

## Stuck in Motion: Inhabiting the Space of Transit in Central American Migration

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## Stuck in Motion: Inhabiting the Space of Transit in Central American Migration

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### Abstract

In this article, I examine what it means to inhabit the space of transit; I argue for an analysis centered on the “middle,” rather than thinking of this “in between” primarily in relationship to places and moments on either side. This article answers calls to focus on the migration journey, adding an anthropological lens to the human condition of being in between. I discuss the migration of undocumented Central Americans in Mexico, and detail how both the criminalization of migrants and approaches to their care in transit push people into further motion. Using the accounts of migrant smugglers and victimized migrants, I show how the regional migration regime produces and perpetuates clandestine movement, which keeps many migrants stuck in motion. As more people are made to inhabit the space of transit, it is critical to understand the roles that are produced there, and how they are read, reacted to, and deployed by states, humanitarian actors, and the migrants themselves.

Keywords: human smuggling, transit migration, ethnography of the mobile

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## Resumen

En el presente artículo, examino lo que significa inhabitar el espacio de tránsito, proponiendo un análisis basado en lo que es, en vez de posicionarlo en relación con lo que queda por ambos lados. El artículo responde al llamamiento de enfocarnos en la migración de tránsito, ofreciendo una vista antropológica a la condición humana de existir en medio de. Detallo la migración de los centroamericanos indocumentados en México, mostrando como la criminalización de los migrantes y los métodos de cuidado provoca más movimiento. Utilizando las historias de traficantes y migrantes victimizados, muestro como el régimen migratorio regional produce y perpetúa la moción clandestina, manteniendo a muchos atrapados en moción. Mientras más personas están obligadas ocupar el espacio de tránsito, entendiendo los papeles que se produce ahí, y cómo se lee, se reacciona, y se utiliza por parte de los estados, los actores humanitarios, y los migrantes mismos, vuelvo crítico.

Palabras clave: tráfico de personas, migración de tránsito, etnografía de lo móvil

## Introduction

When I got to Coatzacoalcos in 2012, I was delighted to find Don Carlos there.<sup>1</sup> It was a happy reunion. We had become friends in a shelter in Oaxaca a year earlier, after his brother had been killed. While filing charges and waiting for a humanitarian visa, the charismatic Don Carlos had become the head of the kitchen, sleeping in the tiny storeroom, ready to prepare a giant pot of beans at any hour of the day or night, should new migrants arrive. Knowing I was a vegetarian, he would save the donated, half-rotten avocados for me. When another migrant acted menacingly toward me, Don Carlos intervened. He told everyone I was his sister; I felt immense fondness for this older Salvadoran man.

I was surprised to realize, after a few hours in Coatzacoalcos, that Don Carlos was now the leader of the Zeta cell there. A railroad bridge had collapsed in a remote part of Veracruz, suspending all trains out of this port city. Thousands of migrants were stranded, setting up camp under a bridge near the tracks. After sharing some tacos near the bus station, Don Carlos offered to walk me to the encampment. I initially thought it was just that same brotherly protectiveness, but as we walked among the waiting migrants, it became clear that he was in charge. He had a small team of teenagers armed with big sticks and bicycles under his command; the crowd respected their authority. He told me his bosses had sent him to keep order, to make sure no one got out of hand. He'd be leaving in two days, to take a group of *pollos* north, but those boys with sticks would be in charge in his stead. I could rely on them, he assured me, should anything happen.

How had Don Carlos gone from a kind protector, victim of trauma, supported by the infrastructure of care (Doering-White 2017) of the migrant shelter to a smuggler, high up in the ranks of the most feared drug cartel?<sup>2</sup> Why didn't he move on after he received his visa? Why was he still in Mexico? This article falls within the trajectory of calls to focus on the migration journey, before people get to national borders, adding an anthropological lens to the human condition of being in between. I show how people are pushed into continued motion both through processes ostensibly designed to care for migrants and discourses that criminalize them. Drawing from ethnographic work conducted across Mexico between 2010 and 2015, I discuss the migration of undocumented Central Americans, focusing on what happens while they are geographically between their countries of origin and their country destination and come to occupy a social space between leaving and arriving. I examine what it means to inhabit the space of transit, and argue for developing an analysis of this space in the middle for *what it is*, rather than primarily in relation to what lies on either side of it.

In this article, I hold that increasingly intensified immigration enforcement contributes to the production of the very characters it claims to police and protect, both the “monstrous” (Carter and Carter 2019) smuggler and the innocent migrant victim. To do this, I take the humanitarian visa as a metonymic device to bring into relief the at once heightened and constrained mobility produced through life in a space of transit. As the US-Mexico border has by design become more difficult to cross (De León 2015), many Central Americans who make it to the border find themselves unable to get out of Mexico. For those who have successfully crossed Mexico but are unable to leave, earning money by guiding others becomes a viable alternative until border crossing becomes accessible. At the same time, increased Mexican enforcement, rife with corruption, pushes migrants into more dangerous areas and modes of travel. More migrants are victimized, which opens access to a humanitarian visa. In this way, heightened enforcement pushes migrants into two supposedly opposite roles—legitimate recipient of care versus smuggler. The reality, however, is that these are roles that migrants move in and out of and, in fact, these roles often bleed into one another as migrants inhabit the space of transit.

### Between Borders: Ethnography in/of Transit

Central Americans headed toward the United States will likely spend months crossing Mexico before they reach the northern border. This journey is not always unidirectional or continuous. Many migrants will advance some, encounter an obstacle, and then return south. People will often take up the same trip a second or third time after they are deported from Mexico. Additionally, some migrants who make it to the Texas-Mexico border decide the risks are too high, or the coyotes are too expensive, and move laterally to the Arizona-Mexico border (or vice versa.) These multidirectional movements add length and complexity to the time spent in transit.

Until recently, transit migration of this sort has received less attention than border crossing and “sending” and “receiving” communities. Many of the early studies of what happens to people en route relied on data collected afterward, asking migrants to recount their experience after completing the journey (Arnold 2015; Coutin 2005; Durand and Massey 2006, 3; Spener 2009, 237). This methodology was limiting in terms of what it reveals about how migrants live the process of migrating, where they “do not have the benefit of arrival” to reinterpret the journey (Collyer 2010, 279; De León, Gokee, and Schubert 2015). The story of transit sounds different from a story told by a migrant after they have made it.

Anthropologists have long been dealing with how to adapt the discipline’s methodologies to a population that does not stay in one place. With the emergence of transnationalism (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992), multisited ethnography crystalized as a crucial method for migration scholars (Dick and Arnold 2017, 400), calling for the study of processes across space (Marcus 1995). While I initially conceived of my research in this tradition, the ethnographic experience and resulting analysis led me to understand the space of transit as a single site. Multisited ethnographic research of transit migration describes Noelle Brigden’s (2016, 2018) work, which combines the route through Mexico with research in a community in El Salvador and engagement with Salvadorans in the United States. For Brigden, the entire route was a site (2018, 27). Alternately, Wendy Vogt’s work is a good example of multisited ethnography *within* transit migration (Vogt 2018, 22), as she bases herself at two shelters through

which Central Americans pass. Vogt argues that it is not necessary to be on the move alongside those in transit (2018, 21). While her insights into the lived experience of transit are crucial, she also notes the particular joy, the added intimacy, that occurs when she finds herself having a second encounter with the same individuals at multiple points across the journey. This suggests that an additional kind of understanding could be achieved through a mobile method that further engages with “the mobile” (Molland 2013).

This is not to say we ought to accompany migrants in their clandestine journeys (De León 2015, 11), as the presence of an outsider could create added danger or drain resources. Even Seth Holmes, who accompanied his interlocutors as they crossed the Arizona desert and were caught by border patrol, questions whether he would make that same choice again (Holmes 2013a, 2013b). Yet without conducting ethnography en route, the important space of transit migration cannot be fully understood.

I conducted fieldwork shuttling among multiple spaces along the migrant route from 2010 to 2015, reencountering many of the same people throughout Mexico and Central America. I did not, for the most part, move alongside migrants but instead moved in parallel or in reverse. By doing so, I increased the potential for serendipitous reencounters, and I became known among those who inhabited transit. Building off the insights of multisited research, scholars have suggested that in part to avoid methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003), we should allow the contours of our fields—like that of our analyses—to be based upon the shape of the space that has meaning for those who inhabit it (Candea 2007, 171; Dick and Arnold 2017, 401; Kalir 2013, 312). Furthermore, an ethnographic field need not correspond to a spatial entity; rather, it can be an “unsited field” (Cook, Laidlaw, and Mair 2009, 69). I argue that the space of transit is such an unsited field. Taking transit as the field emerged as I moved, developing a method and understanding that was not site-specific but experience-specific.

This movement allowed me to identify and build relationships with *polleros*. *Polleros* are not keen to identify themselves as such within shelters. If I had stayed in one place while individuals moved past me, I would have been less able to confirm who was involved in smuggling and talk to them openly about it. Instead, as I recognized individuals along the train lines in different parts of the route—and they recognized me—it became clear to both of us that I knew what was going on.<sup>3</sup> I first met Alan, a *pollero* from Honduras, in Veracruz. I then stumbled across him at a shelter in the State of Mexico, and then along the train tracks in San Luis Potosí. By the third time we met he was no longer coy about his activities; he introduced me directly to the people he was taking north.

My back-and-forth movement and continued but intermittent presence over time was noticeable to those inhabiting the space of transit. On the train tracks outside of Huehuetoca, in the State of Mexico, Ovid, from Honduras, struck up a conversation with me. I thought it was the first time we were meeting, but he pointed out the handful of times he had seen me. He was a *caminador*, a low-level *pollero*, who knows the route well enough to guide others. He didn't have anyone in the United States to pay for the *brinco*, to cross the northern border, so he crisscrossed Mexico, earning some money until he could figure out how to get out of transit. He was surprisingly forthcoming; as he would tell me later, though, he'd already sized me up from afar. After that, we kept in touch, and he would update me on the conditions of the route and shifts in plaza control, crucial information for a *pollero*.

Much like Ovid, and many of the migrants whose experiences inform this article, my ongoing engagement in transit led to offers to collaborate with organized crime. On two occasions, *polleros*

working for the Gulf Cartel (whom I'd come to know well) offered me jobs. Alejandro said to me, "You're in the shelters, everyone knows you, everyone trusts you. Send me people. We'll pay you \$100 per person." I declined, laughing it off with an "*ay Ud, ya sabe que no me meto en eso.*"<sup>4</sup> The same familiarity, built up over time and space, that made them able to make me the offer also allowed me to turn them down without problems, but the trajectory was clear: continued presence, sustained trust, and access to those who need help to make it across Mexico can be leveraged.

Seeing the same people in different spaces and in different contexts allowed for genuine rapport to develop despite the mobile nature of migration. In effect, the classic tenets of anthropological inquiry worked: durable social interaction and sustained presence over time allowed me to get to know those who inhabit the space of transit. As this developed, I came to understand the space of transit as *the* site rather than as a collection of multiple sites connected by a process. This is what I mean when I say that the space of transit is an ethnographic space.

### Between Leaving and Arriving: Inhabiting the Space of Transit

In 2010, Alejandro arrived at a shelter for migrants in Southern Mexico after about fourteen hours on top of a slow-moving freight train. The train arrived hours after the shelter staff expected because it had been assaulted twice. First, criminals stopped it by blocking the tracks; they demanded whatever money the migrants had on them. Then, while waiting for the tracks to be cleared, the federal police came and stole whatever was left. Alejandro, with long, dark hair and gold crowns on his teeth, decided to file charges against the attackers. This was Alejandro's second attempt to get from El Salvador to the United States. His goal had been to work a few years and then return to the young daughters he had left behind. The first time, he was caught just before making it to Los Angeles; he was deported. This second time, he stayed at the shelter for months, waiting for a humanitarian visa.

Each year, hundreds of thousands of Central Americans try to cross Mexico in hopes of making it to the United States. Over the last decade, the journey has become increasingly dangerous as Mexican immigration officials have, under pressure from the United States, cracked down, pushing migrants into more remote areas where they are more vulnerable (Abrego 2018, 11; Balaguera 2018, 651; Cortés 2018, 44; Galemba 2018, 872). Organized crime groups target migrants for kidnapping, extortion, and forced recruitment (Nájera Aguirre 2016, 216). As in many parts of the world, Mexico as a transit country has become a crucial piece of the management strategy of the receiving country (Menjívar 2014, 358). Deterrence, the policy of making clandestine migration more dangerous in order to deter potential migrants, has been pushed south from the US-Mexico border (De León 2015) into Mexico (Abrego 2018, 195). Using "front end" enforcement to prevent people from reaching the destination country (Mountz 2011, 382) results in polymorphic (Burridge et al. 2017) or arterial borders (Vogt 2018, 8), as bordering flows through and beyond national boundaries.

At the same time, a network of shelters, mostly affiliated with the Catholic Church, parallels the train tracks, offering migrants respite (Cruz 2012, 1042). The nonclandestine existence of these shelters reflects the ambivalent role of Mexico (Guevara González 2015), combining a respect for migrants' rights with enhanced enforcement (Cortés 2018, 44). Mexico does this, in part, through reinforcing a discourse of protecting vulnerable migrants from nefarious smugglers. The shelters are fraught spaces (Balaguera 2018, 655; Vogt 2018, 10), adopting a public antismuggler stance aligned with state

humanitarian frameworks (Doering-White 2018, 433), while often discretely accommodating smugglers (Doering-White 2018, 434; Guevara González 2018, 184; Vogt 2016, 375).

In 2013, three years after meeting Alejandro in Oaxaca, I visited him outside of Mexico City. He had eventually made it to the United States again, he told me, but not as he had planned. After months in the shelter and with a humanitarian visa in hand, Alejandro had become a part of a coyote network. He got to the United States only to be sent back—not by immigration but by his employers—to move through Mexico with more migrants again and again. Over the years, he had moved up the ranks. When I visited him, he had a healthy beer belly, short hair, and rarely had to make the trip himself. Instead, he facilitated tradeoffs, dealt with bribing the right bus drivers and officials, and oriented new *polleros*. He had an apartment, and all the local vendors seemed to know him. He'd become part of the neighborhood.

As we spoke, Alejandro pulled out the framed photos of the daughters he had mentioned three years earlier. He still planned to reconnect with them, he told me. His ostensibly settled life was misleading. He had stopped moving, but Alejandro had not arrived or settled, at least not in the sense of shifting his focus of attention and his sense of meaningful social ties to the social space in which he was residing (Rouse 1992, 26). Despite the trappings of stability, Alejandro's journey had not come to an end. He still considered himself a migrant, he told me. More than three years after he first left El Salvador, with an apartment, a steady income, a fixed address, and a place in a community, he was still in the space of transit.

I use this term—the *space of transit*—to denote the social space of life in between borders and, simultaneously, in between leaving and arriving. I borrow “space of transit” from Rodolfo Casillas, who writes of the “*espacio de tránsito*” (Casillas 2008, 174). Casillas refers to the literal space that migrants traverse; I want to expand this, tying concept to method, and use “space of transit” as a conceptual space, a sociocultural space, an ethnographic space.

With different details, the contours of Alejandro's story are typical of transit migration: lengthy time in an in between country, multidirectional travel, made to keep moving. For Central Americans in Mexico, being “in transit” was long referenced in uncomplicated ways, denoting the state of moving through territory (Anguiano Tellez 2008; Servan-Mori et al. 2013; Velasco 2014), or simply describing aspects of the journey (Casillas 2008), the network of shelters (Guevara González 2015), the changes in the route (Martínez, Cobo, and Narváez 2015), or the characteristics of the spaces through which migrants move (Nájera Aguirre 2016). Recently, scholars of Central American migration have been exploring transit migration as an experiential state (Balaguera 2018, 643) and have called for developing an anthropology of transit (Vogt 2018, 6) or “route studies” (Brigden 2018, 180), taking the important insights from borders studies and applying them transversally.

Employing *space of transit* as a concept allows us to talk about an in-between that is shaped by, while distinct from, the limits on either side of it. It is a complex space where movement can be multidirectional, circuitous, and intermittent. It is between poles, yes, but it is more than simply what separates the beginning and the end of a migration journey. It is a dynamic space on its own. While the goal of migrants is generally to get through this space to something beyond, their actual engagement with it can be lengthy, complicated, long-term, and formative. While waiting, migrants are also engaged in dynamic social relations (Mountz 2011, 383).

In both a temporal and a social dimension, transit migration can be the most important aspect of an undocumented person's experience of movement. Crossing national borders may not fully capture the significance of a migration journey (Collyer and de Haas 2012, 470). A focus on transit migration has been used to push against dichotomous and static theories of migration that presume linear movement (Castagnone 2011; Collyer and de Haas 2012) and a stark divide between mobility and immobility (Stock 2012, 1578), yet "transit migration" does not have a single, clear, agreed-upon definition (Castagnone 2011, 3). All of Northern Africa has been described as countries of "transit migration" (Baldwin-Edwards 2006); however, the term has also been used specifically in the context of asylum seekers' secondary movements within the European Economic Area (Brekke and Brochmann 2015). As Cecilia Menjivar notes, transit eludes definition, even as it is the site of some of the most sophisticated mechanisms of the outsourcing of border enforcement (Menjivar 2014, 358).

Broadly, transit migration is useful to refer to "dynamic, non-linear forms of migration" (Collyer and de Haas 2012, 469). This can encapsulate both (1) ongoing mobility, as in continued, multidirectional migrations, and (2) involuntary immobility (Stock 2012, 1577), when migrants are unable to move on from a country that is not of their choosing. Bridging these ideas of both more movement and constricted movement within the same concept, transit migration has been conceptualized as individuals becoming "stuck" in mobility (Hess 2012; Zijlstra 2014). Luis Alfredo Arriola Vega has offered the term *trasmobilidad* (roughly, "transitoriness"), which he defines as being trapped in mobility (Arriola Vega 2012a). He focuses on how criminal and enforcement threats keep people *literally* stuck in a given place, unable to move northward (Arriola Vega 2012b). Some people in this situation move from being in transit to arriving (Rivas Castillo 2012).

I expand this to look at what it means for people to be stuck not in a single place but stuck in the space of transit, able to physically move around but unable to settle. It is commonplace now among scholars of migration to refer to "(im)mobility" to be able to state in one word both the condition of being able to move and its opposite (see Brigden and Mainwaring 2016; Conlon 2011; Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012; Salazar and Smart 2011; among others; Bélanger and Silvey [2019] specifically identify an "im/mobility turn"). This parenthetical implies that these states exist simultaneously, wrapped into each other. In this article, I want to pry apart those terms, get into that parenthesis, and examine the intricate interplay between mobility and immobility. Building off scholars who have pushed against the binaries of mobility and stasis (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013), I argue that in the space of transit, mobility and immobility are layered, bound together, and push against one another in complicated ways. These nested mobilities are apparent when we take an ethnographic look at those living in transit. Vogt notes, "the physical immobility that people experience may be mirrored by an existential immobility . . . in which migrants must cope with the anxieties and uncertainties of waiting" (Vogt 2018, 9), in addition to the fact of ceasing to advance. Others have noted physical immobility coupled with existential mobility, like migrants made immobile within mobility, locked inside compartments inside trucks (Brigden 2018, 196) or where dependence upon the compassion of humanitarian aid becomes confining (Balaguera 2018, 655). Here, I focus on the inverse: when *physical mobility* is coupled with *existential immobility*. Migrants in transit can keep moving and become stuck within that movement.

In examining the existential dimension of living in a situation of waiting, Alain Musset defines *inhabiting* as not just living within a space but also fostering relationships with the world around you (Musset 2015, 311). Inhabiting, he argues, is not an act: it is a process (Musset 2015, 313). In the

section that follows, I identify two of the processes that move migrants into inhabiting this space of transit. Like Alejandro, they are able to move but unable to arrive.

### Between Good and Bad: Migrant/Victim/Smuggler

In fall of 2013, I was waiting for Yessenia to give a joint talk at a university in the United States. A migrant from Honduras, Yessenia had been raped while walking through a remote area of Southern Mexico the year before. Yessenia was ready to speak publicly about what had happened to her, hoping to help put a stop to sexual violence against migrants. But Yessenia never made it across the border from Mexico—where she had been living since the assault—into the United States. Months earlier she had secured a ten-year tourist visa. The embassy official in Mexico City had been impressed with Yessenia’s desire to tell her story, but the border agent was not. When Yessenia presented her passport and visa, he asked her if she had a job in Mexico. Yessenia eagerly replied, “Yes, I work for a freelance journalist. Would you like her number?” She was ready to provide to him the same information she had put on her visa application. “No,” he answered, severely. “You’re not supposed to work with a humanitarian visa in Mexico,” he told her, “and I think you’re going to do the same thing in the United States.” Entrance denied.

Yessenia suffered the assault while walking through the brush in order to avoid an immigration checkpoint in Chiapas in late 2012. Her attacker turned out to be a serial rapist of migrant women. Though traumatized and distraught, she made it to the shelter in Oaxaca, where she confided in one of the workers about what had happened. He encouraged her to file charges and introduced her to two other women who had been raped by the same man. Yessenia’s case is a rare “success” story. Due to multiple eyewitness testimonies and ample pressure from the shelter’s staff, the rapist was jailed. As victims, each of the three women received a humanitarian visa. This visa allows an individual to legally be present in the country. It marks the holder as a righteous victim—a good migrant—in the eyes of the state.

Invoking victimhood can offer migrants like Yessenia access to restriction-free movement in Mexico.<sup>5</sup> It did not, however, allow her access to arrival. The humanitarian visa does not necessarily come with the right to work legally in Mexico, and the tourist visa for the United States prohibited settling there. This presents migrants like Yessenia with a contradictory situation: they are able to be physically present, but they cannot make a life. Holding the humanitarian visa, then, only facilitates continued movement; it does not offer migrants a way to stop moving.

The kind of contingent, partial inclusion has been explored elsewhere. In Italy, female trafficking victims (Giordano 2008) have to be deemed victims to access certain visas. Miriam Ticktin (2006) has argued that humanitarian care has this limiting effect, as in special visas for the very ill in France that offer the undocumented legal presence without the legal ability to make a living (Ticktin 2011, 97). Others have noted the “legal liminality” (Menjívar 2006) of certain humanitarian visa statuses in the United States, where dwelling is authorized but permanence is not guaranteed (Abrego and Lakhani 2015). The humanitarian visa in Mexico allows migrants like Yessenia, Alejandro, and Don Carlos to move across space, to travel north without fear, but it does not allow for settlement.

The humanitarian visa so clearly translates into movement that claiming victimhood can be highly valuable. By 2015, nuns running a shelter in Chiapas became worried about a noticeable rise in *auto-*



*golpes*, migrants injuring themselves in hopes of accessing a humanitarian visa and getting safely out of southern Mexico. As immigration enforcement became progressively heightened in Mexico and deadly violence against migrants increased, the ability to just get through Mexico became particularly valuable. This has only intensified in subsequent years. Many Central Americans are now willing to wait for months in shelters—and even self-harm—to secure this visa and the mobility it offers.

The enabling of movement without arrival that comes with the humanitarian visa, coupled with the increasing difficulty of crossing the US-Mexico border, makes having this visa attractive to those engaged in the business of moving Central Americans across Mexico. Those with humanitarian visas who are unable to exit the space of transit are potentially great *polleros*. The contingent legal recognition offered by the state can be turned to migrants' own ends. Many migrants who have become recognized victims are unable to exit transit. Stuck in motion, they are well positioned to become the opposite of what they are recognized to be, and they can move from victim to smuggler.

Juxtaposed against the figure of poor, suffering migrant is the evil coyote, the criminal who lures naïve migrants into danger. The US government has long blamed coyotes for migrants who die trying to cross the Arizona desert (De León 2017). Focusing on the coyote obscures how US border policy intentionally funnels people toward death (De León 2015). Smugglers are blamed for the tragedies migrants suffer (Izcara Palacios 2017b; Sanchez 2017b, 9) and heightened and violent deterrent and enforcement mechanisms are adopted under the pretext of protecting innocent migrants from bad coyotes (Pickering 2004; Vogt 2018, 4;). Many scholars also reproduce this discourse, framing smuggling as inherently exploitative while ignoring how the necessity of their function is inextricably tied to the failure of states to truly protect migrants (Sanchez 2017a, 54; see also García Vázquez, Gaxiola Baqueiro, and Guajardo Díaz [2007] for a glaring, uncritical example of work framed to “expose abuses of *polleros*”). Even scholars who have found that most smugglers are not exploitative (Izcara Palacios 2017a) still use this dichotomizing language, detailing how “peaceful and fearful labor migrants” are transformed into “ferocious criminals” (Izcara Palacios 2016). In contrast, this article recognizes that in the space of transit, roles overlap and become fluid (Brigden 2018, 15). The “smuggler” is not an immutable category (Brigden 2018, 94).

In the space of transit, care and humanitarian aid may also reinforce the work of bordering (Burrige et al. 2017), as shelters across Mexico have aligned with humanitarian frameworks that see migrants as victims in need of protection specifically from smugglers (Doering-White 2018, 443). Most scholars who have conducted fieldwork in shelters in Mexico have found a complicated relationship between the official prohibition of smugglers inside shelters and the actual reality where the presence of smugglers is tacitly tolerated (see Balaguera 2018; Brigden 2018; Guevara González 2018; Vogt 2018). Everyone who has a deep engagement with transit migration understands that moving across Mexico without a guide makes one more vulnerable to being kidnapped (Izcara Palacios 2016, 13). Individual shelter workers recognize that smuggling is not uniformly immoral and that collaborating with *polleros* may be the most viable way to make it through Mexico (Doering-White 2018, 433); however, the official discourse must remain one that neatly distinguishes between innocent migrants and evil smugglers. Humanitarian assistance is allowed, under Mexican law, specifically in the context of protecting migrants and targeting smugglers (Galemba 2018, 872).

The division between good, innocent migrants and dangerous *polleros* is complicated by the fact that many *polleros* were once—and continue to be—migrants (Sanchez 2017b, 13). With multiple, frustrated trips and intermittent deportations, the knowledge of *how* to cross Mexico becomes a

valuable kind of capital. Many migrants become coyotes through multiple failed migration attempts (Guevara González 2018, 188). If, added to this, they secure a humanitarian visa, which allows for unquestioned movement, a veteran migrant becomes a perfect candidate for recruitment by people smuggling networks. The trajectory from migrant to victim to *pollero* is clear; an individual can be all three simultaneously and legitimately.

Don Carlos, whose story begins this article, is representative of many: he had been in the United States, was deported, came to Mexico, witnessed extreme violence, obtained a visa, and got pulled into the network of organized crime and people smuggling. This is not only a trajectory occupied by men. La Güera—so called because of her curly, blond hair—followed a similar pattern. La Güera is a grandmother from El Salvador, with a round, welcoming face, who called everyone *mi amor* or *corazon* (my love or heart). She took up work in the shelter's kitchen after multiple deportations and after suffering sexual assault while migrating. This access to newly arrived migrants made her a perfect *enganchadora*. Eventually, with her visa, she made her way to the borderlands. Unable to cross into the United States, she turned back, took up her post in the kitchen—and as an *enganchadora*—until her links with smuggling networks became too apparent, and the shelter staff kicked her out. She moved with a fellow Salvadoran migrant nearby, but without her access to the flow of migrants in the shelter's kitchen, her source of income dried up, and eventually she left the area.

As outlined in these stories, Central Americans in Mexico, pushed to the literal and social margins, are made highly valuable to the criminal networks that move them, employ them, and kill them. The life of the migrant who becomes a *pollero* (and continues to be a migrant) consists of moving through Mexico over and over again. *Polleros* turn migration into a livelihood, making a living off of movement. In many cases, they provide a necessary service to other migrants. For many migrants, it is specifically the fact of being unable to succeed as a migrant, unable to exit the space of transit, that opens the door to *coyotaje*. Knowledge of the route across Mexico, familiarity with the different dangers that arise, recognition of who controls which zones, and relationships with those people are highly valuable.

Yet migrants who become *polleros* are constrained in this heightened mobility. They move constantly, making transit not a temporary phase of a linear journey but a way of life in itself. They are excluded politically from the national community by virtue of their unauthorized presence and criminal profession. Further, given the stigma around that figure, they are excluded morally and socially from any kind of sympathetic community of migrants and migrant supporters, even as their skills and knowledge are highly valuable and, at times, literally lifesaving. Even so, many migrant victims become *polleros* precisely because of the constant movement allowed as victims and required as *polleros*.

These roles, so apparent and static to outside observers are, just that: roles. People step in and out of these roles in the space of transit, and the roles structure relations among the people who inhabit that world and those outside of it. Becoming a *pollero* moves a person away from being a *pollo*, a chicken, potential prey, someone inexperienced in need of protection: they become herder/predator/protector. Extended engagement with the space of transit migration makes migrants constrained to mobility, unable to settle. Both public, righteous victims and *polleros* must keep moving; their very mobility becomes an imposition, shifting from a desired ideal to a delimiting reality. Even if they stop going forward temporarily, they have not arrived. They are still in the space of transit, stuck in motion.

## Conclusion

While humanitarian visas may index good migrants as opposed to bad *polleros*, the reality lies somewhere in between. Bad migrants, in the sense of being unsuccessful in making it to their destinations, make good *polleros*. Good migrants, in the sense of being deemed worthy of sympathy and protection by publicly embracing victimhood, make good *polleros*. This is not to say that all *polleros* are truly misunderstood good guys. Many are violent and take advantage of the desperation of migrants. They must all navigate relationships with drug cartels in one way or another. However, in most cases they are also migrants who have been unable to exit the space of transit.

The categories through which individual migrants become legible to the state—as migrant victims or as criminals—are artificial categories. The reality in transit lies in between, where categories such as migrant and smuggler or victim and perpetrator are blurred and fluid. In this article, I have focused on the middle of sets of polarities, showing the fluidity of these binaries and complicating them, arguing for an attention to what is going on between them as connected to but distinct from both sides. In doing so, I have offered a picture of the complexity of inhabiting the space of transit. Much work remains to be done on this complicated and important space, especially as migration journeys across the world are illegalized to a greater extent, making migration in many parts of the world longer, harder, and more expensive.

In effect, mobility—the basic fact of being able to move—becomes as much a part of the policies designed to prevent undocumented migrants from settling in their countries of destination as the concrete structures built to prevent their border crossings or detain and deport them. The urgency of this is all the more apparent as the United States makes being stuck in motion literal policy, sending asylum-seeking Central Americans back to Mexico to wait there for months on end before they can pursue an asylum claim. As more and more people are made to inhabit the space of transit, understanding the roles that are produced there—and how they are read, reacted to, and deployed by states, humanitarian actors, and those migrating themselves—is critical.

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## Notes

1. All names used are pseudonyms.
2. A note on language: In this article I am using smuggler, coyote, *polleros*, *guía*, and *caminador* to refer to individuals who for a fee move migrants through space that they are not



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authorized to cross. All of these terms are used by migrants in transit through Mexico.

Although they have subtly different shades of meaning depending on the context, there are no hard, universal distinctions. For the purposes of this article, I do not think it is crucial to distinguish the varieties that exist among these roles; they are all engaged in the clandestine accompaniment of individuals for money. In every case, I am talking about people who move other migrants through Mexico, not the individuals who move migrants across the international border. I use the Spanish term *coyotaje* as the word to mean the business of people smuggling.

3. In one instance, I struck up a friendly conversation with a man on a bus in Veracruz whom I suspected of being a *pollero*. He was traveling with a small group of young men who did not speak much, but clearly followed his lead. He was aware of them, but each was sitting alone, a tactic used to minimize risk of everyone being deported if one person is discovered by immigration. While we did not discuss his role on the bus that day, the conversation was friendly. Months later, I ran into the same man at the Honduras-Guatemala border, where Honduran deportees were dropped off at the time. This second meeting allowed for perfect clarity as to his activities.

4. “Oh you, you know that I don’t get involved in that.”

5. For studies that examine the interplay between exploitation and agency among women migrants in transit through Mexico, see Cortés (2018); Angulo-Pasel (2018); Schmidt and Buechler (2017); see also Vogt (2016).