of “operationalized compassion” in the context of an “industrialized response to suffering.”¹⁸⁹ While some admire the growth of larger “visa shelters,” which are seen as benefiting from international aid agencies that reward work oriented towards judicial forms of recognition, others see this growth as disingenuous, leading shelters to prioritize their notoriety within the shelter assemblage over what some migrants consider to be good care.

Jhonny from Honduras, for example, talks with admiration of how La 72, a well-known shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco that is one of the first stops for migrants after crossing into Mexico from Guatemala, has grown. He links La 72’s growth to the willingness of Fray Tomás, the shelter’s leader, to stick his neck out. Speaking with me a month after he left la 72 and abandoned his case there, he tells me that he has recently found out that the two friends he left home with have recently been awarded humanitarian visas at la 72. All three had initiated visa applications there after being kidnapped shortly after crossing into Mexico from Guatemala.

I left Honduras with two other friends. They stayed, and they’re about to get their visas. I’ve been traveling for a month. You get your papers in no time (*rapidito*) down there. Fray Tomás, the father there, people are always telling me that he makes things move (*se moviliza*). When there are a lot of people at the shelter, he gets everyone and *boom* they get on the train. He gets on with them! And if not, he calls a few buses and they go right to Mexico City. How does he do it? He has to have a way to influence (*ha de tener influencias*). International support, even from the United States. There are so many Americans there, the volunteers. And it used to be small. It was like a camp basically. Now? *N’ombré!* It’s huge! It’s because the father bothers people (*anda molestando la gente*). He’s always knocking on doors. They might kill him for it, but at least I would have my visa by now.

Fray Tomás, for Paula, is a testament to the power of a public-facing figure to legitimize the work of shelter on a different scale. “Imagine what this place could be like if we had someone like Fray Tomás leading things,” she explains in an interview. La 72 in Tenosique, as with the few other

¹⁸⁹ Molland & Stellmach, 2016.

“visa” shelters across Mexico, has grown dramatically since its founding in 2010. “I remember when this was just a field,” a team member who had worked at La 72 on and off since its founding explains to me during one of my visits there, “We all just slept outside under *palapas* and there were no bathrooms. Those bushes over there are well fertilized, if you know what I mean.” Over the course of my field work, La 72 continues to grow, adding dedicated dormitories for volunteers, unaccompanied minors, and LGBTQ folks, in addition to other amenities like air-conditioned offices, a covered concrete soccer pitch, and bathrooms. This expansion also includes offices dedicated to partner organizations like Asylum Access and Medicins Sans Frontieres that assist with efforts that expand beyond *just* humanitarian aid.

This shift towards legalistic humanitarianism, however, is not without its critics. Some migrants see the growth of shelters like La 72 as prioritizing international notoriety over the well-being of migrants. A man named Freddy, for example, echoes Chucky’s disdain for the CEDH reps that visit La Casita. I originally met Freddy at La 72 while visiting to film with Raul. He had been staying there while initiating a petition for refugee status. When he shows up at La Casita a few weeks later, shortly after I myself have returned, he explains his misgivings:

I was petitioning for refugee status, but I ended up leaving because I saw a lot of things while I was there. The people in charge there, it’s all ego. They give you rotten food, you sleep on the hard concrete, and we complained, right? We wrote a letter to complain, you know, formally, but we did it when someone from the International Red Cross was visiting and they kicked us out saying that we had stolen a cell phone or some bullshit. That’s what they really care about, right (*entendés*)? The money from these international agencies.

To be clear, these kinds of complaints were rare, and they should not be taken out of context as a reflection of migrant shelters in general, nor as a reflection of La 72. The vast majority of migrants I interact with speak with the utmost regard for those providing shelter work. However, the way Jhonny and Freddy evaluate La 72 both positively and negatively points to a cleavage in Mexico’s shelter assemblage.

Shelter workers at La Casita admired the way La 72 had been able to expand in coordination with international aid agencies and sought to emulate this growth and become known as a visa shelter. However, this would involve shifting the scales of shelter legitimacy. Pursuing humanitarian recognition, which involves advocating for investigations into those profiting off of the business of clandestine migration, would threaten to upset the implicit understanding that Mexico's shelter assemblage should *just* provide humanitarian aid. Gustavo's case provides an opportunity to look closely at how migrants and shelter workers navigate Mexico's shifting shelter assemblage as aid organizations like La Casita increasingly wade into the fraught terrain of human rights advocacy amid the intensification of violent policing along migrant transit corridors. For La Casita, helping Gustavo pursue formal humanitarian recognition promises to raise the organization's profile in line with judicialized humanitarianism. Doing so, however, involves dialoguing with state functionaries who are suspected of being implicated in the economies of corruption that enable egregious acts of violence against migrants like Gustavo in the first place. They worry about how promoting ideals of transparency and accountability in the defense of human rights might put their work at risk. This wariness is rooted in efforts to maintain an organization with a single moral face while aiding people for whom duplicity is a key survival strategy.

Month 1 - October

An hour after the workshop ends, the ten men who witnessed the shooting are dropped off at the shelter by two state police detectives. Marcela guides them into the infirmary and explains that the shelter can help them pursue humanitarian visas. She also explains that the investigators will be



Figure 4.3: Resting on La Casita’s concrete patio

returning and that they will likely ask for one or two of the men to accompany them to the scene of the crime. Exhausted from being questioned throughout the night, they fall asleep on the shelter’s concrete patio, soaking up the warmth of the mid-day sun. I wake them one by one for intake, careful not to pry after what they have endured. Then I direct them to the kitchen for food—pork rinds soaked in salsa verde, reheated rice, and tortillas.

When, as promised, the officers return an hour later, there is a quick rush to figure out who will do the talking. A man named José who is ex-military and has made the trip three times before is selected. From the intake, the men know that I am also a researcher. José turns to me as we prepare to meet the investigators, “Güero, you have your recorder? You can get this on tape?” “Yea, that’s ok?” I reply. “*Si’ombé,*” José whispers fiercely as he glances at my recorder to make

sure the red light is on, “Yea man, you have to record. They try to hide everything here, even the human rights people.”

We huddle around the officers in the entryway. One of them takes a piece of paper out of a pants pocket and unfolds it. On the sheet are pictures of several firearms that look like they have been copied and pasted from a google images search.

“All I need from you guys is to tell me which of these guns was used in the shooting,” the officer explains. José points tentatively at one of the assault rifles.

“Are you sure?” the agent replies. “Look,” he continues, “I’m on your side. I want to know who did this as much as you do. The problem is that none of the police forces in this area use that kind of assault rifle.”

José’s voice has a slight tremor as he responds, “With all due respect, you are putting us in an impossible position. You’re asking me to have picked out the difference between an M16 and an AK47 while taking live fire from the top of a moving train. Even if we saw cars from the municipal police, how do we know that the people firing the gun weren’t *mafiosos* wearing fake uniforms?” And then, with a look of resignation, José points at the M16. “It was this one. One hundred percent.”

After the officers leave, we gather again back in the infirmary and the men debate whether to stay or go. Marcela listens for a few minutes, then jumps in to explain that this is all political, that the investigators are just trying to get the men to contradict their own story even as they pretend that they are trying to get the facts straight. At the same time, she makes it clear that the shelter is happy to help them with the process of applying for a humanitarian visa given that they have all been the victims of a threat on their lives at the hands of Mexican officials. She also



Figure 4.4: Railways guards passing by La Casita

explains, however, that this would mean staying at the shelter for several months. “How do you expect us to fend for ourselves in a place like this?” an older man from El Salvador named Arnulfo asks, “Those agents are just waiting for us to leave the shelter. They say they just want to talk with us, but who knows what they really want. If we leave, we’re putting our lives at risk. And if we don’t, if we stay in here and don’t talk to them, we look suspicious.” “We’ll think about it,” José adds, “But you know what that bullshit about the guns was? Pure intimidation.”

In the morning, Paula and I escort the men to the bus terminal. We walk through town in two groups and the men spread out behind us to keep a low profile. We are pushing the limits of permissible humanitarian aid by escorting them in this way. At the terminal, Paula hands the fare for all ten men to the bus driver and they are off to a town 20 minutes north, the next spot where the train slows enough to hop on safely. The bus pulls off with ten eyewitnesses to a murder and a bullet wound.

Month 2 - November

Gustavo and I have just finished watching “Rambo” for the fourth time on the TV in the men’s dormitory. The post of the bunk bed digs into my back and I shift to put a blanket there for some relief. It is a slow day at the shelter. A baker from Tegucigalpa is snoring away towards the back of the men’s dormitory. The chatter of the only other guests, three teenagers from Honduras, filters in through the open windows as a slight breeze circulates the warm afternoon air through the bunk room. This is the first time Gustavo and I have had a chance to talk alone and on tape. Since being released from the hospital, Gustavo has refused to leave the shelter. He spends most of his time in the men’s dormitory where he is out of sight of the railway guards that pass by. He fears that as the only remaining witness to the shooting, the guards might be so brazen as to shoot at him from atop the train if he steps out into the open patio area. It has been difficult to carve out some privacy for an interview and besides, I have been wary of asking him to speak on tape given what he’s been through. Earlier in the morning, however, Gustavo breaks the seal and asks me if am ever going to interview him.

He props his gaunt frame up on a pile of pillows that is rich with the stench of his body odor. He has been sweating through the night. His wound is infected and has been slow to heal. Two weeks from now, a nurse who volunteers at the shelter will pull out an inch-long piece of stitching that the surgeons apparently left behind when they were sewing him up.

“So,” I begin, “what happened?”

“I messed up,” Gustavo replies, “We weren’t going to let them get in our way, but I misjudged the situation.”

I’ve already heard Gustavo recount the incident a dozen times to the wave of reporters who have passed through to catch the story, their voice recorders extended at arm’s length, watching

him struggle to raise his shirt for a photo of the garish stitching that stretches across his chest. Usually, he speaks to the people holding recorders with a sense of war-story bravado. Now, as he comes to terms with how slowly this wound will likely heal, his tone is less confident.

Traveling in numbers for safety, the group of twelve that Gustavo had joined up with first met the guards on a rainy night just after exiting the tunnels past Orizaba. In the station there, they escorted the men off the train at gunpoint and told them to wait for the next one to come by. Faced with the possibility of another night sleeping out in the rain, Gustavo urged the others to ignore the guards' warning and they boarded the train at daybreak, just as it was leaving the station. He had made the trip before, arriving in Nuevo Laredo where he worked construction for a few years. This, however, was the first trip Gustavo had attempted in nearly five years and he underestimated the new brutality of the railway guards.

The morning, Gustavo explains, became a game of cat and mouse. The men disconnected the airbrakes when the guards attempted to kick them off again, causing the train to come to a stop. Then, while the conductors re-pressurized the brake lines, they ran to another car farther down the train before the conductor could get the engine moving again. After repeating this several times, the guards appeared to have given up. Around noon, the train disembarked, and the group spent the day roaring across the countryside. A few hours later, as the sun had begun to set, gunshots rang out from a pickup truck parked along the tracks.

“It took me a minute to realize what had happened,” Gustavo recalls, “First I saw David collapse, then I felt this weird mix of hot and cold. I realized it was my own blood. I waited until the train stopped and then crawled to the guard shack of a factory near the tracks. After that, I don't remember much until waking up with a police man sitting next to my hospital bed.”

Outside, a train whistle moans in the distance. A few minutes later, rail cars start to trundle past the shelter. Gustavo hefts himself up with his good arm and walks to the door to take a quick look. “Güero, turn on your video camera. I want you to send a video to my son.” A railway guard holding a semi-automatic rifle stands atop one of the cars. Clad all in black and wearing a balaclava, he floats from view down the tracks. Gustavo yells above the din into the video camera on my phone, “This is the train, son. I was on one of those when they shot me. It’s big, right love? Those guards going by, those are the *garroteros*. There they go. That’s who shot me.”

Month 3 - December

Three months into his stay at La Casita, Gustavo and I sit at the small folding table in my apartment. Weary of being stuck in the shelter all day, Gustavo has started accompanying me home at the end of my shift. The main attraction is the wi-fi. He spends most of the time exchanging WhatsApp messages with his family back home. I also suspect that he appreciates the privacy. We’ve set up a twin bed for him in the men’s dormitory so he doesn’t have to sleep on the musty bunk beds, but he still has to share his living space with a couple dozen strangers each night. We pick our way through a roasted chicken, wash it down with orange soda, and he opens up about his past.

It becomes clear that the way Gustavo has handled the trauma of the shooting echoes the way he has handled the traumas of growing up struggling to get by in the slums of Managua. As with many of those who pass through the shelter, Gustavo has spent his life confronted with a world in which a two-faced ethical sensibility is not only a means of survival, it is a moral obligation. He tells me how at eight years old his first job involved working for neighborhood thieves who paid him to case potential marks while he scavenged yesterday’s newspapers and



Figure 4.5: Gustavo out on the tracks

other recyclables from the stately homes that abutted the land on which his family squatted. He talks about moving on to hawking *piedra* (crack) on street corners as a young teenager, and then moving from motorcycle robberies to home invasions as he connected with a crew of more experienced thieves in his early twenties.

As he walks me through the chain of events that ultimately led him to leave home, it becomes clear that Gustavo’s ethical sensibility does not carry the same pretension of moral clarity that the shelter seeks to maintain. His world view is rooted more in the dialectic of *doble cara*, what Elana Zilberg describes as a “structure of suspicion” in which “things are never what they appear to be.”¹⁹⁰ An hour into our conversation, with only a pile of bones and gristle remaining,

¹⁹⁰ Zilberg, 2007: 39.

Gustavo expresses this ethical sensibility most clearly as he explains the transition from drug-dealing to home invasion that ultimately landed him in prison.

Gustavo: My wife knew. My mother knew. It's not something you hide. You're standing out on a corner, you know? Everyone sees what you're doing. You burn bridges with the people that try to put the cops on you. So, you're careful, but it's not about hiding.

John: So, you don't really hide it from the police?

Gustavo: No, they just take whatever they catch you with. At first, it was just small stuff: phones, wallets, shoes. And then I moved on to motorcycles. We would sometimes do two motorcycles in a day. By the end of the week, we would have done eight. Two of you pull up. The guy on the back hops off, pulls out a pistol, tells the person on the motorcycle to get off, he gets on. Done.

John: You were doing that before you came here?

Gustavo: No, first I got into selling drugs, and then some heavier robberies. I started selling for another guy in the neighborhood. And then I said, no man, I'm done working for somebody else. I started selling on my own. I'm my own boss. But I was young and stupid. I spent everything partying. That's why I never rose up. It seems like people that get involved in that always end up going bad. Without anything. You know, it goes to your head."

John: You mean, from using the product?

Gustavo: Exactly. I never smoked crack or weed or nothing. And that saved me, but it also got me connected with Lucy, the one who got me doing the robberies. I started hanging out with her and she tells me, 'You need to leave that shit behind, do something less dangerous.' So that's how I got involved in robberies again. With her crew it was different. Heavier, but organized. They already had it studied. They would scope out business people, people with money. She would get to know them, their routines. She would study them. Then we would go in when nobody was around. Easy. That was my life for a few years, until they finally caught us.

I only did a year because my mom found a lawyer who connected with the people we robbed. All that was under the table. You know, you find a lawyer who is connected with the judge and the prosecutor, and you get the contact information for the victim. Then you pay the lawyer to go talk with the victim's lawyer and he comes back with a sealed letter saying that they've worked out a "mediation." That's how the law works in Nicaragua. If you have enough to make it worth it, you stay out of jail. In my case, they left me with nothing.

That's the punishment. You pay off the person you robbed, you pay off the police, and you pay off the judge.

John: Is that why you decided to leave Nicaragua?

Gustavo: When I left prison, Güero, I was pale, skinny, destroyed. I told myself, I'm done with that. Prison messed me up. I didn't want to go back. So, I started working construction, little jobs. That's how I got my footing again (*así me rebuscaba*). I started working aboveboard, but we still had all this debt to pay off. After I got out, Lucy came and looked for me. She told me that she needed my help with a job, but I didn't want any more of that. I went and talked about the job with them. You know, how much, when, all that. But I also was thinking about my kids, about that year just rotting in prison. I was still afraid, I guess. And I was afraid of what would happen if I said no. So that's why I left. I mean, I had already lost everything: my motorcycle, my sound system, my refrigerator. The only thing left was the house. I was done, and all of my old friends were in prison. Everybody was in for *years*. I was already thinking about leaving and I knew from before that I could make money in Mexico, but I didn't realize how much the route had changed.

The way Gustavo talks about his past does not align with an idea of shelter as a space of redemption and recovery, a place where people own up to past misdeeds. He expresses a sense of compunction in talking about his criminal past, but not in the sense of having done something wrong. Gustavo's relationship to the shelter's moral footing echoes what Angela García describes in her work on intergenerational heroin use as the co-constitution of addiction and kinship.¹⁹¹ His morally ambiguous tangle of kinship and criminality spills over the ideological boundaries of the shelter's attempts to appear morally pure. Selling drugs and robbing houses is not something that he is ashamed of, per se. As Gustavo explains, "It's not something you hide." Nor does how he portrays his past echo an oppositional stance, akin to how the young men that Philippe Bourgois worked with violently affirm their masculinity in response to what he describes as "the humiliating interpersonal subordination of service work."¹⁹² Gustavo did not reject menial jobs. The way

¹⁹¹ García 2014.

¹⁹² Bourgois 2003, 141.

Gustavo talks about instead his past reveals a moral framework that is more akin what Ben Penglase describes as the “law of the hillside.”¹⁹³ Penglase describes a moral taxonomy whereby drug trafficking comes to represent a form of patriarchal protection built on “trading protection for complicity” in a context of insecurity that is grounded in corrupt and abusive political and judicial systems. “Traffickers sometimes deliberately [...] use violence “expressively” to demonstrate their power. These apparently “arbitrary” uses of violence are necessary precisely because that power is so unstable .”¹⁹⁴ Similar to the violence of traffickers in Rio, corruption is the moral language through which Gustavo expresses his ability to support a family and keep them safe. To not play the game in this context, to maintain a single moral face, would in fact be immoral because it would jeopardize his ability to support his family. It is tempting to think of Gustavo as shameless, but these are the ramifications of extreme poverty, of living in a place where selling drugs and robbing people is one of the only options, where the education system is busted and people are left with few options. Gustavo has grown up in a context where doing whatever is necessary to protect his family amid impossible circumstances is not something to be ashamed of.

The next day, Gustavo and I walk the two miles to a construction site on the other side of town so that he can pick up his pay. After getting to the point that he can slowly stretch his arm above his head without too much pain, he has had a go at working construction in order to finally send some money home to his wife and two children in Nicaragua. After a week of work, however, the pain from his injury becomes unbearable and he is unable to keep working. By this point, if we are alone the tape is on. There are thirty seconds of our footfall, the buzz of a motorcycle, a storefront blasting reggaetón, then Gustavo starts talking. “You know a good way to make

¹⁹³ Penglase 2010.

¹⁹⁴ Penglase 2010, 321-322.

money?” he begins obliquely, “Like 100 dollars per person.” I side-eye him to let him know I’ve caught his drift. “I’m telling you because you’re my brother,” he continues,

But right now, it’s not a reality, it’s just words. I’m still thinking about it. I’d have to really think about how to do it. You know, I’d tell them something like, ‘Look man, I’m a migrant too. I’m with you, so I know what you’re thinking.’ I’d tell them I’ve traveled with this guide before, but it’s not like I’m trying to screw them over. The idea is that it’s a fair deal. You know, lots of guys get to this point and they’re done walking. They’re tired of the train. And this is a good point to grab a guide because it’s pretty calm here. See, the thing is, everybody needs a guide at some point to get across. By the time they get here, they’re ready. When a migrant arrives, I’m already chatting them up. I start by talking about myself, about what happened to me, my wound, you know, to develop some trust. Like, I’m a migrant too. And then, ‘Do you already have someone or are you going to wait? Because I can connect you with the lady who got me across the first time. She’ll send for you from here. Think about it. It’s nice to dream.’

Gustavo’s plan is no secret for shelter workers. Everybody assumes that he will be tempted by smuggling networks to funnel migrants their way. What they are more concerned about is how, down the road, his interactions with the congressman, Juan Carlos, might implicate the shelter in the kinds of politics they have been so keen to avoid. For the past two weeks, Ramón has been going back and forth with INM agents about the documents needed to officially demonstrate that Gustavo has been the victim of a “grave” offense, the designation required by the 2011 migration law to approve humanitarian visas. Up to this point, La Casita has been unable to acquire a crucial document, what the representative from Mexico City-based organization had described somewhat flippantly during the workshop that took place the day after the shooting as “documentation that an investigation into the offense is underway.” During a later interview, Ramón will recall how INM tried to take advantage of what he refers to in his characteristically formal way of talking as a series of “confusing legal lacunae,”

In order for INM to grant a visa, they need a certified copy of Gustavo’s official testimony, the one made from his hospital bed where he says, ‘I, Gustavo, here in my hospital bed, state that the following is true.’ And then he goes on to describe that he saw such and such a person shoot him at such and such time of day, etc. This is the document that establishes that there is sufficient evidence to investigate what appears to be a ‘grave’ offense. So, we

get a copy of the document and present it to migration, and they say it's not enough. 'Bring us a certified copy of the original file.' At the same time, the state attorney's office tells us that, according to state law, they are not allowed to release a certified copy in an ongoing case. So, you as a victim can go and look at the original file and check what it says, but they are never going to give you a certified copy of that file. You can make a copy. You can take photos of it. But, as private individuals, you cannot have a certified copy. They tell us that certified copies can only be issued to institutions like INM. We go to INM and tell them what the state's attorney told us. And they respond that it is not in their interest nor in the capacity to petition, as an institution, for certified copies. So, the police can't give us the document and migration doesn't want to go get it. So that's the puzzle. What do we do? Well, in Gustavo's case, it seems like the trick was the amount of public pressure his case received. And not only media attention, but political attention. That's what finally pressured the state's attorney to release a certified copy of the file to INM. And, of course, the document explains that there is sufficient evidence to proceed with an investigation. But what really mattered was the public pressure.

As Ramón would go on to explain, navigating these bureaucratic *trampas* (traps) is dependent on Gustavo's willingness to garner the sympathy and collaboration of the very elected officials that Las Casita worked so hard to avoid. He does just that. Throughout Gustavo's third month of recuperation, he stays in regular contact with Juan Carlos, the congressman who visited him soon after he came out of his coma in the hospital. While the lawmaker was the first to slyly raise doubts about who had shot at the train, he has also offered to help Gustavo reach his ultimate goal, the northern Mexican city of Nuevo Laredo where he worked as a welder for a period five years earlier. For the team at La Casita, this deal between the two men is as frightening as it is enticing. Collaborating with the congressman offers the opportunity to win a humanitarian visa and raise its profile while also alleviating the pressure that Gustavo feels to support his family by working for smugglers. Of course, to do so would also mean giving in to a corrupted system where, as Ramón explains, "only people with the money and public pressure to really move things are able to access any kind of justice." What kind of justice requires such duplicity?

Month 4 - January

In the fourth month since the shooting, it is finally time for Gustavo to pick up his humanitarian visa at the local INM outpost. Ramón is wary how the INM agents might react to us filming, so Raul and I sit on the curb outside and wait for Gustavo to emerge. After thirty minutes or so, Raul films Gustavo sauntering out, hair slicked back, holding the small piece of plastic that regularizes his status, at least for the next year.

Later in the afternoon, Gustavo slumps confidently into a bench that sits in the middle of the state congress' spacious hall. The elected officials perched in their leather chairs at the front of the hall wear down vests over their tailored shirts to fight back the high desert chill that lingers in the air. Gustavo's phone echoes out as the session officially begins with a call to order and he rushes to silence the ringer. It is his mom back in Nicaragua. Raul and I are both wearing headphones and we listen in on the call through Gustavo's lapel mic. "*Mita*, let me call you back," he whispers, "I'm trying to get this money for the plane ride from the congressman."

Moments later, Juan Carlos takes to the podium and formally apologizes, "on behalf of the people of [our state]." When Juan Carlos asks Gustavo to identify himself, he instinctually raises his right arm then flinches at the pain. The gunshot wound has been slow to heal. Adding to the infection caused by the embedded stitching, Gustavo has repeatedly re-aggravated his wound over the past month while attempting to send some money home from laying cinderblock for a local contractor.

After the public apology, Juan Carlos guides us to his office. Raul directs Gustavo and Juan Carlos to sit down at a small meeting table so the shelves full of carefully-arranged and leather-bound legal tomes frame the scene just so. In addition to Raul and myself, three reporters pile in to the small room. Juan Carlos, who is well-versed in political theatrics, waits until all the voice recorders are on the table and the red dots indicate that the cameras are recording, then turns to

Gustavo and explains that he and his fellow legislators have pooled together funds for a plane ticket to northern Mexico. “This is a small gesture of support from the party given the injustices that you have suffered while visiting in our state.” he says, handing Gustavo an envelope full of bills. Then, turning to the cameras, he asks, “Ok, are we good?”

Once the red dots have disappeared and he is sure he is not being recorded by reporters, Juan Carlos stands up and turns to Gustavo as the reporters exit and Raul and I pack up the equipment, “You’re headed to Cabo?!” “To the beach,” Gustavo replies as he stuffs the envelope into his pants pocket. The resort town at the southern tip of the Baja Peninsula is worlds away from the peri-urban sprawl of Central Mexico. In Cabo, Gustavo plans to meet up with two friends from back in Nicaragua who have recently made it up through Mexico. “There’s all kinds of drywall work in those hotels,” he tells the congressman with a grin. “Ok, good, good. Make sure you check



Figure 4.6: Gustavo and Raul during a break in filming

for tickets on Volaris. They tend to have the best deals for tickets to Baja.” Then, as he guides us to the door, he asks, “And Ramón? He didn’t want to see your moment of glory?” Gustavo shrugs and rolls his eyes. Ramón and rest of the shelter team are notably absent, and it is clear that both Juan Carlos and Gustavo feel snubbed.

Juan Carlos offers us a ride back to the shelter and we pile into his SUV. “I’ve been *mojado* too, you know,” he says to Gustavo from the driver’s seat. Then he explains how he overstayed a student visa in the U.S. a few years back, waiting tables at an Olive Garden outside of Boston before returning home to pursue a career in politics. Later in the afternoon, after buying Gustavo’s plane ticket at an internet café, we walk around town picking up supplies for a celebration party we are planning later that night. Gustavo chuckles and says, “You know what, Güero. The congressman and I are probably more alike than we are different. We both know how to *charolear*. We’re both experts at getting money out of people.”

The entire shelter team has been planning a party at my apartment for weeks in anticipation of this day, but it fizzles an hour before it is set to begin when Gustavo lets Paula know that he has invited the congressman to the celebration. Ten minutes later, as we load the last of the party supplies into the trunk of Raul’s rental car, Ramón sends me a text message. He has just heard from Paula about the congressman being invited. It reads: “Please tell Gustavo that we are sorry, but I’ve asked the other shelter workers to not go to the party. We want to celebrate with Gustavo as well, but we can’t risk compromising the shelter. We don’t really know how much we can trust him.” The only people who attend the party are Raul, Güero 1, the congressman, and my landlord, who we have invited over to help eat some of the chicken. Gustavo holds up a bottle of beer and adds, with a contemptuous chuckle, “I drink to getting away from that damn shelter where the people are too scared to come share a beer with me before I go.”



Figure 4.7: Gustavo at my apartment

In the morning, I pull milk for coffee out from behind the two cases of *cagiüamas* that sit in my refrigerator, unopened. Bottles from the third case are strewn across the apartment. Raul and Güero 1 stir a little from where they sleep on the floor as Gustavo wanders out of the other bedroom, blinks at the morning light, and asks if it's possible to change the ticket. He has just received a voice message from his friends in Cabo letting him know that the work they have been promised has fallen through. Gustavo slumps down to the floor, dejected. "I can't be in the shelter anymore. I stay here and look for work, whoever shot me might try to finish the job. I go up there and it's the same thing again: starting from zero." Raul is awake as well now and he starts packing up his camera gear as I go online to see about a refund on the ticket. Gustavo stretches his bad arm in a slow circle up above his head, grimacing through the twinges of pain. "Fuck it," he sighs, "*Voy a maquinar algo.*" I'll figure something out.

The Romance of a Visa

Gustavo leaves the team at La Casita uncertain about the benefits of pursuing formal humanitarian recognition. Four months after his departure, Ramón and I sit in the moldy office space loaned to the shelter by a partnering parish across town. I am hoping to get his take on what happened, now with some critical distance. I have just come back from visiting Gustavo in Huixtla, Chiapas, the small town an hour's drive from the border with Guatemala where he has been scraping by repairing motorcycles. Things didn't work out in Cabo. There was less work than promised and pain from his wound kept Gustavo up at night. After working through the pain for a month, Gustavo decides to head home to Nicaragua to recuperate. However, he only makes it as far as Huixtla. Two months after he receives his humanitarian visa, I visit him there before returning to La Casita.

“So, you’re back from another adventure with Gus? How’s he doing?” Ramón asks. “You know, figuring it out (*buscando la manera*),” I respond, trying to hide my concern about what else he might be getting himself into. After the pleasantries, I ask Ramón what he has learned from Gustavo’s case and he responds at first by summarizing a recent encounter with the newly seated station chief for the local INM outpost. The shelter is pursuing a new case after yet another shooting incident on the train and he has just returned from dropping off some papers to INM. According to Ramón, the station chief had scoffed at what he called “the romance of defending human rights.” “The guy tells me, ‘We can issue visas, but is that really what is in the best interest of these people?’ Ramón explains, paraphrasing the INM chief, ‘Because in the course of our work, we have detained people that we know are involved in smuggling. Often, they are people that have humanitarian visas.’ Ramón goes on to explain that while he bristled at the INM agent’s flippant attitude, he also shares some of his skepticism. He continues,

In the last three years, we’ve corroborated how complicated it is to try and support people pursuing the visa. What do I mean by that? Sometimes we get so wrapped up in the struggle to simply survive as an organization that we don’t always take into account the goal of a person like Gustavo. Looking back on things, we find ourselves wondering if it is even worth it to invest time and money as an organization in order to receive something as limited as the humanitarian visa. In our experience, the justice system, at least here locally, makes it practically impossible to find any kind of guilt. We basically have zero faith in the idea of an investigation, in finding anyone guilty, or some kind of restitution. Despite that, the humanitarian visa is still a minimum form of justice for the migrant. But, for the migrant the visa represents just one way of continuing his or her path (*proyecto de vida*). But the migrant tends not to value the visa in the same way that we do as an organization. So, lots of time we invest so much time and effort in trying to get this very limited kind of benefit, and when we are successful, eight days later the person is in the U.S., where the visa doesn’t do them any good. So, we also feel a kind of frustration. Why invest so much resource into something that in the end doesn’t really mean anything?”

Gaining formal humanitarian recognition for Gustavo has involved a delicate balance of invisibility and publicity, requiring La Casita to manage conflicting moral and monetary economies. Managing the curtain between backstage and on stage, as Andrew Shryock writes, is

central to the smooth functioning of hospitality: “When a house is operating smoothly as sovereign space, [...] elements of plot and political method disappear from view; keeping them invisible is a sign of power.”¹⁹⁵ Sustaining humanitarian and human smuggling logics requires the careful maintenance of a nonverbal stage curtain. Gustavo’s case, however, which was widely mediated in press outlets, has threatened to disrupt this delicate hospitality assemblage. A crucial aspect of “what has worked” is that Gustavo’s case has been mediated widely and publicly. Politicians, documentary filmmakers, journalists, and—to the extent that I played a part—researchers have drawn a degree of attention to the case that most migrants are not afforded. Gustavo pulling up his shirt to reveal the six-inch scar that ran along his ribcage makes for good copy in newspapers and online news videos, drawing public attention that made it more difficult for the story, unlike most other cases, to just slip by.

In this sense, Gustavo’s case resonates with several recent studies that examine the power of “civic visibility” for undocumented communities seeking to gain formal recognition from state institutions.¹⁹⁶ Media blitzes, letter-writing campaigns, and the occupation of elected officials’ offices have been a central strategy where the calculated risk of “coming out” of the shadows has functioned as a buffer against the threat of deportation.¹⁹⁷ In the United States, these forms of organizing have highlighted the extent to which discretion permeates a legal system that likes to talk about itself as impartial and apolitical.¹⁹⁸ In Mexico, this politics of visibility takes on a different tenor as it rubs up against a legal system in which few people are kidding themselves about impartiality.

¹⁹⁵ Shryock 2012, S28.

¹⁹⁶ Molland & Stellmach, 2016.

¹⁹⁷ Enriquez and Saguy 2016; Seif 2014.

¹⁹⁸ Rodriguez, 2016; Zatz & Rodriguez, 2014.

“*Es sonado*,” Gustavo would say to Raul’s camera, “It’s talked about.” Gustavo has manifested the kind of notoriety that has benefitted a few well known and well-resourced shelters across Mexico, offering to raise La Casita’s profile from just another humanitarian shelter to one capable of winning formal humanitarian recognition. This also catapults shelter workers into a different register of interaction with politicians like Juan Carlos, the kinds of presumably corrupt state functionaries with whom shelter workers have attempted to maintain an amicable distance. In short, Gustavo’s case signals a scalar shift. In his discussion of Bedouin hospitality, Andrew Shryock writes that “[...] things are likely to go wrong when a shift in political scale is attempted, when a host tries to reduce his equals to the status of guests, or subordinates assert their status as hosts.”¹⁹⁹ In Gustavo’s case this balancing act between host and guest works out, barely. Gustavo’s charisma and willingness to dialogue with Juan Carlos and others is crucial to accessing what was, in the legal sense, rightfully his. But Gustavo’s case also revealed the kinds of compromises that come along with a legalistic version of shelter work. That is, the politics of care has shifted in scale. Local-level politics of collaboration and coercion between migrants and smugglers bleed into a similarly muddled politics of hospitality between shelters and state functionaries at the level of Mexico’s broader shelter assemblage.

I began this chapter by asking how, amid widespread impunity and almost trivial access to humanitarian recognition, the team at La Casita was able to help Gustavo win a humanitarian visa. I have argued that Gustavo’s case exposes a cleave in the hospitality assemblage that is Mexico’s shelter infrastructure between the informality of *just* humanitarian aid and the political/judicial work of formal humanitarian recognition, or human rights. Examining Gustavo’s case through a lens of hospitality draws attention to the ways that shelter workers, in strategically censoring

¹⁹⁹ Shryock 2012, S25.

connections with duplicitous state functionaries, cultivate a single moral face. My argument extends scholarly work that describes the tensions between ethics and politics that surround humanitarian work, showing the deeply rooted and profoundly moral relations of corruption that sustain the work of shelter. As the Comaroffs write, “[p]olitics and crime, legitimate and illegitimate agency, endlessly redefine each other. The line between them is a frontier in the struggle to assert sovereignty or to disrupt it, to expand or contract the limits of the il/licit, to sanction or outlaw violence.”²⁰⁰ Gustavo is the object of a broader humanitarian biopolitics. Yet he is also well-versed in informal survival strategies that pervade Latin American communities figuring a way to get by in the midst of decades of strategic destabilization. In this way, he is uniquely positioned to illuminate how the licit and the illicit hold together.

It is uncomfortable to write about how people engage with corruption, whether migrants like Gustavo or activists like Ramón. Telling these stories risks contributing to portrayals of undocumented immigrants and the people who assist them as criminals, despite my best intentions. This is especially unnerving as news surfaces of bi-national intelligence operations to surveil activists and journalists working with migrant caravans in Tijuana.²⁰¹ As I have struggled to write this chapter, hesitating over and over again how to describe someone like Gustavo who has committed crimes without reifying associations between immigrants and criminality, I have been reminded of the combination of hesitation and exasperation that I saw on Marcela’s face the day of the workshop, just hours before we found out about the shooting. I have felt what might be a similar sense of apprehension about writing on corruption in relation to humanitarian organizations that work with undocumented migrants have also felt exasperation seeing a man whose sordid

²⁰⁰ Comaroff and Comaroff 2008, 11.

²⁰¹ Long and Spagat 2019.

personal and business history epitomizes corruption—taking advantage of public resources for private gain—has relied on violently simplistic narratives that portray Central American migrants as vicious criminals willing to do whatever it takes to make it to the United States. The fact of the matter is that in most of the world, including many sectors of U.S. society, corruption *is* the norm, a dynamic that a growing body of scholarship speaks to.²⁰² Failing to discuss the ethically ambiguous decisions made by organizations and individuals that are otherwise held to unreasonable moral standards is a cruel kind of gaslighting.²⁰³ It is important that we talk about corruption without pathologizing it, even in relation to humanitarianism. Corruption is not uniformly immoral; instead, it is important to consider how, as Laurence Ralph has discussed, informal economies fill bureaucratic voids, engendering forms of relationality *and* autonomy that form in place of the formalized social support systems from which poor people are systematically excluded.²⁰⁴ As I describe in the following chapters, informal economies that surround migration through Mexico go well beyond smuggling and extortion networks. As migrants like Gustavo increasingly settle tentatively in Mexico, people navigate similar tensions between host and guest and they rely on less formal hospitality spaces.

²⁰² Muir & Gupta, 2018.

²⁰³ Semple & Malkin, 2019.

²⁰⁴ Ralph 2014.

CHAPTER 5

A Chutes and Ladders Interlude

Aside from their concern about how pursuing humanitarian visas might mire a shelter's noble image in the muck of corruption, Ramón and others have good reason to be skeptical of where humanitarian visas might lead people like Gustavo given how difficult it is to maintain one's status over the long term. This apprehension stems from the ways the state's politics of compassion and repression intersect with everyday moral economies of mobility as people depend on each other to make do, altering the process of crossing Mexico from a straight line into something more like a game of chutes and ladders. In the first half of this dissertation, I focused on how moral and legal discourses surrounding human rights have been central to the expansion of a deadly policing apparatus along Mexico's railways and highways *and* the humanitarian infrastructure that aims to assist undocumented migrants who are caught up in it. Shelter workers like Ramón, Sandra, and Paula pursued legal recognition warily, well aware that the same legal and moral frameworks for which they were advocating were also being used to intensify policing that could further harm

migrants like Gustavo. In the chapters that follow, I examine how these catch-22's reverberate beyond the strategic maneuvering of civil society organizations and government agencies as migrants who receive formal humanitarian recognition in Mexico navigate intersecting moral economies after leaving the "exceptional" space of shelters.

Within migrant sanctuaries, the gap between human rights discourse and the violent reality of immigration enforcement is particularly stark; however, focusing on these exceptional spaces runs the risk of overlooking how humanitarian labors are interlinked with the much more routine and everyday struggles that undocumented communities face beyond the transit context. With that in mind, the following chapters focus on similar dynamics beyond the space of shelter. First, however, this brief interlude outlines how Gustavo's circuitous travels through Mexico ultimately led him to Monterrey, where the remaining chapters take place.

In Cabo, Gustavo's injury keeps him from working more than an hour or two a day. There isn't much more work than that anyway, so he saves up what little he earns and plans to take the ferry to Mazatlán, Sinaloa on the Pacific Coast. His plan is to get to the mainland and see what comes next. Ultimately, he hopes to just head home to Nicaragua for a few months to stay with his mom, see his kids, and let his arm heal completely. When I tell him a plane ticket to Tapachula won't cost him much more, I wire him enough to make up the difference. Instead of heading back to Nicaragua, however, Gustavo ends up in Huixtla. Two hours northwest of the border with Guatemala, Huixtla is known for its red light district and its proximity to La Arrocera, a major migration checkpoint named after the defunct rice factory it sits next to. Huixtla is infamous among migrants as a choke point where assaults and kidnappings are commonplace.

Gustavo goes to Huixtla because Rana is there. Rana, a Salvadoran, has lived there since fleeing death threats from Barrio 18 ten years ago. Rana has two kids with a Mexican woman from

the area, but like Gustavo and his wife, they are separated. In addition to the prospect of more lucrative work in northern Mexico, the split is why Rana decided to migrate north. He met Gustavo on the train while in Oaxaca and they traveled together until the shooting. Unlike the ten men who were dropped off at La Casita after being questioned by police investigators, Rana didn't wait for the cops to arrive when the shooting took place. Instead, he ran into the fields along the railways, hiding among the corn stalks until all of the ambulances and police vehicles left the area. Then he waited for a slow-moving train to pass by and went as far as Tampico, Tamaulipas on Mexico's northeastern gulf coast before running out of money and deciding to return back to Huixtla. All the while, he stayed in touch with Gustavo over Whatsapp. When Gustavo let Rana know that he would be passing through Tapachula, he invited him to come work the job he had just snagged plastering walls for a coffee plantation's new offices.

Gustavo has been in Huixtla for two weeks and I've flown down to see how he's doing. Why people call the Salvadoran Rana, or Frog, becomes clear as soon as I see his large, glassy, pitch-black eyes. Rana's house is a windowless, one-room, cinder block structure on the edge of town. We sleep in hammocks that hang from wall to wall and prepare meals on a single propane burner that sits on a work bench covered in tools. Rana cobbles together a living with construction work and motorcycle maintenance. Early in the morning, we walk to the offices of a coffee warehouse where Rana has landed a job plastering walls. Throughout the day, I help prepare the concrete, sifting pebbles from a pile of sand and hauling buckets of water while Gustavo and Rana slap pats of the stuff onto the walls then smooth it out with their spades. Gustavo gets a kick out of bossing me around, yelling "*¡Mezcla!*"—"Mixture!"—when he wants me to fill his bucket with more of the sloppy substance.



Figure 5.1: Gustavo working concrete in Huixtla, Chiapas

The night after I arrive, I go with Gustavo to a bar on the edge of the *zona*, as the red-light district is known. One of the waitresses keeps slipping us small plates of fried fish and river snails in garlic broth as she makes her rounds serving drinks. Gustavo is in a budding relationship. Her name is Rosa and she has been in Huixtla for two months. Later in the week when I interview her, she explains how, in addition to an emotionally abusive husband, she came to Huixtla for the pay and to be with her sister Sandra, who has been working bars for the past three years. Rosa and her sister rent a room in the *zona*, as the red-light district is known, but she makes clear during an interview that she is *just* a waitress:

I live right in the zone. Right where the women are. I go by with Gustavo and it's like they're going to eat him on the spot. They devour him with their eyes. And I tell him, 'Look, this is the zone.' And he was shocked at first. 'How can you live here?' Gustavo asks me. And I could tell what he was thinking that I am in it too. But I tell him, 'What does it matter to you if I live here?' I'm a waitress and nothing more. Period. If someone comes to where I work wanting more, I tell them that they should go to the *zona*. And they

say, 'I'll give you 500.' And it's true that I need the money, but I can't do that. I don't have anything against that work. Those women are supporting their families just like I am supporting mine, but that work isn't for me. Where I work has rules. It isn't a *fichera*, as they say. We don't sit on men's laps. We don't let the men touch us. It is just a bar. But I understand why the girls do it. You can earn in a couple of hours what you earn in a week serving drinks. But that's not for me. There's a reason we're the only girls that work there, because most of the girls end up, you know, in it.

From Rosa's standpoint, the *fichera* economy is both unfortunate and understandable. Her interpretation resonates somewhat with how Martha Balaguera describes the relationship between "threat and safety" surrounding sex work for Central American trans women who are transiting through Mexico.²⁰⁵ Balaguera notes that trans and cis women are disproportionately coerced into sex work or forced sexual relationships;²⁰⁶ however, she also explains that sex work offers a place where people who are transitioning can feel sovereign in their own bodies and lives. As one of her interlocutors tells her, "you never know if you will come back or what will happen to you with a client." Brothels, Balaguera writes, are relatively safe spaces compared to working on the streets, they provide a sense of community, and they offer unparalleled financial opportunities. Similarly, Rosa understands why women pursue work in brothels and *ficheras*, even if she does not feel comfortable with that work herself.

These dynamics weave into a broader understanding of how people in transit experience what Balaguera refers to as "confinement in motion" (643). Beyond state detention centers and immigration holding cells, confinement proliferates throughout the everyday spaces that people encounter while in transit. Rana is a good example of how similar tensions also weave through the lives of men who have been impacted by gang life. After fleeing death threats from Barrio 18 as a teenager, Rana obtained refugee status while staying at a shelter in Tapachula. He then settled

²⁰⁵ Balaguera 2018, (644-646).

²⁰⁶ Various studies and reports, largely written through a lens of human trafficking focus on Central Americans and sex work in Mexico. See, for example, Young et al. (2017).

down in Huixtla after meeting the eventual mother of his two children. While leaving for Mexico liberated Rana from what felt like the inevitability of gang life, living in a transit space like Huixtla means that he is still confined, to an extent, within its logic. I came here when I was eighteen,” he tells me during an interview.

By that time, there was so much animosity between the gangs that you couldn't cross into the next neighborhood over. It got really ugly, so I left. People don't ask me about it anymore, but you can usually tell whether someone was involved (*metido*). You can recognize it. Like, the way someone looks. Over there is a guy who always wears a long-sleeve shirt. He always has his cap pulled down low. But it's also the way people dress; the way they walk; the way they talk. You can tell, even without seeing someone's tattoos.

Financial precarity means that Rana is unable to remain fully apart from gang economies. When work is scarce, Rana lets people use his house as a kind of unsanctioned migrant shelter, even if he is wary of doing so,

Sometimes people arrive, and you don't know who they are, but someone tells them to look for you because they know I put people up when I can. All of a sudden, someone shows up and they have lots of money. You treat those people carefully because they can end up threatening you. Like my aunt says, 'be careful about who you're dealing with.' So, what I do is, like, sometimes I need a helper for my construction work. Mexicans like to charge 150 pesos a day and follow their own schedule. But someone from down there? No. I ask them, "Where are you staying?" "Down by the river. Under the bridge," they tell me. "Look," I tell him, "I'll give you a place to stay. I'll give you work, food. You eat what I eat. I'll give you 100 pesos." Someone who isn't involved says, "good deal." But if it's a *marero*, they say, "you're crazy if you think I'm going to work for that little."

Just as shelter workers treat suspected smugglers with extra care, Rana treads lightly with those passing through town whom he suspects of being gang members. He has figured out a discrete way of letting these people know that he is suspicious of them without offending. Like Rosa serving drinks to men who frequent the bar, Rana feels confined to being hospitable to those he most wants to avoid. These are precarious dynamics that can easily turn violent.

A month after I leave Huixtla, Gustavo calls from the bus station in Tuxtla, Chiapas, the capital city, to let me know that he is heading for Monterrey. "It was Chucky's fault," he tells me,

referring to a regular at the bar where Rosa works whom I had met during my visit. In addition to the prospect of better pay, Rosa had also come to Huixtla out of worry for her sister, who was becoming increasingly dependent on alcohol and seemed to be leaning towards earning money through more than *just* waitressing. The bar where Rosa worked was new and did not require waitresses to work for *fichas*, the commission earned by feigning intimacy with men in an effort to get them to order more drinks. However, regular clients like Chucky expected more attention, attention that Sandra was increasingly willing to give, much to Rosa's dismay. Throughout my visit, I would watch Gustavo keep a close eye on Rosa and Sandra as they moved from table to table. The bar's regulars knew Gustavo and Rosa were together, so they avoided chatting with her when he was around. As Gustavo tells from the bus station in Tuxtla, however, Chucky drank too many beers one night. "Fucking Chucky had his hands all over Sandra and I just snapped, Güero. I got some good punches in, but I had to hide out last night and leave as early as possible this morning. You know Chucky knows people." Two days later, Gustavo was in Monterrey.

CHAPTER 6

Fabricating Fragile Futures in the Near North

Heading down the highway leading from the airport, crammed into the backseat of an aging Ford F-150 pickup, I ask Gustavo how things are going. “You already know, Güero,” he replies with a wink as he picks at a piece of foam from the disintegrating seat cushion, “*maquinando* like always.” He is machining, hustling, piecing together his next move. It is late August, we’re coming up on a year since the shooting, and I have just arrived in Monterrey following Gustavo’s invitation to better understand the long-term outcomes of gaining humanitarian recognition.

Rolando, an asylee from El Salvador with whom Gustavo has stayed in touch since the two met at a shelter in Oaxaca, rides up front in the passenger seat, his arm hanging lazily out the open window. Chava, who is driving, owns the workshop where both Rolando and Gustavo have been working since arriving in the city two months ago. Aside from a curt hello as I hopped in the truck, Chava has been silent, so I jump a little when he turns to Rolando and says, “*Maquinando*. You

hear that? Now he's telling *mamadas* about machining? Not just welding? What's wrong with him? Is it the heat or the fumes?"

Chava's eyes meet the road again and he pretends to shift gears in the automatic transmission truck with an empty Coke bottle that sits in the center console cup holder. "I'll show you what machining looks like," he says as he throttles the bottle forward into what would be fifth gear and gives the truck some gas. Then he moves the bottle from the cup holder to his crotch and taps on the accelerator in time with his thrusting hips. "With my half-ton dick, this piece of shit runs like a full-ton."

Turning around in the passenger seat, Rolando looks back at Gustavo and I, "Now look who's telling *mamadas*, pretending like his dick is any bigger than his pinky finger. Go ahead and keep touching yourself down here over your second-hand truck from up there. Where I'm going," he continues, struggling to keep a hard face as he melts into uncontrollable laughter, "the trucks don't have any trouble running hard, right Güero?"

Three hours by bus from popular border crossings in Nuevo Laredo and Reynosa, Monterrey sprawls northward from the jagged cliffs of the Eastern Sierra Madres. For many Central Americans, Monterrey is a tentative stopping point before what many people hope is the last hurdle: the U.S-Mexico border. The city is known both as one of Mexico's business centers and as a hotbed for cartel violence. Among Central American migrants, the city is known as a place where work abounds, although this work is mainly of the low-skilled kind that pays just enough to rent a room and cover meals. People who have spent months in a state of day-to-day vigilance as they have scrambled their way up through Mexico from shelter to shelter, or passing through safe spaces like Rana's, arrive in Monterrey with a sense of relief. Monterrey's urban anonymity allows people to disappear into the sea of shabby suburbs that are devouring the city's

desert periphery. Arriving in Monterrey gives people who have spent months moving through what Wendy Vogt has described as the undocumented migration industry²⁰⁷ —and what Rolando would describe as “traveling with a dollar sign on your forehead” —some time to rest and recuperate while figuring out their next steps. It is a place where you can do some *maquinando*.

Monterrey provides just enough breathing room to ponder not only tomorrow, but next month as well. Next month is when a cousin in New York tells you she’ll have the money together to set you up with a *pollero*. Or next month is when a cousin forestalled farther south is likely to make it up to Monterrey. You promised you’d wait for him before having a go at the border. During that month, you let yourself sink into a routine of labor. If you’re lucky you find work, as Gustavo and Rolando have, helping to build government-subsidized single-family housing developments on the outskirts of the city. Or you spend that month toweling off cars for tips at a car wash because, growing up in the narco economy, as a former smuggler named Donald described it, toweling off cars is the first “honest work” you’ve ever had. It is a time in which men and women sort through the scraps of their former lives and hatch a plan for what is ahead. Monterrey is a resting point, albeit a precarious one.

While I spend most of my time at Chava’s welding workshop, I also make regular visits to a boarding house a few blocks away from one of Monterrey’s migrant shelters. The block of run-down and sparsely furnished rooms is overseen by Carlos, an asylee from El Salvador who is also supervising the construction of a new set of rooms up on the second story. Just as shelters are exceptional spaces where the law is temporarily suspended, so too are boarding houses like Carlos’ places where norms go somewhat out the window. Women take up construction work while men who are recuperating from injuries sustained while traveling become the compound’s babysitters.

²⁰⁷ Vogt 2013.

To save on rent, families double up in small rooms or take on a group of teenage boys traveling alone. It becomes unclear where one family ends and the other begins. Some of this has to do with the fact that the crew of men and women who help out with the construction work in exchange for room and board is constantly rotating over three months of me stopping by to visit once or twice a week. Many Central Americans only stay in Monterrey for a week or two. During that time, people make arrangements with family members in the United States who have promised to help them with the border crossing if they can make it through Mexico on their own dime. Spending a couple of weeks toweling off cars in carwashes or sorting scrap metal in junk yards lets these folks earn enough to pay for a room and a bus ticket for the final three-hour bus ride up to Nuevo Laredo or Reynosa. Others use that money to make it over to the isolated border towns like Caborca, Sonora that are known for the *mochila*, or the backpack, the term migrants often use to describe



Figure 6.1: Women's work

delivering a 50 kg pack of marijuana (or who-knows-what other drug we U.S. citizens are putting into our bodies) across the desert in exchange for a free crossing. Just as often, however, what comes next is much less certain and the line between transit city and destination becomes even more blurry.

Maquinando Mamadas

The trash talk that I first listened to on the trip from the airport is central to how Gustavo, Melvin, and Chava scale back and forth between the banality of welding work and the exceptional violence and uncertainty that lays both behind and ahead of them. In different contexts, *mamadas* refer to tall tales, bullshit boasts, and blowjobs. They are a way that people express their half-baked aspirations and call each other out about those ideas in a context where the uncertainty of the route leads people to rely on each other at the same time that it makes holding each accountable when plans fall through. Extending the work of José Limón,²⁰⁸ I want to suggest that *mamadas* are central to the way Gustavo, Chava, and Rolando navigate the complicated moral dimensions of cobbling together livelihoods while in transit, of figuring out a way to make do and get by beyond the space of shelter following formal humanitarian recognition.

This chapter takes *mamadas* as an entry point for understanding how humor structures what Gustavo refers to as *maquinando*, the struggle to cobble together a living as Central Americans like Gustavo and Rolando are increasingly bottlenecked in northern Mexico. This hodge-podge existence—what I refer to as tentative settlement—is characterized by the intersection of moral economies that surround transit on the one hand and settlement and integration on the other. Previous scholarship has focused on lewd humor and innuendo as a way that people discursively

²⁰⁸ Limón 1989.

invert structural inequalities between “here” and “there,” generally in the context of Mexican migration to the United States. Central American migration through Mexico, however, complicates these north/south, active/passive dichotomies that tend to characterize these moral geographies. Increasingly, Mexican citizens like Chava, people who are typically discussed as the people getting the short end of the stick find in relation to US hegemony, find themselves in a relative position of power as they provide employment and lodging to Central Americans like Gustavo and Chava. Humor is central to how moral economies of transit, settlement, and integration are being reconfigured not only within organizational spaces like shelters, but also in less explicitly moral spaces like welding workshops and boarding houses.

Masculinity and Moral Geographies of Migration

All three men have only known each other for a little over a month, but Chava, Rolando, and Gustavo ruthlessly make fun of each other like they’ve been friends for years. As we continue down the highway, Chava turns to Rolando.

“What do you know about trucks up there?” he asks.

“It’s true,” Rolando nods, turning serious, “All I know about cars in the United States is what I could see parked on the street out in front of that safe house.”

For the rest of the drive, Rolando explains how, soon after being recognized as an asylee in Mexico, he borrowed money from a cousin in New York to pay for a guide. Once across the border, Rolando and the others he had crossed with were held captive in a house somewhere on the outskirts of Laredo, Texas. Rolando smirks and chuckles lightly as he tells how he was able to escape when his captors got drunk one night and passed out, forgetting to lock the door to the single-family home where he was being held hostage. Rolando walked around the neighborhood

in the middle of the night, making his way to a gas station to try and borrow a phone only to get picked up and handed over to ICE agents by a local cop who was inside buying a coffee. He can barely contain his laughter as he comes to the unexpected kicker at the end of the otherwise depressing story, explaining how the US agents had to lecture the Mexican officials on the concept of non-refoulement, the idea that refugees cannot be legally returned to the countries from which they have fled. “The Americans had to convince the Mexicans to take me. They didn’t believe what the U.S. border patrol officer were telling them, that they had to take me back.”

There is a long-standing intellectual tradition that examines the poetic functions of humor, ranging from Bakhtin’s analysis of the carnivalesque to Octavio Paz’ discussion of *chingaderas* and *pendejadas*, which, like *mamadas*, can be glossed as playful insults.²⁰⁹ In his seminal study “The Labyrinth of Solitude,” Paz describes lewd humor as a means of adapting to the humility of poverty, a way to affirm your masculinity by making fun of someone else for being on the proverbial receiving end of things within a framework that views male as active and female as passive. In line with broader critiques of a “culture of poverty” thesis,²¹⁰ however, scholars like José Limón encourage an alternative interpretation that views such humorous sexual innuendo less as an “adaptive steam-valve” that focuses on conflict among working-class migrants and more as a “folklore of resistance.” Instead, Limón writes, joking playfully reverses an active/passive dichotomy and generates solidarity in reference to structural inequalities between the United States and Latin America.²¹¹ “Through interactionally produced play, the aggression of the world is transformed into mock aggression, mock fighting through artistic creativity which does not deny

²⁰⁹ Bakhtin 1981; Paz 1951.

²¹⁰ See, for example, Díaz Barriga’s (1997) analysis of *relajo* in Oscar Lewis’ *Children of Sanchez*.

²¹¹ Vogt 2013.

the existence of aggression but inverts its negativity.” As De León writes, humor is a way that migrants quickly cultivate solidarity and trust in the context of violent and uncertain border crossings.²¹² In his crack about Chava touching himself “down here” about his second-hand truck from “up there,” for example, Rolando links an archetypal symbol of U.S. middle-class prosperity, a Ford F-150 pickup, with a futile attempt to compensate for what Chava must be lacking in other areas of his life, at least according to what Rolando is insinuating. Both men have, or once *had*, aspirations of living in the United States and now find themselves in Mexico. As such, this comment is not only about making fun of Chava, it is also about expressing solidarity around a shared experience in a way that both men were both active and passive. In other words, both Rolando and Chava “returned” (active) and “were returned” (passive).

Scholarship on joking and unauthorized migration that maps north/south dichotomies onto the active/passive framework of prior studies like Paz’ illuminates a moral ambivalence associated with making it to the United States. Alex Chavez, for example, analyzes how at a grill-out in San Luis Potosí, men recounting a frustrating trip “to Dallas” humorously reworked the symbolically loaded journey into “going to da’las,” as in “dar las nalgas,” which can be translated as “show your ass,” or “get fucked over.”²¹³ Chavez, in his reading of folks songs that are riddled with playful puns about what it is like to live undocumented “up there” in the United States, discusses how through playful changes of discursive positioning - what Goffman would call “footing”²¹⁴— “speakers simultaneously acknowledge their vulnerability as unauthorized migrants and consciously refuse to align themselves with the image that they generate, thereby constructing a

²¹² De León 2015, 91.

²¹³ Chavez 2015, 151.

²¹⁴ Goffman 1979.

sense of personhood at a critical distance from the United States.”²¹⁵ As opposed to viewing someone’s ability to travel to the U.S. as a marker of masculine prowess, it is a sign of getting fucked, screwed over, or taken advantage of.

Hilary Parsons Dick, meanwhile, examines how women who stay in Mexico regularly reference migration to the United States as a form of moral discourse that positions the United States as both key to socio-economic mobility and a threat to “properly Mexican” social values.²¹⁶ Dick analyzes how in the early 2000s, a Britney Spears doll was adored by teenage girls in the community where she conducted her fieldwork while their mothers, revolted by the scantily clad pop star, referred to Spears as a *gabacha sinvergüenza*, or, to follow Dick’s translation, a “shameless white-trash woman.” Race, according to Dick, is a crucial dimension of this moral geography, what she refers to as an “ethico-moral assemblage.” Whiteness, embodied in the figure of Britney Spears, is simultaneously desired and reviled.

These moral geographies that intertwine north/south, passive/active, white/black, and moral/immoral dichotomies are clearly relevant for Gustavo, Rolando, and Chava.²¹⁷ They make that abundantly clear when making fun of me, the white U.S. citizen with a passport who has willingly left the United States to come help out as the workshop’s *chalán gringo*, the white boy assistant. They are always ready, for example, to comfort me mockingly when I try to weld with laughable results. “It’s not your fault the education system in the United States is a *mamada*,” Chava giggles consolingly. While Gustavo, Rolando, and Chava, share equal footing when it comes to joking that life in United States isn’t all it is cracked up to be, just as often these jokes are a subtle reminder that the three of them are by no means on equal footing. One day when the

²¹⁵ Chavez 2015, 158.

²¹⁶ Dick 2017, 224-227.

²¹⁷ Harvey 1990.

starter on Chava's truck dies, stranding us at a housing development where we have been installing some security grates, Gustavo playfully mimes Chava by saying, "I made it to the United States and all I got was this lousy truck," equating Chava's pride and joy of a used truck to a piece of shoddy tourist kitsch. The message is clear, 'Don't forget that you have it pretty damn good here in Monterrey.'

Beyond playfully inverting structural inequalities, Gustavo and Rolando mocking Chava's truck also reveals a need to rethink an exploiter/exploited dichotomy that primarily references a moral geography that centers on the U.S.-Mexico border as mobility increasingly shifts from being an exceptional period between "here" and "there" to a situation in which chutes and ladders mobility is the norm. As with the chapters that make up the first half of this dissertation, recent scholarship on Central American migration through Mexico has primarily focused on ambiguities between exploiter and exploited in the context of migrants' temporary relationships with smugglers and shelter workers. At the same time, however, when referencing migrants' encounters with Mexican citizens beyond shelters, these analyses at times replicate readings that scholars like José Limón associate with earlier writers like Octavio Paz. Mexico is a space where Central Americans' experiences at the hands of Mexican citizens comes to sound a lot like Dallas.

Wendy Vogt has examined how many people living in Mexico have come to associate Central Americans with criminality and violence. Vogt describes several discriminatory instances ranging from men being denied employment by Mexican businessowners because of the way they dress to women being fired from jobs because gendered stereotypes that portray Central American women as prostitutes make employers feel uncomfortable about hiring them.²¹⁸ The encounters that Vogt discusses are generally based on accounts that migrants give within shelters, relative

²¹⁸ Vogt 2018, 161-165.

“safe spaces” where migrants may feel that providing a compelling story of oppression and suffering will result in favorable treatment. Rolando was explicit about this dynamic. “Yea, people just make stuff up in shelters,” he explained during one interview, “I would tell the craziest stories to people interviewing. Pure *mamadas*. But don’t worry, I’m telling you the truth. Or at least it’s mostly the truth.” Moving beyond the space of shelter into spaces of tentative settlement reveals a more ambiguous moral geography. In less formal hospitality spaces like Rana’s home in Huixtla or Carlos’ boarding house in Monterrey, the line between moral and immoral is fuzzy. Unlike the boundaries of legitimacy and transgression that I discuss in Chapter Three, they are not written out and hung on a wall in the form of shelter rules.

Prior analyses tend to focus on what we might think of as a transit morality that views the journey as an exceptional moment in which moral norms become temporarily more fluid, similar to the way gender roles were reconfigured in Carlos’ boarding house. These readings are clearly relevant. However, the journey through Mexico has become so elongated and circuitous that these analyses also risk overlooking more ambiguous relations of mutuality and manipulation as Central Americans develop long-term relationships with people like Chava who have experienced what it feels like to have, so to speak, “gone to Denver.” As I discuss in what follows, it is important that we consider how intersecting expressions of privilege and oppression both reinforce and challenge how we think about the relationship between the United States and Latin America, a relationship that is often characterized simplistically as one of oppressor and oppressed.

Chava’s Maquila Mansion

“Welcome to our mansion,” Chava tells me with a self-deprecating wink as we pull up to the house where he lives with his wife Kari and their three children. His two-story home exudes a relative

prosperity, towering above the other one-story homes around it. The second floor, covered by a metal roof with no walls that blocks the blazing mid-day sun and lets a nice cross breeze through, is where Chava has set up his workshop. He winks because he knows that these add-ons materialize the contradictions of prosperity and precarity that characterize working-class life in Monterrey's maquila suburbs.

Emblematic of what the urban planner Lawrence Herzog calls “global suburbs,”²¹⁹ the housing development where Chava and Kari live once echoed U.S. visions of mass-produced middle-class suburban independence. When they first came to Monterrey, this ideal seemed well within reach. Chava left early each morning to drive his small sedan to a nearby factory, returning late at night to park it under a small carport attached to the front of the house. The writing was on the walls, however, that this wouldn't last. In 2006, a year after they purchased their home, former president Felipe Calderón announced his War on Drugs, factories around Monterrey began shuttering their doors at a faster rate, and the relatively new neighborhood became hotly contested as cartels vied for new territory, or *plazas*.

Several studies model the economic consequences of violence associated with the War on Drugs in northern cities like Monterrey.²²⁰ I heard several anecdotes throughout my fieldwork from long-term residents of Monterrey about how the violence led small business owners to close their shops. In Barrio Antiguo, an historic neighborhood close to the city center that had been hit particularly hard by violence in prior years, a shelter worker pointed to pockmarked bullet holes next to a newly opened coffee shop serving mochas and vegan pastries. As the first business to

²¹⁹ Herzog 2015.

²²⁰ See, for example, Brown et al. (2017) and Enamorado et al. (2016) for an economics perspective. For a more anthropological take on the psychological impacts of the drug war, see Garcia (2015) and Muehlmann (2014).

occupy the spot since the violence started, the shopkeepers decided to not plaster over the bullet holes, keeping them as a reminder of how desolate things had been and how much better they had become in recent years. Chava had experienced a similar, albeit precarious downfall and turnaround where he lived. “We bought this house in 2006 and I left for Denver in 2007,” he explains during an interview,

Yea, things got really bad around then. You know that house down on the corner that they use as a mechanic’s shop? Three months after we bought this house, they shot it up with machine guns and it sat abandoned until those guys took it over. That’s why there aren’t any trees out front. They patched over the bullet holes, but they never replanted the trees. A month later, the *maquila* where I worked laid me off. They said I was too old. That’s why we left.

Marginalized from the waning *maquila* market at 35 years old and wary of escalating violence, Chava and Kari rented out their new home to a younger couple. Chava crossed the border with two cousins, and Kari went with the three kids to live with her parents in a safer area of town.

Chava did well in the United States. He built up a nice nest-egg working on roofing crews in suburban Denver, but life there didn’t suit him. Three years ago, Chava became one of a growing number of Mexicans living undocumented in the United States who have returned to Mexico, whether by deportation or, as in his case, after becoming disenchanted with a sense of stress and “coldness” that was about more than Denver’s frigid weather.²²¹ As he explains,

Life up there isn’t for me. You earn good money, but everyone is so stressed and all you do is work, watch TV, and worry about getting caught by la *migra*. The people are as cold as the weather. Where are you from? Michigan? Maybe they’re different there. Here, every Sunday somebody on the block is having a *carne asada* and you wander around having a few beers with your *carnales*. There, people are more closed off, enduring the cold from their sofas.

²²¹ According to the Pew Research Center, the number of unauthorized immigrants living in the United States has decreased since 2007 with Mexicans representing the most rapidly decreasing population (Krogstad, Passel, and Cohn 2018).

By 2012, things in the neighborhood had largely calmed down. The economy had begun rebounding and as production picked up somewhat in the nearby maquilas, construction of housing developments also ramped up. This is not to say that violence was less prolific throughout the city. Media outlets often discussed Monterrey as a barometer for the state of the Drug War in general during those years. A report from Reuters, for example, led with the headline “If Monterey Falls, Mexico Falls.”²²² Another report from that period leads with this paradox, “A wave of drug violence has hit the northern Mexican city of Monterrey at the same time that its factories have started to come roaring back from the global economic downturn.”²²³ However, in Chava’s estimation, the bullets-flying-down-the-street kind of violence that had forced the family to flee had also largely shifted to even newer housing developments where cartel *plazas* were less well established. He loaded his truck down with welding equipment and brand-name clothes for Kari and the kids, then drove it back over the border he had walked across.

Since returning to Monterrey three years ago, Chava has been adjusting to a different sense of prosperity, one that prioritizes stability and time with family over social mobility. The way Chava has renovated the home’s carport exemplifies this shift. Instead of protecting a small sedan, the carport’s concrete block walls provide a cool shaded portico lined with tropical plants and succulents where the family enjoys most of its meals. A sturdy metal sliding door that Chava has fabricated provides a degree of privacy from the street. On Sundays, the only day he doesn’t work, Chava slides the door aside and pulls out his karaoke machine, pumping heartfelt renditions of banda classics out into the street.

²²² Emmott 2011.

²²³ Beaubien 2010.

Welding Under Water

From the start, I am worried about how Chava's sense of contentment might conflict with Gustavo's aspirations. Chava has settled down, but Gustavo is very much still on the move, so I spend my first few days in town scouting out apartments and making contact with one of the shelters in town, wary that Gustavo might up and leave at any moment. As I will come to learn, the uncertainty of the relationship between Gustavo and Chava is about more than the fact that Gustavo sees himself as a kind of temp employee. Indeed, as with his experience with Rana in Huixtla, I see how his relationship with Chava is more than an economic relationship between employee and employer. It is also a morally charged relationship between host and guest in a context where taking someone in is inflected by anxieties that surround making a living and getting by through informal economies, by welding under water, so to speak.

Similar to the tensions that surround the shift from shelters as short-term transit spaces to spaces that also provide long-term aid, the difficult thing is that for many people in transit, what constitutes a "good ending" is unclear; that is, making it somewhere, both in a geographic and moral sense, to be able to *chingarle duro*. "Chingarle duro"—to "work it hard"—is a common way that migrants refer to what they will do once reaching the United States. As one man explained during an interview, "What am I going to Houston for? To *chingarle duro* so I can buy a piece of land out in the mountains away from the city and just live off the land for the rest of my life." I have translated *chingarle duro* here as "work it hard," but it is important to clarify that a central meaning of the verb "chingar" is to fuck something up, whether that is a beer you are about to down or political regimes that seem intent on keeping you down. The paradox of the situation that Gustavo and many others find themselves in is that the "it" of "hit it hard," the end point, is

increasingly uncertain. How much does someone like Gustavo invest in a life in Monterrey, a place that could be his home for either several years or several days?

One way of thinking about this question is to think about different senses of well-being and dignity that intertwine within a context of tentative settlement. In his work on the way social and cultural values about what constitutes a “good life” inform economic decisions, Edward Fischer paraphrases Aristotle to distinguish between two different senses of happiness.²²⁴ One sense focuses on the good life as a state to be obtained, what Fischer describes as a “hedonic happiness of everyday contentment.”²²⁵ These days, Chava appears to be prioritizing this sense of happiness after having lived the second sense in Denver, what Aristotle would call “eudemonic happiness,” or the capacity to draw meaning from the sacrifices that come along with achieving one’s aspirations. Of course, these senses of dignity and wellbeing are intertwined. Eudemonic sacrifices are made along the pathway towards a hedonic happiness and enjoying things in a hedonic sense is not the kind of selfish indulgence that associate with hedonism’s typically negative connotations. It can also mean indulging in a life of dignified labor, what you might call the “American Dream.” Chava’s hedonism is grounded in many ways in balancing hard work with having the time to relax with his family. Moreover, just because Chava seems to be living a hedonic kind of happiness does not mean that he is not also purposefully making sacrifices in order to do so. A eudemonic narrative clearly resonates with how migration is often discussed. Gustavo, for example, is sacrificing his physical and familial wellbeing in the present moment in exchange for the promise of a bright future. However, this narrative of sacrifice typically implies a clear end goal, one that for many migrants bears a striking resemblance to what Chava and Kari have achieved.

²²⁴ Fischer 2014.

²²⁵ Fischer 2014, 2.

On Saturday, Chava invites us all over to grill out after work. While Gustavo and Rolando are out buying beers, Chava gets the mesquite coals going on his grill and asks where I've been looking for a place to live. When I tell him I'm renting in an upper middle class neighborhood not far from the center, he scoffs, "Well, apparently you don't have to pay people on time if you live there. I came back down here to get away from that kind of exploitation." Then he goes on to explain how he constantly struggled to get the money he was owed from the doctors and lawyers who are my neighbors. "Shit like that means you can't make moves like you can working for dollars. But you have more freedom down here," he tells me, "You go up there to *esclavizarte* (enslave yourself). Here, I am happy to just keep my head above water."

Chava keeps his head above water by running his workshop off-books, or as he puts it, *bajo el agua*, under water. While he mainly runs his tools off of the home's electrical meter, sometimes he bypasses it altogether, wiring his tools directly into an electrical pole on the street instead. When Chava first came back home, he didn't have to worry too much about exorbitant electrical bills. He mainly made his living fabricating decorative window grates, outdoor rocking chairs made of rebar, and decorative security fencing like the door that guards his carport for people living in wealthier neighborhoods closer to downtown, people like my neighbors. Frustrated by these privileged clients, Chava has focused for the last year on winning contracts with the crew supervisors who are working on the newer housing developments that are devouring Monterrey's scrub brush periphery. "Jobs like that one," he says, pointing to the newly constructed apartment building that backs up on to the boundary of the subdivision where Chava lives. "I've done thirty of those window grates that you see on the windows up on the third floor." With these larger orders, Chava is able to work hard for a week or two then live off of what he's earned until

the next order comes in. He is able to keep his head above water and still spend quality time surrounded by the warmth of his family.

This arrangement has its drawbacks. Larger orders require more electricity. On the days that he bypasses the electrical meter for extra juice, Chava pays an elderly woman who lives within eyesight of the housing development to keep an eye out for utility trucks, then he carefully wires his equipment straight into the electrical pole outside of his house. “They caught me once a few months ago,” he explains, “The old lady fell asleep on me and I didn’t have time to disconnect from the pole. That wiped out our profits for that month.” Completing larger orders has also led Chava to take on additional help. He explains how a year ago he decided to help out a man named Bairon who was asking for work outside of the hardware store where he orders most of his



Figure 6.2: Window grates on a suburban apartment complex in Monterrey, Nuevo Leon

materials. Rolando and Bairon come from the same neighborhood in San Salvador. The two men had stayed in touch over Facebook messenger as they traveled through Mexico. After Rolando was deported back to Mexico following his failed crossing attempt, Bairon, who had been working for Chava for several months at that point, offered to let Rolando stay at the apartment he was renting in a nearby housing development. Once Bairon had saved up enough money working for Chava to buy a bus ticket to Caborca, Sonora, where he planned to cross the border with a *mochila* as a drug mule, Rolando reached out to Gustavo to let him know that Chava was looking for a welding assistant.

Taking in Central Americans is controversial. Like people living along the Mexico-Guatemala border with whom Rebecca Galemba worked in her study of contraband smuggling, many of Chava's neighbors avoid interacting with Central Americans. Galemba explains how, "Migrants who [become stuck] have come to embody residents' own anxieties about belonging at the border, displaced onto the figure of the racialized, potentially criminal migrant other."²²⁶ As Chava sees it, his neighbors similarly link Central Americans with criminality. Chava, however, sees things differently, a view that is grounded in his own experiences with prejudice while living in the United States. "My neighbors are jealous people," he tells me as he turns the jalapeños that he is searing on the grill, "They ask me why I hire Central Americans because they think they're all criminals. They tell me to be careful that I don't get robbed. But I know what it means to be a migrant. I had people trust me, so I feel like I need to trust these guys. Besides," he continues, as Rolando and Gustavo ascend the stairs up to the workshop carrying a case of beer, "I also feel like I have a lot to teach them. Some days," he concludes with a wink, "I don't know whether I'm their boss or their father." Gustavo rolls his eyes with a smile, tosses me a beer, and cracks open his

²²⁶ Galemba 2017, 2.

own. Then he asks Chava, “¿Te gusta cuando mis chiles te hacen llorar?” —“Do you like it when my chiles make you cry?” —sardonically poking fun at Chava’s sentimentality while implying that Chava likes being penetrated by his *chile*. Jokes like these acknowledge and diffuse the tensions that underlie this seemingly idyllic arrangement.

In many ways, Chava has accomplished what most men I spoke to idealize. Going to Denver meant getting screwed for a few years, but Chava was able to *chingarle duro*, to take advantage of getting across the border. Now, back in Monterrey, he is in a position to “pay it forward” by providing work for Central Americans like Gustavo and Rolando. While rooted in a sense of shared experience, this benevolence is shrouded in tensions similar to what Gustavo experienced while navigating the humanitarian visa process at La Casita. While Chava and Gustavo can connect as migrants, the fact remains that Chava is Gustavo’s boss. Now, just as Chava is balancing stability and dignity in the kinds of jobs he takes and how he uses electricity to support his family, he is also trying to balance supporting Central Americans like Rolando and Gustavo without coming across as paternalistic and without drawing too much attention to his off-books business from suspicious neighbors. Gustavo’s joke playfully acknowledges the potential for their mutuality to turn sour. He does this by humorously inverting the power dynamic, implying that he is the one screwing Chava over with his *chile*.

Gustavo’s discomfort is rooted not only in having just recently left the “confinement” of Mexico’s shelter assemblage, it is also grounded in the fact that Gustavo is accustomed to being the one in charge. Prior to migrating, Gustavo had been working as a drywall crew leader, arranging contracts, supply orders, and payroll for a team of four other laborers. While Gustavo appreciates working for Chava, he also feels resentful about working under someone else for the first time in several years. Compared with Chava’s idealistic migration narrative, Gustavo’s

migration journey thus far has been riddled by roadblocks that continue to divert him from “making it,” both financially in terms of being able to send money home to his family and geographically by arriving at what he hopes will be his final destination: Nuevo Laredo. In this context, humor is central to how Gustavo navigates the uncomfortable situation of feeling physically and existentially stymied.

Over the next few weeks as I work alongside Gustavo and Rolando in the workshop, I see how the fumes, the *humo* to which Chava referred on that first drive from the airport, irritates Gustavo’s lungs. Like a supercharged glue gun, TIG welding relies on an electrical current to melt a tungsten electrode into a bead of liquid metal, which hardens into welds. The process produces noxious ozone gases that inflame Gustavo’s lungs, which are still tender from the bullet wound and surgery. Welding is also surprisingly exhausting, requiring precise muscle control and intense mental concentration. As the day progresses, Gustavo’s eyes redden, he is constantly trying to shake out a kink in his shoulder, and a steady cough from the fumes worsens. Coming up on a year since the shooting, Gustavo’s recovery has been forestalled as he has sacrificed his bodily recovery in favor of remaining mobile while he can still count on the humanitarian visa. Now in Monterrey, Gustavo still struggles to make it through each workday, resulting in dubious welds. These welds are *mamadas* and they stand as objects of humor and ridicule for how Chava, Rolando, and Gustavo negotiate intersecting notions of dignity and aspiration.

Gustavo and Rolando struggle to find a rhythm. Having only recently left a life of slinging crack in San Salvador, Rolando is just learning the ropes of welding work. Chava has gone from a eudemonic experience in the United States to enjoy a more hedonic life here in Monterrey. Rolando has done the opposite, going from a hedonic life of addiction in San Salvador to a eudemonic journey of recovery in his time in Mexico. From living in the heart of the hyper-masculine gang

life for the past twenty years, Rolando now finds meaning in a humbler, comparatively emasculated livelihood. He is essentially an apprentice. His job is to cut pieces of metal to the correct length using a radial saw, which I then pass over to Gustavo, who is tasked with welding the pieces of metal together while insuring that they come out square. To deal with the pain, Gustavo lets the pieces of metal that Rolando is cutting pile up before gritting his teeth through the welds all at once. He works this way so that after he has worked his way through a pile of welds as quickly as possible, he can take a break, slumping down into a metal rocking chair and whispering into his phone as he sends off voice messages to Rosa, who is still in Huixtla. While he sits messaging, Chava takes a break from his own work trying repair one of his air compressors down on the street, coming up to the workshop to inspect what Gustavo has just welded. “That’s not how you do it, *chapulín*,” Chava tells him, comparing his rushed welds to something a grasshopper would do, jumping from spot to spot instead of moving the electrode slow and steady for a nice consistent weld. “They’re not even square,” he continues, “Why did you let Rolando keep cutting if you knew they were the wrong length?!” When Rolando lets out a high-pitched whistle to diffuse some of the tension, Gustavo turns to him and says, “I’ll show you how to jump!” Then he taps the welding electrode on a metal saw horse, throwing a spray of sparks towards Rolando’s feet. One of the sparks lodges in the thread of Rolando’s raggedy tennis shoes. When a tiny piece of molten metal reaches his actual foot, burning through his sock, he drops to the floor and scrambles to get his shoe and sock off. “Eso *sí* es un brinco!” – *That’s* how you jump! – “Watch out or I’ll show you more of this *verga*,” Gustavo blurts out, comparing the electrode to a phallus while also referencing Rolando’s failed border crossing attempt. We all fall out laughing and coughing.



Figure 6.3: Gustavo welding in Chava's workshop

Fabricating without Protection

Later in the week, Gustavo and I lug a screen door that Chava has lying around the workshop to the house that he and Rolando have just moved into. Prior to my arrival, Gustavo and Rolando had been staying in a house twenty minutes away by bus, meaning that a portion of their daily wages went to paying bus fares. Technically, they are squatting in this new house, which is just around the block from Chava's home and the workshop. The last anyone heard from the guy who lived there before, he was heading for Nuevo Laredo. That was two months ago. "We think he disappeared," Chava tells me nonchalantly.

Gustavo has agreed to pay the neighbors' electricity bill in exchange for being allowed to wire an extension cord into the apartment, which he hotwires into the fuse box for light. As he drills holes in the wall where he will hang the door, I ask Gustavo what's up with him and Rolando.

“That *hijo’ e’ puta* doesn’t know how to work. Besides, he can afford to be patient,” he says alluding to Chava’s comment about Gustavo rushing through his welds.

Gustavo then goes on to explain that one of Rolando’s cousins recently sent him \$500 dollars. With this money and what he earns working for Chava, Rolando is able to help out with the rent and send some money home to his ex-wife and two kids. Gustavo, on the other hand, has made the morally dubious decision to stop sending money home to his family back in Nicaragua in favor of saving up enough money to get Rosa up to Monterrey from Huixtla. As he continues working on the door, Gustavo lays out his plan for getting Rosa up through Mexico, which involves renting an ID from Chava’s neighbor. Like Rosa, the neighbor has long black hair and a round face. Rosa only needs to find a pair of eyeglasses, which the neighbor is wearing in her ID photo. He and Rosa plan to travel by plane, largely bypassing the border enforcement infrastructure that dot’s Mexico’s highways and railways.

With what he expects to earn, Gustavo is hopeful that he will be able to rent the ID and pay for the trip in six weeks, which is when Chava and Kari will close the workshop and fly to Cancún for a week of vacation. This, however, means pushing Chava in the mean time to take on more work than he is comfortable with. Over the next several weeks, I come to the workshop for a few hours in the afternoon. On most days I watch as Gustavo playfully shames Chava for not taking on more work. “Rolando tells me you like it without a condom,” Gustavo teases. His joke is multilayered. While insinuating that Chava is “bending over” by not trying to make more money, his quip also communicates a sense of betrayal given that Chava seems unwilling to help out someone like Gustavo out now that his own life is stable.

A week before he is set to leave for Cancún, Chava acquiesces and agrees to take on a large order of metal railing for balconies on a new apartment building. He fronts Gustavo the money

that he needs to purchase the plane tickets with the money that the contractor has given him for supplies. To complete the order in time, we run two welders and the compressor for the paint gun simultaneously, only disconnecting the wiring from the pole on the street when we leave the housing development to buy more materials. The day before Gustavo is set to leave for Tapachula is a mad dash to complete the order. In the rush to load Chava's truck up with the completed railings, we forget to disconnect the wiring from the pole. Shortly after we've arrived at the housing development, Chava gets a call from Doña Letty, the older woman he relies on to let him know about electricity inspectors in the area, letting him know that utility trucks have pulled into the subdivision. I grab a cab from the worksite back to my apartment for a skype call with one of my advisors. Gustavo calls me two hours later to tell me about the note that they found taped to the sliding carport door informing Chava that his electricity has been disconnected and that he will need to pay a fine of 25000 pesos, or around \$1,500. The next morning, Gustavo flies out for Tapachula.

“We Central Americans are *Necios*”

Two weeks after leaving for Tapachula, Gustavo calls me to let me know that he and Rosa have made it up to Monterrey. I meet them in the carport at Chava's and they recount their journey. Gustavo explains how they narrowly avoided being detained by migration agents while riding the bus from Huixtla to Tuxtla (where they would catch the flight to Monterrey). Gustavo jokes about distracting the migration agents that were inspecting Rosa's ID with his accent and a flat-brimmed baseball cap that I bought him as a gift.

Gustavo: You Mexicans are brutal, Chava. We got through the checkpoint at la Arroceria no problem, but when we get to Tuxtla, migration stops the bus and gets on. I nearly shit myself. I tell Rosa, 'Migration. Get ready.' But I know we're ok, she has her hair the right way and she's wearing these

luxurious glasses (*lentes de lujo*) that Kari lent us. So, they get on. And it's a woman, one of the migration agents. And we're sitting next to each other, right? To keep each other calm, but also because I know they'll go right for me.

Rosa: It's that I look like I am from Chiapas, kind of indigenous, you know? But Gus, he can't hide that he's not from Mexico, plus he dresses like a Central American. As I was trying to memorize the information on the ID before we left, I just kept repeating to myself, 'that is you, that is you, that is you.'

Gustavo: 'Show me your documents,' she tells me. And as I'm taking out my humanitarian visa from my where it is in my bag up above the seat, Rosa jumps up and runs to bathroom at the back of the bus.

Rosa: I was nervous!

Gustavo: *You* were nervous?! They grab you and you go back to Guatemala. They grab me and I go to prison. You went to the bathroom, but I nearly shit myself in my seat! The agent asks me what I'm doing in Mexico. 'Nothing. Just visiting,' I tell her, 'Is that a problem?' Then she asks me about Rosa, 'And her? Is she with you?' 'No,' I tell her, 'I don't even know her.' And I try to talk a little loud, like I have nothing to hide. But the agent goes right to the bathroom.

Rosa: 'I need you to come out of the bathroom and show me your document. Otherwise, this bus goes nowhere,' she tells me. Look, I was afraid. It's my first time doing something like this. And I really did think that I was going to vomit.

Gustavo: Rosa comes back to the seat, sits down next to me, she takes the ID out of her bag, and she passes it to the agent. She takes out her flashlight and starts moving it across the ID, looking for some kind of code or marking, who knows, something that shows that it is original. And while she is checking the ID, I stand up and get my hat out of my bag, the one that you brought me from Michigan, Güero. And I ask her how much longer to Tuxtla. And she turns to me and says, 'you really are just passing through here for the first time.'

Rosa: Then she asks me how long I've lived in Monterrey. Eight years, I tell her.

Gustavo: '*Feliz viaje,*' she says.

John: And that was it?

Gustavo: For the rest of the trip, not a single problem.

Chava: *No mames.*

Gustavo: I'm telling you, boss, we Central Americans are all *necios*.

The recounting functions as a kind of apology. Like Rolando telling about escaping from his kidnappers, we are all on the verge of laughter throughout the story. By facetiously referring to himself and all Central Americans as *necios*—manipulative and deceptive—Gustavo acknowledges how he has screwed Chava over by pressuring him take on more work while also positioning himself among a population that is by and large being screwed over by Mexican citizens.

Ultimately, Chava appears to accept this apology. For the next month, Gustavo works off what he owes Chava. He agrees to work for half of what Chava was paying him before the fine in order to help pay it off. To cut back on expenses, Gustavo sells most of the furniture and other supplies that he has accumulated in preparation for Rosa's arrival, including a counter-top propane burner and a tank of gas. They disconnect the electricity from neighbor's house, cook their meals outside over a makeshift wood-fire stove that Gustavo fashions out of cinder blocks, and spend their evenings under the glow of a street light on the corner, lounging in rocking chairs borrowed from Chava's workshop in their own undecorated carport. One lazy Sunday afternoon, I come over with a bag of chicken thighs and a six-pack of Tecate Light. "I came all the way to Monterrey," Rosa quips with more than a hint of innuendo as she takes the bag of chicken from me, "and all I have to cook with is kindling." Then she winks in Gustavo's direction, confirming that she is referring to more than just the wood Gustavo has gathered to cook with.



Figure 6.4: Rosa cooking lunch over a fire

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that humor is central to understanding how moral economies of undocumented migration extend beyond explicitly moral spaces like migrant shelters. It is important to consider how moral geographies are reconfigured as Central Americans are increasingly bottlenecked in northern Mexican cities like Monterrey. As previous studies demonstrate, humor is a form of poetic critique through which working class Latin American communities cultivate solidarity in the face of structural inequalities north and south of the U.S.-Mexico border. Joking about getting screwed over “up there” is a way that Gustavo, Rolando, and Chava commiserate about a shared experience of being on the short end of the stick in the global economy. It is a social practice that inverts normative framings, changing the migration journey from a process of getting fucked over to one of *chingándole duro*.

Increasingly, however, transit migration is not the exceptional moment between “down here” and “up there.” The line between north and south as the defining aspect of moral geographies of migration blurs as Central Americans who are stymied by intensified immigration enforcement turn to prosperous cities like Monterrey as tentative destinations. Transit migration is often described as a moral gray zone in which the exceptional circumstances that surround unauthorized journeys lead people to do things and associate themselves with people that they would not link up with in other contexts. However, as more circuitous and uncertain routes lead migrants like Gustavo and Rolando to spend undetermined amounts of time in places like Monterrey, it becomes more difficult to describe morally ambiguous decisions made in the context of “making it” somewhere as exceptional. In saying this, I want to make clear that I am not calling for a more hardline distinction between what is considered moral and immoral in the context of undocumented migration. People like Chava and Gustavo are well aware that the choices they make, whether that is purloining electricity or facilitating unauthorized migration are both good and bad relative to different intersecting senses of dignity and happiness. As opposed to thinking in terms of an ethic of transit and an ethic of settlement, or in terms of a hedonic and eudemonic approach to happiness and a good life, an ethic of tentative settlement draws attention to how diverse moral frameworks intertwine in the context of increasingly ambiguous boundaries between here and there.

I want to make clear that this chapter is leading up to more than just an intellectual reading of humor as it relates to undocumented migration. Together, this chapter and the next one trace how people who receive formal humanitarian recognition often remain dependent on informal and criminalized economies in order to get by despite their regularized status. People who are recognized formally in one context often remain deeply connected to informal economies in other

contexts. Just because someone is recognized as a refugee or because they receive a humanitarian visa does not mean that all of their problems are solved. This is especially true for the growing number of Central Americans who receive formal humanitarian recognition in Mexico. As a country, some parts of Mexico, like the housing development where Chava lives, have felt some relief from the Drug War in recent years, but in many other places, the violent conflict between the state and drug cartels continues to generate the kinds of insecurity and instability that complicate the ability for people like Rolando and Gustavo to make long-term plans for future stability. Instead, it is important to appreciate the complicated moral dimensions of what it means to *maquinar* something, to cobble together a livelihood and a sense of dignity in the face of an uncertain future. While this chapter has focused on how these changes are being worked out between people like Gustavo and Chava in spaces of tentative settlement like Monterrey, the following chapter focuses on Rolando to examine how these negotiations reverberate well beyond the space of transit itself to also implicate family members and the communities in which they live in the United States and across Central America.

CHAPTER 7

Looking Back, Looking Forward

I carry a camera around during most of my time in Monterrey and Rolando asks me to take photos of him holding a welding torch or standing next to a hot grill loaded with *carne asada*. It is early-November 2016. Two weeks ago, Gustavo and Rosa left Monterrey for Nuevo Laredo, frustrated by Chava's refusal to pirate more electricity. "Take a photo with that good camera, Güero," he says, "Make sure you send it to me *para el Face*," for Facebook. Rolando has seemingly "made it" in Monterrey. He has regularized his immigration status, landed a steady job and his own apartment, and while he still likes to get shit-faced on light beer, he has stopped using heavy drugs. Rolando wants these photos of his hard work and abundance to be seen by his family back in El Salvador, some of whom are the very people he is fleeing from. He wants to show them that he has made it, but, as the next hour's interview will confirm, he doesn't plan on staying in Monterrey for very long. Rolando lounges on a recliner. I am across from him in a folding chair. A fan whirrs in one corner of the room while the Scorsese film, *Gangs of New York*, plays quietly on the TV. It

is Sunday, Rolando's day off. He shuffles a stack of instant photographs in his hands and I set up the recorder, which picks up the sound of a street fight in the film. I ask him to turn down the volume, then there is the sound of me grabbing a pork rind from the bag that sits on the floor between us, and the crunch.

Three years ago, Rolando was in prison in El Salvador after being arrested with two guns and a pound of crack. The MS-13 members he had been working for grew tired of him smoking most of the product he was supposed to be selling, so they allowed the cops to arrest him. Rolando still views his arrest as a kind of bribe that allowed Mano Dura-style policing to appear effective without actually interrupting the control that the gang exerted in the area.²²⁷ Two years ago, towards the end of his sentence, Rolando was informed that he was *baleado*, shot, done for. His older brother Johnny, an MS-13 veteran, told him that he could no longer protect him. The bosses were tired of his antics and wanted him dead. After being released, he hid out around San Salvador for several months, then fled to Mexico and applied for asylum.

At the migrant shelter in Oaxaca where he stayed while waiting for his asylum determination, Rolando ditched crack for the first time in nearly twenty years. Three months ago, he landed in Monterrey and found work in Chava's workshop. Three weeks ago, after largely abandoning participatory photography as a component of my fieldwork, I lent Rolando an instant camera and three packets of film. Five days ago, Donald Trump took the presidency of the United States and anxieties about how his anti-immigrant rhetoric might be put into action hit a fever pitch. Today, we're set to talk through the photos he has taken.

²²⁷ Mano Dura refers to a 2003 zero-tolerance anti-gang policing initiative that was rolled out in El Salvador by then President Francisco Flores. See Elana Zilberg's *Space of Detention*, which traces the roots of Mano Dura policing to the exportation of zero-tolerance policing strategies from the United States (Zilberg 2011).

What can photos—particularly photos taken by someone like Rolando—reveal about the experience of receiving humanitarian recognition for people who still face displacement? In earlier chapters, I focused on how humanitarian mechanisms that rely on crude victim-victimizer dichotomies open pathways to formal status for a select few while rationalizing intensified immigration enforcement more broadly. Like the caricatured gang member portrayed on La Casita’s list of shelter rules, these discourses are mediated visually through the clichéd representations of either prototypical victims like unaccompanied minors or quintessential victimizers like gang members covered in face tattoos. This chapter looks at how more vernacular forms of visual representation are also significant for people like Rolando who are experiencing what I have referred to as tentative settlement, an uneasy blend of starting anew while anticipating the possibility of future displacement. As I described in the introduction, studies examining humanitarian biopolitics tend to focus on destination countries and the moment that victimhood is articulated. This maps on to the tendency in social work scholarship on migration to think in terms of sending and receiving, push and pull, displacement and settlement. People like Rolando who are navigating tentative settlement in cities like Monterrey complicate these dichotomies. Despite being recognized as a refugee, he remains en route. Moreover, being identified officially as a victim in Mexico doesn’t preclude his need to continue collaborating with those who are typically characterized as victimizers, the smugglers, gang members, and corrupt officials who manage the back doors of increasingly militarized borders. In order to make two points, this chapter focuses on the intersections of photography and tentative settlement for someone like Rolando who is still in transit.

First, I argue that attending to the work that photos do as they circulate socially beyond the interview frame—what we might think of as their afterlife—is an important component of

participatory photography that is generally overlooked. Participatory photography in social work research tends to be seen as enriching qualitative data in a way that empowers participants to communicate on their own terms, both visually and orally. However, social work research that integrates participatory photography tends to discuss visual material within relatively structured encounters between researchers and participants. And while researchers have paid careful attention to what photos *mean* for study participants, less attention is paid to what the visual anthropologist Christopher Wright refers to as the “uses of photos” beyond the interview frame.²²⁸ I argue that paying attention to how images circulate through social networks can do much more than enrich reflection on meaning. It also holds promise as a speculative method for helping people to think strategically about the future.

This methodological argument intersects with a second, more empirical point. Attending to the afterlife of participatory photography in Rolando’s case shows how recipients of humanitarian recognition in Mexico often rely on the very people from whom they are fleeing. Even as he celebrates settling into a new life in Monterrey, Rolando is also preparing for the possibility of future mobility. Importantly, these preparations are bound up with family and friends who are also preparing to be on the move given how the uncertainties of immigration policy in the United States reverberate to impact communities across Central America and Mexico. These reverberations illustrate the dense relations of mutuality and obligation that flow through intersecting spaces of displacement, transit, and settlement, often complicating the way being recognized formally as a refugee presumes settlement and closure.

Photographing the Spectacle

²²⁸ Wright 2013, 11.

It might feel like participatory photography has come out of nowhere in this chapter, but I have grand plans to integrate participatory photography into my research long before arriving in Monterrey. At the onset of fieldwork, I planned to integrate participatory photography in three ways. First, I photographed people's belongings and conducted interviews based on those belongings. While my aim was to understand people's experiences outside of shelters, this method led me to unexpected analytical insights about how shelter workers at La Casita interpret the things people pick up, carry, and leave behind to navigate policy frameworks that rely on the specter of smuggling to simultaneously protect and persecute people migrating without authorization. Second, I carried around a Fujifilm instax camera, mainly to hand out portraits as a token of appreciation for those who share their stories with me. These instant photos were not just a tit-for-tat kind of exchange, 'your story for a photograph.' Just as often we passed the camera around and, because instant cameras are fairly straight forward—point and shoot—the process of taking the photos and bantering back and forth as the images slowly developed lightened the mood. Instant cameras also don't require any time to explain all the bells and whistles of a more elaborate camera. Instant photos were something I could give away without having to exchange email addresses or Facebook usernames, the kind of information that can be dangerous if overheard. Most people were interested in a memento from the crossing. Many people I photographed appreciated the physicality of these instant photographs, even if they could be risky. Yea, I can take photos with my phone and send them over WhatsApp, a man named Roberto told me,

You take a picture and send it to [your family]. But it's not the same as a photo like this that you can carry in your hand, because you always up end deleting pictures off of your phone eventually. For us migrants, for people like us that are just passing through (que vamos de paso), we can't hold on to this. When we cross, we don't carry photos. We erase everything. It's in case the *narcos* get you. The most common thing is to be kidnapped. If they grab your phone and you have numbers, photos, it's you giving them something to use against your life (*le das a ellos cómo facturar en contra de tu vida*). Without a phone or photos, I just tell them I don't have family, I don't have kids, nobody. I don't have anything

to link me with kids. At the same time, with these, I have something more concrete where I can remember this journey.

Handing out camera phones was my third photographic method.²²⁹ The idea was that migrants could use phones to document their journeys and message me photos with captions using WhatsApp. This aspect of my visual approach never really took off. For one, the response rate was abysmal. Of the twenty phones that I distributed, eighteen people never sent any images or texts. More importantly, while I do not think the phones put anyone in more danger than they would be otherwise—as Roberto explains, it is not the phone itself that is dangerous so much as the content on it—the photos that people sent from these phones did little to address what these visual methods were all about in my eyes: decentering the way migration is typically portrayed. One man named Ezequiel sent me no more than a photo of his feet covered in blisters and I was left with the kind of decontextualized suffering that I wanted to avoid. Another man called me three days after I had given him a phone to let me know, with a shocking amount of calm, that he was in the middle of being robbed by railway guards and that if he gave them the phone, he would be allowed to stay on the train. I appreciated the call, but I stopped handing out cell phones after that.

In some ways, these failures were a relief. From day one with this project, I have been wary of the tendency for images of Central American migration to contribute, in the context of the broader border spectacle, to what Danny Hoffman describes as “visual clichés.”²³⁰ When I describe my research to people, I tend to mention freight railways only parenthetically and yet, almost invariably, the first question that people ask is, “Did you ride the freight train?” Images taken from

²²⁹ Others have been much more successful collecting cameras after distribution. See, for example, Kevin Mcalvaney’s #refugeecameras project (<http://kevin-mcalvaney.com/refugeecameras/>) and Encarni Pindado’s Migrazoom project (<http://migrazoom.tumblr.com/>).

²³⁰ Hoffman 2007: 104.

my position of whiteness of brown bodies whizzing by while clinging to the sides of freight trains, while powerful and evocative, often stand in for the entire process of transit migration through Mexico. Just as shelter workers numb themselves to the pain that they witness on a daily basis, many people have become numb to images of migrants hopping freight trains and seem unwilling or unable to consider other aspects of the journey, like the fact that people also fall in love, laugh, dance, and have fun while en route. The question of how to represent the pain of others without tokenizing it,²³¹ and then without further tokenizing things with a half-hearted attempt at self-



Figure 7.1: Blisters, Photo by Ezequiel

²³¹ Sontag 2003.

reflexivity,²³² has no easy answer. As Jason De León puts it, photoethnography involves a “steady hum of anxiety, a constant gaze in to the mirror wondering if I am doing the right thing. Am I asking the right questions? Should I be taking this photo? What does my presence do to those around? Who is gazing at whom? What kind of spectacle am I creating in the field, and later, when these images of migrants circulate?”²³³ Throughout my fieldwork, I felt similar anxieties and they often overwhelmed the other voice in my head saying, “People need to see this!”

By the time I got to Monterrey, I had basically abandoned the idea of participatory photography. I was still taking photographs regularly, but more as a means of supplementing written field notes and voice recordings. As I spent more time with Rolando, however, I began to reconsider the promise of participatory photography, what Caroline Wang describes in her seminal essay as a method that “enables people to identify, represent, and enhance their community [...] by providing people with cameras to photograph their perceived health and work realities.”²³⁴

Rolando’s *Subida*

Rolando often talks frankly about war stories from his past. We lounge on the front stoop of Chava’s workshop sipping on a couple of beers at the end of the workday and Rolando tells me about watching bullets get pulled out of a friend’s leg in the back of a mechanic’s shop, or how he only visited his kids where he didn’t have to worry as much about them becoming collateral damage in a shoot-out, places like public shopping malls. He talks for hours about what he left behind, but he is more reticent when it comes to talking about his current day-to-

²³² Sniadecki 2014, 33.

²³³ De León 2018, 128.

²³⁴ Wang and Burris 1997.

day. It is clear that he is proud of how things have changed in his life, but it's like talking about how far he has come might jinx what he hopes will happen next. Rolando asks me to message him the photos I take of him working so that he can send them to his family and friends in El Salvador and New York. He wants to show them how well he is doing. "Let me get those photos, Güero," he tells me, "my sister wants to see what my photographer has been up to during my *subida*."

Rolando's *subida*—his climb—has multiple connotations. A *subida* is the feel of intoxication, of "getting high," but in this context, it is a way of communicating how he has climbed up out of the hole of addiction he was living in back home. For Rolando, the route has been a process of recovery, one that mirrors the discourse that shelters are spaces where one's dignity is restored. For Rolando, recovery in El Salvador was impossible. "I went to Narcotics Anonymous," he explained,

But what is the point of rehabilitating myself if I'm not going to eat? I would go to meetings at night, but what do you think I did during the day? I didn't have work. I had my girl and my kids, and nobody would give me work. What do you think I'm going to do? So, I started thieving again, selling drugs to pay bills. It was ugly, but what I gained in a week with honest work, I gained in a day selling drugs. I mean people knew me, knew who I had been. They weren't going to give me a job. So, I said, fuck it, I'm gone. Lots of people leave looking for help because they find themselves in a hole in El Salvador or in Honduras.

I have tried to problematize the notion of shelters as "safe spaces" that heal migrants, but for Rolando, arriving at the shelter in Oaxaca where he would eventually gain asylum *was* the beginning of a therapeutic process. It was a place to reset, a place where he could leave behind the web of social obligations that threatened to crush him, "If you're in El Salvador, you're always surrounded by the same people, he told me,

You can't escape it. In Mexico, you don't really talk about it, especially when you're in shelters, but at least you're anonymous. No one knows your history. The main thing is that you're able to leave that social circle. I felt like a huge weight had been lifted off me when I got to [the shelter]. There, no matter who you are, it seems like people know who you are

and what you're involved in. You never know who you're living with in a shelter. You could be MS-13 and you're sleeping in a bunk next to someone from Barrio 18. No one knows.

Rolando not only left behind the stress of living on the run upon arriving at the shelter, he also left behind years of addiction by getting off crack for the first time in twenty years. Rolando's process of recovery continues in Monterrey and I come to see parallels between *Gangs of New York* and Rolando's current predicament as sound bites from the film filter in and out of the recording from our interview.

Gangs of New York tells the story of Protestant nationalists battling Catholic immigrants. Back then, the battle was taking place in Five Points, Brooklyn. These days, Long Island is the epicenter of the current administration's racist campaign against MS-13.²³⁵ The nativism and organized crime that ground the film politically are surprisingly relevant for someone like Rolando. The first scenes of the film are a prelude in which we see Bill the Butcher, the leader of a Protestant gang played by a mustachioed Daniel Day-Lewis, kill Vallon, the leader of a rival Irish-Catholic gang. Vallon's newly orphaned son, Amsterdam, flees the Five Corners area of Brooklyn and the rest of the film follows a now adult Amsterdam as he returns to Bill the Butcher's territory and seeks vengeance for his father's death by ingratiating himself into the gang leaders' inner circle.

Like Amsterdam, Rolando is seeking a form of restitution for what gang life has done to him. He has grown up implicated in the shadow of his older brother Johnny, the leader of a local MS-13 *clica*, or clique, who refused to let him officially join the gang. He expressed his frustration about this dynamic in an earlier interview:

One of my brothers used to put the two letters in his notebook: MS. 'Cool!' I thought. One day I followed him to where they met. Johnny saw me and kicked me twice. 'Go home,'

²³⁵ Blitzer 2017.

he told me, ‘This is bad.’ They met in San Mateo. It was the San Mateo *clica*. They all smelled like *pega* (glue used for huffing), something that they would later come to prohibit in the *pandilla* (gang). So that’s how the gang started and how I got started with drugs. It started, got established. San Mateo had a beef with Valle Nuevo. Valle Nuevo were *emeses* (members of the MS-13 gang). But the kids from San Mateo were more like street kids, young, they hadn’t really gotten involved, they hadn’t gotten beaten in yet. They were looking for a way in though. You have to make three hits, you know, kill three enemies. They observe you and then they say, ‘Let’s see if he really wants to belong. Go kill three.’ So, you kill one. And then a month later, another. Then after the third they baptize you with the *brinco de trece segundos* (13-second beating). Two or three guys fuck you up for thirteen seconds. Then you can do whatever you want. Well, pretty much anything. You have to know where the limit is too, but back in those days they didn’t give a fuck. They would get drunk, stoned, they raped, everything. I wanted to be a part of that, but by then there was already a line. I was one of the last in line. They had a list of like 30 and I was number 29. I had to wait for the others to kill theirs before it would be my turn. And I just never had my turn. Thank God I avoided that. But back then, I was angry about it. I guess [my brother] was trying to protect me.

Officially barred from the gang, Rolando lived most of his adolescence at the margins of what Antony Fontes has described as “extorted life” to describe the pervasiveness of protection rackets across Central America as both “a symptom of and an answer to collective anxieties over the terms of everyday survival and the difficulty of determining just who is in charge.”²³⁶ Rolando made small deliveries, sold drugs, and eventually became addicted himself at the age of fourteen as part of what Óscar Martínez has referred to as the “gang subsistence economy.”²³⁷ By then, the gang had become, as Rolando put it, more “professional,” collecting an *impuesto de guerra*, or war tax, and meting out justice over neighborhood conflicts. Extortion economies began expanding beyond neighborhoods and battles between rival cliques escalated into all-out wars. Rolando’s older brothers kept him at the margins, protected yet also excluded due to his addiction. This liminality left Rolando feeling both infantilized and excluded. He became self-destructive and began burning bridges with dealers connected to MS-13 by using all the product he was meant to be selling.

²³⁶ Fontes 2016, 595.

²³⁷ Martínez 2016.

Eventually, Rolando was banned from MS-13 territory and he hid out in a nearby Barrio 18 neighborhood until his addiction led him to burn bridges there as well. After serving his term for illegally possessing firearms and drugs, Rolando realized that he had nowhere else to land. Here he is describing the day he was released from prison:

I left prison on September 8th, no, the 4th. It was the day before my twins turned one. After getting out, I realized that they were waiting for me. I didn't think I was going to get out that day. The day I got out, they transported me to a judge across the city. One of the other guys on the transport bus recognized me. 'Aren't you Rolando?' he asked. 'Yea, why?' I tell him. 'I remember you,' he tells me, 'I know your brothers.' 'And?' he asks me. 'I don't know,' I tell him, "I'm seeing the judge today." "You better hope they send you away," he tells me, "Better to be locked up than out there. They're talking a lot about you," he tells me, "You're *baleado* (literally, shot. targeted) as much by MS as by la 18. They marked you a rat and they're waiting for you." So, I left.

Rolando fled El Salvador after living on the run for a full year, crashing with friends and relatives for a night or two, always in fear of being ambushed.

In the three months that I spend in Monterrey, Rolando has no qualms about telling these war stories, but he is more reserved when it comes to reflecting on how he sees a life in Monterrey fitting into his future. I want to hear what it feels like to hold down a regular job for the first time in years, to not live in constant fear of being killed by rival gang members. I am also curious about how Rolando is thinking about his future. Whenever we have a minute to talk alone, away from Chava and his kids, these kinds of questions lead Rolando to update me about Manuel, a friend from back home who is living in New York. He tells me that Manuel has been promising to lend him \$4,000 for a smuggler. Years earlier, back in El Salvador, Manuel would let Rolando crash in the back room of his bakery to get high in a relatively safe space. Harm reduction without the 501c3 status. To return the favor, Rolando had helped work out a deal between Manuel and his brother Johnny, an MS-13 veteran whose colleagues had been threatening to kill Manuel if he didn't pay the extortion fees they were demanding. I am curious about Rolando's negotiations with

Manuel, but I am also aware that Rolando might not want to share certain things. I lend Rolando my instant camera with the idea of seeing what he feels comfortable revealing, both visually and verbally, on his own terms. As I have begun to learn, both Rolando and Manuel are looking to make moves. For Rolando, this means figuring out a way to get across the border as soon as possible, “before Trump can get the wall built,” Rolando says, half-kidding. For Manuel, it means preparing for the possibility of deportation back to El Salvador. Anticipating deportation leads both men to sustain relationships with the very networks of organized crime from which they were fleeing. Photographs, as I come to learn, are central to these relationships.

During one of our after-work sessions, Rolando starts drawing his neighborhood on a piece of notebook paper, explaining what it is like to live on the run from both MS-13 and Barrio 18 at the same time. By this point, Rolando is familiar with my instant camera. I have plenty of extra film so I have been bringing it around during my visits to the workshop. Chava’s children like to take photos with it. “What do you think about taking some photos of your life here in Monterrey?” I ask Rolando, “Maybe we can do an interview based on the photos that you take. *Cómo ves?*” What do you think?

Participatory Photography as a Mechanism for Reflection

Several systematic reviews in social work journals outline the status of participatory photography as an increasingly commonplace component of therapeutic practice and qualitative social work research.²³⁸ Participatory photography is often associated with empowering reflection on a process of self-transformation, whether as a means of evaluating an intervention or as a way to humanize

²³⁸ DeCoster and Dickerson 2014; Clark and Morriss 2017.



Figure 7.2: Rolando mapping gang territories

a particular social process in a way that emphasizes human agency. Aldridge, for example, suggests that participatory photography “allows participants to more accurately show photography as a “reflective process [that allows social workers] to become humanized to our clients’ diverse experiences and perspectives, which can help us interface more equally and effectively with clients in practice.”²³⁹ Russell and Díaz, meanwhile, argue that, “Humanness and affectivity in research findings can be visually conveyed through the respectful use of image, such as photography” (Russell and Diaz 2013, 433).

When we get together again for the follow-up interview based on the photos that Rolando had taken with the instant camera, the promises of participatory photography contained within these prior publications comes to fruition. I am giddy. The way Rolando’s description of the photos

²³⁹ Jackson 2013: 415.

align with the idea of migration as a process of recovery is uncanny. In talking about a photo of the mattresses in his bedroom, or a shot eating lunch with Chava, Rolando opens up in new ways about the meaning of his current situation. The photographic exercise is consistent with the idea that participatory photography can prompt interlocutors to reflect, in their own words, on aspects of their surroundings or past experience that might otherwise remain implicit, marginalized, or underappreciated. The photos, as Clark and Morriss argue, “provide insight into difficult, emotional, or otherwise, sensitive issues and experiences.”²⁴⁰ They “make the invisible visible.”²⁴¹ After numbering each photo so that I can match them to the audio recording later on, I ask Rolando to walk me through them in whichever order he would like. He starts with the first four images, laying them out on the couch beside him in sequential order as if they are a reflection of his *subida*, then he opens up like never before about his journey.

The first four photos show Rolando eating lunch in Chava’s living room.²⁴² Three of the photos, taken by Kari, show the two men eating. Then there is a photo of two plates of food loaded with pinto beans, rice, and stewed pork in salsa verde. Rolando’s daily life is humble, but the things in his life are a meaningful marker of how far he has come. The fact that Chava provided meals for Gustavo and Rolando, and in his own home no less, is significant for him,

²⁴⁰ Clark and Morriss 2017, 30.

²⁴¹ Bukowski and Buetow 2011.

²⁴² I have excluded the first photo, which clearly shows Rolando’s face.



Figure 7.3: Dinner with Chava, Photos by Rolando

With this photo of the food, well, Don Chava and Doña Kari have opened their house to me with trust. I eat with them and it feels good, you know? Sharing food with someone who does it out of appreciation, not out of a sense of obligation or because they're worried about what you might do to them... I don't know how to explain it. For example, before when I lived in El Salvador, I had money, but I didn't eat comfortably like I do here. I didn't enjoy the food, share it with people, take time to chat. For those days before I left El Salvador, I was practically alone. I always ate alone. I didn't visit anybody for much time because I worried about them becoming collateral damage. But really, it means a lot to be able to get home after a day of work, turn on the TV and rest, make a cup of coffee, go to the store, chat with friends. As long as those friends are sincere, right? Not like friendships that are only about getting something from someone, like in the gangs. You're friends with them, but they're not your friends. Sooner or later they stab you in the back. But yea, it feels good to share food, as humble as it might be. I feel good. Like I told you, it's been a big change in my life. A complete reversal after fleeing, hiding, always being afraid when someone knocked on the door. I would ask myself, 'Are they coming for me? Who is it?' Now, I'm more tranquil. I sleep well. With asylum, I can work freely, which is something that I couldn't do in El Salvador, not because there isn't work, but because the conflict just gets to you too much.

For Rolando, the simple act of sharing a meal, of eating calmly without worrying about being ambushed, marks a major shift, "a complete reversal." Perhaps the most important aspect of this shift has involved developing relationships that are not pregnant with the threat of immanent violence. Rolando describes taking time to eat calmly and to do it with others. He talks about feeling a sense of genuine friendship and of not having to organize one's life around the possibility of being followed. Rolando also discusses a related sense of independence that he has gained by having his own apartment in the next four photos. Like the first four, he works through these images in sequential order, mirroring his process of moving from finding steady work to finding a place of his own.

In a photo of Rolando's bedroom, a fleece blanket is laid neatly over a bare twin mattress. This small mattress is stacked on top of a queen mattress and box spring, princess-and-the-pea style. The part of the queen mattress that sticks out underneath serves as a kind of bedside table



Figure 7.4: A surplus of beds, Photos by Rolando

for a change of clothes and a few toiletries. In El Salvador, having a bed was too dangerous. In Mexico, Rolando has a surplus of beds. He talks about the feeling of sleeping inside on a mattress wearing only underwear after sleeping fully clothed and always outside in case he needed to make a run for it,

Imagine, I lived for a year and half without any kind of stable place to stay. You know, a place where I could end up each night, a place where I could say, 'I pay for this. I do what I want here.' It feels good to arrive at your house, open the door with your key, sit down, and get comfortable. In El Salvador I lived three days with a brother, three days with a cousin, with an aunt, with some friends. I didn't have a fixed place to sleep. I didn't wash clothes. I would just carry two changes of clothes and when they got dirty, I would throw them away and get another outfit. And a bed? No way. I mean, it's nothing special but this mattress is mine. I can sleep how I want with my feet whatever direction I damn please. With my cousin, I always slept outside in a hammock. With my aunt, I slept outside on her terrace. Whatever happened, I was already dressed and ready to run. I slept with my shoes on, fully clothed. Here? Just in my underwear. So yea, it feels good to have your own place. You don't realize how important that is until you have it. When you have your own things, you know what they cost and so you take more care of them.

In Monterrey, after spending years either on the run or dependent on the hospitality of others, Rolando can revel in the little things, like getting undressed before going to sleep. He can develop a wardrobe and think about saving up for new clothes without having to worry about self-policing his style according to gang branding and color schemes²⁴³. "I can go to the store and buy clothes that I want," he explains,

In El Salvador, the police arrest you just because of what you're wearing. You know, gangs adopt a certain kind of clothing, but it's just regular clothing. Nike Cortez, they're just shoes. Here, I can walk around without worrying about what I'm wearing. You can still get robbed here, but I'm not worried about getting killed over a pair of shoes.

In other words, Monterrey is the first place Rolando has felt that he can get comfortable. He can walk to the store for a six pack without worrying about who might see him or what kinds of shoes he is wearing. "In El Salvador, you live in houses like cages," he explains, "You close yourself in.

²⁴³ Explain "gang colors" briefly here.

Here, it's different. You can sit in your house drinking a beer with the door open and nothing happens. Like I told you, it's a radical change." Sure, gunshots still echo throughout the surrounding housing developments a few nights each week, but Rolando doesn't have to worry about the bullets having his name on them. Those bullets are someone else's problem now.

After working through these photos of house and home, Rolando turns to photos of his work. In Monterrey, Rolando can begin to build a new life by developing skills other than drug dealing. The majority of the photos that Rolando has taken are of the workshop and he orders the photos to walk me through his process of learning to weld. The first photo is a circular saw, which was Rolando's first job in the workshop: measuring out pieces metal according to Chava and Gustavo's directions, then making the cuts. Next is a metal security door propped up and freshly painted. The second skill he learned was working with a spray gun. The third photo shows a window grate laid out horizontally on saw horses. "I did some of the welding on this door," he explains, "but just the welds that you can't really see." Finally, we see Rolando out on the street handing a piece of bulk metal up to the second floor where the workshop was located, getting ready for the next job.

I've already mentioned that Rolando's lack of work experience was a point of tension with Gustavo, who ridiculed his novice welding skills. Ultimately, Chava being unwilling to scale up his business by pirating more electricity, something that Gustavo partially blamed on the time it took for Rolando to learn along the way, is what led Gustavo to leave the shop for Nuevo Laredo. With Gustavo gone, Rolando is less insecure about the fact that he has a lot to learn. "How does it feel to be your age and just now learning this stuff?" I ask him:

Rolando: You're right, I'm old for where I'm at with this. I'm learning to do everything: paint, weld, measure. I spent some time in a workshop in El Salvador, but because of the gangs the owner had to close the shop. The extortions were just too high. I didn't really have a chance to learn. Here, with Don Chava, I'm getting paid to learn. Right? You can

see the photos of us painting the doors, moving supplies around, all the things you do in a day of work.

John: Have you thought about looking for work somewhere else? Is that what you want to do?

Rolando: No, honestly, no. I feel good with these folks. They're good people. You feel like you're part of the family. If I go somewhere else, I'd have to start from zero again, get to know people. And you know how people don't trust Central Americans around here. People assume that you're a gang member, that you're up to no good. I would have to start over showing people that they can trust me.

At the workshop, Rolando can begin to develop new skills. He has a chance to get back what the gangs have taken from him and others around him: a home, a job, even a family. Through his photographs, Rolando traces how far he has come, both geographically and as a person. Photos of Rolando's current living situation provide a mechanism for reflecting on his past experiences.

The Uses of Participatory Photography

In their review essay on participatory photography in social work research, Clark and Morriss attribute the ability for participatory photography to facilitate emotionally difficult conversations to the way “the visual can provide an apparently ‘neutral’ —or at least somewhat displaced— element around which to formulate and advance discussion, acting as a kind of ‘third object’ around which participants can focus.”²⁴⁴ As researchers and practitioners, we tend to talk about participatory photography as a means of accessing aspects of someone's life that might otherwise go unmentioned, and to do so on their own terms. Photographs are a window into what the visual anthropologist Anna Grimshaw has called “ways of seeing.”²⁴⁵ Researchers typically describe photovoice as a mechanism for enhancing meaning, usually in relation to broader discourses:

²⁴⁴ Clark and Morriss 2017, 36.

²⁴⁵ Grimshaw 2001.



Figure 7.5: Working metal, Photos by Rolando

Desyllas, for example, discusses her analysis of photos taken by sex workers as an attempt to “focus on the meanings that various experiences, events, and state, held for [participants] on their own terms.”²⁴⁶

The way Rolando talks through his photographs about his struggles with addiction and his daily life in Monterrey resonates with these framings. However, Rolando’s photos are much more than a somewhat ‘neutral element’ that allows him to articulate otherwise implicit connections between his past and his current day-to-day. Similar to the ways shelter workers interpret the objects that migrants carry with them both referentially and pragmatically, looking at how photos function beyond the interview dyad reveals Rolando’s photos as important mediators of ongoing and future social dynamics. While social work research primarily approaches photography referentially, others scholars like Tina Campt focus on photos as sites of “articulation and aspiration.”²⁴⁷ Nicole Fleetwood, for example, examines photos that incarcerated individuals mail to their family members as “practices of intimacy and attachment between imprisoned people and their loved ones, by articulating the emotional labor performed to maintain those connections.”²⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Thy Phu and colleagues discuss how family photos are central to how people construct new identities, often in ways that reconfigure traditional conceptions of family and kinship disrupted by displacement.²⁴⁹

As he walks me through the photos of his work, I notice that Rolando is no longer following the photos in the order that he had originally arranged them. Some of the photos are set aside next to him on the couch and when I ask Rolando about them the tensions around his

²⁴⁶ Desyllas 2014, 482.

²⁴⁷ Campt 2012, 7.

²⁴⁸ Fleetwood 2015, 490.

²⁴⁹ Phu, Brown, and Dewan 2017.

relationship with Chava's family, as well as his relationship with his own family start to come through. I ask him if there is any reason he hasn't shown me photos of the others. "I took photos of them," he explains,

But I gave them most of the photos they're in. You're right, I didn't want to take photos of them because I was like, they're going to wonder why I'm taking photos of them. Maybe they'd think I'm doing something bad with them. And I ask myself the same question, "Why would they be taking photos of me?" I mean, I've been honest with them, but I know they're not really my family. I don't like to lie to people. I've told them who I am, what I've done, in case some son of a bitch shows up and tells them, "Do you know who this is? Do you know he was an addict? A thief? This? That?" I prefer *la neta*, the real. I was an addict. I was around gangs. I stole. But I'm not like that now. And it hurts to say that, to say that I'm an addict, but it also makes me proud to say that I'm no longer involved. My sisters wouldn't talk to me. But now that they see me in these photos with nice shoes, good clothes, I'm sending money home to my kids, they see that I'm changing, that I'm starting over. They say, "That son of a bitch is really changing!"

Rolando's photos document his integration into a family dynamic in Monterrey, but they are also a reminder of the family that he has left behind in El Salvador. Just as it is important for Rolando to be honest about his past with his adopted "family" in Monterrey, he is also trying to convince his family back in El Salvador that he has left his addiction behind and that he can be trusted once again. As he goes on to explain, this trust is rooted in his dream of supporting his family by earning dollars in the United States, something that requires some money up front to get across the border. "In Mexico, you survive," he is fond of saying, "But in the United States, you thrive." As the interview continues, Rolando explains his long-term goals of making it to the United States so that he can eventually return home to El Salvador.

Look, I'm thinking I'll go work in the US for ten years. Hopefully by then all the other dumbasses in El Salvador will be dead. May they'll disappear so I can put up a little shop and be closer to my kids. The truth is I really do miss them. It really bothers me that I'm missing their childhoods. Those are the best years. That's when they love you the most. When they're babies, they see you and are so happy. But when they're older, they ignore you, tell you they don't love you. It was like that with my dad at least. He abandoned us. And now here I am abandoning my own kids. The least I can do is make sure they get a good education, that they have more opportunities than I had. You know, buy some land that they can say is their own.

Next, Rolando opens up about how Manuel fits into these plans. As I mentioned earlier, Rolando has been keeping me up to date about his conversations with Manuel. During a previous interview, Rolando explained how he and Manuel have helped each other out,

I would show up to [Manuel's] house and get high. He would say, you're stoned Rolando. You're going to die. I was really smoking a lot of crack then. No man, change your life, he would tell me. And at the same time, I would help him out. I always had money, you know. I carried my money. What's good, Rolando, he would tell me, let me get 200 dollars. And I would go to his house, he would give me dinner, and I would just lock myself in a room in his house and get high, but safe. I would be in there for three days straight, just smoking. I would get there around this time (sunset) and wouldn't even go to the bathroom until the next night. You okay in there? He would knock on the door. Yes, here I am. That was my world. I closed myself into the vice. I was never mean with him and he was never mean with me.

Manuel also benefitted from caring for Rolando. When they met, Manuel was married to Rolando's cousin Lisbet. Being married into an MS-13 family meant that he was exempted from extortion fees. When Manuel and Lisbet divorced, however, Manuel was once again on the hook for the gang's *impuesto de guerra*. Wary of how long he would be able to sustain the payments and concerned about sticking around after separating from Rolando's cousin, Rolando brokered a deal in which Manuel's brothers would take a lump sum and Manuel would be allowed to sell off some of his assets to pay for a guide to take him to the United States.²⁵⁰ Here is Rolando explaining his relationship with Manuel vis a vis extortion,

I took an extortion off of him. They had started charging him 50 dollars per week for the bakery. 'Do me this favor,' he told me. I talked with my brother. 'Look,' I told my brother, 'Manuel is going to give you 500 dollars and then you won't charge him the extortion.' 'Okay,' my brother said, 'You're (Rolando) going to tell the boss that Manuel is still your cousin.' So, I go and talk with the boss and I give him the 500 dollars. 'He's your cousin?'

²⁵⁰ In recent paper, Lauren Heidbrink describes similar dynamics as “debt-driven migration” (2019, 1). Heidbrink focuses on a shift from family financing of undocumented journeys to “high-interest loans from unregulated or loosely regulated institutional actors, such as *prestamistas* (moneylenders), notaries, cooperatives, and banks, using land, homes, vehicles, or goods as collateral” (2). As Manuel's case illustrates, gangs themselves facilitate undocumented journeys, not only by threatening death, but also by financing journeys.

he asks, 'Okay, fine.' And he never paid extortion on that bakery again, at least while he had it. My cousin (Manuel's ex-wife) still runs the bakery. They don't sell like they used to, but they're still doing ok.

This relationship continued as Rolando made his way through Mexico. A month after receiving asylum and a year before I met him in person, Rolando had paid for a coyote to guide him into Texas near Laredo, the crossing that eventually led to Rolando being held captive in a safe house before escaping (see Chapter Six). Now it is Rolando's turn to owe Manuel a favor. After five years working construction on Long Island, Manuel is preparing for what might happen under a Trump presidency. Amid heightened anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States, Rolando explains that Manuel is now using some of the money he has saved up to once again buy land in El Salvador. He is preparing a landing pad in case of deportation. According to Rolando, Manuel hopes that by helping Rolando to get across the border he can curry favor with the gang. Manuel gets a degree of protection and Rolando gets a smuggler. "How do you think Manuel sees you?" I ask Rolando, "You know, knowing who your brother is?"

I'm like insurance for him, but it's not open like that, you know? He's never going to say it, that I'm connected. But he knows that whatever favor that he needs, I can probably do it. Well, I can't actually do it. I can put in word for him. Manuel knows that he has me. It's not about money, it's about people. I mean, with money you can do what you want. You can get someone killed in prison for 100 dollars in El Salvador. And if the person is out of prison, it's only ten.

The photos, Rolando explains, are key to facilitating this deal to the extent that they demonstrate that crossing Mexico has changed him, that he is no longer using, that he has landed a job, and an apartment. In order to continue migrating, he would have to show that he had arrived.

As much as the photos that he has taken give additional meaning to his journey through Mexico as a process of self-transformation, Rolando is also using them to rekindle and sustain social obligations between his aspirational future and the past from which he was fleeing. The

instant photographs are not only reflective and retrospective; he is also using them sustain relationships where the line between violence and care is ambiguous.

John: But you've shown these photos to Manuel and your brothers, right?

Rolando: Of course! But just kind of playing around the idea (*cotorreando*). The truth is that it embarrasses me to talk with them about it - to ask when I can cross. I talked with one of my cousins who is in touch with my brothers and who I trust a little more. I told him that it embarrasses me to ask but one of these days I need to make the crossing. But he just tells me, "Come on, man!" And I wonder if this new president you have is making them scared. It's like he's caused us to all of a sudden develop a phobia of the border (chuckles).

John: We don't what's going to happen with him.

Rolando: Right, who knows what the dirty old man will do. Just like I don't know what they're going to tell me about the crossing.

A few days after our interview, I leave Monterrey and head back to the Detroit where everyone is still shell-shocked about the presidential election. Since then, I have remained in contact with Rolando. He eventually did leave Monterrey, not because Manuel had sent him along the money for a guide, but because a family member connected him with more lucrative work in Guadalajara. As of this writing, Rolando remains in limbo, scratching out a living in Mexico while he figures out a way to make it to the U.S., which in his eyes is the only way to return safely to El Salvador some day in the future.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined how Rolando relied on these photographs to both reflect on past traumas *and* to creatively sustain social relationships in the face of an uncertain future. Looking at how photographs circulate socially, often in unexpected ways, challenges how researchers and practitioners tend to think about participatory photography primarily as a means of reflecting on

past experiences. This, in turn, raises questions related to the tendency within helping professions to focus on settlement and integration, a lens that tends to overlook the possibility of repeated cycles of migration, removal, and return. Participatory photography helps illuminate what it means for men like Rolando to have “made it,” but it also illuminates how photographs sustain relationships when the possibility of return is imminent.

Looking at how photographs circulate socially, often in unexpected ways, also challenges how we as researchers and practitioners tend to think about participatory photography as a means of uncovering the implicit and eliciting reflection on past experiences. For people on the move, constructing new selves through migration depends to a certain extent on referencing and relying on what one hopes to leave behind. Taking a close look at how photographs taken by people like Rolando circulate through migration circuits helps to draw connections between clichéd gang narratives and more personal entanglements with organized crime. It demonstrates how photographs are technologies that allow the photographer, the photographed, and the audience to maneuver pragmatically within the boundaries of victimhood and victimization.

In many ways, Rolando had “made it” when I met him in Monterrey. He had papers, a job, a place to stay. Rolando’s trajectory of flight, regularization, and integration appeared to mirror a narrative of recovery and recuperation that is present both within shelters and across much social work literature on migration. But in some ways Rolando was also like Amsterdam from *Gangs of New York*. While his was a story of recovery and recuperation, it was also a story of revenge and restitution. Rolando was still induced into mobility by social obligations that extended beyond his own well-being as an individual. Importantly, this mobility was both forward-looking and, in a sense, regressive. In order to reach the United States, where he felt he could earn a wage significant

enough to support his children back in El Salvador, Rolando would need to ingratiate himself back into the networks of criminality that led him to flee his home.

Formal humanitarian recognition tends to assume that people like Rolando can cut themselves off from what they are fleeing. Asylees like Rolando are celebrated for starting over from square one and boot-strapping their way into the American dream. This kind of discourse ignores the complicated web of mutual dependence and obligation that remains between family members in spite of recognition as a refugee. Importantly, the lives of refugees like Rolando are intricately mixed up with others who are undocumented like Manuel. I would like to suggest that if we are to design social work interventions that meet the needs of undocumented communities, we must begin to take into account the tragic, yet very real possibility that families will be confronted with returning to the communities from which they flee. My unexpected experience with participatory photography might offer a kind of speculative methodology for social work research and anthropological practice, one that encourages people like Rolando to not only reflect on the significance of past traumas and current achievements, but to also consider the possibility of removal and return.

CHAPTER 8

Conclusion

In late October of 2017, Raul and I fly to Guatemala City, pick up a rental car, and drive to Rosa's hometown in southwestern Guatemala, thirty minutes by car from the Mexico's southern border. We arrive at night and Gustavo meets us out on the road to guide us through a tangle of lanes. Rosa's family compound is made up of three one-room buildings in various stages of construction. The tightly-packed structures, separated by a narrow dirt passageway, sit on a small plot of hillside land. Rosa and Gustavo have been here for three months. They left Nuevo Laredo in a rush after Rosa's son's seizures intensified and she decided that being close to him was more important than being able to fund experimental medications with remittances. Two years after the shooting, Gustavo isn't exactly home, but in many ways he's back to square one.

In the front house, where Rosa's mom stays with several chickens, two ducks, and her aging brother, Raul sets up his computer as a light rain patters on the metal roof above. Several of Rosa's nieces and nephews gather around the glowing screen, shooing various birds out from

where they roost at our feet as Raul presses play on the latest rough cut of *Border South*. A grunt of complaint comes from one of the beds in the corner of the room and Rosa’s uncle, who is recovering from a cold, sits up, clears his throat, and peeks through mosquito netting to watch the documentary over Gustavo’s shoulder.

“So, you were telling the truth.” Rosa’s sister Aurelia quips from where she is seated, arms crossed. Gustavo shushes her and holds his phone up to the computer, recording snippets of video to send along to his mom over Whatsapp. Raul jokes that he is pirating the film like a *huachicolero* in Mexico, referring to the crews that pilfer materials from railway cars and oil pipelines, the illicit economies that initiatives like the Southern Border Program are supposed to have protected migrants from.



Figure 8.1: Watching *Border South* at Rosa’s family compound

“You can skip over the parts that don’t include me,” Gustavo tells Raul.

“Wait, *en serio?*” Really?

“Those others don’t interest me,” Gustavo nods.

He is proud to see himself on video, but as much as the video recalls how much he has survived, it is also a reminder of how little he feels like he has accomplished. Watching people talk about their hopes and dreams from the migrant trail is clearly hard for Gustavo, at least from where he sits these days. Two days ago, he landed his first work in almost a month. He has to be at the worksite before dawn tomorrow and it is getting late, so we don’t linger.

The next day, with roosters crowing in the background, we rise well before sunrise to film Rosa and Gustavo going through their morning routine. Rosa wipes the sleep from her eyes as she heats up leftover rice and beans on a single propane burner while Gustavo packs his work clothes into a drawstring bag and scoops a bowl of water out of a cistern to shave with. The sparsely furnished concrete-block room is a far cry from the relative luxury of the furnished apartment provided by their boss in Nuevo Laredo. After they left Chava’s workshop in Monterrey a little over a year ago, both found work with a wealthy property owner. Gustavo repaired rental houses and Rosa cleaned them. In Nuevo Laredo, welded grates covered every window and they parked their mini-van in a garage with an electric door. Here in Guatemala, repurposed pieces of corrugated metal cover the room’s unfinished window openings, providing a modicum of privacy even though you can hear every step the neighbors are making next door as they too prepare for the day.

In the year since she last left home to work in Mexico, first as a waitress in nearby Huixtla and later as a housekeeper in Nuevo Laredo, Rosa had been sending a little money home each month to help make this humble compound a little comfortable. The last time Rosa left, it was to

pay for medications that she hoped would help her epileptic son. The time before that it was to get away from her abusive ex-husband. Most of the money she had been sending home this last time from Nuevo Laredo went to installing electrical wiring in her sister's house, the third structure that sits at the very back of the lot. Rosa's sister Aurelia is also a single mother who has traveled to Mexico at different points over the past several years, fleeing abusive relationships and persistent poverty to tend bar in southern Mexico. Together with their mother, Rosa, Aurelia, and Sandra—who is stilling waitressing in Huixtla when we visit—have sustained the family property in the face of economic insecurity and gender-based violence, caring for each other's children and chipping in whatever is left over at the end of the month to make gradual improvements on the small piece of land.²⁵¹ Given the family's history with men, it makes sense that Aurelia is suspicious of whether Gustavo has been telling her the truth about his story.

Aurelia is not the only person who is cagey. This whole area oozes a violent uncertainty. Gustavo hops in the rental car with us after scarfing down his breakfast and as we drive to the small village halfway to the border with Mexico where he is working, he fills us in on how things have been going. "*Mucha bulla.*" Lots of bullshit. "The moment we arrived, people in the neighborhood started messing with me," he explains. "They think I'm a *marero* because of my tattoos and the way I walk. People here are suspicious of outsiders and they know what Rosa's family has been through with men." There is also a lot of "movement" in this zone, he tells us, referring to the trafficking that takes place along highways in the area.²⁵²

Gustavo has been hired to install a metal roof on the second-floor terrace of a home there. The work is being funded by a guy who lives in Kansas City. Gustavo tells us that if he's lucky,

²⁵¹ Yarris 2017.

²⁵² For a discussion of trafficking and contraband along the Mexico-Guatemala border, see Galemba 2017.

he'll get enough money out of the job to send some money home to his family. Since leaving Nuevo Laredo three months ago, he hasn't sent *ni un cinco*, not even a nickel. How much he will be able to send will depend, in part, on how much he ends up paying in bribes to the police officers that set up checkpoints along his route to work. Gustavo tells us that the officers are supposedly looking for contraband, but that they are mainly taxing the caravans of used cars that are stuffed with merchandise and used clothing from north of the US-Mexico border. According to Gustavo, they also like to "tax" laborers like him, especially in the afternoon when people are carrying their day's pay. "They stop me every day and I give them a little something. But you see? *Ya ves?* They don't stop you. They look at a new car with tinted windows like this one and think you're a *marero*. They respect people with money."

When we get to the worksite, I help Gustavo haul a welding machine up to the second floor of the house, back in my role as his *chalán gringo*. As Raul gets the camera rolling, he asks Gustavo why they left Nuevo Laredo for Guatemala. "It was Rosa's fault," Gustavo responds with a wink. "Living in a border town like that is a lot to handle. You can't leave your house at night because of the curfew that the cartels impose. All you do is work then go home and lock yourself indoors. She couldn't handle it, that kind of life." Gustavo talks about leaving Nuevo Laredo as if it was Rosa's fault, but putting his *machista* humor aside, I also get the sense that he feels ashamed about being back here. For one, he was unable to renew his humanitarian visa, something that many people fail to do after navigating opaque bureaucracies that often feel intentionally out of reach for working people who don't have the time or resources to travel to far-flung administrative offices, even *with* papers.²⁵³ I also get the feeling that he is insecure about having chosen to return

²⁵³ As Basok and Rojas Wiesner (2017a) write, renewing humanitarian visas is often filled with administrative roadblocks. These are especially challenging for people like Gustavo with limited literacy who are struggling just to get by day-to-day.



Figure 8.2: Gustavo preparing his work site, southwest Guatemala

with Rosa instead of staying in Nuevo Laredo. In a way, he is in a similar position to the one he made fun of Chava for being in. In Chapter Six, I wrote about how Chava left more lucrative work in the U.S. to have what he sees as a better quality of life surrounded by family in Mexico. The difference is that Gustavo's quality of life isn't better in Guatemala compared with how things were in northern Mexico. Like most decisions that people make who are facing economic insecurity throughout Mexico and Central America, there is little time to parse out the muddle of economics and social factors that guide how and when someone leaves or returns.

After he is done with work, the four of us drive out to Tecun Uman, the Guatemalan border town that sits across the Río Suchiate from Ciudad Hidalgo on the Mexican side. Over the fall of 2018, Central American asylum seekers will be tear-gassed here by Mexican police forces as they attempt to enter Mexico over the bridge that sits just down the river, shifting the border spectacle to the now notorious “caravans.” Today, the river many of these Central Americans eventually swam across after being blocked at the official crossing is relatively quiet. Except, of course, for the steady flow of *balseros* guiding across the river their makeshift rafts made of tractor trailer inner tubes strapped together with rope and a few boards. The rafts are loaded down with contraband cases of beer, vegetable oil, and other untaxed goods. Once Raul has a few establishing shots of Gustavo and Rosa walking along the banks, we order a round of drinks and sit, looking out at Mexico. Listening in as Raul asks the two of them to once again recount what brought them back over Mexico’s southern border, it feels like Rosa and Gustavo are talking through decisions that happened *to* them, decisions that were strategic and yet out of their control at the same time.

Gustavo: I was working in Nuevo Laredo, up there with Rosa, but because of the kid she got overwhelmed (*se sofocó*) so we came back here to Guatemala. What’s done is done (*Ni modo*). Here we are in Guatemala, working, trying to make it (*tratando de salir adelante*).

Raul: What happened with your visa?

Gustavo: Well, up in Nuevo Laredo I tried to renew it, but the problem is that they asked for a lot of documents. They wanted the files about my case, and I tried to get them, the documents that show that my case is still open, but the problem is that I couldn’t travel to [La Casita]. And then I found out that the case had been moved to Mexico City. And I couldn’t get down there either. I didn’t have the money and I don’t know the process, so I left it and I lost it. I couldn’t renew it, so I lost it. The only thing to do was to stay and keep working.

Raul: And how was the work?

Gustavo: The work was the same as always. It was good. The deal was that Rosa wanted to come see her kid. And I knew I wouldn't be able to come back up without the visa. So here I am, working.

Raul: What have you learned as a person?

Gustavo: My experience is the same. The same as always. The same routine. Work to eat and to keep on keeping on (*seguir adelante*). That's life, right? Whether you have papers to work with or not, you have to work. That's what I'm left with (*es lo que me queda*). Look, when they gave me my visa, I felt amazing. I could go and work. But everything went down the drain thanks to Rosa. I got together with her and my plans changed. At first, all I cared about after getting the visa was working. But then I fell in love with her and my life turned upside down. I didn't care as much about the visa or my plans. And really, it's just a little piece of plastic, right? But I feel like I don't know how I got here. All of a sudden here in love with Rosa. All of a sudden, here I am in Guatemala. I still think about it, whether it is possible to get my papers back. But I feel trapped. Things are harder here. Finding work takes more effort here. My experience as a migrant, and I know I'm not alone with this, is that we're stubborn (*terco*). We don't always think about what we're doing. When you're stubborn like that, you lose sight of other things. My stubbornness made me lose my visa, it made me lose my work, it made me lose money, it blinded me. I didn't think things through all the way. I regret coming back. I was already up here where everybody in Central America wants to get to, what was I thinking going back there? All I thought about was being with Rosa. I didn't think about those other things. I could have tried to get across the border, but instead, I'm back at step one.

Rosa: I don't know if we'll go back. We had a lot of experiences up there. Good ones and bad ones. But I don't know.

Gustavo: Things changed once I lost my papers. I told her, 'you're going to think things are easy.' But the truth is that because of my papers, things are different. When you have your papers, things are just easier. But without papers it's different. You don't know what might happen to you or if you'll ever return home to see your family again. You might just disappear. I'll only return to Mexico if I can renew my visa. I won't do it again by train. To do it again would be to risk dying again and never seeing my family. So, for now, I'll just try to survive here in Guatemala. Sometimes I regret that I didn't do more to renew my papers. I don't feel very happy about it. Things are hard here. Up there, I could send money home to my family. Here, I'm not. I can't. So, yea, I was stubborn (*terco*) and here I am back at square one, in Tecum where so many of us start our journeys. You feel like you're starting from zero. It feels terrible.



Figure 8.3: Gustavo, Rosa, and Raul on the banks of the Río Suchiate

This dissertation has told the story of how networks of violence and dignity are being sustained and reconfigured in the face of vast structural inequalities and a constantly shifting immigration enforcement apparatus between Central America's northern triangle, Mexico, and the United States. I have focused on the quiet relations of care that people navigate to facilitate undocumented migration at the intersection of humanitarianism and human smuggling, dynamics that are often morally ambiguous and uncertain. In a political climate where migrants are often treated like disposable objects, I have paid close attention to things like backpacks, portable speakers, welding equipment, and mattresses to illustrate the all-too-human choices that people confront while migrating through Mexico. I hope that drawing attention to these unassuming things counteracts the tendency for the violent spectacle of immigration enforcement to overwhelm and numb how we practice, work, and live in community with families stretched across multiple borders. Along these lines, I have discussed how, in sanctuary spaces like La Casita, mutuality intertwines with unease as migrants like Gustavo weigh whether to pursue formal humanitarian recognition or to continue migrating along clandestine pathways in the wake of policing initiatives that increasingly push migrants into the shadows of *La Bestia*. I have also traced how the apprehension that shelter workers and migrants feel while negotiating humanitarian spaces and humanitarian bureaucracies permeates less formal hospitality spaces like Rana's boarding house in Huixtla and Chava's welding shop in Monterrey. In this way, I have shown how different senses of dignity, evident as much in legalistic human rights frameworks as in the cultural poetics of dick jokes, shape people's lives as undocumented migration increasingly goes from being an exceptional journey between here and there to a process of churning through displacement, detention, and deportation.

Of course, deportation is not the only result. Not everyone returns with their hands zip-tied together on a deportation flight. Others like Gustavo and Rosa return somewhat more willingly, even if they also feel like they have had little choice in the matter. And for many people, deportation is not so much the end result as it is a new beginning, one that can feel like a fresh start and a form of punishment at the same time. Gustavo and Rosa are not alone in finding themselves back at square one after being waylaid in Mexico, looking out once more on the gauntlet that lays across the river. In fact, they increasingly look like canaries in the coal mine.

The Expanding Bottleneck

The beginning of this project was framed by the spectacle of unaccompanied minors surging across the U.S.-Mexico border in 2014. At this stopping point in early 2019, thousands who trekked across Mexico in grass-roots caravans are bottlenecked in northern Mexico as the Trump administration has co-opted their efforts to declare an emergency along the U.S.-Mexico border.²⁵⁴ Many of these asylum seekers find themselves waiting for their names to be called off of *la lista*, the hand-written numbering system implemented as part of a strategy to “meter” the number of individuals allowed to apply for asylum at ports of entry each day.²⁵⁵ Many who made their way north in October of 2018 as part of the most widely publicized mass exodus face the prospect of waiting for months in under-resourced migrant shelters for their names to be called.²⁵⁶ People who decided to bypass this metering system by crossing into the U.S. without authorization face increasingly costly smuggling fees as cartels raised their prices in response to the recent surge

²⁵⁴ Villegas 2019.

²⁵⁵ Semple 2018; Cameron 2019.

²⁵⁶ Sieff and Partlow 2018.

in demand.²⁵⁷ Many who *are* eventually processed languish for an undetermined period of time in detention centers. Some will have their asylum claims denied and others will opt to be “voluntarily removed,” returning home to face what some describe as “death by deportation.”²⁵⁸ Others like Manuel, who sent me the picture of his blistered feet, and who later found me on Facebook to let me know he would be leaving for Mexico once again, will set out for another go at it. As Maurizio Albahari writes, “border carnage is ongoing.”²⁵⁹

In light of this situation, what lessons can we take from the looking through the eyes of shelter workers? What can we learn from listening to the humorous banter of men fabricating fragile futures, or from witnessing the strength of sisters and mothers who maintain loving homes in the face of violence and poverty? In 2009, Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg published *Righteous Dopefiend*, a heartbreaking photoethnography of homeless heroin users in San Francisco.²⁶⁰ Their description of the moral gray zone that chronic heroin users negotiate as they help and harm each other echoes the uneasy feeling between migrants and shelters workers as they benefit and suffer from humanitarian governance. As with Raul and myself, Bourgois and Schonberg also struggle with how to visually represent addiction’s uncomfortable blend of dignity and suffering. Of all the commonalities that I see in our projects, I am called most by their commitment to linking theory to practice. In concluding *Righteous Dopefiend*, Bourgois and Schonberg ultimately ask, “What do we learn that is of concrete utility by placing the sphere of homelessness and chronic drug use in the gray zone continuum?” Inspired by their work, my aim in what remains of this conclusion is to answer a similar question: What do we learn by tracing

²⁵⁷ Ahmed 2019.

²⁵⁸ Sieff 2018.

²⁵⁹ Albahari 2015.

²⁶⁰ Bourgois and Schonberg 2009.

dignity through seemingly incommensurate frameworks of humanitarianism and human smuggling? To answer this question, and to do it briefly, I will focus on three points that approach the question (1) conceptually, (2) in terms of policy, and (3) in terms of practice.

A Pragmatic Approach to Human Rights

Conceptually, this dissertation has shed light on the promises and pitfalls of human rights talk. As a judicialized assertion of universal human dignity, human rights provide a common language for vulnerable populations and allies seeking to advance legal claims in the face of injustice. For migrant shelters like La Casita, human rights is a scalar mechanism that promises to hold policymakers and elected officials accountable, enabling a humble migrant shelter like La Casita to punch above its weight. It is a framework that places an undocumented construction worker from Nicaragua, a congressman, migrant rights activists, an immigrant filmmaker, and a white ethnographer from the Midwest in the same room together.

Human rights does not just bring people together; it is also used to dress domination in the cloth of compassion while stitching together diverse moral traditions of human dignity. In Chapter Four, I write about a YouTube video that shows Malintzín ushering migrants into the warm embrace of Father Nelson and representatives from Mexico's Human Rights Commission. Framed around the defense of migrants' human rights, this video puts the hospitality of a migrant shelter in conversation with national and ideologies of welcome and trespass. Father Nelson's hospitable embrace is likely to come across as bittersweet, even disingenuous, to the extent that it portrays the shelter working in coordination with Grupos Beta, the humanitarian wing of Mexico's INM that many migrants consider to wolves in sheep's clothing. In centering Maltintzín, mother of Mexican mestizaje and translator to Hernan Cortés, the video recalls a colonial history where the

birth of a national identity, embodied in a motherly embrace, is the product of dispossession and displacement. Also present are the promises of 19th and 20th century modernization and dependency, exemplified in the construction of railways. How different is the current situation where these same steel arteries of global capitalism are being violently cleared in the name of protecting the human rights of presumably defenseless young people?

In raising this question throughout the preceding chapters, I have argued that human rights are not the unalloyed good they are often presumed to be.²⁶¹ I have drawn on anthropological critiques of humanitarian governance to show that in addition to being a principled framework for combatting violence and injustice, human rights rhetoric is also used by government functionaries to rationalize policies such as the Southern Border Program, initiatives that put those migrating without authorization at greater risk.²⁶² For shelter workers, rights-based mechanisms have potential for creating change, but in practice they are much more complicated. As I discuss in Chapters Three and Four, in the context of widespread impunity and corruption, shelter workers have good reason to be skeptical of the humanitarian visa. In a sense, rights-based recognition obtained through the humanitarian visa allow state institutions to avoid pursuing the kinds of justice that might address underlying causes of violence and exploitation. Given the bureaucratic hurdles associated with renewing humanitarian visas, let alone accessing them in the first place, they provide only partial and fleeting relief. As one migrant rights activist told the anthropologist Levi

²⁶¹ Human rights has been central to how social work has defined itself internationally. Lynn Healy writes that, “Human rights provide the profession with a clear direction for a presence at the international level, while also bridging local and national issues with global concerns” (Healy 2008).

²⁶² Fassin 2012; Feldman and Ticktin 2010.

Vonk, “We call it la visa vete [the ‘go away’ visa], because it’s clear the Mexican government doesn’t actually want to support these people.”²⁶³

With these critiques in mind, it is also important to remember that human rights rhetoric, as Basok and Wiesner argue, has been central to the development and expansion of Mexico’s shelter infrastructure.²⁶⁴ While aligning the work of sanctuary with state humanitarian initiatives has been beneficial, it also puts shelters in the position of becoming arbiters of what versions of dignity are deemed legitimate at the same time that the state pushes people to make desperate, often undignified decisions. In this way, Mexico’s migrant shelters face a dilemma that is similar to what Sanctuary activists faced in the 1980s: whether to rely on existing legal categories or to work beyond the limitations of legal frameworks.²⁶⁵ As I write in Chapter Three, the work of shelter increasingly involves not only providing basic bodily aid to migrants passing through short-term but also accompanying migrants long-term as they pursue formal humanitarian recognition. These two missions, short-term and long-term aid, do not always mix well. Rights-based approaches to advocacy collide with moral economies of undocumented migration in which collaboration with smuggling networks often represents a more dignified path. In short, human rights cuts both ways.

Given these ambiguities, we might do well to think about human rights pragmatically, by which I mean shifting, as Hannah Miller puts it, from “rights-based to rights-framed approaches.”²⁶⁶ For Miller, this involves recognizing that while human rights speak to an *ideal* of universal human dignity, human rights should not be mistaken for the solution in and of itself.

²⁶³ Vonk 2019.

²⁶⁴ Basok and Wiesner 2017.

²⁶⁵ (Behrman 2015)

²⁶⁶ Miller 2014.

Formal humanitarian recognition is only one form of dignity. In this context, we should be wary of falling into what some scholars call “magical legalism”—“the belief that evil deeds, serious human rights violations and suffering cease to exist because a law exists to prohibit them.”²⁶⁷ Instead, human rights offers an imperfect mechanism that allows small grassroots organizations like La Casita to put their work into conversation with a transnational immigration enforcement apparatus, carving out sanctuary, respite, and hospitality where you might least expect it.

Looking beyond the transit context

Given how intractable immigration is as a policy issue in the United States, instead of making recommendations, I want to focus in the policy vein on continuities between the Obama-era stories that I have written about and more recent Trump-era policy initiatives. This dissertation presages what Central American asylum seekers are likely to encounter under the recently announced “Migrant Protection Protocols,” also referred to as a “Remain in Mexico” framework. This “action,” as the US government euphemistically refers to it, involves returning Central American seeking asylum in the United States to stay in Mexico while their cases move through US immigration courts.²⁶⁸ It is in clear violation of US and international law regarding the processing of asylum seekers at the US-Mexico border. In many ways, Remain in Mexico is the most explicit articulation of the already-existing strategy of bottle-necking Central Americans in northern Mexico.²⁶⁹ As of this writing, much remains unclear about how and to what extent this strategy

²⁶⁷ In his of NGOs in Mexico to frame advocacy with migrant communities in terms of human rights, Trevino-Rangel (2017) draws on the work of Stan Cohen (2013) to describe “magical legalism.”

²⁶⁸ Department of Homeland Security 2019.

²⁶⁹ WOLA 2019.

will be formally operationalized.²⁷⁰ That being said, what I have referred to as *tentative settlement* holds lessons if this still-nascent policy is expanded.

First, this shift has implications for how we think and talk about transit migration. Typically, asylum policy is framed around determining refugee status in a destination country based on conditions in sending countries. This echoes the kind of sending and receiving dichotomies that much of the recent literature on undocumented migration, this dissertation included, seeks to complicate. Wendy Vogt, for example, calls for an anthropology of transit that examines how migrants reshape communities across Mexico, whether they are in transit for a few weeks or a few years. As a corrective to scholarship that focuses on fixed destinations and origins while overlooking how mobility itself is “visualized, problematized, policed, and contested” in spaces of transit,²⁷¹ the focus on transit draws important attention to the increasingly salient role that countries like Mexico play in relation to sending areas like Central America’s northern triangle and destination countries like the United States.²⁷²

At what point does transit lose its analytical purchase, especially in relation to policies like the Migrant Protection Protocols? Writing in the European context, Franck Düvell refers to transit migration as a “blurred and politicized concept.”²⁷³ Is someone like Rolando, who has been living in Mexico now for three years and may very well still apply for refugee status in the United States, still in transit? Similar to the politics of association that Kathleen Millar discusses between trash pickers and trashiness, I worry that relying on transit as a central discursive framing may perpetuate the idea that Mexico is simply a lawless pass-through space, allowing U.S. policymakers to

²⁷⁰ Morrissey and Dibble 2019.

²⁷¹ Walters 2015, 9.

²⁷² Vogt 2018, 6.

²⁷³ Düvell 2012, 417.

overlook the much more complex dynamics of mutuality that characterize relationships between Mexicans and Central Americans. Paradoxically, to speak of transit in an effort to highlight the in-between spaces may risk erasing them in the eyes of policymakers.

Second, the Migrant Protection Protocols raise concerns about how humanitarian visas, along with a discourse of shelter, are being used coercively in new ways. In this dissertation, I have focused on how people who suffer severe abuses or injuries, people like Gustavo who suffer gunshot wounds, have navigated formal humanitarian recognition. Issuing humanitarian visas to Central Americans in the context of the Migrant Protection Protocols illustrates a different kind of humanitarian governance. In the wake of successive caravans, the Mexican government has recently “offered” to shelter Central Americans in makeshift facilities while processing humanitarian visas. On the face of things, under the newly inducted AMLO administration, the Mexican government appears to be removing the kinds of bureaucratic roadblocks to humanitarian visas that I discuss in Chapters Three and Four. I began this dissertation by noting how the number of humanitarian visas issued had “skyrocketed” from 277 to 3,971 between 2013 and 2016. Blowing that increase out of the water, a tweet from Mexico’s National Migration Institute (@INM) on February 8, 2019 reads, “As of #today, in #Chiapas el @INAMI_mx has issued as a total of 12,061 visiting visas for humanitarian reasons to Central American migrants. #Securemigration #orderedmigration @SEGOB_mx.”²⁷⁴ Accompanying this self-congratulatory tweet are reports that migrants being “sheltered” in a defunct maquiladora in Piedras Negras that once made body-bags are being told that only those who accept humanitarian visas will be released.²⁷⁵ The way Mexican authorities have attempted to disrupt caravans moving through

²⁷⁴ INM 2019.

²⁷⁵ Aguilar 2019.

Mexico by issuing humanitarian visas appears to be a tactic aimed at deterring Central Americans from pursuing asylum claims in the United States.²⁷⁶ Given the dangers that Central Americans face in Mexico, it is likely that this will only increase the number of people attempting the dangerous journey into the United States. Indeed, recent reports indicate that in the first months of 2019, apprehensions along the US-Mexico border have surpassed those documented during the 2014 unaccompanied minors' crisis.²⁷⁷

Third, the Migrant Protection Protocols raise important questions about the future role of migrant shelters like La Casita. Historically, migrant shelters have been wrapped up in a politics of hospitality and transit that accommodates Central Americans to the extent that they are “just passing through.” However, Mexico’s shelter infrastructure is increasingly aiding not only people in transit, but also those who find themselves “stuck” in Mexico. In response, migrant shelters that began as fleeting sanctuary spaces are beginning to develop parallel programs to not only facilitate transit but also settlement and integration into local communities and economies. La Casita, for example, has expanded efforts to develop a network of local business owners who are willing to employ people pursuing formal humanitarian recognition with the understanding that many people may only be in town for a few weeks or months. At a shelter in southern Mexico that increasingly serves more as a refugee camp than a pass-through shelter; a new farming initiative provides employment for those staying long-term while providing food security for the organization. In other cases, similar relationships are developing between boarding houses and migrant shelters. In Monterrey, for example, migrants who have surpassed the amount of time the migrant shelter there can assist them are referred to the block of rooms that I mention briefly in Chapter Six. Living and

²⁷⁶ Averbuch and Semple 2018.

²⁷⁷ (Dickerson 2019)

working near the shelter allows for migrants to remain in close contact with shelter workers while also earning a living. How does the role of migrant rights organizations shift as the division between formal sanctuary spaces and informal boarding houses blurs?

These types of initiatives draw attention, as Jim Ife has argued, to the need to “extend human rights to include not only civil and political rights but also economic, social, and cultural rights.”²⁷⁸ This might involve recuperating Latin America’s role in advocating for a more multi-dimensional vision of human rights. As the legal scholar Paolo Carozza writes, critiques regarding the universality of human rights have in many ways diminished attention to Latin American approaches to human rights by “[supposing] a monolithic understanding of rights talk.”²⁷⁹ Latin American delegates pushed for economic rights to be included in the United Nations’ 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, exporting a vision of social citizenship that would go beyond the contemporary human rights anti-politics.²⁸⁰ We might do well to rejuvenate an understanding of dignity that goes beyond legal recognition. A humble next step might include looking more closely at the initiatives I mentioned above in the future, projects that might be thought of as grass-roots approaches to working with migrants who are “stuck in transit.” This dissertation traces the experiences of people whose experiences are increasingly commonplace: those whose migration experience is characterized as much by immobility and it is by mobility. To address the needs of families who are strewn across multiple borders, it is crucial that we move beyond legal forms of recognition that tend to assume a politics of settlement and integration. And it is also important to not limit the idea of transit as a space between here and there. Instead, one direction for future research involves building on research that examines how families make do

²⁷⁸ Ife 2009, 3.

²⁷⁹ Carozza 2003, 282.

²⁸⁰ Grandin 2004, 6.

financially in the context of continued displacement.²⁸¹ by looking at the role of organizations like La Casita not only as a humanitarian effort, but also as a financial justice initiative. What, we might consider, is the role of organizations beyond humanitarian aid and recognition as families increasingly churn through displacement, detention, and deportation?

Shelter Vision

In relation to practice, this dissertation draws attention to the ethical ambiguities associated with aiding people who are in the midst of navigating criminalized pathways. As I write in the introduction, how practitioners interact with those making undocumented journeys has generally been overlooked in social work research with immigrants. Scholars of social work have instead focused on addressing barriers to settlement and integration with immigrant families already living in the United States. Combined with the broader tendency to portray smugglers one-dimensionally as heartless victimizers, clandestine economies that facilitate unauthorized migration can feel like a taboo topic among social workers. Often, this avoidance appears to come out of a concern that talking openly about smuggling might be used as fodder by anti-immigrant activists, policymakers, and politicians. But the proliferation of abuses that Central Americans experience while crossing Mexico relies on a combination of silence and spectacle. Avoiding the issue of smuggling will only exacerbate the problem.

I hope that this dissertation illuminates the suffering that thousands of people experiencing displacement pass through without fetishizing it. Taking Saidiya Hartman's warning about the ways that spectacles of violence threaten to numb us to the suffering of others, I have focused on "defamiliarizing the familiar" in order to illuminate both the indignities of humanitarianism and

²⁸¹ Heidbrink 2019.

the dignity that surrounds human smuggling.²⁸² Shelter vision speaks to how shelter workers, as opposed to turning a blind eye to violence and exploitation, think strategically about ways of seeing, discussing, and interacting with people who feel compelled to rely on smuggling economies. As I discuss in the Chapter Two, shelter vision describes how shelter workers withstand the numbing effect of what can feel like an endless flow of people who are in the midst of experiencing acute trauma without associating migrants with emotional contagion or disposability. Shelter vision is also evident in Chapter Three, where I describe how shelter workers pay close attention to the things that people carry, pick up, and leave behind while migrating. When they see evidence of collaboration with smugglers, shelter workers do not immediately draw a firm line between pure sanctuary spaces and the outside world of smuggling. Instead, during backpack inspections and intake interviews, shelter workers rely on unassuming and imperfect interactional strategies to harmonize economies of humanitarianism and human smuggling. And in Chapter Four, shelter vision is evident in the way that shelter workers like Ramón approach the work of publicizing abuses committed against migrants hesitantly. Shelter vision is not meant to be a “best practice.” It is instead a way of describing how shelter workers and migrants passing through shelters maintain the moral space of sanctuary for people relying on networks of corruption and duplicity.

Along these lines, I have tried humanize those who engage with smuggling economies in ways that complicate typical discourses that portray migrants unreasonably as either heroes or criminals. For some people, smuggling is a way of life.²⁸³ For others who are trafficked unwillingly, smuggling is a nightmare. The vast majority of people that I spoke with approach

²⁸² Hartman 1997, 4.

²⁸³ Sanchez (2015), for example, analyzes smuggling as a multi-generational family business.

smuggling reluctantly as a pragmatic means of getting from one place to another in a world of deeply entrenched inequalities. Collaborating with smugglers is more than an understandable sacrifice or a momentary lapse in one's judgement. Instead, smuggling is also wrapped in complicated family dynamics and expressions of love. It is a multi-faceted moral and economic system that is so intertwined with what we tend to think of as "formal" frameworks that the distinction between formal and informal loses much of its significance.

Shelter vision is not confined to the physical space of shelter. It is also apparent in less formal hospitality spaces like Rana's boarding house, Chava's workshop, and Rosa's family compound. These are spaces where the ethic of solidarity and suspicion that I witnessed at La Casita reverberates. In these spaces, shelter vision is about determining what constitutes a dignified pathway in the face of an unpredictable future. Too often when we think of migration, it is only in reference to the violence of displacement and the dream of a peaceful destination. This dissertation tries to draw our eyes to some kind of middle ground. These are the indeterminate periods of waiting while family members cobble together funds for a smuggler, and the impromptu family dynamics that form as people come to rely on each other while they figure out their next steps. These are spaces of hope and camaraderie, but they are also spaces of betrayal and duplicity where it becomes unclear whether reaching the United States is all it's cracked up to be. In this context, the fact that Gustavo has ended up back in Guatemala is both heartening and heartbreaking. Of course, Gustavo's story is exceptional in many ways, but it is commonplace to the extent that, like all of us, his vision for the future is motivated not only by fear and desperation, but also by love, desire, and hope.

Ultimately, constructing dignified pathways for people migrating without authorization requires a pragmatic approach to idealized frameworks, one that is attentive to the implicit

exclusions that underlie inclusive rhetoric. In the case of shelter work in Mexico, this involves an ethically ambiguous form of practice that does not offer a romantic vision of justice nor tell an easy story of heroes and villains. As people like Gustavo and Rolando continue their struggle to make do and get by, it means recognizing that people fleeing violence and insecurity often remain tied to their home communities in complicated ways. Ultimately, these stories represent the complicated, contested, and yet creative ways that people tinker with what is, find cracks in the wall, and figure out a way through.

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2019 Informativo, 08 de febrero del 2019 Al día de #Hoy en #Chiapas el @INAMI_mx ha entregado un total de 12,061 tarjetas de visitante por razones humanitarias a migrantes centroamericanos. #MigraciónSegura #MigraciónOrdenada @SEGOB_mxpic.twitter.com/97omCI4E7F. Tweet. @INAMI_mx. https://twitter.com/INAMI_mx/status/1093887053098446848?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1093887053098446848&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.huffingtonpost.com.mx%2F2019%2F02%2F10%2Fen-enero-mas-de-12-mil-migrantes-

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