

UNCERTAIN ODYSSEYS: MIGRANT JOURNEYS AND TRANSNATIONAL
ROUTES

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UNCERTAIN ODYSSEYS: MIGRANT JOURNEYS AND TRANSNATIONAL ROUTES

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How do people behave when confronted with uncertainty and violence? This dissertation examines how Central American migrants cope with escalating violence in transit and how these coping tactics reshape the social landscape of transnational routes. From villages in El Salvador into Mexico and through the United States, the sustained practice of migration informs behavior along a dangerous route, not only through social networks, but also by carving a transit political economy and transnational imaginary. Migration decisions are rational, but must be viewed as an ongoing process of learning constituted by information gathering, imagination and improvisation en route. As people move along these routes, migrants and citizens improvise new identities, shifting national, racial and gendered boundaries. The ethnographic framework of this dissertation elucidates the implications of this process for the governance of states through which transnational flows pass. The attempt to impede these flows within the territory of transit states, like Mexico, has not only thickened borders and policing; it has extended the social ambiguities and uncertainty of the borderlands, inviting the Hobbesian anarchy of the international system into the domestic domain of the state. Thus, this dissertation points to how migrants and citizens share the catastrophic human security consequences of migration policing.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Noelle Brigden was born and raised in Southern California. At age 17, she enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in the Signal Corp. She was stationed in the 2nd Infantry Division in South Korea and the 1st Infantry Division in Germany, with a deployment to Bosnia-Herzegovina. After receiving an honorable discharge, Noelle earned an A.A. degree from Colorado Mountain College, where she was the class valedictorian. She also holds a dual-B.A. and M.A. degree in international studies from the University of Denver. As an undergraduate, she minored in Spanish and mathematics, and graduated *Summa Cum Laude*. Before beginning her doctoral work in 2005, Noelle had worked as a ski instructor, wrangler and ranch hand, union organizing intern, and research assistant. In 2009, she received a second M.A., and in 2013 a Ph.D., both in Government from Cornell University. She conducted over two years of fieldwork along migratory routes in El Salvador, Mexico and the United States. At Cornell University, Noelle won the LeFeber Prize for Teaching Excellence and the Buttrick Crippen Teaching Fellowship. She also taught college courses through the auspices of the Cornell Prison Education Program. As of summer 2013, she is a postdoctoral fellow at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University. In 2014, Noelle will join the faculty at Marquette University's department of political science as an assistant professor.

To my father, J. Kraig Brigden, who showed me that it's never too late to learn

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This dissertation is an artifact of a long ethnographic journey, an odyssey that began many years before I even realized that I had embarked on anything of the sort. For this reason, I have accumulated many unacknowledged debts, and I cannot possibly do justice to them all. I will start, however, by thanking my father J. Kraig Brigden, to whom I have dedicated this work, and my mother Katie Kelly. From my childhood in southern California in the 1980s, I remember the queues of migrant men loitering on street corners, in hope of catching a day of labor, and my parents' righteous anger at the failure of our society to guarantee these workers' rights and wellbeing. My father, in particular, raised me on stories of the Great Depression that echoed the images of inequality before my eyes. Without a doubt, the work presented here draws on this social imaginary and ethics.

To my father, I also owe a somewhat dubious gift for stubbornness, rebelliousness and learning from the rough hand of experience. He unwittingly bred an ethnographer. As a child, I once threatened to run away to join the temporary settlements of migrants living in cardboard boxes in the canyons outside San Diego. These camps sometimes sprouted up within sight of the homes that employed Spanish-speaking housekeepers and gardeners. I watched these men and women from a distance with a child's sense of awe, and I cringed at a frightening nighttime raid with helicopters that dislodged them from their makeshift refuge. I had forgotten some of those scenes until I found myself sleeping on a cardboard box in a crowded cement room with Central American migrants en route to the United States. Only then did it occur to me that perhaps this dissertation is, in some way, a long-forgotten promise kept.

I thank the many migrant men and women who taught me during the course of this project. I hope to keep my unspoken promises to them, made while I listened in

silence to stories of injustices suffered. While I am sure there is much in this dissertation with which many individual participants in the interviews would disagree, I hope that I successfully convey the dignity of their experience.

Indeed, this project has been a long time in the making. When as a teenager I joined the army, I travelled the world only to find that Tijuana seemed to follow me wherever I went. Around military bases and border towns, the same local political economy thrived: saloons, brothels, cheap clothing and tacky souvenirs, all animated by grey and black markets of every sort. This experience engendered a respect for the everyday practice of the global economy and a sense of the larger political system in which unauthorized transactions take place. During my time in the military, my father and I often talked philosophically about these observations and traded stories of our various misadventures. I thank him for letting his daughter teach him about the world, which in turn is the most valuable lesson he has given me.

My intellectual debts accumulated rapidly during my return to college after my enlistment. I thank the wonderful counselors and professors at Colorado Mountain College for encouraging me and informing me about the possibilities in higher education. In particular, Laurie Marano from the Student Support Services TRIO program played a special role propelling me on the journey that culminated in this dissertation. At the University of Denver, my teacher, mentor and friend Professor George DeMartino showed me the value of intellectual courage.

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creativity and real-world relevance in academia. I count myself very lucky to be a student of this great scholar. Professor Richard F. BenseL has also played a profound and generous role from the project's proposal through its final stages. I am awestruck by the time and creativity that he has lent to this project. Long conversations with Professor BenseL, both in person and via email, have provided much inspiration for the work presented here. I hope some of his genius has rubbed off along the way.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCING THE MIGRANT ODYSSEY

Introduction

Man of misery, whose land have I lit on now?
What are they here- violent, savage, lawless?
Or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?
--Odysseus¹

Tossed by terrible storms onto uncharted coasts where fantastic monsters dwell, Odysseus makes his way by coping with great uncertainty. An intrepid and resourceful man at the mercy of capricious Gods, he must navigate the “dark wine sea” as it undulates in rhythm with divine moods. As he met the challenge of the unknowable and the unpredictable, Odysseus, like sailors across the ages, relied on a type of knowledge known to the Classical Greeks as ‘metis’:

...a type of intelligence and of thought, a way of knowing; it implies a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behavior which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation or rigorous logic (Detienne and Vernant 1975, p.3-4).

The utility of *metis* does not end at landfall.² On his winding journey, Odysseus continually confronts the unknown: encountering strangers, wilderness and a new politics

¹ All excerpts from Homer's *The Odyssey* come from the 1996 translation by Robert Fagles.

² On the range of activities to which *metis* applies, Detienne and Vernant (1975, p.47-48) explain: “This is a cunning intelligence for which hunting and fishing may originally have provided the model but which extends far beyond this framework as the figure of Odysseus, the human embodiment of *metis*, in Homer, clearly shows. There are many activities in which man must learn to manipulate hostile forces too powerful to be controlled directly but which can be exploited despite themselves, without ever being confronted head on, to implement the plan in mind by some unexpected, devious means: they include, for example, the stratagems used by the warrior the success of whose attack hinges on surprise, trickery or ambush, the art

upon his return home to Ithaca. He relies upon an endless array of stratagems and disguises as he negotiates these adventures. They test both his ingenuity and determination, and teach him and us that the flip side of endurance is flexibility.³

The timelessness of Homer's epic arises from the universality of human adaptability and ingenuity in the face of danger. Like the indomitable sailors and merchants who trekked beyond the known world in ancient times, contemporary migrants must make decisions amidst danger and dynamic uncertainty. It is from this perspective that this dissertation examines the decisions and experiences of unauthorized Central American migrants. These intrepid and resourceful people live "the adventure story of the twenty-first century" (Nazario 2007, p.xiv) and often find themselves at the mercy of criminal gangs and police, who, like the gods of the ancient Greeks, continually manipulate the rules of the game.⁴ The interplay of violence and evasion structures the migratory route. To make their way, migrants must respond with both flexible tactics and an indomitable will. To survive, they must endure hardship and draw upon the same constellation of strengths possessed by Odysseus: "flair, wisdom, subtlety of mind, deception,

of the pilot steering his ship against winds and tides, the verbal ploys of the sophist making the adversary's powerful argument recoil against him, the skill of the banker and the merchant who, like conjurers, make a great deal of money out of nothing, the knowing forethought of the politician whose flair enables him to assess the uncertain course of events in advance, and the sleights of hand and trade secrets which give craftsmen their control over material which is always more or less intractable to their designs. It is over all such activities that metis presides."

³ In his analysis of the 'practical intelligence' of Odysseus, Jeffrey Barnouw (2004, p.21-26) emphasizes the duality of being "wily yet single minded." Determination and craftiness are inextricably intertwined.

⁴ Peter Andreas (2000) famously describes U.S.-Mexico border crossing as a 'game', highlighting the ritualistic aspect of repeated crossing attempts. The stakes of this terrible game have increased asymmetrically since the mid-1990s with migrants either receiving long prison terms if they are caught or dying during the journey. While there are ritualistic components in unauthorized migration (these will be explored in depth in this dissertation), the rules also shift unpredictably.

resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills and experience acquired over the years” (Detienne and Vernant 1975, p.3).

Drawing on the concept of *metis*, this dissertation describes how practices of *information, imagination* and *improvisation* construct a ‘mobile knowledge’ of transnational migratory routes in North America. Migrants are rational, but they must solve an almost impossibly complex problem under conditions of extremely imperfect information in which uncertainty is exacerbated by clandestine activities. The migrants respond by embedding their decisions in a mobile culture constructed during the journey itself; they are informed by a ‘mobile knowledge’ that they create. The fluidity of the social reality they construct accounts for the durability of migration flows despite intense suffering and criminal predation. This process has broader implications for the governance of transnational routes.

Uncertain Journeys

In what way is the journey ‘uncertain’? While risk is the probability of a danger and its potential harm, uncertainty characterizes a dangerous situation without a known probability (Knight 1921).⁵ A consensus of scholars, journalists and migrants suggests that the journey from Central America to the United States has become much more dangerous in the last two decades.⁶ Both risk and uncertainty are on the rise along the route.⁷ Bandits, corrupt officials and unscrupulous smugglers have robbed and raped

⁵ On the difference between risk and uncertainty, see Mark Blyth (2006), John Maynard Keynes (1921), F. H. Knight (1921), and Anthony Giddens (1999).

⁶ For sustained journalistic accounts of the dangerous journey from Central America to Mexico see Oscar Martinez (2010) and Sonia Nazario (2007).

⁷ Wayne Cornelius (2007, p.11) documents an increased awareness of the dangers of the journey among Mexican migrants: “Eight out of ten thought that it is much more dangerous to cross the border without papers today, and nearly two-thirds of our interviewees personally

migrants ever since people began to transit through Mexican territory en route to the United States (Frelick 1991). But, in the last decade, even more serious dangers, such as organized mass kidnappings in which the victims are systematically tortured to extort money from their U.S.-based relatives, have emerged (Amnesty International 2010; CIDH 2010). The National Human Rights Commission of Mexico (CNDH 2009) estimates that, between September 2008 and February 2009, at least 9,758 migrants were kidnapped in Mexico. Between April and September 2010, the CNDH (2011) believes that 11,333 migrants fell victim to kidnappings.

Compounding the growing sense of apprehension about the journey, Central American media began reporting crimes along the Mexican routes with greater frequency following the end of the civil war period in the 1990s. And the increasing organization and severity of this violence came to international attention with the shocking discovery of seventy-two corpses of Central and South American migrants in a mass grave in Tamaulipas, Mexico in August 2010 (Sanz, Reynolds and Dalton 2010). Mass graves are a tragic byproduct of increased territorial competition between drug gangs, their attempt to control passage and charge tributes from human smugglers, and the kidnapping opportunities that attend the route. Ask any migrant and they will tell you that the journey is far more dangerous today than ever before.

However, knowledge concerning the general context of risk does not give the migrants much useful information about migration tactics once the decision to leave has been made. Uncertainty along the route has risen because the rules, routines and social

knew someone who had died trying to enter clandestinely. But for the overwhelming majority of potential migrants, such knowledge does not diminish the propensity to go north.” The journey facing Mexican migrants is shorter with fewer uncertainties than confronts Central Americans.

networks that underlie undocumented migration have undergone profound change in the wake of both intensified immigration policing (since 2001) and the Mexican drug war (since 2006). Nevertheless, Central American migrants continue to leave home, relying on their faith and wits to survive.

Indeed, Central American migration has not slowed as precipitously as Mexican migration, despite greater dangers and difficulties during the longer journey from Central America. According to the Mexican Migration Project, net Mexican migration slowed to zero in 2008 (Massey 2011). Based on American Community Survey (ACS) data, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security estimates that the unauthorized Mexican population decreased from a peak of 7,030,000 people in 2008 to 6,640,000 people in 2010 (Hoefler, Rytina and Baker 2011, p.4); that is 390,000 fewer unauthorized Mexican migrants living in the United States in two years. However, the estimated unauthorized population of Central Americans in the United States (from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala alone) increased during that same two-year period from 1,300,000 to 1,470,000 people (p.4).⁸ The U.S. Border Patrol intercepted 95,532 Central Americans attempting illegal entry in 2012, up from 46,997 migrants captured in 2011, a surge in apprehensions that does not appear to be explained by changes in policing at the border (Archibald 2013). Therefore, while the overall trend in the United States is toward less unauthorized immigration, the decline is largely driven by the slowdown in Mexican migration.

⁸ These findings from Hoefler, Rytina and Baker (2011, p.3) are generally consistent with the Pew Hispanic Center estimates based on Current Population Survey (CPS) data (Passel and Cohen 2011).

For practical purposes, migrants traveling the entire length of Mexico (over 1,000 miles from southern Mexico to the Texas border following the shortest line) must presume that each journey will be unique. Migrants face information constraints, but they are not naïve; they know that they do not know what the future holds. ‘Reflexive feedback loops’ (Soros 2009 cited in Katzenstein and Nelson 2013) along the migratory route constantly remind them of the fallibility of the past as a guide for the future. On the ground, strategic interaction between migrants, police and criminals renders the iteration of successful tactics dangerous, because predators rapidly identify and respond to migrant travel tactics. Therefore, a path or ploy that had previously offered passage cannot guarantee safety a second time around. For this reason, migrants insist that, “every trip is different”; the strategic context of the route thus ensures that no two journeys are ever alike, and specific information from any previous trip quickly becomes outdated. Fully aware of this dynamic, migrants assume a worldview of uncertainty.

Danger heightens this sense of uncertainty. Frank H. Knight (1921, p.149) noted that “a decision in which one’s whole fortune (or his life) were at stake” may be an exception to the human tendency to view events as patterns in a lifetime. When the entire future is at stake, a person is more likely to view the impending event as completely isolated from past experience. In the course of migrating, people may lose their life savings or even worse, people sometimes die. Migrants thus come to view each journey as uncertain, rather than risky.

Furthermore, traveling the route changes people, and the continual presence of travelers changes society. In her study of migrant disillusionment in receiving

communities on Long Island, Sarah Mahler (1995, p.75-81) described the often-painful transformation that the journey entails:

The individual who emerges from a tunnel or trailer or trunk of a car and steps onto U.S. soil is not the person who left Peru or El Salvador or Colombia. Her identity has become the near antithesis of the woman left behind. She has gone from citizen to foreigner, law abider to law breaker, legal to illegal, independent to dependent, social member to social outcast; and her personhood is degraded. Fragments of her previous self remain, but they lie scattered like shards of broken glass. The trip strips her naked, and from her nakedness she is expected to clothe herself in the American dream....The journey of undocumented immigrants to America is cultural as much as physical. By selling their worldly goods to finance the trip, divorcing themselves from their families and the reciprocal bonds of friendships, breaking many rules of proper behavior, and falling prey to abuses that humiliate even the most steadfast, these immigrants must shed much of their past identities. They take on new identities as debtors, passive chickens in the clutches of coyotes, beguiling chameleons who assume new personae to test wits with seasoned predators, and finally illegals, wetbacks, or merely outlaws in the Promised Land. They approach their last crossing, the Rio Grande, with little more than the shirts on their backs. They have come to nature virtually in a state of nature.

Mahler presents the most difficult realities of unauthorized migration, but even journeys that are less dramatic and painful can profoundly reorganize identity. It is cliché to remind readers that every journey across the globe has its parallel journey into the self; as the old adage says, we travel to know ourselves. Heroes, and even a reluctant warrior like Odysseus, voyage into the unknown to realize and test their inner mettle. This process of realization alters self-awareness, giving birth to new desires, changing our preferences and broadening our imagination. Whether we go as tourists or migrants, this process of dual discovery, one part internal and the other external, changes us. Obviously, some interests do not change: nobody wants to be maimed, raped, killed or incarcerated. Nevertheless, migrants rethink their goals, consider new destinations, change their loyalties, gain new capabilities, and become enmeshed in unanticipated activities as they

move through the social field of the route. Identity becomes a more open question as people travel through foreign places.

As the quote from Mahler (1995) suggests, identity also becomes a more open question as people confront violence face-to-face.⁹ Just as new experiences and travel transform identity, so too can proximity to violence. Violence reconstitutes identities, motives, social roles and norms; in Michael Taussig's (1984, p.468) words, violence produces a "space of death" that:

... is preeminently a space of transformation: through the experience of death, life; through fear, loss of self and conformity to a new reality; or through evil, good. Lost in the dark woods, then journeying through the underworld with his guide, Dante achieves paradise only after he has mounted Satan's back.¹⁰

Primo Levi (1988, p.36-49) understood this transformative space as a 'gray zone' where victims and bystanders unintentionally or intentionally commit violence while attempting to survive, blurring the boundary between master and slave, perpetrator and victim. Survival often requires subtle forms of collaboration with victimizers. Likewise, Lee Ann Fuji (2009, p.8-11) argues that genocidal violence is a dynamic process with the power to transform identities and complicate categories of "perpetrator", "victim", "bystander" and "rescuer" as people occupy multiple positions or change their positions in response to a shifting context over time.

Similarly, violence produces a fundamental ambiguity and uncertainty along the route. As I will show, this ambiguity begins in the impoverished and insecure home

⁹ Note that Mahler (1995) wrote even before the dramatic escalation of violence along the route through Mexico that occurred in the 2000s.

¹⁰ This need to enter a 'space of death' in order to arrive at a destination is common for travel narratives of all sorts, including the Odyssey. For migrants, it erupts in the discussion of sacrifice and the journey. Likewise, Odysseus had to travel to the underworld to consult the dead before escaping the grasp of the nymph Circe.

communities of Central America and follows the migrant all the way to the destination. At various places along the route, the roles of the ‘migrant’, ‘smuggler’, ‘gang member’, ‘state official’ and ‘kidnapper’ overlap or become fluid. Migrants or smugglers may be forced to collaborate with kidnappers or police, and police may be forced to collaborate with smugglers or kidnappers. It is a strategy that Levi says is “well known to criminal associations of all times and places” (p.43). Many social markers that might normally signal trustworthiness or solidarity, such as nationality, religion, gender or class, betray those who would rely upon them.¹¹ Among people forced to make decisions under violent conditions, treachery is rampant and uncertainty is high as loyalties shift under the strain.¹²

On the other hand, solidarity, political participation and collective resistance also emerge from the experience of violence and the perception of injustice. Amelia Frank-Vitale (2011) documents moments in which a shared migrant identity facilitates collective resistance to violence among Central Americans in transit through Mexico. In a different context, Elisabeth Jean Wood (2003) documents how violent injustice provoked peasant solidarity and armed resistance to the state during the Salvadoran civil war. Therefore, migrants have some good reasons to rely on the loyalty of their comrades. The

¹¹ For an excellent overview of the extensive anthropological literature on the indeterminacy of violence and the social ambiguity it produces, as well as discussion of the special challenges of ethnographic fieldwork in violent environments, see the introduction to the edited volume by Carolyn Nordstrom and Antonius C.G.M. Robben (1995).

¹² Here, I am concerned with direct forms of physical violence. Nevertheless, the ‘structural violence’ of extreme poverty and scarcity may have a similar effect. Johan Galtung (1969) famously defines structural violence as “the increased rates of death and disability suffered by those who occupy the bottom runs of society, as contrasted with the relatively lower death rates experience by those who are above them.” For the purpose of this thesis, however, the focus is on a threat or act of harm to another person’s body. For analysis of structural violence and the Central American migration route, see Felipe Jacome (2008) and Wendy Vogt (2012).

journey can bring out the best in people, creating allies of strangers in a time of need and generating a sense of community along the routes through Mexico.

To be sure, without this hope there would be no betrayal.¹³ Both sides of the migration narrative are true at the same time. Similarly, Wendy Vogt (2012, p.17) notes the seemingly contradictory tendency toward both social fragmentation and displays of transnational solidarity along the Central American migration route in the wake of escalating violence. In fact, the potential for many intervening shades of ‘gray’ responses between disloyalty and solidarity underscores the unpredictability of individuals’ reactions to violence. Therefore, what Levi described of the experience of imprisonment is equally and ironically true of movement across a violent terrain:

The world into which one was precipitated was terrible, yes, but also indecipherable: it did not conform to any model; the enemy was all around but also inside, the “we” lost its limits, the contenders were not one not two, one could not discern a single frontier, but rather many confused, perhaps innumerable frontiers stretched between each of us. One entered hoping for the solidarity of one’s companions in misfortune, but the hoped for allies, except in special cases, were not there; there were instead a thousand sealed off monads, and between them a desperate covert and continuous struggle (p.38).

As they travel a violent route, people meet strangers and build unexpected friendships. However, established friends may become strangers when confronted with violence; the frontiers between friend, enemy, acquaintance and stranger shift. Moving across this violent landscape is a process of acquiring knowledge about a dynamic path and the ‘shape-shifting’ people and strangers encountered along it. As noted by Knight (1921, p.154), under conditions of uncertainty “knowledge is more a matter of learning than the exercise of absolute judgment. Learning requires time, and in time the situation

¹³ Fuji (2009, p.18), citing Mark Granovetter’s (1985) work on trust-building and breaking, reminds us that “by trusting someone, a person becomes more, not less, vulnerable to betrayal.”

dealt with, as well as the learner, undergoes change.” Migration requires time, and in time the situation dealt with, as well as the migrant, undergoes change. Under conditions of violence, people take on metamorphic capacities, not unlike the deceitful and cunning gods of Greek epics. This dual ability to transform and to cope with the transformations of others is the domain of a *metis*-like knowledge.¹⁴ Ultimately, this ongoing learning process blurs boundaries between foreigners and citizens, migrants and settlers, thereby transforming the social landscape of the route in such a way that complicates the governance of transnational flows.

The illegality of human smuggling and migration further exacerbates uncertainty by reinforcing incentives for secrecy and deception. Of course, if such practices were perfectly concealed, smugglers would run out of clients. So, there are also incentives for publicity. Unauthorized migrants share their travel stories, and they even make claims on the state for protection and services during their journey. As a result, the location and protocols of unauthorized routes become common knowledge in the communities through which they pass. Nonetheless, illegal activities are undocumented in the sense that we lack an objective general record to understand migrant vulnerability to danger while in

¹⁴ Detienne and Vernant (1975, p.21) explain the relationship between the goddess Metis, her legendary cunning and the uncertain conditions that she must confront: “...Metis imitates those elusive beings which baffle men with their constant transformations and thus escape from their planned hold over them and slip through their fingers. The many-coloured, shimmering nature of metis is a mark of its kinship with the divided, shifting world of multiplicity in the midst of which it operates. It is this way of conniving with reality which ensures its efficacy. Its suppleness and malleability give it the victory in domains where there are no ready-made rules for success, no established methods, but where each new trial demands the invention of new ploys, the discovery of a way out (*poros*) that is hidden. Conversely, the ambiguous, disparate, unstable realities with which men attempt to come to grips may, in myth, take on the appearance of polymorphic monsters, powers of metamorphosis which delight, in their cunning, to disappoint all expectations and constantly to baffle the minds of men.”

transit. For this reason, Susan Bibler Coutin (2005) defines clandestine terrain as territory that is simultaneously “hidden yet known”. While the veil of secrecy is far from complete, it certainly complicates an objective evaluation of risk. And survival in this environ of deception requires metis, an intelligence that “operates through disguise” (Detienne and Vernant 1975, p.21).

The Role of the State

It might be tempting to describe this environ of deception and danger as a Hobbesian state of nature. However, it is an anarchy crafted by the state, not a primordial place that predates the state. The Mexican and United States’ governments have partnered to increase the risks to migrants travelling unauthorized routes, thereby deterring would-be border crossers. To do so, U.S. migration authorities have explicitly channeled the migrant stream toward the most dangerous places at the U.S-Mexico border, such as the most deadly desert zones (Cornelius 2001; Eschbach et al. 1999). Mexican migration policing now also channels migrants to the most dangerous places within Mexico, such as the drug-running corridors where kidnapers and corrupt authorities prey upon them with relative impunity (Casillas 2007; Martinez 2011). In this sense, the heightened risk of criminality to migrants constitutes an extralegal violence that informally serves state purposes to deter Central American migration. In so far that policymakers are aware of their role in exacerbating these risks, states are complicit in crime against migrants.

However, these states have not *only* exacerbated the risks of the journey. Under the banner of the drug war, the Mexican and United States’ governments have also allied to increase the uncertainty experienced along unauthorized routes. They have intentionally dislocated the routines and relationships that underpin the political economy of transit

through Mexico. To do so, police have explicitly “decapitated” the drug cartels. They hunt the terrain bosses to generate violent strife within and between competing gangs, and thereby disrupt unauthorized traffic in drugs and people (Wilkinson 2010).¹⁵ The outcome of this policing strategy has been the state-induced growth of what Guillermo O’Donnell (2004, p. 41) called a ‘brown area’:

Whatever formally sanctioned law exists is applied intermittently, if at all. More importantly, this intermittent law is encompassed by the informal law enacted by the privatized- patrimonial, sultanistic, or simply gangster like- powers that actually rule those places. This leads to complex situations involving a continuous renegotiation of the boundaries between formal and informal legalities, situations in which it is vital to understand the interplay between both kinds of law and the uneven power relations that develop.

In Mexico, migrants have only intermittent recourse to formal law, because of their vulnerability to violence committed by officials and their fear of deportation. Since the intensification of the drug war (2006-present), informal rules have been subject to a continuous renegotiation by criminal actors. As a result, these informal legalities offer less than perfect guidance for migrants in transit. From the perspective of migrants, these

¹⁵ For this reason, the Mexican government has periodically claimed that the high death toll of criminal violence represents an indicator of success in the drug war (e.g. President Calderon quoted in Wilkinson 2010). They expect gang warfare to weaken organized criminal actors, and they expect violence to spike as gangs undergo their death throes. Indeed, the Mexican government expects cartels to lash out at migrants, as well as competitors. In response to the August 2010 mass murder of 72 Central and South American migrants in Tamaulipas, Alejandro Poire, a security official, offered the following analysis: “This act confirms that criminal organizations are looking to kidnapping and extortion because they are going through a difficult time obtaining resources and recruiting people willingly” (quoted in Archibold 2010). In other words, the administration of Felipe Calderon read violence against migrants as an indicator of success in the drug war, despite the fact that both a public minister and a police officer were murdered just days after their investigation into the massacre began. However, this massacre may be viewed as a ‘success’ in a second, more disturbing way; as migration policing channels migrants into the path of drug cartels, criminal violence against migrants can be seen as an extralegal enforcement of borders. States are complicit in this criminality. Violence between and within drug gangs was an explicitly stated goal of Calderon’s policing strategy, directly articulated by him and his advisors. Violence against migrants has been explicitly hailed as a regrettable unintended (but predictable) consequence of success in the war against cartels.

informal legalities inadequately anchor the contracts, codes of conduct and protocols that facilitated unauthorized migration in previous eras. The result has been a humanitarian catastrophe along the routes, rather than a cessation of migration.

This 'brown' and 'gray' migration route is not a space outside governance. It is a conflicted child of the state, itself constituted by governance and resistance to that governance. As predicted by O'Donnell, "the resulting informal legal system, punctuated by temporary reintroductions of the formal one, supports a world of extreme violence" (p.41). Thus, the combined effect of migration policing and the drug war is largely responsible for the dramatic increase in both risk *and* uncertainty.¹⁶

In other words, these violent conditions are not natural. Ironically, this anarchic reality is a product of governance that prioritizes the integrity of borders at the expense of human security within national territory. The internalization of border policing has brought a level of anarchy normally associated with the international realm into the domestic affairs of the Mexican state. As this dissertation will demonstrate, the struggle between the state, criminals and migrants has eroded legitimacy, upended identities, and deepened social ambiguity along transnational routes. The policing of transnational flows in the interior of states extends and deepens the clandestine contestation that normally occurs at the borderlands. By intentionally exacerbating the risk and uncertainty of migrant journeys, the Mexican and U.S. governments are culpable for this humanitarian catastrophe.

¹⁶ Wendy Vogt (2012) traces both the contemporary migration policing and the drug war offensive to a neoliberal agenda pursued by the United States in the region, and she argues that this militarized, free-market agenda constitutes a continuation of processes of colonial and Cold War social fragmentation in Latin America.

The Practice of Survival and Social Transformation

Despite this state-induced risk and uncertainty, migrants have a variety of tools for understanding and avoiding danger and assessing alternative choices. Uncertainty necessitates a seemingly intuitive response, as opposed to statistical estimation (Knight 1921, p.139). The practice of migration facilitates this social intuition. People acquire information about violence through their movement across terrain. Indeed, uncertainty privileges the experiential gathering and transmission of information over other forms of communication and planning. And face-to-face confrontation with danger turns the migratory experience into a voyage of self-discovery, as people discover strengths (or weaknesses) they did not know they possess and they reconsider their goals. The long road north changes the migrant, and migrants learn to how to bend the rules to avoid violence. As people update their information and reimagine their worldview, they improvise new tactics and performances. As the migrants adapt to this new social reality, the routes change course and other strategic actors adjust accordingly. But because migrants can draw on a mobile knowledge, they can adapt to these eventualities.

This dissertation describes the construction of that ‘mobile knowledge’. To do so, it traces the micro-practices of the transnational migration route from Central America through Mexico and the United States. It examines how migrants gather information, imagine possibilities and improvise new tactics to negotiate a dynamic and violent terrain. It argues that the decision to migrate is not a one-time choice based primarily on a plan of action, but instead, an imaginative and improvised *practice* that unfolds as people move across the physical and social landscape. By examining the journey as a learning process and the social practices that shape it, this dissertation explains migrants’

seemingly paradoxical flexibility to adapt to nearly any situation and their inflexible resoluteness to continue moving forward.

Finally, this dissertation probes the interaction between these individuals and the communities of the route. It shows how their relationships and the roles that define them become transformed in passage. In so doing, this dissertation highlights a paradox of continuity and change in a globalized world; informal rules govern sustained unauthorized flows, but official and unofficial violence demands their constant renegotiation. The subsequent mobile knowledge created and carried by these seemingly inexorable transnational flows fertilizes the imagination and inspires the improvisation of potentially new identities and spaces in transit states. Both citizens and migrants participate in this creative process, complicating the governance of the unauthorized routes which form a ubiquitous feature of globalization.

Contributions

In this way, this dissertation contributes to conceptual and empirical debates across multiple disciplines and the policy realm. Empirically, it documents a new trend along international migration routes. Previous generations of migration and smuggling scholarship emphasized the imperviousness of the routes to government intervention and the stability of migration routines despite intensifying risk to migrants (e.g. Andreas 2000; Massey et al. 1987). In contrast, this dissertation describes a drug war context that de-stabilized smuggling networks, unsettled migration protocols and subsequently exacerbated uncertainty for migrants, as well as intensified risk; it provides a snapshot of a period of transition. Migration continues, but routes, relationships and routines have changed.

Furthermore, the dissertation examines the personal, social, and political transformations that accompany the journey in greater depth, an experience that has received relatively little scholarly attention relative to integration issues in destinations. Importantly, this dissertation argues that the individual travel experiences of migrants shape the cultural and material landscape of Mexico. Each experience diversifies the practice of human movement and shapes the social context for the people that follow. The experiences of migrants also shape the social context for the people who stay and settle along these routes. A study of these odysseys reveals the intimate impact of sustained Central American migration on local Mexican identities, interests, and ultimately, possibilities for governance. Thus, the dissertation should interest migration scholars seeking to understand the importance of journeys to the societies, economies and politics of transit and settlement countries.

In addition to its intrinsic interest to migration scholars, the conceptual apparatus developed to understand how migrants navigate this uncertainty should find a much broader audience. The social sciences, by and large, have failed to cope adequately with the issue of uncertainty and its impact on human behavior, instead assuming a world characterized only by risk (Katzenstein and Nelson 2013). This dissertation breaks new ground, not by predicting the violence that besieges migrants, but by elucidating how migrants cope with a violence that is largely unpredictable. The ethnographic framework of mobile knowledge developed in this approach has wide application beyond the realm of migration studies, potentially contributing to our understanding of the behavior of actors under a wide range of uncertain and dangerous situations.

In particular, scholars with an interest in how everyday people cope with crises of human security will find a new way to think about resources for and constraints on life and death decisions. By focusing at the level of practice, I move the discussion of these resources beyond the static concepts of rational choice and social capital. Rational choice models assume that decisions occur in discrete moments with stable identities. They therefore miss the fluid social and personal transformations that accompany movement across violent and uncertain terrain. The concept of social capital implies that knowledge may accumulate overtime, when in fact, the utility of specific information expires quickly in dynamic strategic settings. For these reasons, people rely on a *metis*-like ‘mobile knowledge’ to cope with uncertainty. Their capacity to do so underlies the adaptive flexibility of unauthorized transnational routes and the resilience of the transnational imaginary constructed in human movement.

To arrive at these conclusions, the dissertation travelled an ‘ethnographic journey’, which pushes the methodological boundaries of political science. Borrowing methods employed in the anthropology of flows (e.g. Marcus 1995; Nordstrom 2007; Watts 2008), this study offers a unique window into unauthorized globalization from the ground-up, bringing the everyday practice of violence and the global illegal economy into dialogue with concepts that have influenced contemporary political science. This micro-practice lens refines our understanding of the nature of information under conditions of violent uncertainty. It is eclectic, empirically grounded, transnational scholarship that challenges us to think critically about the tensions between individuals and nascent transnational communities. In sum, the study employs the in-depth approach of anthropology to better understand the broad theoretical concerns of political scientists.

This conceptually rich analysis constitutes a necessary antidote to policy propaganda about participants in transnational criminalized activities. The need to hide criminalized activities from state actors underlies a dearth of reliable data and undermines reasoned public discourse on these issues. In particular, Andreas (2010, p.23) finds faults with the use of statistics in policy debates over the global illegal economy:

...illicitness makes possible a politics of numbers that is particularly susceptible to speculation, distortion, and sometimes even outright fabrication that is rarely questioned or challenged in policy debates and media reporting.

Illicitness generates incentives for a potentially misleading politics of statistics, one that effectively ignores how people understand and respond to the uncertainty that plagues their clandestine lives. Therefore, to study activities prohibited by the state, political scientists must also venture beyond the official story and into the everyday practices of participants in the criminalized global economy. As cargo with a voice, migrants' stories provide a unique vantage point on the social and political mechanisms that underlie the global illegal economy and violence within it. These voices, otherwise silenced by a purely macro-level discourse, offer a missing piece for our broader understanding of the elasticity of unauthorized practices under conditions of both escalating risk and uncertainty.

By reinterpreting these voices and bringing public discourse to the level of practice, this dissertation has much to teach liberal democratic states about how to manage migration flows. By re-focusing our attention on how unauthorized routes become transmission belts for information and violence, the dissertation illuminates the contradictions of contemporary liberalism. These routes are not isolated edges of society, limited to border zones; they are embedded in the nation-states through which they pass,

incorporating migrants and citizens alike into their activity. An analysis of the social and political processes that unfold along these routes leads us to a strong normative argument in favor of the prioritization of the human security of migrants over a myopic commitment to the border security of nation-states. By describing mobile knowledge, the dissertation elucidates an overlooked contributing factor to the failure of migration policing, and it highlights the increasingly illiberal implications of that failure.

In conclusion, the Greek concept of *metis* is essential for understanding the itinerant imagination and tactics of unauthorized movement across a terrain. *Metis*, as the character trait of clever heroes, finds a parallel in mobile knowledge, which is a practical learning that emerges in the movement of people through places. Contemporary migrants must demonstrate the same craftiness summoned by the classic Greek hero Odysseus, whose return to his beloved Ithaca and faithful Penelope had been forbidden by a powerful God. The successful completion of that epic journey required the capacity to judge the trustworthiness of both friends and strangers using clever stratagems, to leverage existing knowledge to navigate uncharted territory, to disguise or blend into a variety of crowds, to know whom to ask for hospitality and how, to use existing instruments and objects for alternative purposes that their makers had not intended, and perhaps most importantly, to manipulate restrictive social mores and rules to produce a freedom of action. And like Odysseus, contemporary migrants know that much of their success can be attributed to the will of a higher power that arranges the specific place where their practical intelligence can be viable, providing them with an opportunity to help themselves.

Outline of Argument

The argument proceeds in three parts. The first part, containing chapters two and three, sketches concepts and establishes the routes as uncertain and violent terrain. This first part of the dissertation explains the overarching argument for understanding the journey in greater depth, situating this unconventional approach within the sociological and economic literature on migration decisions. It also provides an introduction to the players of the route and how their relationships change over time. These fluid relationships generate social ambiguity and acute uncertainty for the migrants.

The second part of the dissertation, including chapters four and five, explains the initial expectations for the study. It further explicates the shortcomings of conventional approaches to migration studies. To do so, the dissertation compares and contrasts the informational setting of two Salvadoran migrant communities of origin, arriving at surprising conclusions about the ineffectiveness of information as social capital. In this sense, part two presents null findings. This analysis of home communities reinforces the need for research along the transnational routes to understand the learning that happens during the journey. Finally, the second part of the dissertation describes the fieldwork and sketches migrants' geographic and normative orientation to the journey.

The third part of the dissertation, spanning chapters six and seven, explains migration practice in greater detail, fleshing out the concepts introduced in the theory. It turns to the question of how migrants navigate the violent and uncertain terrain, if conventional approaches fail to adequately describe this process. These chapters explore the social and material dimensions of the journey in turn. Thus, part three examines how stories and social performances constitute survival tactics in transit, thereby changing social roles

and identities as people move across terrain. Next, it examines how migrants understand and employ material resources in unexpected ways during the journey. Taken together, this third part of the dissertation documents a process of mobile knowledge, as migrants transform information with imagination and improvisation under conditions of violence and uncertainty. The final chapter concludes by outlining the implications of this analysis for a liberal society of states.

CHAPTER 2

THEORIZING MIGRATION

Introduction

“Ah my friend,” seasoned Penelope dissented,
“dreams are hard to unravel, wayward, drifting things-
not all we glimpse in them will come to pass...”

Like seasoned Penelope, who knows better than to play at oracle, migrants understand that their “American dream” offers only vague lessons for reality. Their goals can be illusory, because wayward, drifting journeys potentially bring them into harm’s way. In Central America and Mexico, a common refrain suggests that the American dream may just as easily become the “American nightmare”. For this reason, migrants attempt to hold concrete expectations at a minimum, relying instead on a mixture of hope, faith and a one-step-at-a-time sensibility. They remain ready for the unexpected challenges that erupt en route.

This chapter outlines a novel approach to our understanding of how migrants respond to uncertainty and violence; it examines how they cope with this omnipresent possibility of undone dreams. Standard approaches treat the journey from the origin to the destination as unproblematic and leave unanalyzed migrants’ adaptations to unexpected situations along the way. In contrast, this chapter builds a conceptual framework that traces the micro-practice of migration. In so doing, it responds to Emanuel Adler and Vincent Pouliot’s (2011, p.7) call to bring “scholarly debates down to the ground of world politics in order to empirically scrutinize the processes whereby certain competent performances produce effects of a world political nature.” Specifically, this chapter views migration as an ongoing learning process constituted by information-gathering,

imagination and improvisation en route. To navigate a violent and unpredictable passage, migrants convert information into 'mobile knowledge' through practices of imagination and improvisation that unfold during the journey. The route through Mexico is the place where this conversion occurs.

Sustained social practices of human movement constitute the transnational route. This notion of a 'route' provides a powerful metaphor for the relationship between material practices and the social imagination. These practices leave tangible imprints across both the physical and the socio-economic landscapes. Over time, the footfall of migrants cuts trails through the desert and mountains. Cultural and economic configurations adapt to the movement of people across the landscape, clustering along prominent paths. As people move great distances over time, these ruts in the landscape become a 'transit political economy' where clusters of social activity emerge; entire communities spring to life in the wake of trade routes. The human movement along a trade route is like a river, carving a path through the society it crosses. In so doing, it deposits the physical and cultural sediment of people in its wake. The routes through Mexico have thus carved a transit political economy and a transnational society of unauthorized movement. As Michel de Certeau (1984 p.97) so eloquently describes:

Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps. They are myriad, but do not compose a series. They cannot be counted because each unit has a qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation. Their swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together.

These observable changes, the weaving of places together, parallel changes in the human mind. The routines of the route become fixed in expectations and social identities, as well as the physical terrain of the pathway. As a 'culture of migration' emerges in

communities of origin and transit, sustained human movement wears grooves in the social imaginary¹⁷. Charles Taylor (2004, p.23) defines the social imaginary as:

... something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode. I am thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

In this social imaginary, where strategic expectations, causal evaluations and normative commitments fit together, a culture of migration takes hold. As defined by Jeffrey H. Cohen (2004, p.5), a ‘culture of migration’ emerges when geographic mobility becomes a pervasive presence in the everyday practices within the community, such that the decision to migrate becomes a socially sanctioned (and even expected) means for achieving economic goals.¹⁸ Transit communities become both socially and economically oriented to the passage of people. Pierre Bourdieu (1977; 1980) would refer to this phenomenon as the formation of a *habitus* with “practices that tend to produce regularities.”¹⁹ The material path also shapes where people think to tread, making a

¹⁷ Following Lisa Wedeen (2002, p.714) I define *culture* as “practices of meaning –making”.

¹⁸ William Kandel and Douglas S. Massey (2002, p.982) similarly describe the culture of migration in Mexican migrant sending communities: “within such communities, people come to valorize foreign wage labor positively, along with the behaviors, attitudes and lifestyles associated with it....As migratory behavior extends throughout a community, it increasingly enters the calculus of conscious choice and eventually becomes normative. Young people who grow up and come of age increasingly expect to migrate internationally in the course of their lives. For young men, especially, migration becomes a rite of passage, and those who do not attempt it are seen as lazy, unenterprising and undesirable as potential mates”.

¹⁹ Bourdieu (1977) defines ‘habitus’ as “a system of internalized structures, schemes of perception, conception, and action common to all members of the same group”. When the habitus becomes like ‘background knowledge’, accepted unthinkingly, it takes on the character of a stable ‘doxa’.

particular route seem self-evident, thereby bounding the social imagination; it becomes an unintended 'knowledge-based artifact', an object that conveys social memory.²⁰

As the social sediment of passing people accumulates along the material path, cultural landscape changes, ultimately widening the social imagination. A cultural exchange occurs, as migrants from diverse origins in Central America track the social practices that constitute everyday life, thereby connecting the cultural space of home through transit communities and destinations. Transnational ways of speaking with mixed dialects combining Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, Mexican and American slang; types of food; methods of negotiating; and creative tactics for moving and evading obstacles emerge along the way.

This exchange occurs both between migrants moving along the route, and with the people from communities of origin, transit and destination. The everyday world of food vendors, bus and taxi drivers, hotel owners and landlords, and employers does not necessarily directly involve smuggling, but these people contract with migrants in transit and smugglers on a daily basis. They thereby rely on the transit economy for their livelihood, and through their economic practices, they become enmeshed in social relations with the people in passage. Migrants make friends, create enemies and form sexual partnerships along the way. Because of their ongoing daily interaction with migrants, settled citizens along the routes play an integral role in the production and transmission of mobile knowledge. They do so without ever leaving home.

²⁰ In his study of drug trafficking networks, Michael Kenney (2007, p.4) draws on organizational theory to define a 'knowledge-based artifact' as an organizational memory, emphasizing the intentional storage and transmission of information in tangible forms.

Over time, the traverse becomes entrenched as a cultural form. Yet, unauthorized migration through Mexico requires immense tactical innovation during periods of intensified policing and criminal violence. Under these uncertain and dangerous conditions, the routines and ruts that constitute the route cannot be trusted as a guide. Thus, migrants learn through the practice of migration. Learning is “a process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb 1984, p.38). In this chapter, I *first* explain how a more complete understanding of the learning process en route extends the standard account of migration. *Second*, I discuss information acquisition en route, highlighting how both physical and social experiences of the route provide informational updates during the journey. *Third*, I trace the transformation of this experiential information into knowledge through imagination and improvisation. *Finally*, I describe the mobile knowledge that emerges when people *practice* migration.

Conventional Approach to Understanding Migration

The conventional approach to understanding migration decisions does not shed light on the enigma of the journey: how do people navigate uncertain violence along the routes to the United States? In both neoclassical and social network models of migration, people base their travel decisions solely on the information available at the outset of the journey. The journey to the United States is treated as a plan that, once set in motion, remains invariable. When scholars approach migration in this manner, migrants’ agile responses to dangers during the journey are rarely treated as a puzzle in themselves. While rational actor models and social networks provide important conceptual tools for understanding how migrants make decisions about their travel tactics, scholars working in this tradition

treat knowledge as a thing, not a transformative process, thus conflating knowledge with information. This obscures the learning process along the transnational route.

Migrants are rational. They respond to information about the costs and benefits of migration. In the long history of collective movement, we see the impact of push and pull factors on the level and direction of migration flows;²¹ people move to mitigate poverty and violence. Central American migration to the United States accelerated during the civil war in the 1980s and early 1990s, as people moved in response to political repression, violence and the economic dislocation (Chinchilla and Hamilton 1991, p.95-101; Montes 1987).²² In the mid-1990s, the migration flow from the region again accelerated dramatically, primarily in response to economic incentives for movement (and opportunity widened by social networks established during the previous period) (Rosenblum and Brick 2011, p.1-15). Since the 1990s, escalating criminal violence and insecurity in the region have begun to play a greater role in pushing migrants to leave (Archibald 2013; Brigden 2012).²³ Since 2007, economic incentives for movement from

²¹ Push and pull theories of migration focus on the macrostructures that motivate movement, while neoclassical decision models focus on how individuals respond to incentives at the micro-level (Massey et al. 1993; Massey et al. 1998). These two lines of scholarship are generally compatible, and for the purpose of this thesis, discussed together. For a historical view of European mass migrations responding to economic push and pull factors and rational choices by individuals, see O'Rourke and Williamson (1999, p.199-166). For a brief history of Mexican and Central American migration that outlines changes in push and pull factors over the last several decades, see Rosenblum and Brick (2011).

²² In the 1980s and early 1990s, academics and policy makers hotly debated whether Central American migration was primarily a labor flow, pulled by the relative economic opportunity of the U.S., or a refugee flow, pushed out by political repression and violence in Central America (e.g. Morrison and May 1994; Stanley 1987).

²³ Using Latinobarometro data, Charles H. Wood et al. (2010) found that criminal victimization significantly increased the propensity to migrate. On the growing sense of uncertainty and insecurity in El Salvador, see Moodie (2012). For a description of the new urban insecurity in Central America, see Rodgers (2009).

Central America to the United States have weakened, but persist.²⁴ The desire to reunify families also propels people to attempt unauthorized entry.²⁵

When discussing their decisions, migrants clearly articulate the material and social interests that motivate them to leave and describe their own decisions as rational. In interviews, they often list concrete material goals, such as a new roof or house, their children's educational expenses or capital to begin a small business, when explaining their initial motive to leave home. They explicitly weigh the dangers of the migration journey against the insecurity and criminal violence of Central America. People also discussed their desire to rejoin family members already living in the United States, making migration the means to fulfill an important social and emotional commitment.

²⁴ Central American migrants interviewed for this study acknowledged that the hey-day of getting rich by moving to the United States was over; people are generally aware that jobs are scarce and immigration enforcement increasingly strict in the U.S.. However, even in the context of the recession and rising unemployment among migrants, the lasting wage differential between Central America and the United States justifies the journey for many people. If the migrant succeeds in entering the United States and finding employment (a task that has become much more difficult), the pay off is enormous: the opportunity to earn the rough equivalent of an entire Central American day's wages in one hour in the United States. If times are tough in the United States, they are even tougher in Central America. The difficulty finding work after arrival makes family less willing to burden themselves with the large debts for paying for high-end, door-to-door smuggling service, and more people may choose to risk traveling through Mexico to the U.S. border without professional help. Mexican migration has slowed more abruptly than Central America, in part because the Mexican economy has been more robust. The Mexican growth rate exceeded the United States, but Central American countries continue to lag behind. On Mexican migration trends, see Passel, Cohen and Gonzalez-Barrera (2012).

²⁵ Family reunification and fear of crime in home communities figured prominently as motivations in interviews with migrants. There may be a link between the changing motives for migration and changes in immigrant composition. For example, apprehensions of Central American children attempting unaccompanied unauthorized entry almost doubled between 2011 and 2012 (Preston 2012). The rise in apprehensions of unaccompanied minors may signal increased importance of family reunification strategies or the transition to a refugee flow, as parents move children for reasons of safety rather than leave them behind to receive monetary remittances from the U.S. Either way, it seems that 'labor migration' may not perfectly characterize the true nature of the contemporary Central American migration flow. For this reason, arrests for illegal re-entry now outpace arrests for illegal entry (Cave 2011).

For these reasons, neoclassical models of migration decisions have much to say about *the initial* motivation to leave.

But *how* do people travel? How do migrants negotiate their relationships with smugglers, natives and other migrants during the journey? How do they navigate an uncertain and violent odyssey? To answer these questions, a neoclassical decision framework falls short because many choices about travel tactics occur en route. Neoclassical models of migration treat knowledge as a static entity and the decision to migrate as a one-time choice made in the community of origin.²⁶ As explained by Douglas S. Massey *et al.* (1993, p.434) in their sweeping review of the literature on the causes of migration, “in this scheme, individual rational actors decide to migrate because a cost-benefit calculation leads them to expect a positive net return, usually monetary, from movement”. Theories based on these ‘neoclassical’ models do not consider the reflexive and strategic process of the journey itself. According to these models, the journey from the community of origin to the destination and its associated risks (such as the probability of capture by authorities, injuries during desert crossing and exploitation by smugglers) are simply a cost weighed in the initial decision to leave home, not a transformative experience through which migrants learn, improvise new tactics and adapt to challenges (e.g. Gathman 2008, p.1928; Hanson and Spilimbergo, 1999 p.1339; Todaro and Maruszco 1987, p.104). These authors presume that all relevant decisions about the method of travel and hiring of a smuggler occur before the journey, at the same time as the initial choice to leave. They leave no room for the adaptations that migrants undergo after departure and before arrival. In a rational decision framework, the choice

²⁶ For *the* archetypal neoclassical analysis of migration to the United States, see Borjas (1989). In the study of crime, Gary Becker (1968) provides the exemplar of the neoclassical approach.

of migration tactics is understood as a *plan*, based on information received at the outset of the journey. The informational context for these decisions is too frequently assumed, not explored.

For example, Yuji Tamura (2007, cited in Tamura 2010) considers the impact of policing on whether smugglers exploit their clients under conditions of both perfect information and asymmetrical information. However, Tamura's model assumes that once the smuggler has been hired, the client remains totally passive, submitting to all manner of exploitation and unquestioningly following the direction from the smuggler:

Migrants lose control over the assets they carry with them-their bodies and labor- once the provision of smuggling services is implemented because they are required to obey smugglers in order to achieve a successful border crossing (p.540).

It is, of course, true that migrants are routinely deprived of liberty in these travel arrangements; even when migrants enter voluntary smuggling contracts, as opposed to being trafficked, they may be locked in safe houses, stuffed involuntarily into unsafe secret compartments, and compelled to accept severe sexual, physical and emotional abuse. While migrants must accept the authority of their smuggler and are vulnerable to smuggler predation, they also devise clever survival tactics to deal with smugglers and companions in their travel group. Under extreme conditions, the customers may turn on their smuggler, making threats or declarations to authorities. When injustice is collectively perceived, migrants within the travel group may conspire against their smuggler. While migrant agency is severely constrained after the contract is negotiated, first payment made or travel underway, migrants are resourceful. Scholars should treat how migrants receive new information, find opportunities for resourcefulness or adapt to overcome adversity along the route as an open empirical question.

The ‘neoclassical’ research cited here includes diverse models of why people leave, whether they hire smugglers and whether they suffer abuse during the journey. However, all the models share the assumption that these decisions are bundled once at the outset of the journey within a single cost-benefit calculation. And much of this literature derives decision frameworks exclusively from the experience of Mexican migrants. A notable exception is Guido Friebel and Sergei Guriev (2012, p.16), who point out that the short-distance migration journeys typified by the Mexican case probably have different informational resources than long distance journeys. Not coincidentally, they also observe that migration researchers have better informational resources for studying the Mexican case (p.16). While Friebel and Guriev (2012, p.13) argue for a richer understanding of “the respective specificities of home and host countries” to inform models of smuggling markets, they continue to overlook the importance of transit state context. Perhaps this failure to see transit countries as an important influence on smuggling markets is a residue of the nearly hegemonic focus on Mexico-US migration, where one border represents the primary obstacle. Even in studies of the exploitation and violence against migrants that occurs en route, the route itself and decisions made along it are ignored.

Studies of migrant social capital and interpersonal trust networks improve upon these oversimplified neoclassical decision models by tracing information flows and incorporating social context into our understanding of these migration decisions. While Tamura’s (2007; 2010) neoclassical model does not incorporate iterative interactions between the client and smuggler over multiple journeys or the potential for reputation effects, social capital scholars argue that “the ‘decision’ to migrate...is best characterized

not as a discrete decision by an individual but rather as a social process....” (Kyle 2000 p.197). Over time, the development of transnational interpersonal ties lowers the costs and risks of migration and produce path dependency in migratory flows, despite intensified policing (Gaytan 2007; Sheridan 2009). There is no doubt that the social capital, conveyed by ‘interpersonal trust networks’, prepares people for their journey, enhancing the chances of survival (Singer and Massey 1998; Menjivar 2000, pgs. 58-76; Spener 2009; Tilly 2007). Bourdieu (1986) defines social capital as

...the aggregate or the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectivity-owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word. These relationships may exist only in the practical state, in material and/or symbolic exchanges which help to maintain them.²⁷

Access to reliable information is one aspect of this social capital, a product of participating in networks based on reciprocity and trust. Since its popularization in the study of human migration by Massey (Massey et al. 1987; Massey et al. 1993), the metaphor of networks has achieved hegemony over migration studies, becoming an indispensable tool for thinking about the path dependence of migration flows (e.g. Kyle 2000; Tilly 2007). The concept of interpersonal trust networks is experiencing a similar popularity in the study of criminal activity, where networks based on kinship help mitigate the absence of the state in the enforcement of contracts and discourages

²⁷ Robert Putnam (1993, p.167) similarly defines social capital: “features of social organization, such as trust, norms and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions”. In turn, he cites Coleman (1990). I chose the definition by Bourdieu to emphasize the fact that *ongoing* exchanges, whether material or symbolic, are central to the persistence of networked relationships.

defection to the state (e.g. Kenney 2009; Mcillwain 2000).²⁸ Similarly, Avner Greif (2006) discusses the role of kinship and social networks in medieval trade. This research goes a long way toward explaining how each individual's decisions alter the pay-offs for the future choices of kin and community members, and it highlights the durability of migration and other unauthorized activities overtime. It points to the potential for a reputation mechanism to solve the problem of private order in the smuggling market (Spener 2009; Kyle and Scarcelli 2009). Indeed, in interviews, I found that migrants' family networks play an important role in the provision of financial resources for the journey, and ultimately, migrant safety during unauthorized travel.

However, the social capital critique of neoclassical models also overlooks the central importance of the journey itself as a major source of the dynamism of migratory flows when policing and violence escalates. Conventional approaches to understanding migration, whether neoclassical or sociological, tend to assume that people cross the border mechanically and somewhat predictability, with an itinerary neatly planned in advance. They do not fully consider the possibility that the migrants learn and adapt while moving within an ever-changing flow. To the extent that these scholars have considered learning, they have used the lens of human capital to measure its impact on future journeys, rather than examine sources of creativity and adaptation en route (e.g. Singer and Massey 1998).

In summary, the conventional approach to understanding the choice of migration tactics focuses almost exclusively on decisions made in the communities of origin and

²⁸ For an introduction to the use of network analysis as a *method* for understanding organized crime, rather than the conceptual use of networks more generally, see Goldsmith and Lysaght's (2011) workshop.

destination. In neoclassical decision models, information about the dangers of the journey is treated as a given; people calculate and consider the risks relative to the benefits in advance of the adventure. Knowledge is assumed, rather than explained and a focus on pre-departure decisions obscures the learning process along the route. In social capital models of migration decisions, information about the dangers of the journey accumulates through reciprocal relationships among family or community members. The assumption is that information about past journeys can be relayed to the home community before it becomes obsolete. In this view, knowledge is a product of social capital; it is a thing that can be possessed, hoarded and exchanged without losing its value over time. Despite their utility for explaining the durability of informal institutions, the concepts of social capital and interpersonal trust networks do not fully explain the flexibility of these practices under conditions of violent suppression. In reality, networks emerge and disappear in a dynamic process that unfolds along the migratory route. Social capital and interpersonal trust networks play an important role in rational migration decisions, but they must be augmented with other sources of information that surface only during the journey.

The journey can be transformative for both individuals and society. The route provides a physical and social infrastructure for the acquisition of information after departure. As individuals practice migration, they come into physical contact with new situations and update their tactics accordingly. Along the route, migrants also observe and mimic tactics in real time, experiment with new tactics, talk with strangers, confront specific situations requiring immediate responses, and learn how to use new technology to communicate with people at other points in the route (such as *Facebook*). Without

ongoing imagination and improvisation, however, crowds become herds. For all these reasons, unauthorized migration is a continuous learning process. As Taylor (2004, p.25) says, “If the understanding makes the practice possible, it is also true that it is the practice that largely carries the understanding.” Migrants often learn the newest adaptations and innovations as they move across terrain, not when planning that movement. And as they move, they transform that social and material terrain.

Informing Routes

Unauthorized routes become what Abraham and van Schendel (2005) call an ‘underground’ of “legally banned but socially sanctioned and protected” practice where information mediates entry (p.22): “One may see these spaces but not know how to enter them. Hence, privileged information becomes a primary distributional resource to access this space....” There are two primary ways of accessing this social space during the journey: ‘practiced terrain’ and ‘practiced crowds’. These are the physical and social institutions of the route, constituted by the practices of movement. As they travel, migrants shape places, leaving traces of their passage behind in physical artifacts, both intentionally and unintentionally. These places become gathering points, where crowds engage in migration practice and proximity provides vital information.

First, a ‘practiced terrain’ includes the places and objects molded by routine social activity. Places and things form part of the material culture of sustained human movement. As ‘knowledge-based artifacts’ that emerge when migratory routines become fixed, they are the *physical* institutions of transit. In his study of long-distance trade, a process bearing many similarities to the transnational migratory route, Greif (2006, p.134) follows Friedrich von Hayek (1973; 1976) by explaining how “institutionalized

rules aggregate private information and knowledge and distribute it in compressed form”. Similar to social rules, the material evidence of practice is a compressed form of knowledge: it is the physical manifestation of patterned migration.

Practices of movement shape tangible objects both deliberately and accidentally, conveying information to migrants as they encounter these physical remnants en route. Of course, these knowledge-based artifacts also unintentionally transmit information to would-be predators of migrants, such as bandits and police. By codifying sustained practices for all to see and generating an expectation of repetition, these knowledge-based artifacts identify points of vulnerability for unauthorized migrants.

In this case, unintended knowledge-based artifacts include train tracks and footpaths, as terrain reconfigures to sustained movement thereby orienting travelers. Many migrants leave home without financial resources or accurate geographic orientations, knowing only that they must arrive at a train yard to find the route north and then move along with the human tide. Now that passenger service has been discontinued, the only people (aside from the conductors) that travel the Mexican trains are unauthorized; every morning in southern Mexico, train yards and the rooftops of trains fill with hundreds of Central Americans. In this manner, migrants use the train tracks, artifacts of the legally sanctioned movement of commodities, as a compass needle for unauthorized movement; and they co-opt the train yards, key sites in the legal economy, as a platform for unauthorized movement north. As explained by a Salvadoran man who was too poor to hire a paid guide to help him cross Mexico, “The train is the guide. You just follow the tracks and they get you there” (El Salvador, 4/9/10). Similarly, footpaths (exclusively used for unauthorized movement) emerge around migration checkpoints, to and from

shelters and train yards, and across borders. Once formed, these footpaths direct movement to these locations.

For this reason, movement in the legal and illegal economies is often symbiotic. At a macroeconomic level, Peter Andreas (1995, p.75) traces the relationship between free market policy and the growth of the illegal economy in Latin America with a warning that “legal and illegal markets are often inextricably intertwined”. At a micro level, Andreas (1996, p.58; 2003, p.96) notes the tendency for legal traffic to facilitate illegal traffic by camouflaging clandestine movements and complicating the capacity of the state to filter unwanted trade. He notes how the physical infrastructure of border crossings and roads can be harnessed by both legal and illegal traffic. In a similar vein, Eric Tagliocozzo (2000, p.5) describes how busy urban environments provide camouflage for illegal transactions. However, legal economic practices do not just conceal information from police; they provide information to participants in illegal activity. In this case, migrants orient themselves to the legal traffic through the tracks and highways as a guide from the periphery to the economic core. They may also collect information about smuggling services through the networks forged while a customer or worker in legal economic activities. Legal economic practices contribute to an *informational* infrastructure that may also be harnessed for unauthorized movements through a process of re-imagination and improvisation.

Intentional knowledge-based artifacts include efforts by both organizations and migrants to convey knowledge to the people passing behind them. Migrants sometimes leave notes with addresses on the walls of shelters. Migrant artists paint elaborate murals about the experience of migration. Family members post flyers with the photos of

missing migrants. Gang members mark territory with graffiti and their bodies with tattoos. Kidnappers and gangs publicize their brutality by mutilating and dumping human bodies. Government agencies post wanted signs and propaganda. Human rights agencies and organizations make maps and print brochures describing the dangers, migrants' legal rights and safety precautions. However, like unintended artifacts and the places where migrants congregate, these messages can cut two ways, both transmitting vital information for the security of migrants and exposing migrants to harm by publicizing the nature of migration practices to potential predators. And as migrants are fully aware, these messages may also become instruments of misinformation.

Clandestine places along the route also convey information by facilitating social encounters. Through the sustained practice of movement over terrain, key places emerge along the route and provide an excellent environment for these social interactions to occur, with both positive and negative consequences for migrant vulnerability to violence in transit: shelters, train yards, overlooks with a view of the border, brothels, flophouses, and cantinas. Clandestine places for information exchange along the route are "hidden but known"; they consist of space routinely and knowingly used for purposes outside the law (Coutin 2005, p.198). Thus, the physical architecture of practice channels migrants into crowds, which encourages social encounters among strangers.

These places become increasingly visible to a variety of actors, because they persist over time, thereby generating both security and vulnerability for migrants. They are places where information surfaces in an informational desert, and like oases, they are necessary for the migrants' survival. But they attract predators too. As visibility increases, these places become sites of a struggle over information. Migrants, state

authorities with a variety of official agendas (ranging from public health to law enforcement), kidnappers, smugglers, corrupt authorities, humanitarian workers, activists, religious leaders, family members of missing persons, potential employers, journalists and academics vie for access to the underground at these locations.²⁹ They are places with perpetual rumors about the presence of informants, and migrants devise tactics for maintaining secrecy. Eventually, the very persistence of these sites eventually makes migrants too weary of unwanted attention to visit them, and the sites suffer periodic purges or decline into the ruins of a former trade route.

Second, the *practiced* crowd that gathers in and around these places transmits information through both observational and social learning (Bikhchandani, Hirshleifer and Welch 1998, p.153): what James Surowiecki (2004) popularly calls the “wisdom of crowds”. In observational learning, the mere presence or movement in a crowd can trigger an information cascade.³⁰ Within the crowd, social learning also happens. Information diffuses among strangers by word-of-mouth, and socialization occurs through both verbal and visual cues. While serendipity plays a role in all human affairs, casual meetings in these crowds are something more than a random encounter; through practice, opportunities for these exchanges are shaped by their location within all three landscapes: material, socio-economic and the socio-psychological. These roving crowds constitute the social practice of human movement. This notion of a practiced crowd

²⁹ Not coincidentally, these are many of the places I visited during fieldwork.

³⁰ An information cascade is when “individuals rapidly converge on one action on the basis of some but very little information...when it is optimal for an individual, having observed the actions of those ahead of him, to follow the behavior of the preceding individual without regard to his own information” (Bikhchandani, Hirschleifer and Welch 1992, p.994).

draws on the concept of 'communities of practice' (Wenger 1998). In his discussion of transnational communities of practice, Emanuel Adler (2008, p.196) explains that:

The vanguards or 'carriers' of social structures across functional and geographical boundaries are not necessarily states or societal networks, but 'communities of practice' - like-minded groups of practitioners who are informally as well as contextually bound by a shared interest in learning and applying a common practice.

Likewise, migrants come together, informally bound by a shared interest in learning and applying migration practice. They follow the crowd in search of information, and sometimes, the physical and emotional security found in numbers. Sometimes the agreement to travel as a collective is explicit, as people break into teams at key places along the route. At other times, people just happen to be moving in the same direction, in the same way.

These crowds do not necessarily lead to a sense of 'community'. Depending on the specific circumstances and social practices of the crowd, socialization within it may lead to suspicion and animosity, rather than trust, reciprocity and obligation. Most often, crowds are a situational mix of community and hostility. In other words, practiced crowds do not necessarily follow the process outlined by Adler (2008) to become transnational 'communities of practice' with institutionalized moral expectations. But they may. Along the route, some travel groups dissipate after a short time together, whether consciously fleeing danger or simply wandering their separate ways. Other groups develop a sense of solidarity through shared emotional experiences in the practice of movement; by learning how to migrate within the context of a social group, they may reimagine their collective identity as migrants (e.g. Frank-Vitale 2010). Because of their

informational value, kidnappers and smugglers (and it is sometimes rumored, undercover police) often infiltrate these crowds and communities.

Importantly, community is not always a necessary context for the exchange of information, even in dangerous situations. In the anonymity of a crowd, there is little or no expectation of repeated interaction or reciprocity. These social moments do not meet Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) requirement that "the reproduction of social capital presupposes an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed". Nevertheless, within an anonymous crowd in motion, migrants convey and process vital information, and they engage in simple forms of mimicry. Casual meetings of strangers are invaluable to the people involved.

A variety of face-to-face encounters occur in these places: warnings, small talk, storytelling, sex, bragging, commiserating, joking, singing, evangelizing, speculating, complaining, interviews, begging, selling and trading. Sometimes people intentionally transmit information to strangers and, at other times, the information exchanged is accidental to other social purposes. Misunderstandings and misinformation (i.e. intentionally conveyed misunderstandings) are common. Motives for sharing information range widely, from boredom to economic self-interest. Sometimes there is only the mutual need for information. At other times, there is neither a clear instrumental nor altruistic motive to share information. People often carry on a conversation for their own entertainment or comfort. Sometimes people overhear information conveyed to others; eavesdropping is very important. Finally, sometimes the information exchanged has very little to do with what is actually said, let alone what was intended (Goffman 1959).

Speech is certainly not the only form of communication; people also take in scenes and strangers with their eyes.

People watch and mimic strangers along the route. If any mental state can be said to characterize a clever person in an uncertain situation, it is watchfulness. They look for uncoordinated collective actions, like the sudden dispersion of the crowd in response to danger, rapid movement to the train yard that indicates an impending departure, or the presence of a large group of customers waiting to depart with a guide signaling good reputation.³¹ And migrants watch other migrants, looking for ideas and tactics that might help move along the route.

Finally, migrants also observe other migrants in order to evaluate their intentions. Membership in “imagined worlds” (Appadurai 1996, p.33), such as those constituted by nationality, religion, street gangs, class, and gender, provide interpretive frames for judging strangers. These memberships can be inscribed on the body, as well as verbally expressed. And information about them is an invaluable asset en route. These imagined categories define possible roles that people might perform, and thus the ways that other migrants might pose threats, offer assistance or themselves be vulnerable or valuable to criminals.

The ability to conceal membership can also be invaluable. For example, Central Americans watch and mimic Mexicans living along the route. Incentives for such mimicry are high because the ability to pass as a Mexican citizen provides greater safety from state authorities and criminal predators. Central American migrants conscientiously

³¹ All three of these examples could be characterized as ‘information cascades’. Fearful, uncertain and sudden situations seem to be most likely to trigger these reactions along the route. The use of a crowd to signal reputation of a smuggler mirrors the oft-cited example of a crowd in front of a restaurant indicating the best food (e.g. Surowieki 2004, p.53).

learn to dress and speak like Mexicans as a form of camouflage. Other mimicry occurs unconsciously, as new expressions, accents and mannerisms become habitual adaptations through interaction with Mexicans along the route. In so far that they are advantageous, such adaptations may become a form of ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu 1986). And the reverse is also true; some Mexicans unwittingly take on the cultural tells of Central Americans. Indeed, urban Central American street culture, generally associated with the spread of immigrant gangs from Los Angeles back to El Salvador in the 1990s, has already become a hybridized panoply of transnational urban practices, speech patterns and styles of self-presentation (Zilberg 2004; 2011). These, too, are now common among all nationalities along the migrant route.³² On the one hand, this cross-cultural exchange can be a distinct disadvantage for Mexicans because it enhances the likelihood of wrongful deportation and other abuse. Some Mexican people along the route traversed by Central Americans are, for all purposes, undocumented in their own country; many people lack papers and some Mexican squatter settlements along the train tracks fall into ambiguous legal status. Central American cultural cues can be a dangerous asset for these already marginalized Mexican citizens. On the other hand, such cues may be an everyday advantage by generating a more permanent community of practice, ultimately bringing them culturally closer to the people that inhabit their everyday world.

³² By using descriptors “Mexican” and “Central American”, I am not making claims about national authenticity. While in El Salvador, I frequently heard complaints from older people about how Salvadoran youths adopted these styles and practices in the United States and then brought it with them back to El Salvador, where they spread rapidly. Some of these street critics, who view the cultural change as an external threat, called it a Mexicanization of the youth, and others called it an Americanization. Given the long history of regional human, economic and cultural mobility, I would argue that there is no ‘authentic’ Central American, Mexican or American practice. I use these national markers, because participants use them and the people who transgress national categories either suffer real material penalties or gain real material advantages.

Ironically, the increased difficulty of entering and staying in the United States has created a fertile social field for ‘communities of practice’ along the routes. With so many people making repeated attempts to enter the United States, unauthorized travelers may encounter each other several times. Aggressive immigration policing and deportation policies in the United States has encouraged the emergence of permanent bands of Central American migrants who rove the routes through Mexico. Some migrants have simply adopted transit as a lifestyle. Unwilling or unable to return to the poverty and criminal violence they left behind, but equally unable to make a home in the United States, these young men roam the railways like hobos.³³ Indeed, migrants who wander aimlessly across Mexico are sometimes recruited into street gangs and/or as guides in smuggling networks (and/or more sinister kidnapping networks) working the Mexican segment of the route. In this manner, aggressive immigration policing and deportation policies in the United States generates a transnational class of vagabonds, and with it, a more durable ‘community of practice’ with links to professional smuggling networks. Hang out in any migrant shelter or train yard along the route for a time, and you will begin to recognize their faces in the crowd.

The familiarity that perpetual migration produces cuts two ways for these route-dwellers. On the one hand, they benefit from their ties to settled Mexican citizens, transnational street gangs and professional smuggling networks. On the other hand, their face becomes increasingly recognizable to others along the route, making them a potential target for criminals or authorities. As they become recognizable, they lose their capacity to claim that they are ‘legitimate’ migrants searching for a better life. As a

³³ This class of wanderers seems to be almost all male, with some exceptions.

consequence, Church-run shelters, for example, may deny them assistance because they suspect that they are a guide or gang member. In many situations during the journey, it is best to pass incognito and, thus, not to become a potential source of information for others. In the strategic context of unauthorized migration, any patterned behavior, including participation in transnational communities, can be dangerous because it increases visibility.

Therein lies the central problem of information along the route. Information becomes most accessible, most visible and most 'legible', where practice becomes institutionalized in the form of social rules and reputations that bind communities or in the form of the material artifacts that define place. James Scott (1999, p.183) warns that "legibility is a condition of manipulation" by the state. Indeed, the visibility and potential legibility of information often diminishes its utility for migrants, who must respond to a very dynamic and violent strategic environment. Patterned behavior generates vulnerability, rather than safety. In the context of criminal violence and immigration enforcement, a path or strategy repeated one too many times results in disaster. Therefore, information alone is not enough to safely navigate conditions of extreme uncertainty and insecurity.

Imagining and Improvising Routes

The ultimate impact of information is determined by how it is used by migrants and their foes, not simply whether the information exists. For instance, the utility of information largely depends upon migrants' capacity to exploit it in novel ways. In turn, this novelty can only be imagined and improvised. To be sure, migrants' behavior exhibits a lucid rationality as they attempt to evade violence, but this rationality can only be deployed as practice. Messages written into a material and social landscape constituted

by practice convey informational cues to migrants during the journey. With information obtained as they move along the route, migrants thus imagine and improvise new paths forward.

As migrants approach unfamiliar people and situations or as they question the motives of people they once trusted, the sense of uncertainty deepens. Jens Beckert (2011) notes the tendency to rely on imagination to make decisions under conditions of uncertainty; building on the work of Wolfgang Iser (1993) and John Searle (1975), he defines *fictions* as “images of some future state of the world or course of events which are cognitively accessible in the present through mental representation” to explain rational decision-making in a context of uncertainty (Beckert 2011, p.1).³⁴ Fictions represent specific imaginings that inform future expectations (p.7). Indeed, rational decision-making always requires these story-like expectations about the future, which are not formed mechanistically, but drawn from the vast creative and symbolic reservoir of the human mind. Without expectations, any purposeful action (let alone rational action) would be impossible (p.6). The images and narratives that inhabit the imaginary come from religion, popular media and word-of-mouth, but the imaginary does not become a repository of *useful* fictions until people move along the route and confront specific situations. These fictions, with their capacity to envision a new and different future than the present, explain human creativity.³⁵

³⁴ The term ‘fiction’ is not meant to imply that these imaginings are false. Beckert (2011, p.5-7) goes on to explain that fictions could be true. They are narratives about what might happen in the future, and under conditions of uncertainty, we must act upon them *as if* they are true.

³⁵ Cornelius Castoriadis (1975; 1994) emphasizes the emancipatory potential of imagination in politics. Building on that work, Beckert (2011, p.9) underscores its potential for explaining dynamism in the global economy.

Paradoxically, the imaginary seems to spawn reified ‘common sense’ as much as creativity. To return to Taylor’s (2004, p.26) description of the social imaginary, it is “the implicit grasp of social space”.³⁶ The nature of this imaginary is clarified when contrasted to information. Information triggers moments of inspiration. The imaginary is the *structuring* that presorts possibilities without strictly determining them. As explained by Taylor (2004, p.25), however, the imaginary is also unstructured. It delimits without being limited itself. It defines without being definite. At first, an ‘unstructured structuring’ may seem like an oxymoron, but the imaginary is not organized in a linear manner; it is abstract, rooted only in practice and consecrated by imagery and emotion. It prefigures reason. It is a fluid *ordering*, not an order fully amenable to conscious comprehension. Indeed, the imaginary is largely unconscious and unthinking, only revealing itself in fragments and generating connections “not by conscious choice or deliberate selection, but by a mechanism over which we do not exercise deliberate control” (Hayek 1973, p.30). We may put ourselves into a place or position that creates opportunity for imagination, but creativity (in the form of an exciting recombination of fragments of the imaginary) rarely happens on cue. The imaginary posits purpose, but cannot be directed to serve one without a muse. As we will see, the imaginary is the cognitive companion of practice; practice provides the imagination with a continuous form of inspiration. And as maps drawn by migrants will illustrate in Chapter 5: *Mapping Routes*, the imaginary provides a normative and geographic orientation to migration, but

³⁶ As such, the imaginary the available content from which the imagination draws; it is the “background knowledge” (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Searle 1995), the “doxa” (Bourdieu 1980), the “abstract knowledge” (Hayek 1973, p.30), the “logic of practicality” (Pouliot 2010); the “tacit knowledge” (Iser 1993; Polanyi 1983 [1966]), or at least, it is a close approximation of these many related concepts.

without a predictable grid.³⁷ Its non-linearity and tendency to re-compose images and ideas in unanticipated ways generates the appearance of intuition. In Stephen Greenblatt's (2010b, p.76) words:

...the imagination works through metaphor, personification, magical animation; that is, it works by projecting voices, inventing geneologies, transporting and knitting heterogenous elements together.

First social contacts between strangers are negotiated within this mosaic of imagination. In this vein, Erving Goffman provides what is perhaps the most complete sociological theory of the practice of face-to-face interaction. He reminds us that, in the absence of full information about another individual, we tend to use "cues, tests, hints, expressive gestures, status symbols, etc- as predictive devices" (1959, p.249). Goffman (1959) famously argues that each social meeting requires a performance to make the situation recognizable to its participants, and, in fact, to make the participants recognizable to themselves. Each performance requires a social role or rule re-enacted through a *script*, the repetition of which gives form to a coherent sense of self despite an individuals' competing identities. Jean-Paul Sartre (1984 [1943], p.101-103) reminds us of the imaginative element of these 'bad faith' performances, the self-deceiving "dances" of everyday life that mollify the conscience into believing our actions are determined when other possibilities actually exist (Goffman 1959, p.75-76); through the performance of scripts, migrants, kidnappers, smugglers and border patrol agents may even become convinced that certain situations are inevitable or tolerable. The intelligibility of these

³⁷ Taylor (2004, p.24) agrees: "Such understanding is both factual and normative; that is, we have a sense of how things usually go, but this is interwoven with an idea of how they out to go, of what missteps would invalidate the practice".

scripts and their cues to all parties in a social meeting is not guaranteed. A mismatch may occur, whether by honest misunderstanding or fraud.

These roles and scripts originally come from a social imaginary that migrants bring from sending communities and are integrated into the transnational routes through stories of perpetual departures, returns, and absences, as well as long-distance symbolic and economic transactions, such as remittance flows and popular media.³⁸ Sometimes life imitates art. Before Central Americans leave their birthplace, they are inundated by a deluge of movies, songs, internet sites, television programs, radio reports and newspaper articles about the journey. For example, films like *El Norte* (The North) (1983), *Tres Veces Mojado* (Three Times a Wetback) (1989), *La Misma Luna* (The Same Moon) (2007) and *Sin Nombre* (Without a Name) (2009) have become cult classics. Spanish-language television news programs and Central American newspapers now publish reports of abuse of migrants almost daily.³⁹ The U.S. border patrol (USBP) sponsored a public relations campaign in Mexico and Central America that uses these mediums to raise awareness of the dangers of migration.⁴⁰ Lynnaire Sheridan (2009) analyzes print and music representations of the U.S.-Mexico border crossing and argues that these mass-

³⁸ Arjun Appadurai (1996) calls this the 'mediascape'.

³⁹ Central American migrants with whom I spoke often had a jaded view of information received through newspapers, and understandably so, given the politicized history of journalism in Central America (Rockwell and Janus 2003). However, even when approached with skepticism, media stories come to inhabit the social imaginary.

⁴⁰ In 1997, the USBP launched its first media campaign to raise awareness of the dangers of illegal border crossing among potential migrants in Mexico. In 2004, the Border Safety Initiative of the USBP launched 'No Mas Cruces en la Frontera' through Elevation, a private advertising agency. Critics complain that the materials provide little transparency about their sponsorship (Ceresole 2009; LeBron 2009; Marosi 2005; Surdin 2009). An official website highlights stories of suffering and death: <http://www.nomascruces.org>. The campaign first targeted potential Mexican migrants, but was extended to Central America in 2010. It began with a focus on desert dangers, primarily targeted at male migrants, but now includes warnings about human trafficking targeted at female migrants. For examples of materials, see the PR firm website at: <http://elevationpr.com/>.

produced cultural expressions influence risk perceptions of migrants before they begin their journey. Since the same Spanish-language songs, movies and television programs often air in Central America, we should expect them to influence a transnational social imaginary across the Americas. And, of course, the book of singular great importance for the transnational social imaginary of Central American migrants is the Bible. Narratives from these sources form archetypes of people, places and things that migrants come to expect to encounter along the route.

Furthermore, as they navigate the terrain of the route, migrants listen intently to stories about the journey of others. In the fleeting communities of practice that converge for short distances along the route, migrants share and receive information by way of campfire stories, anecdotes, songs, jokes, rumors, sermons, and testimonies. These narratives circulate among migrants, as well as among the many other people along the route: bandits, kidnappers, police, townspeople, smugglers, activists, journalists and academics. Migrants recognize that these stories represent a mishmash of truth and untruth as people err, exaggerate, bluff, boast, entertain and just plain lie. But in a dangerous and uncertain context, no information can be entirely dismissed. People listen most intently to tales about events that occurred in their immediate surroundings or what might lie just ahead. But even when stories are fantastic, new images and ideas seep into the imaginary. Memories of these images and ideas may surface again during the process of improvisation.

In this way, the route becomes a 'place' in the social imaginary through the stories told before, during and after the journey. And people become their performances, as they imagine themselves into the various worlds along the route. Within these 'imagined

worlds' (Appadurai 1996, p.33), migrants may perform a variety of competing and complimentary social roles with varying degrees of sincerity: migrant, smuggler, friend, lover, wife, mother, gang member, informant, activist. The possibilities for scripts are legion. Dynamic conditions and violence along the route promote constant revision, giving rise to hybrid roles, imaginaries and communities.

Jens Beckert (2011, p.5) juxtaposes script following and imagination as two ideal types of decision-making, but I emphasize how neither pure script nor pure innovation can be fully realized. Imagination occurs as scripts meet new and unknown realities. Script following is not a separate mode of decision-making associated with a determined outcome, but part of the real world process of reimagining. Scripts amenable to constant experimentation and ruthless rewrites do not serve as social macrostructures; rather, they are the basis for improvisation. The improvisation that occurs under conditions of uncertainty is not pure innovation, but a tinkering with the existing symbolic and material resources at hand. Indeed, these scripts guide tentative social interactions along the route the way a *theme* might guide a stand-up comedian confronted with hecklers or a *mood* might guide a jazz musician performing in a new ensemble.⁴¹ Social scripts, employed loosely and altered to fit the particular scenario of the moment, aid the self-presentation, interpretation and organization of face-to-face social interactions under conditions of uncertainty.

Thus, the individual imagination has both a liberating and constraining nature. On the one hand, as noted by Beckert (2011, p.9), imaginative interpretations of a situation produce dynamism and “indeterminancy”, as people rethink and see differently. On the

⁴¹ The metaphor of the jazz musician is borrowed from Curtis (1991, p.xviii) and Yanow (2001, p.58).

other hand, imaginative interpretations are also overdetermined, produced at the juncture of a seemingly infinite variety of memories, images, and stories. Like the dreamscapes that unfold unpredictably during a night's sleep, the imagination sometimes reconstructs information in idiosyncratic ways, moving it from one context into another seemingly at random in such a way that, when reassembled, it leads to novel insights. During the movement of people, the imaginary becomes transnational (Appadurai 1996) as people from many cultural backgrounds meet and exchange habits, ideas, and tall tales. And as they confront violence together, they share emotional experiences. The imaginative potential of the migrant redoubles by living in this clandestine crossroads of cultures; but this creativity can only be activated in practice.

To better understand how the imagination becomes a useful fiction, and hence its janus-faced quality of innovation and reproduction, we must understand the process of movement: we must understand improvisation.⁴² Stephen Greenblatt (2005 [1980], p.165) defines improvisation as “the ability both to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one’s own scenario....the opportunistic grasp of that which seems fixed and established”.⁴³ Improvisation depends on available informational, social and material resources to meet pressing needs in new ways. In his critique of the

⁴² Taylor (2004, italics mine p. 29) also recognizes the relationship between improvisation and change in the social imaginary: “For the most part, people take up, *improvise*, or are inducted into new practices. These are made sense of by the new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory; this outlook is the context that gives sense to the practices. Hence the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn’t before. It begins to define the contours of their world and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things too obvious to mention”.

⁴³ Unlike my treatment of the concept here, Greenblatt (2005) downplays the “spur-of-the-moment quality of improvisation”, because “the impromptu character of an improvisation is itself often a calculated mask, the product of careful preparation”. Without denying that some actors (particularly smugglers) have an incentive for “faking” the need to improvise, I stress this impromptu character of improvisation under conditions of uncertainty.

conflation of rationality with planning, David Ames Curtis (1991, p.xviii) looks to the improvisatory nature of jazz music as an exemplar of this character of living:

One need not write out all one's notes in advance, or even "plan" them all, as evidence precisely by jazz "improvisation". But playing *before* this planning process is "complete" is not lack of "foresight".

Improvisation is not a lack of rules, maps, scripts or other informational resources. It is not the absence of preparation (Yanow 2001, p.59; 2009, p.293). Instead, it is an irreverent attitude to those resources, co-opting whatever symbolic or material tools might be at hand without respecting their origin or purpose. Curtis (1991, p.xx) further argues that the development of the *improvisational* jazz genre in America, a self-consciously migratory society, is no coincidence; he calls it a fundamentally "mulatto" musical form, because black Americans "adopted, reworked, and fashioned anew and in particular ways the instruments, practices, and rules of a different, dominant culture while changing that culture in the process".

To paraphrase Curtis, Central American migrants adopt, rework, and fashion anew the instruments, practices and customs of Mexican and U.S. culture, while changing that culture in the process. Confronted with sexual violence, female migrants and female smugglers use feminine wiles and patriarchal norms to overstep traditional roles (as well as immigration law), altering gender in the process. In a shift that some might call "corruption", migrants and smugglers adopt, rework and fashion anew the instruments, practices and rules of the state and legal economy. Such is the handiwork of improvisation. Similarly, David Spener (2010) argues that Mexican migrants engage in a form of 'rasquache' while crossing the border. Chicano artist Ybarra-Frausto (1991, p. 156) explains the origins of the 'rasquachismo' art form:

In an environment always on the edge of coming apart (the car, the job, the toilet), things are held together with spit, grit, and *movidas*. *Movidas* are the coping strategies you use to gain time, to make options, to retain hope. *Rasquachismo* is a compendium of all the *movidas* deployed in immediate, day-to-day living. Resilience and resourcefulness spring from making do with what is at hand (*hacer rendir las costas*) (quoted in Spener 2010, p.15).

Spener (2010) mistakes this sensibility as a distinctly Mexican and Chicano/a cultural form. However, improvisation permeates all migrations. All migrants learn the art of making do. Appadurai (1996, p.6) correctly points out that contemporary diasporas “move the glacial force of the habitus into the quickened beat of improvisation for large groups of people”. Nonetheless, improvisation characterizes all human life, most often and most poignantly at the margins. The homes of the poorest people in Latin America, whether urban or rural, are improvised structures of recycled materials: discarded tin, tires, cardboard, mud, extension cords that tap ‘borrowed’ sources of electricity, bits of string, fallen tree branches and trash bags.⁴⁴ Their livelihoods must be patched together in similar ways, with odd jobs and hustle. Indeed, the migratory journey is part of a larger improvisation of living that begins at home, long before the decision to move has been made; the hardship that necessitates this constant improvisation begins at home. As explained by a Salvadoran campesino who had returned to his village after a long experience abroad, “To be a migrant is to be exploited...migrants are migrants, whether they move or not” (12/7/09). In this sense, the journey represents a continuation of a perceived injustice. It also represents a continuation of improvisational tactics for coping with physical insecurity, economic marginalization and injustice.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ On the development of a landscape of squatter communities and slums to accommodate the unplanned life that takes place within planned cities, see James Scott (1998, p.103-146).

⁴⁵ In the words of pianist Michael Jones (2001, p.63), improvisation is “not only a technique or skill but also a foundation for living and leading in a rapidly changing world”.

During the journey, people often usefully employ both things and ideas in a manner that the thing's creator or author never intended. Empty plastic bottles are fashioned onto a makeshift raft or a life-vest. A mango becomes a hiding place for money. A national anthem or national holiday becomes an impromptu citizenship test at a migration checkpoint. An ambulance hides contraband. A tattoo identifies the nationality of a dead body for the government bureaucrats who must arrange its shipment home to Central America.

Conscious *planning* cannot account for these improvised adaptations (Scott 1998), and it is certainly not adequate preparation for the migrant trail. People cannot plan their routes, before they confront and seek to evade a proactive state and bandits. As a rural Salvadoran community leader explained, and many migrants echoed in interviews, “no-one is ever prepared” for the unknowns that wait along the route (1/5/10); nobody knows exactly what the journey will entail before they begin, because “every trip is different”. To hold stubbornly to a route chosen before the journey would, in a context of rapidly changing patterns of violence, be suicide. In this context of obvious but unpredictable danger, to mindlessly follow established habits of travel would lead migrants to their destruction, like lemmings over a cliff.⁴⁶ However, the process is not purely spontaneous either. Unauthorized migrants do not summon their tactics from thin air, but instead

⁴⁶ Human migration is fundamentally a social practice, and while it draws on forms of tacit knowledge, it is not *instinctual*. The seasonal migrations of most species follow a direct and predictable path, and when obstacles (such as hazardous roads) emerge along this path, most species do not deviate from the established migratory route. Thus, migratory species are prone to extinction when disturbances occur along the routes. Humans, not surprisingly, are an exception in the animal kingdom; the social process of migration takes people to unexpected places along a winding and wandering course to evade obstacles to our movement. Mobile knowledge is more adaptable than instinct. Hayek (1973, p.31) also warns against the misconception that people behave in a manner that is either ‘instinctive’ or ‘intuitive’. It only appears intuitive.

improvise through a reflexive reinterpretation of themselves and their knowledge of the route in specific social and strategic contexts. They must be both flexible and determined to survive the possibility of detentions, deportation, robbery, rape or even death. Thus, violence structures migration practice, such that the routes exist *because of* violence not simply *despite* it.

The individual repetition of social routines also drives their transformation (Bourdieu 1980, p.57).⁴⁷ The repetition of practice in a changing environment and the cross-fertilization of practices encourages subtle forms of *recycled* creativity, a patchwork of existing practice reassembled in novel ways, which ironically stabilizes the routes and the unquestioned viability of migration as a life strategy. In this context, practice both reifies and liberates the social imagination, giving the social imagination its dual character: sometimes blinding us to the obvious and at other times generating ingenuity when confronted with seemingly intractable puzzles.⁴⁸ It is both the source of unwavering faith and creative questioning of possibility.

Likewise, Michel de Certeau (1984) challenges the dichotomy between the consumption and production of information, pointing to this practice of “bricolage”.

⁴⁷ This idea of a “reiterative power” is also at the heart of Judith Butler’s (1993) concept of performativity in the discursive realm of gender identity. It is the repetition of norms that ironically opens space for reinterpretations and reinventions.

⁴⁸ This duality reminds us that stability and change are not opposites; mobility and constraint reinforce each other in often surprising ways (Greenblatt 2010a). Following Bourdieu, Adler and Pouliot (2011, p.7) incorporate patterned regularities into their definition of the concept of practice, but they also note the potential for practice to bridge the study of change and continuity. Ted Hopf (2010) points out that by ignoring the role of habitual behavior in practice, in favor of normative and instrumental decision making logics, IR constructivists have overemphasized possibilities for change and intentionality. Migrants intend to survive and reach their destination, but actions to achieve these basic material goals come with unintended consequences for them and the unauthorized route. And while they must respond with flexibility to achieve their immediate goals, determined migrants also bring their structured habits of mind with them on their journey.

People do not simply consume new information, passively adding it to an immobile reserve. Nor do they produce new information without reference to an existing social imaginary or habitus. Instead, the knowledge that emerges from improvisational practices is novel but situational, arising through the simultaneous navigation of the physical, socio-economic and socio-psychological terrain (p.81-82). As de Certeau (1984, p.82-86) reiterates, this improvised knowledge is "...a memory, whose attainments are dissociable from the time of their acquisition and bear the marks of its particularities" but derives its utility from its "very capacity to be altered- unmoored, mobile, lacking and fixed position".

Mobile Knowledge

In this manner, an ongoing process of *imagination, information and improvisation* constitute a 'mobile knowledge' of the route.⁴⁹ To elaborate upon the type of knowledge that emerges from bricolage, de Certeau (1984, p.81) cites Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant's pivotal study of the Greek concept of *metis*. Scott (1998, p.311-341), also drawing on this pivotal study by Detienne and Vernant, emphasizes how this knowledge is *local*. Physical terrain matters for the development of clandestine routes and the 'local knowledge' acquired from travelling along them. As Tagliacozzo (2005, p.18) describes in his history of contraband in 19th century Southeast Asia, capricious weather conditions and the varying depth of channels in the Straits of Malacca gave an advantage to homegrown smugglers with intimate knowledge of the terrain.

Emphasizing the resources produced by this experiential knowledge of the local setting,

⁴⁹ Scholars of experiential learning have devised a similar conceptual apparatus to describe the process of knowledge creation. In David Kolb's model (1984), an iterative cycle of experience, reflection and analysis constitutes this creative process. It is not my wish to formalize the process as the study of pedagogy does, but the similarities are clear.

Tagliacozzo notes that three physical terrain features encourage sustained smuggling practices: borders and peripheries, natural choke points, and urban environments (p.5).

These terrain features encourage the development and durability of clandestine routes, even in the age of globalization. In a study of 'clandestine transnational organizations' in contemporary Southeast Asia, Justin V. Hastings (2010, p.5-6) argues against Thomas Friedman's (2006) assertion that 'the world is flat':

In effect, the farther and faster any non-state actor wants to move around the world, the more dependent it becomes on chokepoints....Moreover, the groups' movements are territorially constrained- people moving through mountain passes do not have the option of skipping over several countries as those in planes do.

Building on Murphy (2003), Hastings notes that policy and perceptual space overlay territory generating an "iterative interplay" of ideas, transnational activities, politics and landscape (p.6). In other words, Hastings ultimately emphasizes 'place', not natural (Euclidian) space, when analyzing the flexible tactics of unauthorized non-state actors. Similarly, John Ruggie says (1999, p.235), "space is not given in nature. It is a social construct that people, somehow, invent". The invention of *place*, as opposed to natural space, occurs in the practices that weave together the physical terrain, the socio-economic configuration of the landscape and the social imaginary. Human mobility is central to this iterative interplay.

'Mobile knowledge' encompasses both the movement of travelers and the migration of local knowledge that accompanies them. This knowledge is neither a stock of human capital nor a personality trait, like *metis*. As explained by Colin McFarlane (2011, p.18):

If we reject the functionalist view of knowledge as static, bound and fixed, and argue instead for a view of knowledge as social, then the practices and materialities through which knowledge is learnt are brought into view....while situated, this knowledge is also

mobile: it is formed not simply in place but through multiple knowledges that run through and call into being various spaces.

Thus, mobile knowledge is a socio-spatially structured learning process, rather than a product (McFarlane 2011, p.24). Through socio-economic interaction with people along the routes and the material artifacts produced by these practices, 'local' knowledge may be transported to new spaces and, in the process, transformed; it can be made 'mobile' and acquired in practices of moving. As a process of moving information from one context to another using both material practice and imagination, 'mobile knowledge' transcends the dichotomy between local/universal knowledge.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Of course, even the master of *metis*, Odysseus, does not end his travelling life upon his safe return to Ithaca. As the ghost of Tiresias warned as he passes through the underworld, Odysseus is fated to undertake other quests to far away lands. He must placate the God he angered and regain the wealth that he lost in his initial adventure. Despite being the object of intense longing, the destination is only a temporary one. By the time Odysseus crosses the threshold of his palace, he already re-imagines the possibility of his next journey.

Similarly, as noted by Cecilia Menjivar (2000), Susan Bibler Coutin (2005) and Sabine Hess (2010), the learning process does not end when migrants arrive at a

⁵⁰In the field of Science and Technology Studies, Helen Watson-Verran and David Turnbull (1995, p.115-116) describe how this dichotomy has influenced the study of knowledge systems: "So-called traditional knowledge systems of indigenous peoples have frequently been portrayed as closed, pragmatic, utilitarian, value laden, indexical, context dependent, and so on, implying that they cannot have the same authority and credibility as science because their localness restricts them to the social and cultural circumstances of their production. These were accounts of dichotomy where the great divide in knowledge systems coincided with the great divide between societies that are powerful and those that are not. Here was a satisfying explanation of the relation between knowledge and power".

destination, because they constantly face deportation and therefore must continually reimagine the possibility of another journey.⁵¹ Clandestine spaces emerge within the United States; these routes include footpaths around highway checkpoints, the locked safe houses in Los Angeles and Houston where migrants await final payment and delivery, the predictable seasonal circuit followed by immigrant agricultural workers⁵², the city street corners where immigrant day laborers await employers in broad daylight, and trafficked women await customers at night. With the intensification of internal migration policing at bus and train stations, a smuggling industry now exists within the United States, not just at the border. Indeed, when I did my fieldwork, it cost just as much for an unauthorized migrant to travel with a guide from McAllen, Texas to Houston, Texas as it did to cross the U.S.-Mexico border.⁵³ For these reasons, immigrants must improvise new lives in their destinations. The seemingly endless migrant odyssey brings the wisdom of Anthony T. Carter's (1988, p.166) approach to human decisions into sharp focus; summarizing the contributions of G.W. von Leibenstein and Anthony Giddens to anthropology, he says that:

⁵¹ In this vein, Massey (1987, p.1498) says, "Migration is a process, not an event. Unlike birth and death, which happen once and are bounded in space and time, migration involves at least two points on each dimension. Except on the margins, the definitions of life and death are self-evident and widely shared. However, the definition of a move relies on ambiguous concepts of settlement, residence, and place that are socially constructed and culturally variant. The situation is further complicated because moves may occur more than once, and may encompass a variety of origins and destinations".

⁵² Ted Conover (1987) traveled these seasonal circuits with Mexican farmworkers in the 1980s.

⁵³ Drawing from his fieldwork in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Spener (2009, p.68) writes that after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border, "The biggest challenge was still yet to come: traversing the unforgiving South Texas brush country that lay between the river and the immigration checkpoints on the highways leading away from the border. In South Texas, the greatest difficulty for migrants had never been crossing the border itself. That had always been and still remained relatively easy. The big challenge was to get past the immigration checkpoints to the towns and cities in the U.S. interior where jobs awaited them."

...human action or agency involves the reflexive monitoring and rationalization of a continuous flow of conduct rather than a sequence of discrete acts or instances of choice and planning. There are too few close ethnographic studies of such flows.

We should understand migration strategy as an ongoing decision-making process, as opposed to an impulse to leave home. Migrants update their information along the way, and this information often prompts them to change tactics, and even goals. Importantly, smugglers may be hired at any point during this journey, and the location of the contract between smuggler and migrant influences its content. Strangers interact. Interpersonal trust networks are forged and dissolved. Along the way north, migrants respond with ingenuity and agility to unexpected situations. As they move across a terrain, they come into contact with new practices and their artifacts, mimicking other people as a survival tactic, improvising upon social repertoires and adapting material objects to their needs, sometimes unconsciously.

Thus, this chapter has argued that information is one part of a larger learning process that continues long after departure from the home community. Knowledge comes through the practice of migration. Because information about danger along the route quickly becomes outdated, migrants cannot rely solely on news retrieved from interpersonal trust networks to stay informed about dangers. In the hyper-dynamic context of the Mexican drug war (2005-forward) and intensified migration policing along the route through Mexico since 2001, by the time a friend or relative arrives in the United States his/her route and the players along it have frequently changed beyond recognition. Under these conditions, migrants must continually gather information, reimagine their options and improvise. In writing about the relationship between improvisation and the imagination in the work and life of Cornelius Castoriadis, Curtis (1991, p.xviii) exhorts us to find “a

kind of life that does not deny rationality, planning, and organizing, but does not confuse the plan with living nor does it live for the plan”. In other words, he asks us to live like a migrant.

CHAPTER 3

A VEIL OF BROWN AND GRAY: THE AMBIGUOUS AND UNCERTAIN

SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE ROUTE

Introduction

The cave has two ways in,
One facing the North Wind, a pathway down for mortals;
the other, facing the South, belongs to the gods,
no man may go that way...
it is the path for all the deathless powers.

The southern border of Mexico, like the entrance of the cave that greets Odysseus on his return to Ithaca, marks the beginning of a dangerous path for migrants. The way forward is obscured by ambiguous social relationships. There can be no blind trust in humanity in these dark places; they fall under a veil of ‘brown’ and ‘gray’ with sullied norms (O’Donnell 2004; Levi 1988). Social groups and their allegiances reorganize rapidly. Territory changes hands among competing criminal gangs without warning. Kidnappers disguise themselves as migrants or smugglers. Authorities collaborate with criminals. New violence emerges suddenly and spectacularly. Even hindsight of violence seldom provides clarity, as rumors compete with official versions of events. Instead, the unearthing of anonymous mass graves, the transience and disappearance of migrants, a lack of faith in the capacity of governments to prosecute the culpable, and rampant conspiracy theories heighten a sense of uncertainty along the route.

Indeed, the cave has grown darker in the aftermath of the drug war (2006-present). Mexican bandits have long assaulted Central American migrants. For over three decades of mass migration, beginning with the northbound wave of refugees in the 1980s, corrupt officials have robbed and raped them. And tricksters have posed as

smugglers to defraud and then abandon them along the route. Those dangerous characters remain on the scene today. However, organized actors capable of orchestrating mass kidnappings of migrants for ransom have joined the repertory of criminal predators along the route. The emergence of these new predators and the subsequent reordering of social relationships, norms and routines create uncertainty for the migrants who must cross Mexico.

This chapter describes the gauntlet of organized crime that migrants must run as they move through Mexico. It explains how relationships among organized criminal groups along the route have changed over time with deleterious consequences for migrants. I trace the evolution of the social menagerie of the route over three historical periods. First, I examine the route travelled by Central American refugees in the 1980's, and the relationship between its *coyotes* (human smugglers) and the migrants who followed them. Second, I describe the intensification of immigration enforcement in the 1990s through 2001 and the manifestation of a new face of villainy: transnational street gangs, known as *maras*. Third, I discuss the contemporary relationship between kidnappers and smugglers in the post-2006 drug war era.

The discussion of each of these three historical periods follows a travel story from a migrant. I selected these three stories as exemplars of the changing personae dramatis of the route in each epoch, but the reader should be advised that there is no 'typical' journey. In conveying these stories in three acts, I hope to give the reader a sense of the violent, unpredictable and dynamic context of migrant journeys and its cast of characters:

Figure 3.1: Cast of Criminal Characters

<i>Character</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Stereotypical Costume</i>	<i>Halcyon First Period (1979-1992)</i>	<i>Statist Second Period (1992-2005)</i>	<i>Contested Third Period (2006-Present)</i>
Coyotes	Human smugglers, including low-level “guides” that move with the migrants, “connectors” that recruit customers and make introductions between migrants and service providers, or coyote “bosses” who coordinate the actions of many guides; diverse social group	Low-level guides dress as migrants (backpack, dirty clothes, worn sneakers and jeans) to avoid detection while en route, usually unarmed; bosses may dress ostentatiously to display wealth	Relatively reliable performance of services with hometown heroes; some breach of contract, abandonment and rape	Subcontracting schemes undermine accountability to customers; rising prices for smuggling services	New business models blur line between trafficking and smuggling, further undermining accountability to customers
Tricksters	Confidence men (and women) who pose as smugglers	May dress as low level guides or coyote bosses	Fraud, robbery and rape	Fraud, robbery and rape	Fraud, robbery, rape, collusion with kidnapers
Corrupt Authorities	Some Mexican federal, state and local police; immigration enforcement personnel; military; security guards	Official Uniforms	Petty bribery and rape	Petty bribery, rape and theft	Petty bribery, rape, theft, collusion with kidnapers
Bandits	Some Mexican locals commit crimes of opportunity	Varies; may be armed with pistols or machetes	Overcharging migrants for goods or services, extortion, assault, rape	Overcharging migrants for goods or services, extortion, assault, rape	Overcharging migrants for goods or services, extortion, assault, rape
Mareros	Members of transnational street gangs (maras) with strength in Central America, such as MS 13 and Barrio 18; particularly active in southern Mexico along the train route	Tattoos; piercings; hip hop fashions; hand signals; may speak Spanglish or street slang; pistols and machetes; youth	N/A	Robbery, rape, murder, extorting passage fees	Robbery, rape, murder, extorting passage fees, kidnapping
Zetas	Former enforcers for the Gulf Cartel, now an independent drug organization that controls territory along the route; particularly active along the Gulf coast; widely franchised and imitated by other groups; also used as a generic word for ‘kidnapper’ by migrants	Black clothing or military fatigues; military bearing and hair cuts; high powered weaponry; military-like code names and passwords; dark sports utility vehicles and trucks with tinted windows	N/A	Paramilitary group working for the Gulf Cartel, to which coyotes paid fees for passage, but did not interfere with migration	Extort passage fees, kidnapping, trafficking, murder, torture and rape; now franchised and widely imitated; also a generic term
Rateros	Spies working for kidnapers	Dress as migrants of humble origin; carry cell phones	N/A	N/A	Collaborate with kidnapers; assault

These are the players in the human security tragedy along the route. The relationships among these players define the social structures through which migrants must pass on their journey. Clearly, the characters are not mutually exclusive. Shakespeare is quite right that “one man in his time plays many parts”, and the actors along the route may unexpectedly shift their roles and betray their allegiances. Adversaries have the potential to recombine into allies, giving them the quality of dangerous chimera. Fluidity characterizes the relationships between corrupt officials, coyotes, mareros and Zetas. Furthermore, in this transient and anonymous environment, people may not be who they seem to be. These fluid relationships and ambiguous roles, leading sometimes to unexpected changes in territory and organizations, generate uncertainty for migrants as they contemplate their journey.

Halcyon First Period

We met at a popular local church in rural El Salvador. The evangelical minister wore his hair in a short, military style (El Salvador, 12/30/10; 1/6/10; 1/24/10).⁵⁴ A faint scar marked his left cheek. He had been counting the Church’s finances when I knocked on the door. A notebook, a pile of pennies, a dollar and a few rolls of coins were strewn across the table in front of him the first time we talked, and he agreed to share his story with me.

He left El Salvador in 1989, during the war. It was a period when hundreds of thousands of Salvadorans and Guatemalans traveled north, fleeing the violence and the economic dislocation wrought by civil war (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991; García

⁵⁴ All interview quotes are reconstructed from shorthand notes, not recordings. This research followed protocols of informed consent and confidentiality approved by the Cornell Institutional Review Board.

2006). As he spoke, the minister returned again and again to the fact that the halcyon days of an easy journey north had ended. Neither the rules of conduct along the route nor life in the US were what they had been when he travelled:

Back then, the United States was a land of opportunity. Now, it is only a false hope....False promises, sometimes by the coyote. False hopes. They [migrants] enter something like a trance with the dollar. They can only think of the money. It is all they see. They don't think about the risks, the impact on their family. It is a sickness.

He explained that only the people who left early and established lives in the United States could build big houses in the rural Salvadoran town. The big houses perpetuate the illusion of opportunity.⁵⁵ But, the minister warned, the young people leaving now are not going to build big houses, because the epoch of opportunity ended in the 1990s. I asked what advice he gave the members of his congregation when they make migration decisions, and he explained that the Bible is central to his advice to them, not his own experiences along the route. He thought his experiences were no longer relevant for the younger generation.

A Story from a Bygone Era: The Minister

He joined the Salvadoran army at the age of fifteen. After his first two-year enlistment, he re-upped for two more. He was in the army in the mountainous Morazán department, the stronghold of the guerilla fighters, during the worst years of

⁵⁵ Amparo Marroquín (2012) notes that in the early period of Central American migration, “It was not only the houses of the migrants that stood out in the local urban infrastructure, but those of the coyotes as well.” One community member of a small town in El Salvador explained to me that these days, the migrants who leave do not build the big houses, but the coyotes collect land from defaults on loans. Since the economic recession of 2006 in particular, migrants have had a difficult time paying off the debts they accrue during the journey. If I want to identify the human smugglers, he told me, I should look at who owns more and more property in town. Indeed, when a new migrant does build a large home in the present era, he or she may be accused of various illegal activities in local gossip (Pedersen 2012).

the war from 1985 to 1989. But the leftists discovered that he had volunteered to re-enlist, and they assumed he did it because he wanted to serve the government. Since he was not a forced conscript, they threatened to kill his pregnant companion and their toddler son, and once his enlistment contract ended, his family urged him to leave for their own safety. Despite the fact that she understood why he had to go, his mother cried when he told her that he was leaving. His father was already in the United States and saved the \$1,500 to hire a smuggler. The map he drew of the experience shows him leaving home with a backpack that did not survive the journey:

Figure 3.2: The Soldier who Became a Minister



The left hand side of the map shows his mother crying as he left home. On the right, he reunites with his father in Los Angeles.

The map also shows how he took a bus from El Salvador to the Guatemala-Mexico border. The minister, his smuggler (known as a ‘coyote’ or ‘pollero’) and the other migrants disembarked the bus to sneak across that border. After crossing into Mexico, the coyote purchased a tourist visa for him, and they flew by airplane to Tijuana. The minister travelled the length of the journey with the same coyote. He explained that he had a very good coyote:

A good coyote is well connected. He knows who and how to bribe. That is his job. He also can talk like a Mexican and pass. Those are his skills.

Community Coyotes: hometown heroes and neighborhood confidence men

As this story illustrates, the coyote has long been a central character in the drama of Central American migration. The coyote is the guide to both the natural terrain, orienting migrants to the desert and watching for the movements of U.S. border patrol, and the social terrain, negotiating the bribes to authorities and fees to criminal bosses necessary for safe passage through Mexico. The coyote also coaches the migrants about Mexican culture, helping them ‘pass’ undetected among the citizens. However, the very experience and social connections that permit coyotes to negotiate bribes also link them to nefarious networks, a potential source of corruption and threat to the migrants who contract with them. Even in these early days of mass Central American migration, the coyote represented a dual personality, rendered both useful and dangerous by the capacity to transgress terrain and the social contacts that come with it. Coyotes facilitate escape from the horrors of war and poverty, but also potentially trick, abandon or abuse clients (Spener 2009, p.88). As Amparo Marroquin (2012) explains,

In this flight there is a central character. In many cases, he has been the difference between life and death, success and failure. He is an obscure character loosely portrayed in the media: the forger of roads, the speaker of riddles, the knower of passwords and secret handshakes that open borders and close the doors to extortion and kidnapping. Alternately respected, feared, invoked and conjured: he is the coyote.

In the 1980s, a coyotes' breach of contract posed perhaps the greatest danger to migrants en route. Coyotes could abandon their charges in dangerous places, like the desert. Coyotes often squeezed profits out of the travel costs by renegeing on the purchase of promised hotels or food during the journey. In this case, the minister was fortunate. His coyote did neither. His father, already waiting for him in the United States, had found him a guide with a solid reputation. According to the usual protocol for such transactions, the father paid half the money in advance and expected to pay half on arrival. These pay on delivery arrangements built on Mexican traditions of coyotaje (Spener 2009), enforcing contracts in the absence of a third party. These protocols and social ties developed around the networks established by the earliest movers from the region. In this case, the minister's father had left to look for work in the United States before the civil war.

Despite the potential duplicity of the early Central American smugglers, they generally maintained a direct relationship with their clients, which anchored (however imperfectly) both social and reputation mechanisms in the market for smuggling services. If and when a calamity occurred during the journey, the families at home knew whom to hold accountable. In the 1980s and 1990s, smuggling and migration had not yet been criminalized in migrant home countries. In El Salvador, migrants could contact coyotes through legitimate travel agencies, which openly advertised trips

to the United States “with or without visa”.⁵⁶ While some unscrupulous tricksters would accept money for travel services and abandon their clients en route, the legal framework in Central America provided a slight and highly imperfect degree of protection before smuggling became outlawed. Migrants and their family members could bring fraud charges against tricksters or irresponsible smugglers in a court of law. Such charges were usually settled out of court, but the law provided clients of smugglers with some leverage when dealing with co-nationals (police officer, El Salvador, 3/4/10). When the state failed to punish an irresponsible guide, migrants and their families sometimes took the law into their own hands.⁵⁷

Perhaps for these reasons, some observers have called this period “the era of the heroic coyote.” Some home communities embraced this generation of pioneering migrants and coyotes, and by the early 1990s, an emerging patriotic discourse extolled their contributions to the national economies of Central America. Tales of suffering and adventure saturated song, film, newspapers and even monuments, transforming migrants and their guides into celebrated public figures (Coutin 2007, p.83; Marroquín 2008, p.36-40). Indeed, a successful career as a hometown coyote in Latin America might even pave a way to the mayor’s office. Then as now, the clients of coyotes generally did not view them as “good or evil”, but as the provider of a potentially

⁵⁶ Classified ads in newspapers in El Salvador still occasionally advertise smuggling services in thinly veiled code. Online advertisements also occasionally surface.

⁵⁷ In one memorable story from 1975, a woman was abandoned by her guide in a hotel in San Salvador, but she tracked down her smuggler and demanded that he fulfill his responsibility (returned migrant, El Salvador, 7/1/10). She and her travel group did not know his name or other identifying information. So, they grabbed a taxicab and drove around the capital city until they located his car. They knocked on various doors in that neighborhood until they found him. They warned him that now that they knew where he lived, he had to comply with the terms of their contract. He did.

dangerous, but necessary, service (Marroquín 2012; Spener 2009). For migrants, a trustworthy and competent coyote was (and is) invaluable.

Border Policing and Border Crossing

In the 1980s and early 1990s, immigration control concentrated on borders. Until 1983, Central American migrants could easily obtain six-month tourist visas (FM-T) to travel legally in Mexico on the way to the United States (García 2006, p.56). In 1983, as the Central American refugee crisis worsened, Mexico sent more migration personnel to its southern border (p.56). Throughout the period, the U.S. border patrol militarized its southern border (Dunn 1996). As a result, the border is the focal point of migration narratives from this period; it was the point of the most acute danger. Even in the early days of Central American migration to the United States, the aboveground desert and underground tunnel crossings were becoming prominent symbols of death in popular culture. Human bones and debris had already begun to accumulate along the paths through the wilderness traveled by migrants into the United States. As early as July 1980, 13 Salvadoran migrants died together while attempting to cross Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona (Conover 1989, p.224). Coyotes would sometimes abandon their clients during a difficult border crossing; migrants suffered the elements and died from exposure.

The plot of the minister's story also climaxes in the drama of the U.S. border crossing. After he flew in an airplane from southern Mexico to Tijuana, as illustrated in the map that he drew, the minister and his coyote arrived at the staging ground just to the south of the U.S. border. There was an area at the border that had been off limits to both the Mexican and U.S. border patrols:

You can stand in this zone and see the patrols on the mountains on either side. There's a big market that sells lots of food. People chat. The coyotes shepherd their groups through. It is safe and harmonious. You can relax before the next part of the journey. The coyotes chat. They watch the hills for the right moment. Then they set off in small groups along their routes. They take different routes and stay in small groups....You don't get to this place alone.

In that no-man's land, coyotes had friendly relations among themselves.⁵⁸ The minister did not see them argue. His description sounds more like a picnic than the beginning of a potentially deadly trek through the wilderness. There, he crossed the desert, and he likened that experience to the song and movie *Tres Veces Mojado* (Three Times a Wetback) written and starring the Mexican norteño band *Tigres del Norte*. His travel group included an old woman who had hurt her leg. Despite the fact that she slowed them down, making them vulnerable to capture, they could not leave her behind to die. After all, "in the trip, people become what happens to one happens to all." They band together. His group of ten travelers came from many different communities across El Salvador, and they became friends during the journey. They had to carry the old woman.

They slept in the desert overnight, but they were captured by border patrol outside San Diego. When they saw the U.S. border patrol approach, they huddled together to hide under a bridge. The patrol surrounded them, and an agent pushed him onto the ground. The agents had their guns drawn, but the minister was not scared. Others might have been scared, but he had been in the war and knew that they were not going to harm him. When they arrested him, one of the agents taunted him in Spanish, "Bienvenidos a los Estados Unidos, cabron" (Welcome to

⁵⁸ This description of the border is strikingly similar to the no-man's land between Tijuana and San Diego described by Ruben Martínez (2001, p.196).

the United States, bastard). The minister laughed coldly remembering it, but not because it was funny.

Bandits and Corrupt Officials

The minister, like many migrants, encountered rough handling and rudeness by U.S. officials at the border. Human rights organizations have documented extensive, and in some cases fatal, use of excessive force by U.S. Customs and Border Protection (ACLU 2012). Scholars have documented corruption (Spener 2009, p.132-133) and numerous sexual assaults of migrants by officials on U.S. soil (Falcon 2007[2001]). I interviewed one man who received a severe beating by U.S. border patrol agents and several others who reported verbal or emotional abuse, both at the border and in immigrant detention facilities (returned migrant, El Salvador, 1/19/10).⁵⁹ Two migrants reported the denial of vital medical services to which they are entitled during their detainment, and one of them urged me to investigate the death of a friend that resulted from the denial of these medical services (returned migrants, El Salvador, 4/17/10; 2/19/10). The humiliation of detainment in and deportation from the United States is extreme. Nevertheless, the encounter with U.S. migration officials is generally traumatic for its potential to end in official detention and deportation, not for its potential for criminal victimization, when compared to interactions with Mexican

⁵⁹ One woman reported mistreatment during *legal* entry (family member, El Salvador, 3/30/10). At the airport, migration officials pulled her aside for further questioning. She was pregnant and repeatedly asked to see a doctor, sensing that something was wrong after the turbulence experienced during the flight. However, the officials kept her waiting and refused to provide medical care, even after she began to bleed vaginally and pleaded for attention: “my baby was dying and they did nothing”. Only when the blood had drenched her legs did they take her to a doctor, who gave her a suppository to complete the miscarriage. She has not been able to conceive since that brief tourist visit to the United States.

authorities. Despite the degradations inherent to detainment and deportation procedures, many migrants reported professional behavior from U.S. officials.

Encounters with Mexican authorities, by contrast, were almost always accompanied by the extortion of bribes, and sometimes assault or rape: “the corrupt [Mexican] police beat you and leave you robbed. The others [in the U.S.] arrest you and deport you” (Salvadoran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/2/11). In fact, migrants *expect* corruption and criminal violence from Mexican officials, whether they are dealing with federal, state, or local police or migration authorities. During the early period of Central American migration, encounters with Mexican authorities usually occurred in border towns. The fact that corrupt Mexican officials perpetrated many crimes helps to explain why the most policed zone of the route, the borders, was also likely to be the most criminally dangerous. While migrants suffered fraud and banditry across Mexico during this period, the U.S. border itself constituted the most visible and dangerous segment of the route. As another Salvadoran man who flew to Tijuana explained, There was always danger. The border was always dangerous in the past. Our own coyotes assaulted us, raped people. At the U.S.-Mexico border, it was always like that, risky.

This is not to say that danger and violence were limited to that border space. This man, like the minister, could afford luxury; they traveled by airplane across a large portion of the route through Mexico.⁶⁰ However, many Central Americans, lacking the funds or contacts with well-connected coyotes, had to make the land journey in its entirety, sometimes requiring weeks or even months of sacrifice to arrive in the United States, if they arrived at all (O’Dogherty 1989; Menjívar 2000, p.63). Despite the

⁶⁰ In Cecilia Menjívar’s (2000, p.63) study of migrants of this era, 33% of Salvadoran respondents had traveled by airplane for some segment of the route.

relative ease of passage through Mexico in the 1980s when compared to later decades, the journey could be very dangerous. Even in the halcyon days, bandits and corrupt coyotes raped, robbed and assaulted Central American migrants with impunity (Frelick 1990; Mahler 1995; Menjívar 2000). Many people who traveled across Mexico by land, even those who did so with a visa, reported some form of criminal victimization or threats.⁶¹ Indeed, criminal victimization of migrants has been integral to the route through Mexico since this early period. The Salvadoran minister was lucky that he did not meet with corrupt Mexican authorities or bandits at the border.

U.S. Entry: Legal, Economic and Social Integration

During this early period, the U.S. border patrol practiced ‘catch and release’ policing (Andreas 2000; migration official 2/9/10); they bussed Mexicans immediately across the border and released them to try their luck again. For this reason, many Central Americans attempted to impersonate Mexicans to avoid beginning again from home. For a time in the early 1990s, however, Mexicans began to impersonate Central American political refugees who might be eligible for protected entry to the United States, released into the country to await asylum hearings or granted temporary status (migration official 2/9/10). There was no charade for the minister. The U.S. immigration agents knew he was Salvadoran. They looked at the passport he carried. After he explained that he was a military veteran fleeing persecution, the border patrol released him. His father paid several hundred dollars in bail money, roughly what he would have paid for the final installment to the coyote.

⁶¹ In Menjívar’s (2000, p.63) survey of Salvadorans living in San Francisco in the early 1990s, many of whom had traveled in the 1980s, 33% of her respondents had been assaulted once and 34% of her respondents had been assaulted multiple times.

Eventually, the minister received Temporary Protective Status (TPS). TPS is a provision established by the Immigration Act of 1990, which followed on the heels of a series of legal judgments that also opened possibilities for Central American asylum seekers (García 2006, p.111-112). Under this provision, the Secretary of Homeland Security may temporarily designate countries with vulnerable populations, such as people fleeing war or natural disasters, thereby granting a short-term, renewable stay to their citizens in the United States.⁶²

Even after receiving legal status, the minister had trouble finding work in the United States. Until that point, his only experience in life had been carrying a gun. Despite eventually landing a factory job, he never really adapted to the U.S. lifestyle; in words that echo many other unsatisfied Central American migrants, the minister complained that too much “pressure” permeates daily life in the United States.⁶³ With persistence and hardship, he ultimately met with financial success, but he remained socially isolated and missed the country he loved. As soon as the war ended in 1992, he returned home. By that time, his companion and two children had moved on with their lives.

⁶² El Salvador received its most recent TPS following the earthquake of 2001, and Honduras and Nicaragua received the designation after Hurricane Mitch in 1999. These temporary measures were renewed and Salvadorans, Hondurans and Nicaraguans granted TPS following these environmental catastrophes can continue their stay at this time. In the wake of a recent volcanic eruption and tropical storm in 2010, Guatemala petitioned the U.S. government for TPS, but has never before been granted the provision (Allison 2012; Menjívar 2012). At the time of writing, the Guatemalan request was pending.

⁶³ Many migrants talk about the pressure of inflexible deadlines, restrictive work routines and the difficulties of negotiating the foreign (and sometimes unfriendly and racist) culture and language that they encounter in the United States. Migrants in the contemporary era also cite the pressure of living under surveillance and fear of deportation. While many leave home under threat of violence and poverty, migrants find a new host of daily stressors and humiliations in their destinations (e.g. Mahler 1995).

The minister bought his current house with money he saved in the United States, and he began a new family. He explained, however, that nowadays many people take loans to travel to the United States and lose their houses. The interest on these loans can run as high as thirty percent, and coyote services are now much more expensive than during his journey. With the economic recession and intensified immigration enforcement in the U.S., many people return home poorer than when they left. Indeed, his brother wants to take an \$8000 loan against their father's property to pay a smuggler, and he could easily lose their family homestead. The minister had warned him not to go, that times have changed, but his brother is an adult. If he wants to go, there is nothing to be done about it.

Then and Now

Beyond differences in the legal and economic context in destination communities, the minister's travel story points to several key differences between the route in the early days of mass migration from Central America to the United States and the post-2006 journey. In the 1980s, when the refugees from internal conflicts in El Salvador (1979-1992) and Guatemala (1960-1996) began moving north en masse, professional smugglers generally maintained a more direct relationship with their clients, often accompanying them for the entire length of the journey. Relations among coyotes, while not always amicable, alternated between collaboration and market competitiveness, as opposed to combat. While women often suffered sexual coercion during the journey, loyalty within travel groups was the expectation. Confidence men sometimes posed as smugglers to defraud migrants, but prices for coyote services were thousands of dollars less than today. Many people simply relied on experienced

relatives to guide them. Some Central Americans had ventured north in search of work before the civil war, and the refugees relied on these transnational social networks for assistance during migration (Menjívar 2000).

The journey, while dangerous, was easier than the passage that confronts migrants today. Before the implementation of new technologies and stricter control at the border, some people could cross U.S. border patrol checkpoints hidden in the trunks of cars of family friends or relatives (e.g. Salvadoran migrant 2/8/10). Most importantly, however, migration control largely stopped at the borders. For either very daring or very poor migrants, it had been easier for Central Americans to travel the length of Mexico without a paid guide, as internal immigration enforcement through Mexico had been more lax. Bandits attacked migrants and corrupt authorities extorted money from migrants, but fewer checkpoints within Mexico funneling migrants to clandestine routes made a relatively wide range of travel options available to avoid crime. Thus, the early days of mass Central American migration to the United States was less risky and uncertain than the periods that followed.

Statist Second Period

Throughout the 1990s, the risks of the journey increased in tandem with the intensification of migration policing along the length of the route through Mexico. Mexican migration authorities established checkpoints along the northbound highway and began to inspect major transit points, such as bus terminals. The United States also implemented interior checkpoints and inspections. Both Mexico and the United States adopted more punitive laws for convicted smugglers. The United States also criminalized illegal entry, giving prison sentences to migrants who cross the border

repeatedly. The United States adopted laws making it easier to strip legal permanent residency from convicted criminals, even for minor offenses.

With the new emphasis on internal migration enforcement, deportations from the United States to Central America escalated rapidly. In a five-year period, deportations of Central Americans jumped from 5,695 people in 1993 to 16,418 people in 1998, not including voluntary departures (DHS 2003).⁶⁴ Five years later, in 2003, the United States deported 20,702 Central Americans, not including voluntary departures (DHS 2003). In fiscal year 2009, removals of Central Americans peaked with 81,104 people sent back to the region, not including voluntary departures (DHS 2011).⁶⁵

These deportations carried new cultural formations to Central America, including (but not limited to) the protocols, language and styles of immigrant street gangs from Los Angeles. These practices soon spread along the train corridors of Mexico as a new generation of Central American migrants with experience and extensive social ties in the United States travelled the route. Migrants continued to move despite the intensification of deportations and internal migration policing. They also continued to move because of it, motivated by the desire to return to the United States after deportation. The intensification of policing and the deportation circuit generated a permanent transnational transience along the routes, in which migration became a lifestyle with an indefinite beginning and end. In so doing, it also produced new criminal opportunities and actors along the route.

⁶⁴ A voluntary departure is not necessarily voluntary. When apprehended, migrants often agree to depart in order to avoid the legal penalties that accompany other removals. While apprehended unauthorized migrants do not always have this opportunity to avoid legal penalty, voluntary departures far outnumber deportations.

⁶⁵ This data includes citizens of Belize, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Honduras, Costa Rica, and Panama.

Home and Back Again, and Again: the English Speaking Man

For example, one of the men I met in the migrant shelter in Saltillo, Coahuila spent enough time in the United States that he preferred to speak English in our interview (7/18/10).⁶⁶ In the summer of 2010, he was on his way north through Mexico yet again, hopefully for the last time. He was originally from a community near the shores of Lago de Yojoa in Honduras, but he started riding the freight train through Mexico at the age of 17. That first time crossing through the southern state of Chiapas in 1998, migration agents raided the train in the dark of the night. From the next wagon over, other migrants warned him not to talk and to stay hidden. Then he heard a loud scream. When the train stopped five miles later, the conductor told him that someone had died and warned the migrants to be more careful. The English-speaking man did not see what happened that time, but he has witnessed many other assaults during his extensive time on the route.

Bandits

On another occasion in Chiapas, close to Tapachula [where the train line used to begin near the Mexico-Guatemala border], the train stopped with its head in the city and its tail concealed in the bush. Thirteen migrants lingered alongside the tracks waiting for it to depart. They pooled their money to buy a soda pop, and they sent him to the store. When he returned, his twelve travel companions were naked. Three Mexican thieves with firearms had assaulted them. They stole everything. They hit them. One of his companions had a purple eye. Alerted to the robbery, the English-

⁶⁶ During fieldwork in Central America and Mexico, I met several people who claimed that they preferred English to Spanish. Some of them probably enjoyed showing off their English language skills, but remained fluent in Spanish. Others felt like non-native Spanish speakers after living away from their country of birth for many years.

speaking man hid in the bush, and when the assailants left, they walked right by him.

Such incidents, often committed by opportunist locals living nearby, regularly occur in the train yards and walking paths that lead through the wilderness around highway migration checkpoints in Mexico.

Mareros

Those thieves were Mexican, but there were also Central American gangs, and the English-speaking man told me about yet another harrowing ordeal on the train:

There used to be a lot of MS13 [a prominent Central American street gang] on the train. I caught a wagon once. Inside the wagon were seven guys playing cards, each with a machete and tattoos. “We’re MS 13”, they said, and they threw the signs [hand signals]. I threw the signs too, and pretended to be one of them. They gave me some food. They talked about all the stealing and raping they had done, bragging. They asked me what I had done. I played along. They told me to go collect money and food and come back. I didn’t come back. Thank God I never saw those people again. Those gangs used to be Hondurans.

Beginning in the mid-1990s, these Central American street gangs, whose members are known as *mareros* in Spanish, boarded the cargo trains that the poorest migrants ride through southern Mexico to rob, rape and sometimes, murder. The two most prominent transnational street gangs are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and Barrio 18 (M18). Members of the MS 13, in particular, frequently demand fees from migrants and coyotes to ride and sometimes throw uncooperative migrants from the train. Armed with machetes and pistols, they also stalk migrants in train yards, bars and hotels in transit towns in Chiapas, the southernmost state of Mexico on the border with Guatemala. In communities along the routes, they engage in extortion, drug shipments and dealing, and deadly disputes with rivals. The gangs generally include street kids and young adults from Central America, some of them with experience in

the United States. The most sophisticated members of the gangs issue orders, by word of mouth or cell phone, from the inhumane, overcrowded and uncontrolled prisons system in Central America (Cruz 2010, p.396). However, individual cliques may only be loosely affiliated and not entirely controlled by this imprisoned leadership. The control and coherence of the gang has fluctuated dramatically over time (Cruz 2010).

The history of both of these gangs is inextricably tied to human migration. Barrio 18 traces its roots to marginalized Mexican American youth, who formed street gangs to protect their neighborhoods from local toughs in the 1960s (Valdez 2011, p.24); it is named for 18th Street in the Rampart district of Los Angeles, and it became one of the first multinational Latino street gangs. In the three decades that followed Barrio 18's founding, subsequent waves of immigration to these communities, coupled with conflict over control of local drug markets, violently splintered Latino gangs in Los Angeles (Valdez 2011). In the 1980s, Salvadoran refugees created the Mara Salvatrucha to protect themselves from Barrio 18 and other hostile Los Angeles-based gangs (Valdez 2011, p.25; Wolf 2011, p.48). When the Mara Salvatrucha integrated into the Mexican Mafia, it added the 13 to its name to signify this relationship.

The initial spread of these gangs to Central America was an unintended consequence of U.S. migration policies. Elana Zilberg (2004; 2011) argues that U.S. incarceration of immigrant youths and their subsequent deportation forcibly transnationalized street gang and policing culture, linking Los Angeles and San Salvador in a "securityscape." Under the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act, thousands of temporary and permanent residents became eligible for deportation from the United States to El Salvador after committing

crimes. Having been fully acculturated into the street life of Los Angeles, many deportees felt like foreigners in their country of birth, expressing extreme feelings of disorientation and dislocation. Some of them barely spoke Spanish (Salvadoran police officer, 5/1/11). As cultural strangers and social outsiders in the country of citizenship, deportees created enclaves of urban U.S. street culture in San Salvador (Zilberg 2004; 2011). Over time, they crowded out the local gangs (Cruz 2010, p.385; Salvadoran police officer, 5/1/11). Nor did they passively accept exile; many attempted return along the route through Mexico, facilitating the unauthorized movement of drugs and migrants with them (Papachristos 2005, p.53). From San Salvador and Los Angeles, the gangs spread to Tegucigalpa and Guatemala City, and then infiltrated rural areas across Central America. These gangs flourish in the transnational circuit created by U.S. deportations (Cruz 2010; Papachristos 2005, p.53).

As the English speaking man's story suggests, these gangs developed cultural tells that mark membership with distinctive linguistic traditions and codes (including hand gestures), etiquette, artwork and written symbols in graffiti, music, style of dress, mannerisms and spoken history. Andrew V. Papachristos (2005, p.51) argues that these scripts and performances constitute the most powerful a transnational dimension of the gangs⁶⁷:

Globalization and street gangs exist in a paradox: Gangs are a global phenomenon not because the groups themselves have become transnational organizations (although a few have), but because of the recent hypermobility of gang members and their culture.

⁶⁷ Despite the fears of the security community, survey research as recent as 2006 in Central America suggested that only a minority of gang members maintain transnational criminal networks (Cruz 2010, 393-394). Indeed, it may be that street gangs have fewer transnational contacts than other more cosmopolitan sectors of Central American society. Shared routines and cultural repertoires, not necessarily sustained interpersonal networks, link these gangs across borders.

Thus, these gangs are a collection of transnational practices that emerged spontaneously from the dislocation surrounding international migration and exclusionary policies. As cultural formations, they sit uneasily with national identity. For example, one day, the members of a MS 13 clique benevolently explained themselves to terrified migrants on top a moving freight train; the gang members lamented that they no longer felt Central American because they have lived in Mexico so long (Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/29/11). But they were not Mexican, and they claimed to feel solidarity with their marginalized Central American brethren. This confusion is understandable given their transient transnational lives. They frequently speak a mix of English, Mexican Spanish, Central American Spanish, and slang (known as ‘caliche’ in El Salvador) among themselves, ingeniously employing mixed modes of communication incomprehensible to many outsiders (fieldnotes 11/5/10).

These young people move around a train like it is most natural thing in the world to jump on and off a speeding locomotive or leap among the moving boxcars to defeat boredom (fieldnotes 3/3/11); for many, ceaseless unauthorized movement has been their life, except perhaps, when they have been imprisoned. They have faced extralegal extermination by cartels, vigilantes and paramilitaries. Many members, having lived in the streets since an early age, have substance abuse problems. At night, some of them huddle, cold and hungry, in the train yards.⁶⁸ The gangs have norms and

⁶⁸ In October 2010, I accompanied several volunteers from the migrant shelter to the railroad tracks in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico (10/22/10). There, we found a small group of young people huddled under streetlights, among them two women. When the volunteers approached the young people, others emerged from the darkness between the train cars. The night breeze was chilly, and not everyone had a sweatshirt. The volunteers brought bread and atole, a warm corn drink received by smiles by those unfortunates who sleep in the train yards. Several people sent salutations and thanks to the priest

a hierarchy, enforced by violence, but leadership is frequently challenged and internal jealousies emerge; young people rebel. Their life expectancy is not long. In summary, *some* of the cliques along the route are not rigid, disciplined organizations.

Under these conditions of transnational transience, their cultural markers and protocols are meant to establish permanence of loyalties and inculcate a sense of belonging. To this end, both MS 13 and Barrio 18 have traditions of tattoos and the infamous “morgue rule”, which promises that the only way out of the gang is death. Despite these practices, membership and allegiances are continually challenged. While navigating a safe exit from these gangs is extremely difficult, some escape by fleeing their neighborhood or converting to Evangelical Christianity (Brenneman 2012). As they engage internal and external power struggles, gang members manipulate the norms and rules of their group, as well as the legal norms and rules of the state. Members of competing gangs may disguise themselves to infiltrate another gang. The state may sponsor impersonations of gang members in undercover police work. As suggested by the English speaking man’s successful impersonation of a gang member,

running the shelter. They complained about being hungry and unable to find jobs on empty stomachs. Some had visible tattoos. Others did not. A young man, maybe in his early twenties, with a baseball cap and earring took command of the distribution of the food, ensuring that the women received their portions first and that everyone ate. After everyone in the group had been served, this young man (presumably the leader) took his share. With the food gone, the young people retreated back into the shadows of the train yard. Because of its ordinariness, this encounter between shelter volunteers and MS 13 street gang members is a revealing moment; it illustrates the basic conditions under which these young people sometimes live. However, caution is necessary before generalizing from this encounter, because other cliques of the gang are not as desperate. The gang is not a consistent and coherent organization across the various cliques, and with turnover and internal struggles, turf changes hands among them. Furthermore, a glimpse into the camaraderie and humanity shared by these marginalized youth should not mask the brutal violence and victimization in which they often engage.

the signs of belonging cannot be fully relied upon. Ambiguity persists despite these cultural markers.

In fact, the distinction between gang member and the outside acquaintance of gang members is rarely as well-defined as either the law or the gangs' own protocols would imply. Gang members inhabit a variety of other roles as parents, siblings, lovers, friends, migrants and citizens; no one is *only* a gang member, subsumed entirely by a singular role. Despite the rituals of entry (often a beating or an assignment to kill), membership and mutual respect accrues gradually in a courtship period with new recruits, such that the social boundaries that demarcate membership have a gray zone of "sympathizers" (Brenneman 2012, p.34). During a journey along the route, gang members and migrants (as well as migrants who happen to be gang members and gang members who happen to be migrants) must shape-shift between competing social expectations and uncertain interactions, improvising scripts from all of these roles depending on the context.

Fluctuations in Criminal Control

Importantly, these gang members can become more professional over time, acquiring skills and alliances with other criminal groups. Their control waxes and wanes along the unauthorized migratory routes. For example, the presence of gangs along the route surged in 2003, when El Salvador and then other Central American governments implemented a repressive policing strategy called *Mano Dura* (iron fist) (Cruz 2010; Hume 2007). Caught between the *Mano Dura* in the south and zero tolerance gang policing in the United States, gang members began to roam the route indefinitely (activist, Ixtepec 11/6/10). In southern Mexico, the presence and power of

MS 13 peaked after this legislation and before Hurricane Stan in 2005. The storm damaged the railroad connecting Tapachula with Arriaga, halting the trains. Following the termination of train service along that segment, migrants dispersed and depended more heavily on busses, combi (shuttles) and foot to arrive in Arriaga. The dispersal of migrants to other routes undermined the power of the gang, devaluing their territory and cutting their transport line (shelter staff, Ixtepec 4/1/11).

With the post-2006 upheaval among the Mexican drug cartels that previously controlled the routes, the gang may acquire new resources along the route. In the throes of the territorial wars and intercartel violence, Mexican cartels may increasingly subcontract limited tasks to gangs.⁶⁹ Previously, street gangs were too unruly to be reliable partners, but are now valued for their low risk; street gang members know little about the inner circle of the cartels and their liaisons in government, which poses little threat if they are apprehended by authorities. Furthermore, Central American migrants can be used as an expendable, replaceable resource in a war with no end in sight (fieldnotes, Saltillo 7/17/10). This subcontracting follows a predictable division of labor among criminal groups, described by Richard Friman (2004, p.98), in which: “Native crime groups relegate immigrants to the higher-risk and lower value-added stages of criminal activities and exclude them from information about how their stages fit into the broader economic processes of the national criminal economy.” For MS-13, contracts with Mexican cartels could mean greater access to sophisticated

⁶⁹ For an analysis of the pros and cons for alliances between Central American street gangs and Mexican cartels, see Stephen Dudley (2012). He points out that if the Zetas are, in fact, allied with the MS-13, it represents a de-professionalization of the cartel.

weaponry, bigger profits from drugs and less fear of predation by stronger crime groups.

Recent rumors suggest that the railroad between Tapachula and Arriaga may reopen, thereby increasing the value of the MS-13's traditional stronghold in Chiapas and restoring their transport lines, giving the Central American gangs a greater bargaining position with cartels as the 'caretakers' of train shipments of drugs and people. New, more organized and professional, gang members may be moving north from their stronghold in Central America to take advantage of these opportunities (fieldnotes, Ixtepec 5/13/11). These new cliques may be displacing or taking over the cliques of marginalized youths that roamed the route terrorizing migrants and community members since 2005. As explained by one official (San Salvador 4/28/10) with field knowledge of the migration route, "Well, there's a little of everything." By July 2013, gangs had again reasserted their control of the Southern train route, demanding payments of \$100 per migrant from smugglers boarding the train in Arriaga (private communication, 7/29/13). However, nothing about street gangs is permanent.

Intensified Internal Policing

There were many dangers for a Central American in Mexico during the 1990s. Nevertheless, when the English speaking man had traveled while underage in that era, Mexicans also reached out to help him and give him money. He worked and made friends in Saltillo. Then, he worked for six months in Piedras Negras, a border town straddling the U.S. and Mexico, before crossing the border with a few Mexican friends instead of a paid guide.

Unfortunately, he was only in the United States for two months before he was deported back to Honduras. He had made the mistake of riding the Greyhound bus through Arizona. In the 1990s, migration agents began extensive surveillance of bus and train stations in search of migrants. In 1992, political pressure for migration enforcement mounted in the United States (Dunn 1996, p.173). Beginning in 1993, the U.S. Border Patrol launched a series of high-profile operations to deter migrants from attempting the crossing, and began construction on a wall at the border (Dunn 1996, p.174). Inside the country, Section 287(g) of the Immigration Nationality Act (INA) of the 1996 Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) established partnerships between state and local police and migration enforcement. The same legislation increased criminal penalties for smuggling and illegal re-entry (Spener 2009, p.116), and it contained provisions for the deportation of permanent legal residents who commit even minor offenses.⁷⁰ The Border Patrol also established 71 interior checkpoints along highways inside the United States as a second tier of defense after the border (Bustillo 2013).

Migration policing and deportations also intensified south of the U.S. border (García 2006). In 1990, Mexico criminalized human smuggling, making it punishable with ten years in prison (Frelick 1991, p.221-222). In a post-NAFTA ‘de facto bilateralism’ on the issue of border security with the United States, Mexico intensified both its internal and external policing (Carlsen 2008; Castillo 2003; Casillas 2007;

⁷⁰ Originally, this legislation was applied retroactively to migrants who had pleaded guilty to offenses, making many people eligible for deportation for crimes they thought had been resolved and punished. In 2001, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the law could not be retroactively applied to migrants pleading guilty before 1996 (INS v. St. Cyr). However, not before many legal permanent residents had been unconstitutionally returned to their countries of origin.

Sassen 1996). In 2000, Mexico's National Institute of Migration (INM) maintained 25 migration stations, most of them congregated in Chiapas, near the Guatemalan border (Casillas 2007, p.16). In 2001, President Vicente Fox launched Plan Sur, which established two internal control belts, with highway inspection checkpoints, across the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (p.18). Between 2003 and 2005, Mexican migration authorities reported a dramatic rise in the number of migrant apprehensions across the country, a fact that Rodolfo Casillas (2007, p.10) attributes to their increased resources and personnel deployed in that time period. By 2005, the INM had expanded operations to 52 migration stations across the length of the country, not only at the border (p.19).

Under pressure from the United States, Central American home countries also began to criminalize smuggling (activist, San Salvador, 11/24/09). For example, El Salvador outlawed coyotaje in 2004, coupling trafficking and smuggling under the same law. Peter Andreas (2003, p.79) labeled this shift to internal and transnational policing with cooperation between destination, transit and home countries a 'thickening' of borders.

The English speaking man did not know the specific legal and policy changes that ushered in this new era of migration policing, but he had experienced it. And he felt confident in his capacity to navigate this intensified policing. In part because of his extensive experience and the kindness of Mexican and American friends he met during his many journeys north, the English speaking man proudly explained that he had never been caught by migration authorities, whether Mexican or U.S., at any border: "...I know they don't catch me. They never catch me at the border." After his

earlier deportations, he had learned not to ride the busses. However, as migration policing extended and deepened along the length of the route, so too did criminal violence against migrants, and it was the ever growing threat of crime that frightened him more than the possibility of apprehension by border patrol.

Coyotes: Subcontractors

In this challenging environment of growing banditry, extortion and policing, coyotes diversified their tactics and raised their prices. After his capture while riding the bus and his subsequent deportation, the English speaking man immediately returned to the freight train through Mexico, and a nephew paid \$400 for a very inexpensive coyote, only to cross the U.S. border. In the 1990s and early 2000's, door-to-door smuggling service from Honduras might have cost as much as \$5000, and he could not justify such an expense. By that time, the freight train had become the symbol par excellence for the dangers of the journey, as migration policing funneled the poorest migrants toward the tracks (e.g. Nazario 2005). The bus routes had now become off-limits for anyone incapable of negotiating a series of bribes for passage through the checkpoints, and migrants with sufficient financial resources often paid for expensive passage in hidden compartments in trucks. But the hidden compartments are not without their own risks.

A Salvadoran man described his harrowing experience in 2000 (El Salvador, 3/1/10). They were trapped inside the truck until Puebla. He heard the migration officials outside, asking “You carrying any pollos [chickens, slang for migrants] in there?” and banging on the walls of the hidden compartment. The officials walked loudly over the top of the compartment, but everyone inside sat silently. He had curled

into a small ball with his head to the side. He could not shift his weight. The migrants urinated on one another, but the guides had given them a pill to keep them from defecating. They passed the migration checkpoint, and when the coyotes dragged them from the compartment, none of them could move. The coyotes pulled their ankles or legs and dumped them onto the ground like bags of potatoes. People would fall and lie immobile, as the blood returned to their limbs. It took thirty minutes before he could move.

Another man told of strikingly similar experiences during the same era (El Salvador, 4/11/10). On his first adventure in a hidden compartment, Mexican migration police had rescued his travel group at a checkpoint. Without the intervention of law enforcement, they would have suffocated. However, the close call with death did not prevent him from attempting a second ride in a hidden compartment from Mexicali to the border:

We got into another hidden compartment to be taken to the border. When I got out, I couldn't move. My body was asleep. I had a fat woman on top of me the whole time. I had been one of the first in. They had to drag me out by the arms and legs and toss me under a tree. Helicopters were circling overhead. It took an hour before I could move my body again. I was numb. The guide said not to move, but I was worried the police would come and everyone would run. I would just be laying there.

These men's experiences are not isolated events. Many others tell similarly stories, and describe the crippling, humiliating, and near fatal conditions within hidden compartments (e.g. returned migrants, El Salvador 4/15/10). In what journalist Jorge Ramos (2005) called "the worst immigrant tragedy in American history", 19 Mexican and Central American migrants, including one small child, suffocated in a trailer after their coyote abandon them at a truck stop in south Texas in May 2003. Smugglers hid

the migrants inside the truck trailer in order to pass the inspections at the interior migration checkpoint in south Texas before reaching Houston (Ramos 2005).

These dangers increased as coyotes adopted business models that complicate accountability in the wake of such tragedies. In response to intensified policing and criminalization of smuggling, some coyotes began to outsource risky segments of the journey to other guides (police officer, El Salvador, 3/4/10). Coyotes specializing in high-end door-to-door service from Central American to the United States, in particular, increasingly subcontracted to specialists for each part of the route.

Underling Mexican guides were easy to blame for the mistreatment of clients. Safe houses, the places where smugglers hide their clients en route, became increasingly overcrowded, as multinational travel groups merged there. Service deteriorated and migrants found themselves frequently locked inside under unhygienic conditions as they waited for transport to the next rest stop on the route. The safe houses, under the control of people with only distant relationships with the migrants' home communities, were not safe.

Over time, these arrangements began to erode some of the reputational and social mechanisms that enforced contracts. Suffering became normalized, an expectation of the journey. Migrants with close relatives in the United States continued to pay for premium services, in hope of avoiding both the police and gangs stalking the routes. Some migrants also continued to rely on experienced friends and family members to

guide them. Human smuggling through Mexico became an increasingly diverse collection of enterprises with packages to fit any customer's budget and risk profile.⁷¹

Then and Now

The English speaking man managed to stay in the U.S. for five consecutive years. He worked. He helped two brothers get to the United States. He got married. After marrying a U.S. citizen, he tried to fix his legal status. However, an attorney provided poor advice. In reality, he could not change his status until a ten-year re-entry ban that he had received during his previous deportation expired. When the English speaking man went to the government office to file the paperwork, migration agents caught him and deported him again. Thus, in 2010 at the age of 29, he immediately began again.

He had experienced the dangers first hand during his last journey, and he knew that the route had deteriorated during his years in the United States. So, I asked him why he was willing to risk it all again to return. In response, he explained that he had a three and a half year old U.S. citizen son. On the phone, his son had pleaded with him, "Daddy come back home." With the sound of his son's voice in his ears, he was ready to undertake any risk and uncertainty to arrive. His wife, born and raised in the United States, was frightened for him on this last journey, but she did not want to live in Honduras. She had a job in Minnesota.

The irony of his transnational life had not been lost on the man. He had achieved his original goals in the United States, but through his son and wife, now found himself tied permanently to a country to which he did not legally belong. He had first left Honduras, because his family was poor. He and his brothers worked hard. They

⁷¹ David Spener (2009) comes to the same conclusion after fieldwork among Mexican migrants.

acquired nice houses, land and a truck in Honduras, but his son was in the United States; “it is one thing or the other.” Even so, the man lamented, “This is my last trip. I don’t want to die.” After all, since the 1990s, the migration route has seen the spectacular emergence of new forms of violence, and the man’s migratory experience and social ties no longer guaranteed his safety. Indeed, on this journey to end all journeys, these social ties rendered him even more vulnerable. If kidnappers were to learn that he has family in the U.S., they would demand a large ransom for him.

Contested Third Period

Since 2006, the security situation along the migratory routes has deteriorated precipitously. As the drug war escalated, contestation over territory and tributes paid to “plaza” bosses has intensified both risk and uncertainty for migrants. In Mexico, the discovery of anonymous mass graves and alleged disappearances of migrants have become more frequent. With the splintering of Mexican criminal groups, the protocols and relationships that formerly underpinned smuggling networks have been undergoing a period of renegotiation. Allegiances cannot be trusted. Drug cartels have turned to kidnapping migrants for ransoms paid by U.S.-based relatives, and have coerced some formerly trustworthy coyotes into collaboration, blurring the boundaries between traffickers and smugglers. Nevertheless, migrants embark on the ever more dangerous journey.

A Story of Betrayal: A Desperate Young Man

For example, I met one such desperate young man in the office of the migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, Mexico. He was from Tocoa, Colon, Honduras (12/3/10). The first time he traveled through Mexico to the United States was in 1999, when he

was just fourteen years old. His mother had lived in the United States since he had turned one, and he had never known her. His grandparents sent him away after a street gang killed a family member. His aunt in the United States told him to come quickly to avoid the violence. He left suddenly, without a guide. His family gave him a thousand dollars to travel by bus to Chiapas, and there he met a cattle farmer who brought him north. The rancher was connected to organized crime, but he became a friend, willing to adopt the fourteen year-old. However, the desperate young man chose a reunion with his mother over the adoptive father. The rancher accepted his decision and helped him on his way. A smuggler friend of the rancher took him in a hidden compartment of a truck to Mexico City. This friend stole cars for a living, and the fourteen year-old stayed with him for ten days before the rancher arranged for a second smuggler friend to take him as far as Monterrey. Again, the rancher asked him to stay and offered him a job, but by this time, the boy was determined to join his mother. The rancher took him to Reynosa, Tamaulipas where the desperate young man's aunt came to help him across the border.

He lived in Houston for nearly a decade, acculturating to his community there and embracing life in the United States. By his own admission, he felt more at home in Texas than Honduras. In Houston, however, a cousin started a fire in their apartment and police falsely accused him of his cousin's crime. Understanding that he was taking a fall for another family member, a second cousin paid a lawyer for him. But, in order to receive parole, the lawyer advised him to sign a paper with an admission of guilt. The desperate young man followed this advice only under duress; he had never been incarcerated before, and felt utter desperation to be released. However, after accepting

the guilt, the court sentenced him to two years in state prison, and three months later they sent him to the migration authorities. It was October 30, 2008 when they deported him. The deportation papers bore both his name and his cousin's name.

He began the return journey to the United States in November, as soon as he landed in Honduras. There was no internal debate, no moment of indecision, about the choice to return. His work was in the United States, as well as everything he owned and everyone he cared about. The desperate young man could not stay in exile in Honduras.

A friend from Honduras accompanied him on the return journey. This friend had a friend in Veracruz, Mexico who had taken him north last time without a problem. The last journey with this friendly contact was safe, comfortable and inexpensive. The contact offered to take them from Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz to Houston for \$3500. From Central America to the United States, smuggling services can cost double that sum. The young men called their relatives in the United States to arrange the contract and payment. After some negotiation, his cousin offered to pay for delivery when they arrived in Reynosa. However, the two migrants did not know that their 'friend' in Veracruz was now working for the Zetas.

The Zeta Franchise: "You know the letter"

The daily humiliations and crimes of opportunity committed by mareros, tricksters, bandits and corrupt officials continue, but the specter of the *Zetas* now overshadows them in the contemporary imagination of migration. Smugglers, humanitarian workers and migrants all agree that human security of migrants and smugglers deteriorated with the arrival of the *Zetas* on the scene. Systematic mass

kidnappings of migrants crossing Mexico were virtually unheard of until after 2005. The policy of ‘decapitating’ organizations through kingpin killings and prosecutions incited violent power struggles within drug associations, as well as between them. During President Calderon’s tenure in office (2006-2012), perhaps as many as 50,000 Mexicans, and an unknown number of undocumented migrants, died in drug war violence (Wilkinson 2012). In August 2010, the Zetas allegedly committed a highly publicized mass murder of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas, Mexico.⁷² In the years following this massacre, Mexican authorities discovered other mass graves of migrants, and many of the corpses exhibit signs of torture (CIDH 2011, p.7). On May 13, 2012, Mexican authorities discovered forty-nine mutilated corpses, many of them missing heads, arms and feet, in Cadereyta, Nuevo Leon. The government of El Salvador and human rights activists worried that the dead could be Central American migrants, but the bodies had not been immediately identified (Najar 2012). Despite an arrest in the case, the massacre remained shrouded in fear-provoking ambiguity, the subject of endless rumors rather than a sense of justice. In such situations, the Zetas are often the official suspects, but one can never be sure. One shelter staff member answered the question of when violence began to escalate against migrants in this way:

Three years ago. I came to work in the shelter in 2007. There were painful stories about suffering back then, particularly in the north, in the desert. But in 2008, Veracruz became worse. Then the stories from the Istmo began. Between 2009 and 2010, it has been continuous violence, stronger every day....It has been getting worse since the Zetas. In the past, it was common thieves. Of course, the migrants *say* it is the Zetas. I do not know. The Zetas cause so much fear. People used to say ‘maras’

⁷² After forensic analysis, the most recent death count for that mass grave has been raised to 193 (Dudley 2012). However, I use the number originally reported in the media, because today the victims collectively are known across Latin America simply as ‘the 72’.

and now they say ‘Zetas’. They are so feared because they are organized and strong. They can stop a train and take everyone away and there is nothing that can be done. Many thieves might say they are the Zetas. The real Zetas are more organized than all the shelters combined....But those thieves that steal 200 pesos.... Why would a Zeta risk himself for 200 pesos? When they can stop whole trains? There must be thieves who claim to be Zetas. They must be common delinquents if they steal only 200.....All a thief has to say is “you know the letter” [the letter Z] (shelter staff, 1/20/11).

I sought more information, but she demurred, explaining that she does not want to know more about the Zetas. Knowing less is better, safer. The original Zetas group formed when Osiel Cardenas Guillen, then boss of the Gulf organization, hired Mexican Army Lieutenant Arturo Guzman Decena as an enforcer in 1997 (Castillo 2010).⁷³ In turn, Guzman recruited other soldiers. The Mexican Special Unit Against Organized Crime (UEDO) initially identified 31 former enlisted men working as ‘Zetas’ (Otero and Aviles 2003), of whom at least 13 served in the Special Air Mobile Force Group (GAFEs) (Medellin 2004). These men formed the original ‘core’ of the organization behind Guzman, and their penchant for dressing in black uniforms and driving dark suburban vehicles with tinted windows quickly became part of their legend (El Universal 2003; Logan 2009). Since that time, the group continues to recruit ex-military (including Guatemalan special forces), ex-police personnel and corrupt officials into its ranks (Thompson 2005). Some evidence suggests that at least some new Zetas undergo a military training at compounds in Guatemala and northern Mexico (Castillo 2010; Thompson 2005).

⁷³ While working for Cardenas and the Gulf organization, Zeta activities ranged from debt collection, personal security, territorial control, kidnapping, execution and internal enforcement (Cook 2007, p.8). During kidnapping and murder schemes, the Zetas impersonated soldiers (Otero and Aviles 2003), tapped the government phone lines (Otero 2003), used sophisticated weaponry (Cook 2007, p.7), disseminated propaganda (Monge 2003), established military-style training camps (Castillo 2010; Thompson 2005), and boldly launched frontal attacks on police installations to free their associates (Cook 2007, p.8). These tactics signaled a professionalization of criminal enforcer groups.

However, there has been turnover within the Zetas group, including at its highest echelon. In 2002, a rival gang killed Guzman, leaving Heriberto Lazcano Lazcano and Miguel Angel Treviño Morales in charge, until Lazcano was killed in 2012 and Treviño was captured in 2013 (Althaus 2013; Cervantes 2011, p.8). The Zetas began to receive public scrutiny in the violent wake of Cardenas's capture in March 2003. Violent rivalry among drug associations spiked after his capture, as the Zetas struggled to maintain the Gulf cartel's drug routes (Gomez 2005; Meyer 2007, p.6). After Cardenas' 2003 arrest and 2007 extradition to the United States, the Zetas became increasingly independent, splitting entirely from the Gulf cartel in February 2010 when the Gulf cartel murdered a Zeta operative (Dudley 2012) and Cardenas received his U.S. conviction (Roebuck 2010 citing anthropologist Howard Campbell).

The Zetas' increasing independence from the Gulf cartel precipitated the more aggressive entry of this group into the kidnapping industry. The timing of Cardenas' capture in 2003, his extradition in 2007 and his U.S. conviction in 2010 roughly correspond with an intensification of violence during migrant kidnappings and the transition to kidnappings on a massive scale. The Zetas probably began kidnapping migrants, because they had never maintained a drug route independent of their former employer the Gulf cartel. Without having independently maintained a drug route, the kidnappings may have been necessary to make first social contacts and negotiate passage fees with human smugglers crossing the terrain. Cardenas had carefully guarded his drug contacts and know-how, leaving the Zetas without the opportunity to manage the Gulf organization or independent entry into the drug industry upon his arrest (Riva 2005 citing Carlos Resa Nestares of the UNAM). However, the Zetas

identified the potential for a large-scale industry in migrant kidnappings, turning the stream of unauthorized travelers into a “gold mine” (Mendez 2010): possibly the fledgling cartel’s primary source of income for a time. Indeed, the capacity to franchise these kidnappings, granting the right to commit them in the Zetas name, now provides an easy way to pay members of a very loosely connected extended network (activist, Tenocique, 6/2/10). By 2012, the Zetas controlled much of the terrain along the Mexican border with Texas, collecting passage fees from coyotes (fieldnotes, Saltillo, 7/17/10).

Very few of the original Zetas members remain alive, and they no longer constitute an exclusive, elite group of professional mercenaries. According to Jose Wall, Senior Special Agent with the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives, “most of the original Zetas are gone, but the legacy of the Zetas still lives on” (quoted in Logan 2009). This turnover prompts Logan (2009) to distinguish between ‘Los Zetas’ and ‘the Zetas Organization’, the larger more diffuse group today. Nevertheless, Zetas and their imitators go to great lengths to maintain their image of military efficiency, threatening journalists who write stories about their weaknesses and defeats (Meyer 2007, p.4). They frequently make a spectacle of their black uniforms, high caliber weapons, and a cavalcade of black Suburbans, as well as the torture and killings of their captives. The image-conscious Zetas pioneered the practice of beheadings as “narcomessages”, now part of the common repertoire of Mexican drug gangs. Zetas and their collaborators may purposely spread rumors of their own brutality.

Thus, the image of this paramilitary group came to personify kidnappings and extortion of migrants. The Zetas and violence against migrants have become synonymous in the public imagination, despite the fact that the Sinoloa cartel has also kidnapped migrants crossing its terrain (Martinez 2011). Other groups, including the Gulf, Juarez and Tijuana cartels, do not provoke the terror and spectacle of the Zetas, despite some forays into kidnapping and trafficking, as well as charging crossing fees from smugglers passing their territory (Dudley 2012).⁷⁴

As a result of the infamy of the Zetas, less well-organized, local groups also imitate their kidnappings. They use the infamous Zeta image and name to incite fear in their victims. The extent to which the Zetas now license the use of their name or outsource certain activities to local collaborators is open to speculation, but it also seems to have become a common practice. Furthermore, unauthorized use of the Zeta brand and internal conflicts within and among the various Zeta cliques may be on the rise. Competing gangs may commit crimes claiming Zeta responsibility to bring the attention of law enforcement personnel to Zeta territory; indeed, the investigation into the Cadereyta massacre was complicated by a strange series of messages both owning and disowning Zeta responsibility (Najar 2012).

Moreover, several reports leading up to Lazcano's 2012 killing by government forces suggest that the remaining core leadership had been fighting for control, leaving Lazcano exposed to attack (Pachico 2012; Pachico and Dudley 2012). The extent to which Treviño commanded the Zetas before his arrest is unclear (Pacheco and Dudley 2012). Factions within the group had been in rebellion (Althaus 2013).

⁷⁴ Only one migrant in my interviews believed that he had been kidnapped by the Gulf cartel.

The boundaries of the group are unclear. In previous years, some evidence of the enforcement of Zeta name brand surfaced, such as in 2009 when a kidnapping band was killed in a Nuevo Laredo jail, allegedly for using the Zeta name without permission (Corchado 2009). However, these enforcement activities have been restricted to key territory, and it is unclear whether leadership can continue them effectively. For this reason, Alejandro Hope (2013; quoted by Althaus 2013) reasons that the Zeta organization may be in disarray following Treviño's arrest, but the violent and remorseless Zeta attitude and practice will continue at the hands of new perpetrators.

Further complicating the attribution of blame, the term "Zeta" has become a generic descriptor for organized and brutal kidnapers, thereby likely undermining the group's capacity to enforce its brand. I asked kidnapping victims how they identified their kidnapers as "Zetas". Some kidnapers claim to be Zetas, despite working in regions not known for Zeta activity. Some kidnapers claim to be Zetas, despite a poverty and lack of professionalism that contradicted the gang's folklore.

Nevertheless, migrants seem inclined to believe these claims. As explained by shelter staff (Ixtepec 4/1/11), "They construct the meaning of the word [Zeta] in the route... as they move north, they feel their presence more." In other words, migrants themselves use the name 'Zetas' in a manner that changes its meaning, undermining the group's control of the trademark. The word becomes associated with cruelty and the costumes of any paramilitary criminals, such as the black or camouflage clothes, the trucks with dark tinted windows and high power rifles. When asked how migrants knew their kidnapers were Zetas, many people respond with a shrug; of course they are Zetas,

they were cruel and bad men. Indeed, the word for kidnapper is now often used interchangeably with the letter “Zeta” in conversation. The transference of ‘Zeta’ to mean ‘kidnapper’ illustrates the ambiguity that confronts migrants. The infamous letter Z has become one of many phantoms that stalk the route.

Corrupt Officials

For migrants, the difference between a *Zeta* and a *migra* [Mexican migration official], like the blurry boundary between rival criminal gangs, is also often unclear. When a freight train stops for a migration raid, few migrants wait around to identify who has stopped the train or check their uniforms. In the confusion and the dark, people scream, push and fall from the train. Everyone runs. Families sometimes become separated. People hide. Afterwards, few people know with any certainty whether the migrants captured have been kidnapped by criminals or detained by officials or both. In an interview in the chapel of a now-defunct migrant house in Lecheria, a Honduran man explained (7/13/10):

In San Ramon [on the train route between Arriaga, Chiapas and Ixtepec, Oaxaca], there was a truck that drove along the side of the train. From the truck, they stopped the train using the break tube. The truck was white with two people in it....The two were armed and they caught like thirty [migrants]. Some say it was *migra* and others say it was *Zeta*. I did not have time to figure it out. I escaped in the corn.

The man guesses that he witnessed a kidnapping, but there is no way to be certain. Even when Mexican authorities wear uniforms, migrants cannot be certain that they will carry out official duties or corrupt activity. Sometimes officials simply extort bribes. At other times, they work more intimately with organized crime (fieldnotes, Saltillo, 7/17/10). Such criminal activity is common enough that encounters with law abiding Mexican police and soldiers come as a surprise to migrants. Thus, migrants

attempt, with limited success, to develop frames for understanding the intentions of state authorities.

For example, a Honduran migrant (Ixtepec, 3/29/11) explained a rumor about secret codes in Mexican police uniforms. He and his friends had met a mysterious group of well-armed men, some in uniform and others in plain clothes, on a trail through the wilderness leading around a migration checkpoint. At first, he thought they were kidnappers, but the well-armed men claimed to be protecting the migrants. They warned the migrants of the known locations of bandits. In retrospect, the Honduran migrant reasoned that they must have been ‘real’ police, because Zetas who dress in Mexican police uniforms, “go about with the insignia on the opposite side” or so a friend told him.

These migrants were understandably nervous when approached by any armed person, whether they wear a uniform or not. Despite the belief of the Honduran man, clues like subtle alterations to uniforms are not a reliable code to understand intentions. Indeed, even if *real* Mexican officials detain migrants, there is a chance that they end up in the hands of kidnappers, or beaten and robbed, rather than deported home. Migrants do not necessarily know whether the police approaching them are kidnappers or serving in their official capacity, and either way they are likely to try to escape before they need to find out (e.g. Salvadoran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/30/11). In 2011, Mexican migration officials allegedly apprehended 120 Mexican, Central American and Chinese migrants travelling north by bus and gave them to the Gulf cartel (Dudley 2012; Ramsey 2011). In that year, the National Institute of Migration (INM) registered 230 reports of corruption (Fox 2013). Between January 2006 and

December 2012, the INM removed 883 agents from their posts for “irregular conduct” (Fox 2013). Furthermore, kidnappers sometimes evade capture, because they receive advance warning about Mexican officials’ plans to raid their drop houses.⁷⁵ Of course, collusion between Mexican officials, including police and military personnel, is particularly blatant in kidnapping stories in which victims must be transported across the country to captivity in the northern border towns. Some victims of these kidnappings, both in interviews I conducted and in interviews conducted by human rights groups, reported that officials at highway checkpoints interacted with their kidnappers (Amnesty International 2010; CNDH 2011). For example, a Salvadoran man (Ixtepec, 6/28/11) described his kidnapping and collusion between kidnappers and Mexican police:

A friend from Honduras said, “let’s go have a beer”.... In the park, close to the church and the Casa de la Caridad [shelter], there were two taxis, and we went five and five in each. The plan was to [later] take the train to Nuevo Laredo, but it didn’t go like that. We were kidnapped by the Zetas....There was a group of 12, well armed and dressed as civilians in three trucks, like what the Padre has [small SUVs]. They hit us. They took our money. They killed my friend and another.....

I interrupted to ask, “Why did they kill him?”

His error was that he didn’t tell them that he had a wife and children in the US. The boss told me, “I cooperated with the killing of the 72.” I said I had family that would pay. And I told them I was looking for La Guera in Nuevo Laredo [a coyote]. The boss said, “We’re the same”. So, he took us to a neighborhood in those cars. I thought, “Why don’t my friends call for help?” There were people around. But it was because of fear. This was Saturday. On Sunday, three friends’ money came. The ransom came. They were released. I had to wait eight days.....

⁷⁵ For example, on March 7, 2013, the Mexican Navy freed 105 Central Americans held in Nuevo Laredo, Tamaulipas, but they did not capture a single kidnapper at the scene of the crime (Cawley 2013). In this case, there is no certain evidence that a leak provided information to the kidnapping gang. However, I speculate that the frequency with which these gangs escape before the authorities arrive indicates that they receive some insider tips. Most observers arrive at the same conclusion.

I asked about the ransoms, and he explained:

They asked for \$5,000 each one. One Nicaraguan friend had an aunt in Costa Rica who sent \$6,000. Every day they hit us. At ten to seven he took us in a car for the money. When they moved us, they passed a patrol and the police talked to the murderer. The law is corrupt.

This quote illustrates the potential for collaboration between coyotes, police and Zetas, as well as its dire consequences for migrants. The man who told the story had been released by the kidnapers after his sister in El Salvador sent three thousand dollars to save his life (Ixtepec, 6/29/11). A brother in Las Vegas did not help. Instead, his sister took out a high interest loan to pay the ransom. Debts acquired to pay ransoms are potentially catastrophic for families, because the rescued person is not delivered to the United States where a job might be available to help pay them. For this reason, kidnapers sometimes need to torture victims or kill their travel companions to extract contact information of family members from migrants. Kidnapers also sometimes audibly torture migrants during negotiations with family members. The sacrifice made by this man's sister, who earns \$238 dollars a month in a Salvadoran clothing factory, drove him to contemplate suicide. Instead, he embarked on the journey again, desperate to find work and pay the debt or die trying.

Coyotes vs. Zetas

While collusion between coyotes, police and Zetas is common, the relationships among the different groups of actors along the route change over time, and these changes reshape the physical security of migrants in transit. Today, the most violent crimes against migrants are not committed by coyotes, but by cartels. Indeed, migrants now pay coyotes largely to help them negotiate the tributes to organized crime, rather

than evade capture and deportation by migration authorities. As explained by the English Speaking man I met in Saltillo:

I don't plan to go by myself, alone, because of the kidnapping. The coyote pays the Zetas \$300 for each individual. So you have a license to walk from here to the border. The price of a coyote [only from Saltillo, Coahuila to cross the border] is \$2000. They charge you to be in this territory....A friend told me...A friend came in bus. In Veracruz, the *migra* stopped him and said that for \$300 we let you go and be sure to call this number. It was the Zetas, and you have to pay and they gave him a pin. They said if another Zeta catches you, give him the pin. He once gave the pin to the police, and they let him go. They're together, the police and the Zetas.

The friend who had recounted this story had traveled in 2008. The story makes evident important changes in the route since the English-speaking man's earlier adventures on the train. Migrants hire coyotes, not primarily to avoid immigration enforcement as they did in the 1990s, but to avoid the possibility of kidnapping. Organized criminal groups, who charge fees for passage, often seem more capable of controlling passage than law enforcement officials. By the time they reach the shelter in Saltillo, migrants, like this English-speaking man, overwhelmingly believe that to travel farther without a connected coyote would be tantamount to suicide

Don't take the train after Saltillo. You take the train, you'll get caught by either migration or the Zetas. Big organizations, a chain, cross fifty people at a time. That's why they [the Zetas] respect those people [big coyotes]. They [the coyotes] pay to let them work.

This man and his travel party decided to rely on a cousin who traveled to the United States three weeks before them to choose a coyote. They hoped that the record of the coyote in his recent dealing with the migrant's family member signals reliability, but the danger is always that the coyote sells them to the Zetas rather than deliver them to the U.S. Given how quickly criminal territory and relationships change

in the post-2006 environment, past dealings with the coyote offer no certain outcome for future contracts.

Indeed, the relationship between kidnapping groups and smugglers alternates rapidly between conflict, coercion and collaboration (Fieldnotes 9/5/10). Likewise, the ‘Zetas’ and mareros have a sometimes adversarial, sometimes cooperative relationship. In the northern part of Mexico, the Zetas and other organized groups fight over territory (Cervantes 2011), and factions within the Zetas now fight among themselves (Pachico 2012; Pachico and Dudley 2012). As explained previously, the Zetas do not control use of their brand at all times and places, and other, smaller bands of kidnapers capitalize on their symbolic resources (with or without permission). For these reasons, the criminal threats to migrants are multiple and fluid, depending on changes in the relationships among these actors and the territory they control. This complicates the relationship between the Zetas who control terrain and the coyotes that wish to pass clients across it.

Several stories of Zetas torturing, threatening or murdering coyotes came to my attention during fieldwork. These stories underscored the potential for conflict between smugglers and kidnapers. In interviews with migrants describing their own kidnappings, two types of criminal violence against guides have surfaced: punishment and coercion. Criminal groups tax movement on the routes north, and guides who have not paid the requisite fee may be killed and their clients held for ransom. During kidnappings, Zetas have also tortured migrants to identify paid guides within travel groups, presumably with the knowledge that each paid guide has a smuggling boss with money to ransom his worker and clients. A middle-aged Salvadoran woman

(12/1/10) at a shelter in Arriaga recounted the story of the kidnapping of her travel group in Tierra Blanca in 2009:

At first, the Zetas did not know the Guatemalan was the guide. There was a Honduran, a Guatemalan and my husband. They beat all of them. The Honduran fingered the Guatemalan as the guide. The Zetas know that when there's a guide, there's a boss. They knew this Guatemalan had a boss who would pay. They told him to call his boss and tell him he needs to pay \$5,000. The boss paid and we ended up at his house in Nuevo Laredo where there were about ten Central American guides and that Mexican boss....Migration gets paid \$300 for each migrant, like the Zetas.... In Monterrey, migration stopped the trailer. The boss paid to get us through to Nuevo Laredo. No problem. We did not know where we were going. When we got there, we knew we were in Nuevo Laredo.... The boss insisted that we pay \$2800 per person.

Her Mexican 'husband' endured a terrible beating by the Zetas, leaving him "black and blue all over his back and chest" and barely capable of walking.⁷⁶ Since the coyote boss paid the ransoms to the Zetas, the woman and her 'husband' became his chattel in Nuevo Laredo:

Well, I was in the hands of those people, a band of coyote. They wanted \$2800 for each of us.... They said that we had to work for them, if we could not pay. But we escaped. The guards were drinking and then fell asleep. They forgot to lock the door.... They wanted him to work as a coyote, and they wanted me to work as a housekeeper, helping the woman of the house. My husband is Mexican. The boss threatened to turn him over to migration, and he said "go ahead." I will go to migration myself. I am not going to work for you.... The boss bargained with them: "OK, how about \$800 for the food and shelter that they used en route [from Tierra Blanca to Nuevo Laredo]? But my husband refused to pay... And he said "I am Mexican." He was not going to be bullied by them like the Central Americans get bullied.

Despite this woman's insistence that she had escaped and now desired to return to El Salvador, rumors that surfaced during interviews with other migrants indicate that

⁷⁶ Later in the interview, the woman explained that her travel companion was not her husband after all. After a pause, she said, "He is not my husband. My husband died long ago. It's just that this man helped me. My coyote abandoned me in his town, and his family let me into their house and he offered to take me north. He was kind and helped me." In Central America, it is fairly common for monogamous sexual partners to pronounce themselves husband and wife for a time.

she continued along the route and might actually have been working for an abusive coyote. While drunk guards forgetting to lock a door is a plausible story (one that appears in multiple kidnapping narratives), the escape may have been a fabrication to hide the woman's complicity with illegal schemes. In other words, this kidnapping might have forced migrants to become smugglers or forged a new collaboration between smugglers and kidnapers. The coyote boss in Nuevo Laredo now presumably knows he must pay Zetas, just as he pays migration, to get his people through their territory. And clients who cannot pay their debts become 'his people'.

Indeed, with a little coercion, Zetas have turned the capture of guides into new business arrangements that blur the line between the kidnapping and smuggling industries. With the shifts in territory caused by leadership change and criminal reorganization in the wake of intensified policing, kidnapping is a method for making contact with human smugglers; it is a form of communication with potential business partners, a means to begin negotiations over a new system of tributes. Smugglers may then be forced either to pay tribute to the plaza boss or to find victims for kidnapers with false promises of travel services; when they cooperate with kidnapers at the expense of their clients, they are no longer smugglers, but tricksters.

In the process of establishing their independence from the Gulf organization, the Zetas launched an immense effort to co-opt guides and control the taxation of movement along the routes. In the migrant shelter in Saltillo, a Honduran kidnapping victim (7/18/11) reiterated the claim that the coyotes must pay three hundred dollars per client to pass Zeta territory or pay with their lives. When I asked him how he knew that, he shrugged, "All the world knows that."

Independent coyotes face a two-fold threat. First, the guides fear apprehension and prosecution by state authorities. In Mexico, the government has criminalized smuggling and adopted highly punitive policies. Second, independent guides fear punishment and coercion from non-state violent groups. As violent criminal groups proliferate, human smuggling becomes more difficult; tribute demands may also proliferate, and territory may change hands requiring new, and often dangerous, first social contacts. As explained by Stephen Dudley (2012) in his analysis of migrant kidnappings and organized crime:

Which group he [the coyote] paid depended on what was happening in the area. Responsible coyotes, therefore, may carry extra cash on hand for any unforeseen circumstances. No matter what the system, confusion about how has paid whom and when remains a strong possibility. Moreover, in a shifting landscape, it is difficult for coyotes and their representatives to properly identify a given criminal group's role and informants.

Furthermore, organized criminal groups have distinct characteristics, resources and strategies, such that changes in territorial ownership among them have consequences for patterns in violence.⁷⁷ Given their reliance on coercive business practices with smugglers, the Zetas presents a special safety challenge to coyotes and their clients. Indeed, a smuggler based in El Salvador claimed that things would be much better for Central American migrants if the Gulf cartel won its fight against the Zetas and reestablished its domain (7/5/10). In Monterrey, Nuevo Leon in the summer of 2011, when fighting between the groups still erupted in the area, locals whispered in hushed tones that they longed for the old criminal bosses, because the Zetas obeyed no codes of conduct (fieldnotes 7/20/11). One Salvadoran migrant chose to travel through

⁷⁷ See Cervantes (2011) for a brief description of each of the major crime groups and their leadership and characteristics, as described by Mexican government reports.

Piedras Negras, Coahuila rather than Zeta territory in Nuevo Laredo, because he had not heard negative reports from returning migrants from that location and he knows that “it is the cartel of El Chapo there [the Sinoloa cartel], and that is the best of the cartels” (7/16/11). However, given the amorphous nature of the new Zetas and their imitators, it seems uncertain that either the Sinoloa or the Gulf cartel would be capable of putting the lid back on the kidnapping box. Indeed, given its recent setbacks, the Gulf cartel hardly seems capable of securing a wide swath of territory. Finally, codes of conduct, once broken, are difficult to reassemble.

Smuggling vs. Kidnapping

The Mexican human smuggling industry and the migrant kidnapping industry overlap, each with an intimate effect on the business opportunities in the other, but the activities should not be conflated, as they often are in media reports. The migrant kidnapping industry grew from a common practice in the human smuggling industry: payment on delivery. For Central American coyotes, payment of half the travel fee prior to the journey and half upon successful arrival within the United States is still the norm. Migrants are then held hostage until family members pay the agreed upon final installment; it is a guarantee for payment. Importantly, migrants do not consider this to be a ‘kidnapping’, *unless* the smuggler unilaterally changes of the terms of the contract and demands more money than expected. In some cases, the journey north may have accrued unexpected expenses and the smuggler may attempt to recoup these expenses by changing the terms of the oral contract after departure. From the perspective of the migrant, changes made after departure may constitute an unfair business practice, or worse, a kidnapping. Extreme violence and torture does not

generally accompany this type of smuggler-kidnapping, probably because the perpetrators remain tied to a travel service business that depends on attracting future clients.

However, smuggling and kidnapping share a common insight: family members waiting for migrants in the United States have money to pay the border crossing guides. If they have a long-distance coyote that takes them all the way from Central America, and not just a border crossing guide, the family members have even more money waiting for the migrant's arrival. Brian Roberts et al (2010) summarized various survey estimates of the U.S. border crossing for Mexican nationals to find a range in averages estimates between \$1,305-1,845 and rising over time. Of course, that money only covers the short distance of the US border itself. Healthy adult Salvadorans paid between \$5,000-7,000 for door-to-door service from El Salvador to destinations within the United States in 2010. At that time, special service from a reputable coyote for small children and pregnant women who cannot cross long distances by foot could cost as much as \$10,000. Unauthorized travel from McAllen to Houston, once inside the United States, cost as much money as the border crossing. Prices vary according to the services and length of segments included in the travel package. For high-end long distance arrangements, a protocol from an earlier era of migration remains intact: half the money is generally paid at departure, and half the money is paid upon delivery.

Therefore, kidnappers generally ask for the amount expected by the average smuggler on delivery, anywhere between \$2,000-5,000 in ransom from US family members. Sometimes family members can negotiate the ransom down to a few

hundred dollars. But we should expect the prices in the two industries to influence each other. As fees for smugglers increase under pressure from immigration policing, so will the ransom demands of kidnapers. Kidnapers will continue to assume that the families of migrants have sufficient money to pay the guides.

If kidnapers do not receive payment, they may try to extract profit through forced work. This also happens when a family cannot pay a smuggler the agreed upon fees at delivery. Women might be forced to prostitute or do housework in the drop house. Men might be forced to smuggle. Today, the Zetas force some Central American migrants to work as spies along migratory routes, known as *rateros*, identifying other migrants who receive remittances from the United States and setting them up for capture.

Given the emergence of this new criminal activity, it is particularly important to correctly differentiate between the types of criminal actors that travel the unauthorized migratory routes. Recent media coverage conflates smugglers and kidnapers to the benefit of the Mexican government's human rights reputation. Under pressure from human rights groups promoting the protection of migrants, the Mexican government and its associated media have been quick to call any interception of migrants en route a "rescue". The language of "rescue" began to appear with greater frequency following the publicity that surrounded the massacre of 72 migrants in Tamaulipas in August 2010. Not all claims of rescue are valid. For example, on February 8, 2011, the military claimed to have rescued forty-four Guatemalan migrants in Reynosa, Tamaulipas; but the Guatemalan Foreign Ministry argued that the migrants were not victims of kidnapping, but paying clients of a smuggler (Avila 2011).

News reports about ‘rescues’ provoked an incredulous reaction from human rights defenders. In particular, they argued that if the reported “rescue” occurs at a highway checkpoint and migrants are pulled from a northbound moving van, it is possible that they were traveling in their chosen direction with their guide, not held against their will. Furthermore, a human rights activist pointed out that these so-called ‘rescues’ provide a convenient excuse for military personnel to perform the duties of migration agents, a crossover prohibited by the law (fieldnotes 1/11/11). Without testimony from migrants themselves, it is difficult to tell the difference between rescues and immigration raids, and few newspaper articles include such firsthand accounts by victims. Several cases have surfaced in the Mexican media in which immigration enforcement has likely masqueraded as human rights protections, making it difficult to evaluate government efforts to protect migrants. These cases illustrate the danger of conflating smugglers and kidnappers.

Kidnappers and thieves frequently disguise themselves as guides or coyotes. Furthermore, even reputable smugglers sometimes engage in extortion and other misdeeds (particularly sexual coercion or threats to enforce contracts⁷⁸), but smugglers do not *necessarily* use violence against migrants or others; the primary source of their profit is the provision of a travel service, and the best guides treat migrants as customers, not cargo. By definition, however, kidnappers and thieves assault migrants, and the interests of these violent criminals are at odds with those of reputable guides engaged in the smuggling industry. When the Zetas declared their independence from the Gulf organization, clandestine spaces along migratory routes became more

⁷⁸ Rape, a special case of endemic violence along the route, is beyond the scope of this chapter. I will discuss it in greater depth in Chapter 6.

fragmented and fluid, with former alliances under continuous renegotiation and a shifting territorial control of routes. This new social menagerie challenges simple state-crime dichotomies.

Coyotes: Traffickers or Smugglers?

Of course, the boundaries between actors are not fixed, and frequently one actor has many roles depending on the place, time and people with whom he/she is engaged. For example, the low-level guides and the coyote that I met during fieldwork do not engage in smuggling fulltime or as a lifetime career. At many levels of the smuggling enterprise, it seems necessary to ‘keep your day job’ with smuggling only supplementing other income or occurring as the opportunity presents itself. Consistent with Spener’s (2009) study of Mexican coyotaje, I found that many experienced Central American migrants also pass in and out of the category of smuggler along the route; at some times and in some segments, they guide friends for altruistic reasons, and at other times, they ask for a little financial help in return (often to finance their own unauthorized migration north). While the era of the ‘heroic coyote’ might be over, human smuggling remained a diverse cluster of social processes; no single crime group controlled all Mexican human smuggling routes. Nor did smugglers respond to danger in a homogenous manner. Guides adopted a variety of strategies for dealing with risk and uncertainty, frequently combining tactics of collaboration, subversion and conflict.

In addition to subcontracting schemes, an even more decentralized system emerged to cope with increased violence: a chain of people who buy and sell migrants (e.g. returned migrant, El Salvador, 4/15/10). The smuggler in the community of

origin receives the first payment for recruitment of the migrant. After crossing the first segment of the route north, the smuggler then sells the human cargo for a small sum of money. As delivery pay-off gets closer and risk of apprehension decreases, the price of the migrant increases and the human cargo changes hands many times. This system mirrors how investors deal with risk in commodity and financial markets; it is a form of hedging against the increased risks posed by intensified policing. Indeed, migrants hire smugglers, because they can often better judge risk. Consistent with Mexican migrants' experiences with coyotes crossing into the United States, coyotes who cross Mexico are 'risk managers' (Sheridan 2009, p.66). By complicating the attribution of blame when violence occurs and distancing social relationships between client and service provider, both of these schemes undermine the reputational and personal mechanisms that could enforce a smuggler-migrant contract. This tactical displacement thereby exacerbates the insecurity of migrants en route. Over time, practices developed by migrants and smugglers to evade immigration control have exacerbated migrants' exposure to violence perpetrated by criminal gangs. Both risk and uncertainty have increased.

In other words, a smuggler is not an immutable social category, but includes people that engage in a transient practice that overlaps with other social practices, including activities motivated by both reciprocity and economic profit. Likewise, 'kidnapper' is not an immutable social category, but a transient practice that overlaps with other social practices, including smuggling. In some social contexts, officials may be corrupt, but not others. Finally, despite the youth gangs' emphasis on lifetime membership, fealty, and the indelibility of tattoos, it too represents a transient practice

overlapping with other social practices and relationships. The key for understanding the human security of migrants is to examine the social practices that link the activities of these actors as they move across a violent landscape.

To be Kidnapped

The desperate Honduran man discovered what happens to a migrant when they fall into the clutches of the Zetas, and he lived to tell about it. The friend in Veracruz, now under contract as their guide north, took them in trucks to another guide in Reynosa. But the contract suddenly changed. The new guide wanted another \$3500 in addition to the original bargain. The new guide began to negotiate with relatives in the United States, and the migrants were kept locked in a safe house with insufficient food. The young man estimates that 140 men and 36 women were in this house. The guides, now acting as kidnapers, extorted money from relatives in the United States, and they repeatedly raped the women.

To celebrate Christmas 2008, the kidnapers drank heavily. Only two of the six armed-men had been left to guard the house, and they were outside making fajitas. As they became aware of the lax security during the holiday celebrations, the migrants had an idea; they would escape as soon as the New Year's Eve festivities began. He and his friend organized a group of forty captive migrants to escape.

Unfortunately, hunger overcame one skinny migrant, and he alerted the guards to the plan in an attempt to receive larger food rations. The kidnapers subsequently identified the four masterminds of the escape. When they first separated the young man and the three other plotters from the larger group of migrants, he thought his relatives must have paid his ransom. He expected to be released. But very suddenly,

they started hitting him with a pistol in the chest and head. They tied his arms behind his back and took him to a second safe house, where the kidnapers held another large group of migrants. He slept that night with his hands tied uncomfortably behind his back.

One member of his group of four masterminds was a man from San Pedro Sula, Honduras. He was a Christian. They came for him on a Friday and said, “You are on the way to Houston.” But instead, they took him to the Rio Bravo where they cut off his head with a machete and threw the body in the river. On Saturday, they showed the video of his beheading to the remaining three masterminds of the escape plot. They told the young man that it would be his turn on Monday. He knew he would soon be dead.

However, the young man and his two co-conspirators began to talk to the other migrants in the safe house. There were people from Brazil, Guatemala, Peru, Nicaragua, Ecuador, a few from El Salvador and even a Chinese person. But most of the victims were Hondurans. All of the migrants had been tricked into thinking they were dealing with coyotes and brought only to the drop house in Reynosa instead of the United States. Many people had been held captive four to six months, and some had been there as long as a year. That Sunday, six Nicaraguan migrants agreed that it was time to escape. At five am, when it was still dark, they turned off the electricity, and everyone began to fight the kidnapers, wielding a pitchfork and anything else they could get their hands on. He saw one person killed with the pitchfork. All of the migrants on the bottom floor of the house escaped. They broke the windows, smashed through them. Blood drenched the floor.

By seven or eight in the morning, the kidnappers had regained sufficient control to move over one hundred victims, including the man who told me this story, from the top floor to a neighboring house. The kidnappers squeezed these people into three cramped rooms that already housed over one hundred people. The man estimated that the little house held around 340 victims. A Honduran kidnapper with a gun guarded the new house. Monday morning dawned, and four Zetas arrived to take the young man to his death. By this time, the desperate young man was thin and close to starvation.

At that moment, when the four Zetas arrived to take the man to his death, the military and police raided the house. The soldiers had beaten a kidnapper found in the abandoned safe house next door, hit him in the head with a rifle butt, and smashed his teeth to get information. He disclosed where the migrants were held. The military surrounded the house in a big circle so that no one could escape, but few of the migrants ran. The migrants had made an agreement among themselves not to run when the police came, to stay and give their testimony rather than evade deportation. Despite this agreement, the desperate young man ran and hid in the garage, where a soldier found him. Upon being discovered, he gave a silent signal to indicate the hidden position of a kidnapper nearby. The soldier then discovered and beat the kidnapper, and the young man re-joined the migrants, now in official custody.

The police and military rescued the young man from the kidnappers on January 4, 2009. He and sixty other migrants gave their testimony in Reynosa, and then they were promptly turned over to the migration authorities. He did not know about the Mexican FM3 visa, designed for victims of crime who give testimony, he would have

been eligible to receive. In 2007, the Mexican government acquiesced to human rights advocates and established these humanitarian visas (Amnesty International 2010, p.29). Unfortunately, like this desperate young man, few migrants seem capable of accessing these visas, or even aware that they are entitled to them.

In fact, to his surprise, they turned them over to the same migration officials who had visited the kidnappers' house. They were part of the same group of Zetas. Of course, neither he nor the other victims said anything, because they were afraid. The desperate young man reasoned that the migration authorities could let the Zetas kill them while they remained in official custody, because the police had only caught the guards at the safe house, not the bosses. Even the soldiers had their faces covered for their own protection. Fortunately, a special police force and consular officials from some of the home countries accompanied them during the deportation process.

Over a month after his rescue from the kidnappers, the young man was deported from Mexico to Honduras with the same friend who had accompanied him throughout the hideous experience. His friend left immediately again for the United States, but the young man could not. He had been beaten savagely, taking blows to the head. And he was so skinny. He needed medical attention and vitamins. He rested in Honduras for a year before trying again.

Then and Now

In December 2010, when I met him in the migrant shelter in Oaxaca on his third journey through Mexico, the desperate man felt confident that he now had better information about where the dangers were. The contours of these dangers had begun to take shape in his mental map. He explained that MS territory extends for some part

and then the Zeta territory begins. He had heard rumors that the contact who betrayed him during the last journey is now an infamous boss of a clique of Zetas in Medias Aguas, Veracruz, the next stop north of Ixtepec on the western train route.

While he expressed greater confidence that he could locate the dangers on a map, he had suddenly found himself more vulnerable to these dangers. He had come to know the route, but in the process, the *maras* had come to know him. As a result, he had to abandon his original plan to travel north by train. A friend had come through this shelter only three months before, and reported that there had not been a gang problem. However, now in the shelter, he had come to believe that the gangs had infiltrated the place. The desperate man watched gang members wander the grounds at night, and they returned for a meal during the daytime.

The gang's entry into the shelter made him nervous, because a handful of gang members, armed with a knife, had attempted to rob him after he disembarked the train and walked toward the shelter. In response, he and his friends had picked up rocks and threatened their would-be attackers. After that incident, the gang knew him and could recognize him as one of the migrants who resisted them. He feared that they might seek their revenge. In fact, he believed that they sent a black Honduran man to spy on him⁷⁹: "From street gangs to *Zetas*, there is danger on every side. Before, one could pass like it was nothing.... This time there is no social interaction. Now, I cannot confide in other people." He lamented how he must now assume the worst of people, but he repeated that he had seen, with his own eyes, the black Honduran with the gang

⁷⁹ After watching the accused man visit the shelter multiple times, I interviewed him and he did not admit to any involvement with the gang. I did not push the matter, but the allegations against him seem plausible, because he spent a great deal of time along the route on the tracks in the company of others with ties to the street gangs.

that had attempted to rob him. Because of the likelihood that the gang would hunt him down for resisting them, the desperate young man received advice from the shelter manager about a little-known bus route; he lacked the anonymity necessary to travel the train route safely.

Conclusion

This chapter describes the anonymous, violent and uncertain social context of migrant journeys. It charts the black and gray zones of the route (O'Donnell 2004; Levi 1988), in which the dramatic and unexpected changes in the relationships between migrants, coyotes, Zetas, mareros and Mexican officials have unfolded along the routes over three decades of mass migration. Despite this veil of uncertainty and ambiguity, we must not conflate the many actors involved in diverse clandestine activities along the routes. The relationships between coyotes and kidnapers vary between collaboration and conflict with important consequences for migrant safety. People change their roles without warning; coyotes or police may become kidnapers. Friends and travel companions report to kidnapers. Mareros and Zetas may strike deals. When street gangs become a nuisance, Zetas hunt them. So-called Zetas may be imposters, and common criminals manipulate cases of mistaken identity to their advantage. Members of the same gang may turn on one another, battling for control and collaborating with enemies. In summary, loyalties are more ephemeral than the tattoos they wear.

Indeed, loyalties are often crosscutting, as individuals who wander the route trespass across multiple social roles and identities, as well as across terrain. A gang member might be a migrant, a Central American by birth, an adopted member of a

Mexican community, a man, a friend, a boyfriend, husband, a Catholic, a father, an occasional kidnapper or bandit, and a part-time coyote. Pulled in many directions, these conflicted souls might collaborate with one another one day and combat the next. As they wander lost in the land of lotus-eaters, their own odysseys to the United States derailed, gang members struggle for power within their own cliques, as well as against competing gangs. The result is uncertainty and ambiguity for all migrants.

A Story of a Conflicted Soul: The Informer

In December 2010 in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, where the routes north bottleneck in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, a mass kidnapping, the murder of a *marero* and threats against the life of the shelter priest provoked one such conflicted soul to turn informer against his own street gang. When a competing group within his own gang collaborated with the Zetas, the informer sang to human rights activists and police (fieldnotes 5/13/11). Sometimes his loyalties seemed to lie with the priest and the abused Central Americans along the route. Killing time with small talk in the dusty yard of the shelter, the informer would shake his head and lament the exploitation of his fellow migrants (e.g. fieldnotes 1/14/11). On occasion, he would announce his commitment to protect them by any means necessary, savoring the idea of being a ‘social bandit’ riding the rails to bring justice (Hobsbawm 1959, p.13-29). At other times, he would commit crimes against his fellow migrants, or work as a recruiter for smugglers (fieldnotes 3/28/11). A cynic might view his testimony to authorities as pure power politics, rather than a crisis of conscience (e.g. government official 4/28/11). He had murdered people, after all. The informer vied for control of the Arriaga-Ixtepec smuggling corridor with challengers from both inside and outside the

ranks of his own gang, and he might have expected the police to clear away his competition for him.

Thus, while the tattoo on the side of his face marked him as a member of the MS 13, his identity was more complicated. By his own admission, he was neither Mexican nor Central American anymore. As an unaccompanied child, he had left Honduras behind, beginning an indefinite odyssey along the train tracks (fieldnotes 1/14/11; 5/30/11). He improvised a living with the materials at hand, and had performed many roles in his time.

When I met him, he had been hiding in the migrant shelter with a girlfriend, taking refuge from his own gang. He left Ixtepec for the last time when people began to gossip and warn that someone was coming to get him, whether he remained under the protection of the shelter priest or not. The informer had many enemies, before and after his betrayal, and his ultimate disappearance from the route triggered many rumors. Some people (myself among them) wanted to believe that he had faked his own death and went into hiding, maybe in Mexico City (fieldnotes 5/30/11). However, the general consensus among migrants and shelter staff was that he had died. Some migrants passing through the shelter heard the rumor that his own gang killed him. Others whispered in hushed tones that it was the Zetas who killed him and then dissolved his body in acid (fieldnotes 5/13/11). A mutual friend told me different stories on various occasions. When I pressed him on the inconsistencies, he responded with mild exasperation that all the stories were probably true (fieldnotes 5/12/11).

In this case, the acceptance of inconsistencies is not evasive; it is instructive about the nature of truth, violence and uncertainty along the migratory route. Given the

complex and fluid relationships along the route, there will never be a final answer about the violence: who did it and why. There is no expectation that a court of law can arrive at the truth, and there is no expectation among migrants that only one uncontested truth about violence exists.⁸⁰ Indeed, when I asked a legal advocate for migrants about the possibility of justice in the courts, she laughed, “Justice...ha ha...that’s a big word. Go ask the priest about that.” In an uncertain context that implicates authorities in violence, this attitude is simply realistic, not jaded. Within an ambiguous and uncertain social structure, multiple plausible alternative versions of a violent event can co-exist, long after formal arrests have been made and the official investigation comes to a close. As Ellen Moodie (2011, p.14) explains in her analysis of the socio-political role of crime narratives in the aftermath of the Salvadoran peace accords:

What is important is that people imagined a common shape of their world. What is important that the stories had patterns- and that they were seen (or rather, heard) as possible....They created convictions, social facts, structures of feelings, senses of reality that had effects. They had consequences in and on the world. Consciousness cannot be false in that sense.

The co-existence of multiple unofficial versions (and the lack of credibility of official versions) of criminal events says something important about the actors and alliances that perpetrate that violence. The relationships among these actors are extraordinarily flexible. Along the route today, people betray their loyalties, transgress agreements and rebuild relationships. *Nothing is settled*. People may not be able to distinguish between kidnapers, authorities, smugglers, and migrants, because

⁸⁰ This is the janus-faced nature of violence in Central America, defined by Elana Zilberg (2007, p.39), drawing on the work of Begona Aretxaga (1998, p.2) as a “a montage of interlocking images and imaginaries...a fragmented gaze” that functions “through a discourse of conspiracy.”

individuals switch roles without warning. The uncertainty produced by such ambiguities has a profound impact on how migrants and smugglers navigate the route. In the next chapter of this dissertation, we will begin to explore how migrants negotiate with these chimerical characters and navigate the dark cave that is the migratory route.

CHAPTER 4
INFORMING ROUTES: A MORAL ECONOMY OF LOCAL SMUGGLING
MARKETS IN TWO SALVADORAN HOMETOWNS

Introduction

Rumor the herald sped like wildfire through the city,
Crying out the news of the suitors' bloody death and doom
And massing from every quarter as they listened, kinsmen milled
With wails and moans of grief before Odysseus' palace.

Rumor is a herald that motivates the plot of the *Odyssey*. Rumors about Odysseus' location, his actions and the misdeeds committed by the suitors against him travel across an anarchic landscape through gossip. These word-of-mouth messages potentially impugn reputations. They alternately sow distrust, anger, fear and hope, thereby impelling characters to fulfill fate. Likewise, rumors animate the drama of migration from rural Central America. Information circulates along the transnational route, spreading like wildfire in the aftermath of tragedy. Rumors may damage the social reputation of migrants and smugglers, thereby provoking vengeance. They circulate distrust, anger, fear and hope within a community. Rumors about migration permeate hometowns, conveyed through social networks, and they are often migrants' primary source of information about the migratory route. However, in reality, these rumors seldom provide clarity.

Given the tendency of information to flow through social networks, research suggests that communities with a long migration history develop informational advantages. This research implies a strong tendency toward path dependence for migration flows; we would expect that early start communities fare better during the journey.¹ Drawing on

¹ James Mahoney (2000) explains that 'path dependence' is a small, contingent event triggering a larger pattern over time. The concept has described a wide variety of processes,

fieldwork among Mexican migrants from 1998 to 2004, David Spener (2004, p.315-316) speculates that migrants from new sending areas may initially lack the human and social capital that might ensure safe arrival, leaving them more vulnerable to abuse and assault in transit. Spener's (2001; 2004; 2009) approach emphasizes the 'social embeddedness' of unauthorized migration and the smuggling markets that facilitate travel under conditions of policing.² Likewise, as David Kyle and Marc Scarcelli (2009, p.298-299) explain in their comparison of violence along Cuban and Haitian migratory routes to the United States:

Violence is not a necessary part of migrant smuggling organizations, which are embedded within wider social networks, cultural norms and contractual relationships....The smuggling contract both exposes migrants to risks, including violence, and, at the same time, prevents violent coercion from being a central feature of clandestine migration industries. Nonetheless, there are distinct patterns and conditions in which violence, both en route and after arrival, are likely to occur.

Beginning with an understanding of smuggling and unauthorized migration routes as rooted within this context of "social networks, cultural norms and contractual relationships", this chapter examines what migrants from different communities know about violence before the journey begins, and where this information comes from. Therefore, I explore the social context of smuggler-client contracts and rumors of violence in two migrant hometowns in El Salvador. I ask what people know about the journey before it begins, what role interpersonal networks play in transmitting that information, and whether beliefs about the journey vary across different migrant sending

ranging from technological innovation to economic theories of increasing returns (e.g. David 1985, Easterly 2002). In the study of migration, Douglas Massey et al. (1993) call this tendency 'cumulative causation'.

² Highlighting the role of the social networks that underpin economic transactions, Mark Granovetter (1985, p.487-491) explains 'social embeddedness' as a "concrete, ongoing system of social relations" which grounds the economy.

communities. To do so, I compare and contrast the experiences and information of migrants from two Salvadoran towns with divergent migration histories. Then, using interviews with migrants of other nationalities along the routes through Mexico and the United States, I ground the analysis of these two Salvadoran towns in a larger regional context.

My findings run against accepted wisdom that dominates the field of migration studies. These findings also run against my own initial expectations for the research. Based on accepted wisdom, I had initially expected to observe community-level variation in the quality, intensity and frequency of rumors about violence circulating within the two Salvadoran communities. I also expected to observe more frequent first hand reports of violence in the community with a shorter migration history. Finally, I expected to find evidence of the stabilizing impact of reputation mechanisms and more precise information about the behavior of particular smugglers in the community with the long migration history. However, I did not find any such variation.

Ultimately, I explain why the smuggling markets and migration flows embedded in the two towns do *not* fit the expected model of path dependence. Migrants from towns with a long migration history do not necessarily have an informational advantage over migrants from towns with a short migration history. In fact, the attrition of the town's available social capital and internal migration gives rise to cross-country familial networks that reshape the boundaries of 'community'. A cultural norm based on a belief in 'envidia' (envy) generates an obstacle to resource flows by undermining community solidarity and cohesion.

Thus, I find greater evidence of variation in resources at the level of the *family*, as opposed to the hometown. While much scholarship on Mexican migration emphasizes hometown networks, Lynnaire Sheridan (2009, p.167) notes that, even where community is important, “without a doubt, the number one risk management tool for unauthorized Mexican migrants is family”. In the Central American context, family networks are the most important financial resource for migrants before the journey begins. In addition to providing migrants with money, families play a vital role as potential retribution systems in enforcing contracts in local smuggling markets. These findings contrast with previous research conducted by scholars in Mexico who emphasized community migration histories (e.g. Spener 2009).

The role of these family networks is primarily financial. Migrants with more money can more easily adapt to unexpected situation en route, ranging from the renegotiation of smuggling contracts to payments for ransoms or bribes. For this reason, migrants receiving remittances from family members in the United States have an advantage. These migrants from families with a long migration history are better prepared to cope with uncertainty, but not necessarily better informed, than migrants without family sponsorship.

In contrast to the important financial role of family for migrant safety, I emphasize the contingent and fallible nature of these migrant family networks as an information resource, given the present reality of the route. Migrants understand that information can outlive its utility. When I locate changes and gaps in information flows, I also ask: What do migrants *not* know about the routes before the journey begins? I explain that migrants have ample knowledge about the dangers of the route, but they cannot judge the

probability that the dangers might befall them during a specific journey. Recent violence along the route in Mexico is restructuring relationships between smugglers and criminal territory bosses, generating uncertainty for even experienced migrants and established smugglers. The rules of the game are subject to change. Indeed, migrants are aware that even information from trustworthy sources (or even recent personal experience) might be outdated by the time it is applied en route, and this awareness erodes confidence in all information. A common refrain is that “no two trips are ever alike”, even for the most experienced migrant or smuggler. I point to the ramifications of this uncertainty for migrant strategy and safety.

In summary, the social world of the migrants mirrors the social landscape of the Odyssey. It is a social reality where family ties, not community ties, matter. As it was for Odysseus, social reputation matters more than market reputation for smugglers; where luck and divine will dominates, the sense of a man’s character is more powerful than a record of transactions and kept promises. It is an anarchic world, with social contracts grounded in family and the use of force, as opposed to community regulation and market-cooperation. For smugglers, the threat of violent retribution is more important than potential changes in consumer behavior. Finally, the route is a fluid entity where rumors may outlive their utility, becoming misleading and mistrusted artifacts.

Methods

In this chapter, I leverage my experiences and interviews along the route with migrants from various nationalities and diverse communities of origin (both urban and rural) to interpret and occasionally augment findings from extensive interviews in a paired comparison of two Salvadoran home communities. El Salvador provided an

excellent starting point for a community-level analysis. Salvadoran migratory and political patterns both exhibit strong spatial variation at the level of municipality. El Salvador is a small country with enormous contemporary migratory and remittance flows that have left an indelible imprint on the social and economic landscape. Susan Gammage (2006) maintains that a “transit economy” now dominates El Salvador, and thus shapes Salvadoran society and politics. To put the magnitude of migration in perspective, it is helpful to consider that the Salvadoran Ministry of Foreign Affairs claims that roughly a quarter of the Salvadoran citizenry lives in the United States (Coutin 2007, p.7). The Salvadoran case exemplifies global migration processes, but in their most extreme incarnation. These characteristics bring causal relationships surrounding migration routes and migrant strategies into focus, and facilitate theory building through process tracing.³

Given the dynamic and clandestine nature of Central American migration, all perceptions of the route through Mexico and into the United States are necessarily partial. All documentary evidence of this migration and its companion practices is, by definition, incomplete. How can we understand the route from migrant sending communities, when unauthorized migration and criminal violence remain shrouded in official secrecy, thus precluding the possibility of a reliable objective record?

To begin, I triangulated information sources, both from within the towns and from the outside, to develop a sense of the situation that confronts migrants. I interviewed a wide variety of actors of different nationalities along the routes from origin to destination.

³ Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett (2004, p.6) explain that, “in process tracing, the researcher examines histories, archival documents, interview transcripts and other sources to see whether the causal process a theory hypothesizes or implies is in fact evident in the sequence and values of the intervening variables in that case”. In the two Salvadoran towns, I began with hypothesis testing, but used process tracing to construct a new theory when my original expectations proved false.

Importantly, my own sense of the situation does not represent a more complete account of the violence than does the viewpoint of migrants from these towns, but I use information drawn from diverse sources to interpret the stories told in the two towns. Second, I compared and contrasted the information available to particular migrants from different hometowns and first hand reports of violence against those migrants. I judged the reliability of these autobiographical reports with interpersonal assessments, alternative narratives and social understanding accumulated during participant observation. Third, I traced rumors in the towns, attempting to identify their origins and track changes in those narratives over multiple tellings. I frequently asked townspeople whether they had confidence in their information and why. Finally, I searched for outliers who believed different information than seemed generally available to other residents, and I conducted oral histories with those people to understand what explained this divergence.

These interviews are not a survey. Some participants produced long narratives with very little prompting, while others waited for directed questions to discuss their experiences. Ethnographic interviews often begin with a set of questions, but permit conversations to emerge and allow participants to have a high level of control over the direction and pace of questioning, particularly about sensitive topics.⁴ The result is not a simple ledger for accuracy, but systematic qualitative documentation of what people believe to be true and why.

During these conversations, it was the very opacity of the migration context, and how migrants navigate it, that most drew my attention. People often expressed skepticism that

⁴ Lee Ann Fuji (2009), Ellen Moodie (2010) and Elisabeth Jean Wood (2003) exemplify this tradition of ethnographic interviewing about violence.

anyone could believe *anything* about the route, beyond a faith in God that would guide them through inevitable sacrifice and suffering. Indeed, in the face of rapidly changing dangers along the unauthorized routes and a dearth of *specific*, reliable information about dangers, migrants from both communities struggle to plot their course. Nobody (not migrants, government officials or academics) can say with certainty that a migrant from one community has human security advantages over a migrant from another community. By tracing what migrants from different towns believe about the route and what townspeople believe about each other, I identified reasons to believe that no community-level patterns in migrant vulnerability to violence in transit likely exist for migrants leaving El Salvador.

Case Selection

Research for this chapter began where the migratory journey often begins: walking along those cobblestone and dirt roads in rural towns in El Salvador. I selected two similar towns with divergent migration histories: one with early migration onset (Town A) and one with more recent migration onset (Town B).⁵ The selection criteria for the two communities constitute a most similar systems design (Przeworski and Teune 1970 cited by Lijphart 1971).⁶ While any number of places in El Salvador could have been

⁵ Town A is easily identified with the information provided here, and I do not fear its identification. Nevertheless, the names of these communities will be withheld to protect the confidentiality of study participants in Town B. I believe that, given the collaboration of key local people from that community, it is not prudent to reveal the location of Town B at this time.

⁶ Despite considerable effort made in both places, my time investment and level of engagement was deeper in Town B than in Town A, resulting in higher participation and better responses in Town B. The decision to spend more time in Town B, where no written history of local migration processes exists, was strategic. Of the ninety participants in this phase of the study, twenty-four participants were living in Town A, fifty-five participants were

selected as a town with early migration onset, scholars and journalists have visited Town A for over two decades to study migration processes, thereby producing a rich secondary literature that provides a window into the past and a context for the interpretation of my own ethnographic fieldwork (e.g. Montes 1987; Pedersen 2003; Pedersen 2012).⁷

Both towns have pre-conquest origins and indigenous names with obscure meanings, largely forgotten by the present Spanish-speaking population that retains little awareness of their long concealed and ostensibly lost indigenous heritage (Lardé y Larín 2000). Though located on opposite sides of the country in the departments of La Unión and La Libertad, both towns straddle the boundary between coffee country and the coastline. They are heads of counties (i.e. *municipios*) that span both small plantations and beachfront properties.

Given their similarities in terrain and agricultural production, it would be easy to imagine that the two towns would share similar economic trajectories in the absence of divergent migration histories. Despite Town A's fame as a magnet for remittances from its diaspora in the United States, some students still miss school during the harvest to earn

from Town B, and eleven participants (family members of disappeared migrants, activists, police officers and government officials) were from urban areas of El Salvador.

⁷ Town A has been used as the exemplar of the extreme expression of long-term migration processes by a number of well-known sources, including in Samuel Huntington's anti-immigrant diatribe (2004, p.206). It seems that whenever a reporter or analyst travels to El Salvador for a story on entrenched emigration, they pay homage to Town A. A road sign pointing to the town illustrates the cover of the UNDP (2005) report on El Salvador, highlighting the importance of migration to the national economy. In response, David Pedersen (2012) complicates the mythmaking that surrounds Town A's reputation as the "city of the dollar". He argues that the town's widely accepted remittance-led success story represents only an experience of the local elite, and he traces the insertion of the town into transnational capital flows through narratives of daily life in the town to broader trends in global political economy, including the local-global transformations wrought by the Salvadoran civil war period and subsequent neoliberal restructuring of the regional economy of Latin America. His detailed telling of the lived experience of this migration mecca and his observations about the changes in the community over time are broadly compatible with my analysis.

piece-rate wages that supplement their families' incomes, just as they do in Town B. Both towns have long participated in El Salvador's agricultural economy, in national decline since 1930s Depression-era cutbacks in coffee production (Gould and Santiago 2008, p.58; Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991, p.102) and the economic restructuring caused by the civil war (Wood 2000, p.54-62). Cotton production has also long been a mainstay in Town A, but it suffered major setbacks in the 1960s with fluctuations in global prices and never fully recovered its market value (Pedersen 2012, p.92-93). Local economic development and distribution in both municipios follows a core-periphery model, common in rural El Salvador, in which the town center represents a privileged position (home to the mayor's office, more expensive real estate and most wealth) while the population of the surrounding neighborhoods (i.e. *colonias*) in the municipio seem relatively deprived, with the exception of the coastal hotel strips.⁸ The proximity of the towns to the coast provides opportunities for tourism development, a nascent but quickly growing industry in both places.⁹

Politically, the two towns share a common history. At the time of fieldwork, neither town had ever elected a mayor belonging to the FMLN, the political party that emerged from the leftist insurgency during the peace process.¹⁰ During the civil war period (1979-

⁸ For more detailed analysis of these inequalities and how migration has structured them in Town A, see Pedersen (2012). His account provides detailed discussion of the layers of movement between the margins and core of the town.

⁹ Wealthy Salvadoran urbanites own vacation homes along the beach near Town A, but the diaspora has fueled the tourism boom. In addition to hosting day tourists from the capital, the coastal area near Town B has a new and thriving international backpacker and surfer scene, which is less dependent on the 'nostalgia tourism' of the diaspora.

¹⁰ In Town A, the reputation of the right-wing ARENA party was severely damaged by a corruption scandal, and the party has not won a mayoral election since the early 1990s (Pedersen 2013, p.203-204). Instead, centrist parties, like the PDC, were most popular at the local level. The Salvadoran Supreme Court eliminated the PDC and PCN in 2011, but they

1992), both towns fell under military control, challenged only a handful of times by sporadic raids made by guerilla forces (community member, 1/29/10; Montes 1987, p.170). While a common history of political repression shaped both communities and their surrounding areas during this time period, neither locale became a depopulated battlefield like the mountainous departments of the FMLN-controlled north or a violent contested zone like the low lying areas where insurgency had taken hold among the peasantry (Wood 2003, pgs. 52-60). If insurgent land occupations can be used as an indicator of the strength of leftist organizing and insurgent participation during the final phase of the war period, the departments of La Libertad and La Union (locations of Town A and Town B respectively) rate similarly low, both with only 1.8% of the area occupied (as opposed to a high of 25.3% of the contested low lying department of Usulután) (pgs. 84-85).¹¹

Despite these similarities, the two towns developed very different migration stories. Town A is located in the far southeast of the country in the department of La Union. In that town, widespread economic dislocation from economic sabotage and nearby wartime destruction generated an early mass emigration that built upon meager migrant networks to the United States established prior to the outbreak of the civil war (Montes 1987,

were reborn under new names. In Town B, ARENA dominates local politics, challenged by a vocal local faction of the FMLN that has yet to win a mayoral election. The conservative GANA party was established and entered a national governing coalition with the liberal FMLN during my fieldwork in January 2010. At that time, it was too early to predict the reception of the new party in the rural areas where I worked.

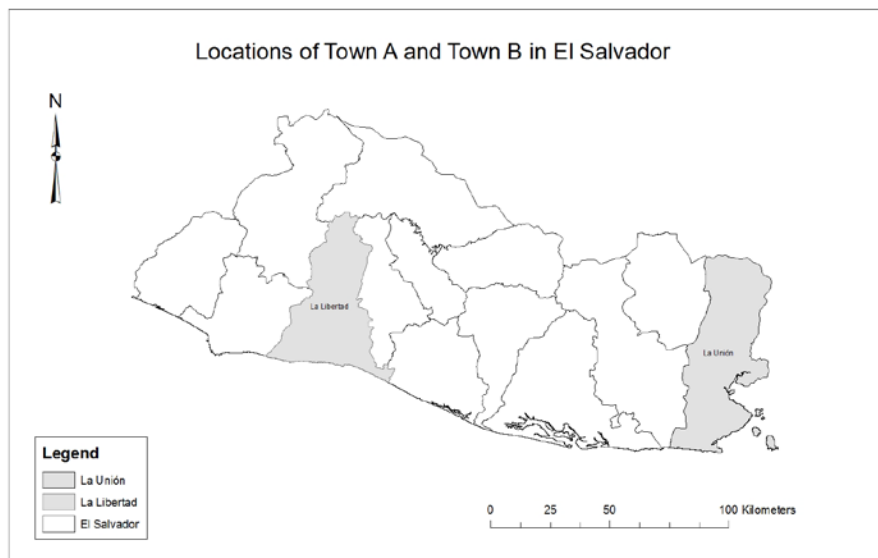
¹¹ While it is impossible to say whether the people of Town B participated in the 1932 rebellion (and I have uncovered no mention of it), similar villages throughout this Western region rebelled and suffered violent oppression afterwards (Gould and Santiago 2008). The genocidal repercussions of this rebellion forced the rapid and near complete integration of indigenous peoples in El Salvador into the nation-state.

p.170).¹² The first known emigrant to the United States from the town left in 1967, over a decade before the war began (Montes 1987, p.170). By 1987, Segundo Montes, the first researcher of Salvadoran refugee flows, was hard pressed to locate a local family without relatives in the United States, and U.S. remittances had already begun to change the material landscape of the town (pgs.171-173).

In contrast, Town B, located in the La Libertad department, became a refuge of relative calm and economic stability during the war period. Only a trickle of migrants left in response to political repression and forced military recruitment. Emigration from Town B accelerated only after a series of natural disasters (mayor, 11/4/09). A severe earthquake devastated the zone in 2001, causing many homes to collapse. Hurricane Stan struck Town B hard in 2003. And in 2006, the town experienced an extremely windy season that caused widespread hardship. Emigration also increased nationally during the last decade, as crime and unemployment motivated Salvadorans to leave.

¹² Some young men also left in response to forced military recruitment (Montes 1987, p.173).

Figure 4.1: Map of the Departments of El Salvador



The map shows the locations of the fieldwork sites in El Salvador. Town A is located in La Unión to the east. Town B is located in La Libertad to the west. To put the distances into perspective, El Salvador is roughly the size of the U.S. state of Massachusetts.

Until the civil war, the two towns seemed to share a common demographic destiny. Today, however, the staggered start of the two migration flows is readily apparent to any visitor. Town A, which only three decades ago was just a collection of simple adobe structures, is now famous for its developed infrastructure (banks, tourist agencies, cultural center, road signs and commerce), large U.S.-style homes and English street names. However, it houses relatively few inhabitants; population in Town A grew slowly from an estimated 5,000 people in 1987 (Montes 1987, p.170) to just over 7,500 people in 2007 (with nearly 3,000 people living in the town center and over 4,500 people living in the more rural surrounding colonias, i.e. roughly 38% urbanized in the town center (DIGESTYC 2007)). The center square of the community, “Parque de las/los Emigrantes” (Emigrant Plaza), boasts of its long migration history with a statue of the

first migrant to the United States and photos of his family who now reside in New Jersey. Several of the large US-style homes sit empty, waiting for holiday visits from Salvadorans naturalized abroad.

Figure 4.2: Emigrant Plaza with the Statue of the First Migrant: Town A



The statue, a man carrying a backpack and looking back over his shoulder, pays homage to the “first migrant” in the Emigrant Plaza in Town A. (Photo Credit: the author)

Town B has a stable economy and less poverty compared to more remote areas of the Salvadoran countryside. While not poor by Salvadoran standards and home to continuing construction of two-story cement buildings even in the context of an economic downturn, the town center has fewer large U.S.-style homes than Town A. The town center of B also has several small, simple adobe structures packed with large families. A handful of locally owned restaurants and small shops recently put up signs to attract customers, but

the residents of Town B must still travel nearly an hour by bus to reach a bank or ATM. The 2009 El Salvador census estimates the population of Town B's municipio at just over 13,000 people (with nearly 4,000 people living in the town center and over 9,000 people living in the surrounding colonias, i.e. 29.2% urbanized in the town center) (DIGESYTC 2007).

Given the differences in the material environment of the two towns, the uninitiated observer should be forgiven for thinking B is smaller than A, despite the fact that the municipio of B has almost twice the resident population of the municipio of A. Indeed, the arrival of Town A's first bank in 1996 caused at least one resident to reflect differently about the size of his town and proclaim that "...we are no longer a pueblo [small town]. We are a ciudad [city]. No, we are a villa [large town]- something in between" (quoted in Pedersen 2003, p. 431). In terms of population, however, Town A remains relatively small, at least excluding its sizeable expat community that lives in the United States (for which estimates vary wildly, but there might be about 7,000 people abroad). While the two towns fit the population category of medium-size rural Salvadoran communities, the contrast between them, a legacy of Town A's head start in the migration circuit, is stark.

Initial Expectations Based on Migration Literature

Across Central America and Mexico, the most important migratory strategy is contracting with a paid guide (i.e. a *coyote*).¹³ Migrants without access to reputable coyotes are in the greatest physical danger of apprehension and abuse during their journey (Singer and Massey 1998; Spener 2001; Spener 2004). Coyotes' importance

¹³ Migrants use various words to describe their smugglers: 'coyote', 'pollero', and 'guia' (guide) are the most common in conversation. I use these terms interchangeably.

increases as policing intensifies (Andreas 2000; Spener 2001; Spener 2004). Secondary sources have documented a diverse array of human smugglers specializing in different ‘travel packages’ (Kyle 2000; Kyle and Siracusa 2005; Spener 2001; Spener 2004; Spener 2009).

Using survey data from 34 Mexican sending communities, Singer and Massey (1998) find that migration-specific social capital influences the likelihood of hiring a paid guide. In addition to personal experience that accumulates at the individual level, the information conveyed through social networks proves invaluable for such contracts for entire communities; “family friends show the migrants how to bargain on price and how to extract guarantees for services rendered, and they teach them how to behave if and when they are apprehended and what to expect upon arrest” (p.566). Following this research, we should expect the content of coyote contracts to vary between communities with established migratory networks and those without such networks. In other words, migrant social capital is an important resource for coyote-migrant transactions, and ultimately migrant safety from violence in transit.

In northern Mexican communities, research has documented several informal institutional components that stabilize and facilitate the market for these services. At an individual level, the ‘culture of migration’ generates expectations of mobility (Kandel and Massey 2002). At the community level, social networks enhance both informational and financial resources, thereby increasing opportunities for migration. Concomitantly, an etiquette emerges surrounding the departure, journey, smuggler contacts and remittances. These practices and social networks perpetuate a cycle of movement from

particular places, and fuel the path dependent character of migratory flows (Gaytan et al. 2007; Singer and Massey 1998).

Payment and customer recruitment protocols facilitate the coyote-migrant transactions in migrant communities (Kyle and Scarcelli 2009, p.308-309; Spener 2004; Spener 2009). In the absence of a state to enforce contracts, these protocols constitute preconditions for coyote bargains. They are the basis for private order. Furthermore, variation in these protocols may change the relative importance of reputation and the ability of both parties to monitor the contract. Therefore, they can structure the incentives for other important aspects of the travel arrangements, such as the likelihood of violence in the undocumented migration process (Kyle and Scarcelli 2009, p.308-309). Indeed, these protocols may dictate when migrants are treated as commodities or customers.

Drawing on this approach, I originally expected that the sequencing of migratory flows and policing should matter. Migratory flows become institutionalized overtime. All other things equal, the timing of a community's insertion into transnational migratory networks should shape the informational resources available to migrants within that community. Communities with migratory networks and practices institutionalized prior to intensified policing should have greater informational resources than more recent sending communities. These informational resources should result in variation in the modes of smuggler-migrant contract recruitment, payment, and enforcement. In turn, this variation should cause divergent levels of violence in the migratory route from each community with a different migratory history.

Without reputation-based mechanisms and a well-institutionalized market, coyotes may rely more heavily on coercion and become less attentive service providers.

According to this view, variation in violence against migrants from communities with different migration histories should become particularly pronounced during times of most intense policing, when these institutions face external stress. Only the most extraordinarily draconian policing measures would be enough to dislodge well-established reputation-based institutions. However, policing would easily disrupt the early development of these institutions, undermine migrant safety, and exacerbate violence within less well-institutionalized smuggling markets.

For these reasons, in the community with the long migration history (Town A), I expected to find a market for smuggling services in which reputation mechanisms protect migrant customers, as evidenced by: fewer reports of abuse and violent episodes in transit; more accurate information about smuggling services, unauthorized travel service providers and the dangers of the journey; and fewer migrants traveling without the assistance of professional guides. In the community with the short migration history (Town B), I expected to find the opposite. However, despite the strong scholarship that informs this expectation, fieldwork in these two towns refutes it.

Findings

Unauthorized migrants from Town A, with its long migration history, did *not* express different beliefs about the dangers of the route than people from Town B. Town A's early entry to the migration circuit translated into a unique local material culture, expressed by physical structures and formal businesses that testify to its transnational ties to the United States. Nevertheless, interviews reveal that people from Town A generally did not have more information about the reputation of local coyotes or more specific details about the risks of the journey. Migrants from Town A reported very similar fears,

perceptions of mistrust, personal stories of violence, and rumors of violence along the routes as migrants from Town B. Residents of Town A could not agree upon the existence of a particular responsible coyote, or even if honest guides exist at all. Indeed, many people in Town A thought no good local coyote was available and they purchased unauthorized travel services in a nearby city. While some inhabitants of Town B chose to shop elsewhere for their smugglers, most people agreed upon a particular smuggler as responsible and trustworthy: the only local coyote doing business in town at the time of research.

Information about Violence along the Routes

The information about violence along the routes was remarkably similar across the two communities. Study participants reported the same fears about the journey in both places. Most would-be migrants were aware of a wide variety of dangers before their journey, including deportation, rape, kidnapping, death or amputation by train, robberies, drowning deaths, the desert and extortion by corrupt officials. Study participants in both communities also reported distrust in the information they received from other people within their community. There is also some skepticism about information conveyed by newspapers and television news: “They don’t tell is how it is... they only try to make people afraid so they do not leave the country” (e.g. male migrant, 5/18/10). Among migrants who had already traveled the route at least once, firsthand reports of violence were similar in each town, with frequent autobiographical reports of robberies and

assaults in transit, a handful of people cheated by their smugglers and only a few victims of kidnappings, as shown in Figure 4.3:¹⁴

Figure 4.3: Autobiographical Report by Victim or Witness of Crime in Transit¹⁵

Crime	Town A		Town B	
	Victims	Percentage of Returned Migrants Interviewed in A	Victims	Percentage of Returned Migrants Interviewed in B
Robbery/Assault	7	44%	9	43%
Cheated by Smuggler	3	19%	2	7%
Kidnapping	2	13%	3	10%

The Smuggling Market

In the two decades since the refugee flow ended with the cessation of civil war hostilities, the Salvadoran smuggling market has changed. Human smuggling was not illegal in El Salvador until 2003. Until that time, travel agencies in urban areas advertised their capacity to arrange trips to the United States (with or without visa) in their storefronts. Smugglers would offer their services to strangers in the street (male migrant, 4/15/10). In the 1980s and 1990s, want ads boasting of “fast and secure arrival” or “safe trip” with “passport only” (i.e. no visa necessary) filled the travel section of the two major nationally syndicated Salvadoran newspapers, *La Prensa Grafica* and *El Diario de*

¹⁴ I have reason to believe that autobiographical accounts of rapes have been underreported in my interviews. I analyze sexual violence in Chapter 6.

¹⁵To interpret the data in this table, it is important to keep in mind that some returned migrants from both communities traveled decades ago when, by all accounts, the route was less dangerous. Interviews conducted in migrant shelters and train yards report a much higher proportion of migrants who have witnessed or suffered violent crimes than interviews in home or sending communities. A disproportionate number of migrants without high-end coyotes or who have already suffered a catastrophe en route enter the shelters. Furthermore, the longer migrants spend on the train route through Mexico, the more likely it seems to become that they suffer *multiple* incidents of violence.

Hoy.¹⁶ In Town B, I met one man who had migrated during the 1980s through a travel agency in a nearby city (male migrant, 1/15/10). Today, the newspaper want-ads still offer the occasional slyly worded advertisement, but the dominant form of customer recruitment for smugglers is word of mouth.

Despite these changes, it is easy to find a smuggler in any part of El Salvador today, and without traveling a great distance, would-be migrants can find competing guides offering door-to-door transnational service at various price and quality levels. At the time of research, regular door-to-door service from rural El Salvador to a destination in the United States for a healthy adult cost between \$6,000 and \$7,500, from anywhere in the country. Additional expenses apply to special packages designed for children or people with travel restrictions due to poor health.

These prices are common knowledge, like the daily price of tortillas. Smugglers do not hide. In fact, there have been several successful human smugglers-turned-mayors in El Salvador (and presumably other parts of Central America and Mexico); alleged Salvadoran smugglers-turned-mayors include Narciso Ramirez of San Francisco Menendez, Cristobal Aleman Alas of Acajutla, and Mario Osorto of La Union, among others (Marinero 2010). While human smuggling may be illegal, it is widely acceptable,

¹⁶ I reviewed these want ads in the library archive of the Universidad Centroamericana (UCA). Today, the occasional advertisement for “fast and secure travel”, or as Coutin (2007, p.104, f.n.3) observes “arrival guaranteed”, is still listed in newspapers. Some of the change in advertising may not be related to changes in the law, but instead to changes in technology. A quick Google search online provided the phone number of a service provider who offers a “trip to the US fast and secure without visa.” An interview with police and a brief review of victim testimonies in the National Civil Police (PNC) case archives indicate that trafficking networks sometimes use the internet, as well as word of mouth, to lure victims with false advertising for international modeling agencies or other false work opportunities (police officer, San Salvador, 3/4/10).

even honorable.¹⁷ As one Salvadoran human rights activist explained to me during an interview, “coyotes are usually the good guys. Thank God they do what they do...Human smuggling is *not* a crime against humanity” (activist, San Salvador, 11/24/09).¹⁸ With one of the highest homicide rates in the world (second only to Honduras), Salvadoran law enforcement has more pressing concerns than the victimless crime of human smuggling (ICE agent, 2/9/10). Prosecutions of coyotes are rare, and limited to cases in which claimants step forward to press charges (activist, Salvadoran police officer, 11/24/09; 2/25/10).¹⁹ More often than not, disputes with coyotes are settled out of court and outside the law (Salvadoran police officers, 2/15/10; 3/4/10).

While prosecutions in El Salvador are rare, smugglers may have become more wary about crossing the border with their clients as a result of the potential threat of legal punishment (Salvadoran police officer, 3/4/10). However, the intense violence between drug gangs and the changes in criminal territory that accompany the escalation of the drug war in Mexico more seriously increased the risks to Central American smugglers (Martinez 2010, p.138-150). During the 1980s, the person who made a contract with a

¹⁷ Indeed, when I visited the National Civil Police (PNC) and explained the purpose of my visit in passing conversation to various people who inquired about my presence in the station, it prompted personal accounts of officers’ own journeys to the United States and the officers’ families’ dealings with smugglers. Despite the illegality of human smuggling, police and their families must still arrange their passage on the black market: a testament to pervasiveness of migration practice.

¹⁸ Of course, human rights activists want traffickers and *abusive* smugglers to be brought to justice. Human trafficking involves the threat or use of force, unlike smuggling, which is a voluntary relationship between guide and migrant (Shelley 2010, p.10-11). In practice, the boundary between trafficking and smuggling gets blurred.

¹⁹ The most recent high profile attempt to prosecute a smuggler came in the wake of the uproar of ‘the 72’, the high profile discovery of a mass grave of seventy-two Central and South American migrants (and among them fourteen Salvadorans) in Tamaulipas, Mexico in August 2010. Two Salvadoran smugglers were captured and charged with transporting some of these migrants to their deaths, but later released (Chavez 2012). Prosecutors vowed to appeal the court’s ruling.

migrant often served as a guide throughout the journey, at least until the U.S.-Mexico border where they might shift responsibility to a Mexican specialist; this tradition of the 'heroic coyote' seems to be slowly dying (Martínez 2010, p.138-150). Today, only a few for-profit local smugglers brave the journey to check on their local contacts in Mexico; to do so can lead to a long prison term if arrested by police or even death if apprehended by the wrong criminal territory boss (e.g. migrants, family member of smuggler, 12/22/09; 2/8/10; 4/25/10). Experienced migrants, who take people on their journeys with them to offset their own travel costs, still move people along the route; but these migrant-guides and their travel companions suffer serious consequences if captured by police or drug gangs because they lack the resources to pay bribes or tributes, unless they agree to collaborate with the Mexican gangs (Martínez 2010, p.138-150).

Today, if the contract is arranged in the home community, local recruiters begin the transaction.²⁰ In these smuggling arrangements, recruiters generally receive half of the payment from the migrant in advance of the journey. The standard agreement requires the other half on delivery to the United States (a norm widely shared across Latin America). Traditionally, this first payment guarantees the migrant three attempts at delivery. Recently, economic recession and increased fear of criminal violence has negatively impacted demand for expensive contracts, such that some high-end door-to-door service providers offer 'specials'. For example, some smugglers will now allow the migrant to transfer the second and third migration attempt to a friend or relative, if the migrant

²⁰ Here, I describe only arrangements made in home communities. However, family members at the destination often arrange the contract from within the United States; immigrant-receiving communities also have local recruiters who operate within them. Some people, in an attempt to save money, contract with smugglers at various points along the route through Mexico. Low budget smugglers and those contacted along the route through Mexico or at border towns have no need to offer 'specials'. They have seemingly unlimited clients.

decides that the journey was too painful or frightening to try again (male migrants, 2/8/10; 5/19/10). Indeed, the smuggler from Town B claims that the recent economic recession increased vulnerability of Central American migrants in transit, because many people opt to travel without expensive, good quality coyotes (like him) (smuggler, 7/5/10). Some experienced migrants may receive special treatment or discounted travel by helping the guide keep order within the travel group along the way, and in so doing, technically become smugglers themselves and vulnerable to prosecution (e.g. male migrant/helper, female migrant, 2/24/10; 6/2/10).²¹

If a migrant lacks the resources to travel, local recruiters may offer loans or connect desperate migrants with loan sharks (e.g. male migrant, 2/11/10). However, this credit system poses a risk of default and property loss to the migrant if the journey does not end successfully. Because coyotes have an incentive to engineer unsuccessful journeys if they stand to gain property, it is safer to take loans from family in the United States.²² Rumors about this practice circulate widely in both towns. Other local recruiters are actually human traffickers who only pose as smugglers; they promise poor women low-cost passage, but then sell them into sexual slavery en route (Salvadoran police officer, 3/4/10; activist 12/3/09).²³ While people were aware of the dangers of sex trafficking, I heard no reports of this happening to the inhabitants of either Town A or Town B.

Local recruiters may not know much about what happens next to their clients, providing only a connection and receiving an occasional finders' fee from the next

²¹ I say 'technically' because these migrants do not view themselves as coyotes.

²² I received one first hand report in each town from former clients of coyotes who alleged that a smuggler had purposefully botched the delivery in an effort to take possession of property (female migrant, family member, 6/2/10; 3/1/0).

²³ Sexual payments for passage are discussed in Chapter 6.

smuggler in the chain. Several youths work as recruiters for the coyote in Town B, and it is doubtful that they know much more about the journey than the migrants (family member, 4/7/10). Indeed, the organization of smuggling groups varies considerably, some depending on subcontracting for segments of the route and others selling migrants like cargo to smugglers who consolidate human shipments from across the region.²⁴ These organizational structures and membership within a smuggling network are fluid, and migrants rarely know their details. Migrants in both towns believe that recruiters will understate the risks and suffering of the journey to entice customers (e.g. migrants, 1/27/10; 3/1/10; 6/2/10; 7/1/10).

While would-be migrants in Town A complained about a lack of information by which to judge the reliability of competing smugglers, the market for smuggling services inspired relative (though incomplete) confidence among consumers in Town B. All of the clients of the sole coyote in Town B with whom I spoke reported confidence with their choice of smuggler *before* the journey. Despite the danger, this smuggler occasionally travels with his clients to check on his Mexican connections (male migrant, 2/19/10). All clients who subsequently returned to the community *after* time in the United States reported satisfaction with his travel services.

²⁴ As discussed in Chapter 4, the structure of smuggling networks changed in response to violence in Mexico, with configurations ranging from subcontracting schemes (in which the Salvadoran smuggler pays a series of Mexican guides to transport clients) to a series of exchanges between unaffiliated ‘guides’ in which human cargo is purchased and sold along the route. This latter trading system emerged as smugglers needed to hedge the risks of crossing Mexico: migrants’ value to smugglers, and hence their price when traded as commodities, increases as they move closer to the final payment on their contract and the likelihood of capture decreases. This arrangement effectively changes the role of smugglers from service providers to human traders, altering their incentives for good behavior and blurring the boundaries between trafficking and smuggling.

In Town B, I received one firsthand report of severe violence during a journey contracted with this coyote (female migrant, 12/22/09). In 2006, a Mexican criminal syndicate intercepted a travel group and murdered the group's driver for not paying the appropriate passage fee through their territory. From a cramped hidden compartment in the banana truck that transported them north, the migrant and her travel companions listened fearfully to the three gunshots that assassinated the driver. However, the migrant who suffered this abduction, which included ransom demands and brusque treatment by the kidnappers, claimed that the event could not have been prevented. During informal discussions, her family reported satisfaction with the coyote's reaction to events, his ongoing correspondence and responsible attitude in its aftermath. Despite the harrowing experience, the migrant arrived and worked in the United States, voluntarily returning to El Salvador two years later to comfort her dying mother and start a small restaurant with her U.S. savings. As a measure of her satisfaction with the service, she later contracted with the same coyote to transport herself, her husband and their seven-year old child to the United States on a second trip north.²⁵ This coyote had transported many members of the family.

²⁵ During this second trip, the family endured extreme hardship, despite its ultimate 'success': hunger, fear of the drug-addled guides subcontracted to lead them, unsanitary living conditions, temporary imprisonment in drop houses, and exposure to the elements. The child, eight years old and fluent in English by the time my fieldwork ended, still cried at the thought of visiting El Salvador, because return would require them to make another terrifying unauthorized journey to the U.S. Migrants generally accept this level of suffering en route as a necessary evil, not grounds for complaint about a coyote. Border patrol apprehended their travel group entering Texas, and the family filed an asylum claim based on their persecution by extortion gangs in El Salvador. At the end of my fieldwork, the family lived in the U.S. while awaiting their hearing. They did not make their final payment to the local coyote, because they were apprehended rather than delivered.

I received no firsthand reports of dissatisfaction with the local coyote in Town B from migrants or their family members, and only one secondhand account of a client who had been unhappy with these services about two years ago. When I questioned two townspeople about this rumored dissatisfaction, they said that the dissatisfied client (who subsequently was delivered to the United States and therefore unavailable for an interview) misbehaved during the journey, forcing the guide to abandon him en route. The allegations of the dissatisfied client were shocking to the townspeople, because it seemed so unlike the coyote. Because of the client's misbehavior, people reasoned that the client had no legitimate claim against the coyote (e.g. family member, female migrant, 4/24/10).

In this instance, however, market reputation was not the primary mechanism for the enforcement of the smuggler's good behavior. When the dissatisfied client's family grew angry in Town B, the client's mother stood outside the coyote's sister's home, shouting insults and threats. Not unlike the kinsmen who "milled with wails and moans of grief before Odysseus' palace", this family employed a combined campaign of shaming and coercion (family member, 4/24/10). Another client explained her confidence in the coyote as an outcome, not only of long-term friendship and trust between their families, but also as a result of the fact that he took eighteen community members on the journey with her (female migrant, 1/18/10). If something had gone wrong, eighteen families would have surrounded his house.

Previously, a less reliable (and by at least one account, dishonest) coyote had worked in Town B, but had left town. Most people simply stopped patronizing him when he proved incapable of delivering (male migrant, 2/19/10). However, the wife of a

dissatisfied client of this coyote explained how she retaliated against him when he and a loan shark allegedly conspired to cheat her family out of their home (family member, 2/24/10). She claimed that the coyote deliberately stranded her husband during the journey to cause a loan default. The coyote allegedly did this to at least five other people. Therefore, the wife of the dissatisfied client began to call the coyote's house in Mexico and harass his family. When the coyote's wife answered the phone, the client's wife told her to be ashamed, how the coyote had thrown five children onto the street and that he should give the money back. When the coyote's wife hung up, the wife of the client kept calling, even when only the coyote's children would answer the phone. The coyote left town, but the client's family did not get their money or house back. Perhaps cognizant of these strategies, an interview with the 'responsible' smuggler of Town B indicates that fear for the safety and comfort of his family weighs on his mind during business transactions with migrants (smuggler, 7/5/10).

Similarly, in Town A, a female client who had been cheated by a coyote from the nearby city of San Miguel reported that the coyote had been gunned down shortly afterwards. While this client did not claim responsibility for the murder, she shrugged and coolly reasoned that the coyote had finally cheated the wrong person: "If you treat people this way, sooner or later someone will come for you. Not every person says that God will make him pay" (female migrant, 6/2/10). Importantly, these are not instances of community vigilantism that require collective action (as is often reported in indigenous

Guatemalan communities), but familial retribution systems executed by individuals, much like the conflict between the Hatfields and McCoys.²⁶

When asked how to choose a trustworthy coyote, many people emphasized the importance of researching smuggler reputation. A time-tested relationship between the smuggler and the family of the would-be migrant is most important; most migrants reported that it is safest to travel with someone who is known to the family, and has previously transported immediate family members, particularly siblings (e.g. male migrant, 4/15/10). Family recommendations have priority. Coyotes recommended by friends are second best, and recommendations from strangers a distant third. The hierarchy of recommendations stems from: 1) higher levels of confidence in recommendations from family, as opposed to friends and acquaintances; and 2) the social relationship and obligation between the families implied by an ongoing business relationship (e.g. male migrant, 2/26/10).²⁷ However, knowing *where* the coyote's family lives is as important as knowing the coyote's track record as a service provider because it provides a means for retaliation in the event of a breach of contract (e.g. male migrant, 2/26/10).

²⁶ On community vigilantism in Guatemala see Handy (2004) and Godoy (2002; 2004). While villages participate in collective public lynchings and mobs in Guatemala, clandestine social cleansing and individualistic or familial retribution systems are more common in El Salvador.

²⁷ This analysis is also consistent with Granovetter's (1985, p.490) discussion of the value of information embedded in a personal relationship. He explains, "In practice, we settle for such generalized information when nothing better is available, but ordinarily we seek better information. Better than the statement that someone is known to be reliable is information from a trusted informant that he has dealt with that individual and found him so. Even better is information from one's own past dealings with that person. This is better information for four reasons: 1) it is cheap; 2) one trusts one's own information best- it is richer, more detailed, and known to be accurate; 3) individuals with whom one has a continuing relation have an economic motivation to be trustworthy, so as not to discourage future transactions; and 4) departing from pure economic motives, continuing economic relations often become overlaid with social content that carries strong expectations of trust and abstention from opportunism". However, fear of retaliation also plays a most significant role.

In addition to family retribution systems, a second non-market mechanism regulates contracts for smuggling services in Town B: social reputation. The local smuggler of Town B would like to maintain an honorable image in the town. In fact, the desire for status may have partially motivated his entry into the smuggling business. A family member of the smuggler claims that:

He makes sure his clients have food, shoes, clothing. Sometimes he even takes them as many times as they need, not just the three tries. He makes no money off those people, because it costs money every time they try. He'll guarantee them. Why?.... He doesn't want to hide his face in town. This is his town (Interview, family member, 4/25/10).

Thus, saving face weighs heavily on his mind.²⁸ However, as explained by Avner Greif (2006, p.144), "such social and normative behavior is *situationally contingent*: whether a particular action insults others, how status is acquired, who is deserving of altruism, and what constitutes fair behavior depend on the time and place". In other words, this non-market mechanism for good behavior only lasts as long as: a) the coyote's ego remains tied to his status in the local community; b) status can be acquired by safe delivery of people to the United States; and c) clients agree on the boundaries of negligence or maltreatment. As violence has intensified in Mexico, agreement on the boundaries of fair behavior has eroded in both towns because the journey is viewed as inherently dangerous and beyond the control of the coyote. Subcontracting schemes, whereby a coyote connects a migrant with a chain of guides linked along the route rather than vertically integrated into the coyote's family or organization, diffuse blame when

²⁸ Indeed, he and his family may harbor local political ambitions. One family member mused aloud about the possibility that the coyote will one day become town mayor, and the family actively supports the current local mayor's political party.

disasters occur. As conditions along the route worsen, the coyote in Town B may yet lose his social incentive for the careful transport of his clients.

What about market incentive for the careful transport of clients? Market reputation does not *always* influence smuggler behavior. Regardless of the dangers inherent in the journey, there seems to be no potential shortage of clients. Large numbers of Central American migrants desperately want to travel, and are willing to take risks on guides with an unknown record and reputation. For this reason, subcontracted Mexican guides and coyotes working in border towns do not seem particularly concerned about market reputation. Some coyotes may not anticipate negative short-term economic consequences for poor performance.

For example, a Honduran woman (4/1/11), interviewed at a migrant shelter along the route, attempted to dissuade her guide from sexually assaulting her by pointing to the damage it would cause his market reputation, but in his response to her, the guide expressed a lack of concern about such matters. He pointed to an apparently unlimited demand for his services. She described their interaction:

When I would not give myself to him, he became very violent. He said bad words, ugly words: “Don’t fuck around. You are an old lady. You are *aguada*”.²⁹ He only treated me badly. Abuse. He threatened to leave me.... He kept touching me. It was 9:45 at night. My arm was sore from getting him off me.... He said rudely, in front of the other migrants, “Are you going to give me some ass or not?” When I said no, it made him very aggressive and he mistreated me. I told him that he had better watch out, because I will not recommend him to future clients. I know lots of potential clients, but with him acting like this, I cannot recommend him, not unless he behaves. But he answered that he already had plenty of clients and did not care. He had twenty-five clients waiting right now. My recommendation, it’s not important.³⁰

²⁹ *Aguada* does not have a perfect translation from Spanish to English; it more or less means “flabby, soft”. It is a vulgar word used in this manner.

³⁰ The smuggler may or may not have been bluffing, but he convinced the migrant that he was unfazed by her threats to ruin his professional reputation. She later reported him to a staff member of a migrant shelter in Oaxaca. With the legal support provided by the shelter, she

The long-term impact of market reputation may not matter to every smuggler. I met many guides during my time along the route through Mexico, but I never met a ‘professional’ who was dedicated permanently and full-time to the occupation. This is not to say that life-long smuggling careers do not exist (particularly beyond the ground-level of subcontracted guides and ‘connectors’ in which I was immersed), but many unauthorized guides do not think of their activity as a long-term career.³¹ In fact, some low-level unauthorized guides anticipate that each trip they arrange is the last trip, a means to achieve only an immediate goal, like their own arrival in the United States. Spener (2009, p.126), in his description of the continued diversity of Mexican ‘coyotaje’ practices, also observed these types of non-professional unauthorized guiding arrangements. Since smugglers do not necessarily intend to continue providing unauthorized travel services indefinitely, some may not be concerned about market reputation and may not develop a long-term strategy for the recruitment and retention of clients. As a result, they may be less careful about exposing clients to violence.

Traveling without Door-to-Door Smuggling Service

The major impediment to hiring a guide in Town B was not a lack of trustworthy information about whom to hire, but the cost. In Town B, I encountered a relatively high number of young men who intended or had already attempted (both successfully and

denounced the smuggler to Mexican authorities and received a Mexican visa for victims of human rights abuses. However, as is typical in such cases, no further prosecution of the smuggler followed.

³¹ While he has been in the business for at least five years, the smuggler from Town B is not a full-time coyote. For him, smuggling is a lucrative side occupation that grew accidentally from social contacts forged during the extensive travel required by his permanent formal job, as well as contacts from his family network (family member, 4/25/10). He began to connect people, but never left his original vocation.

unsuccessfully) to make the journey without the assistance of a paid guide, at least as far as the Mexico-U.S. border where a contract for a short distance coyote can be negotiated for less money. In particular, young men from the outskirts of the towns, where cobblestone or paved roads turn to mud, lacked the money to hire a coyote. I did not meet anyone who traveled with the expensive local coyote of Town B from these more impoverished areas. People from the surrounding colonias patronized other local operators or went to the city to find a less costly coyote. Many of the poorest migrants seek out a more experienced family member or friend to guide them, sometimes in exchange for paying passage for their partner. Others go alone to avoid potential accusations of abandonment or maltreatment of a travel partner if the trip goes badly.

Migrants from the periphery of Town A also had fewer financial resources than those in the center, and they were more likely to take chances on an inexpensive unknown guide or attempt to go it alone. However, few people in the center of Town A reported sufficient knowledge or willingness to try to make the trip alone. Although migrants in Town A seemed more risk averse than migrants in Town B, it was not because they had more information about danger. Their risk aversion instead seems to stem from a belief that legal migration could be within their grasp, given the number of U.S. naturalized and legally resident family members distantly related to townspeople (e.g. male migrant, 5/6/10).

The mansions built by the first wave of migrants generate a stable material illusion of easy money in the United States. This idea, set literally in concrete, lingers after the recession has altered economic reality (mayor, 11/4/09). Similarly, the first wave of migrants generates an illusion of opportunity for legal migration, not confirmed by a

contemporary reality. This belief in legal opportunity does not seem to be based on a clearheaded evaluation of U.S. immigration law and visa availability; the United States has a system that suffers chronic visa shortages and application backlogs for even close family members of citizens entitled to entry. According to the U.S. Department of State, El Salvador ranked eleventh in the list of countries with the highest number of waitlisted visa applicants, surpassing the allotted preference visas by 83,221 applicants in fiscal year 2012. The ‘family first preference’ category alone, i.e. visas for unmarried sons or daughters of U.S. citizens and their minor children, has 8,749 waitlisted Salvadoran applicants. Other preference categories for the relatives of legal permanent residents or siblings of citizens are similarly oversubscribed. Uncles, aunts, cousins and in-laws cannot sponsor relatives for visas at all.

The people (overwhelmingly men) who migrate without long-distance coyotes often come from exceptionally poor households or face emergency situations that cut the time for saving money short, such as threats from criminal gangs, family illness and unexpected financial difficulties (e.g. migrants, 11/13/09; 5/19/10). Some of the men have already traveled multiple times and therefore feel comfortable navigating the route independently, relying on their courage and wits. Others have been deported from the United States and find it difficult to talk their families into paying another expensive passage, particularly if vices (such as alcohol or drug abuse) led to the deportation. Each journey must be financed by debt for the family, and would-be migrants must seem likely to repay these debts to gain familial support.³² In several cases, when family and friends would not or could not provide financial support, the desire to reunite with underage

³² These findings are consistent with Spener’s (2009) description of migration practices in northern Mexico.

children or a spouse with U.S. citizenship produced a desperation that drove people to undertake otherwise intolerable travel risks (e.g. male migrant, 6/3/10).

Central American migrants who travel without expensive door-to-door smuggling service frequently ride northbound cargo trains like modern-day hobos, a dangerous but relatively inexpensive means to travel through Mexico. They may try to contract with guides at difficult points en route, such as crossing the U.S. border. These migrants may suffer more frequent violent incidents than clients of coyotes with social ties to the hometown, because they do not have an experienced guide to negotiate payments to corrupt authorities and drug gangs as they transit their territory. Furthermore, guides contacted en route do not have the same incentives for good behavior as do hometown coyotes.³³ For this reason, Spener (2009, p.200) labels contracts made with guides en route ‘partially embedded’. Some of the migrants must beg, work or stop to wait for small contributions from friends and family in the United States to make each leg of the journey. As a result, the duration of these trips is longer and more variable than trips made with door-to-door service, thus increasing the exposure to criminal victimization.

Migrant Social Ties

This chapter makes two important claims about social ties and their capacity to convey resources. First, migrant responses to insecurity and distrust can be read through the lens of strong and weak ties, with medium-strength ties playing a minor role.

³³In a similar situation, Granovetter (1985, p.490) notes that “this transaction has three characteristics that make it somewhat unusual: 1) the transactors are previously unacquainted, 2) they are unlikely to transact again, and 3) information about the activities of either is unlikely to reach others with whom they might transact in the future. I argue that it is only in situations of this kind that the absence of force and fraud can mainly be explained by generalized morality. Even there, one might wonder how effective this morality would be if large costs were incurred.”

Granovetter (1973, p.1361) distinguishes between strong and weak ties, defining the strength of a tie according to “the amount of time, the emotional intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services” implied by it. Michael Woolcock and Anne T. Sweetser’s (2002, p.26) discussion of *bonding*, *bridging* and *linking* ties, provides further nuance to our understanding of social ties.³⁴ In this case, *bonding* relationships arise among similar people with close proximity and a shared identity, such as immediate family members. *Bridging* relationships are those among dissimilar people; in the context of rural El Salvador, this would refer to relationships among neighbors, local acquaintances or compatriots who inhabit the same class status, but lack the strength of household commitments. Finally, *linking* relationships are social ties to elites, and in this case, foreigners.

This tripartite categorization of social ties highlights the effect of distrust on information flows in migrant hometowns. In particular, a cultural belief in ‘*envidia*’ (envy) erodes bridging ties and devalues information attained from them. However, bonding and linking ties (the strongest and weakest) remain relevant categories for active social networks that provide potential resources for migration.

Bonding ties, i.e. those within a household, convey the most important resources that migrants have before the journey begins. Indeed, households often make decisions together.³⁵ Migrants with multiple siblings, a husband or parents in the United States, on

³⁴ In a footnote, Granovetter (1973, p.1361 fn. 4) also distinguishes between absent and negligible ties. The bridging ties that I discuss in this paper are generally (but not always) stronger than negligible ties.

³⁵ The initial decision to leave is often made in consultation with parents or a spouse, depending on the age of the person involved. For this reason, Oded Stark and David E. Bloom (1985) treat the household as a decision-making unit. For a summary of this ‘new economics of migration’ literature, see Massey *et al.* (1993). I would not, however, go so far as

the whole, seem better prepared. While resources do not accumulate within a community, migrants from families with a long history of continuous departures have better financial resources and more confidence in their informational resources. Meanwhile, information conveyed through *linking* ties, with foreigners or elites, sometimes engenders greater confidence.³⁶ In other words, there is a tendency to trust outsiders more than potential rivals in the community; as Granovetter (1985, p.492) reminds us, and as Salvadoran migrants are acutely aware, “both enormous trust and enormous malfeasance may follow from personal relationships.” Paradoxically, the physical proximity of people in the town has generated distrust; in the absence of a norm of reciprocity or the closely tied fortunes and name that unite a household, suspicion dominates perceptions of social interaction. Fortunately for migrants, linking ties may emerge during the process of migration itself, when migrants interact with people from different class and national backgrounds along the routes and in the United States.

Of course, the importance of continuous departures in a family migration history cannot be stressed enough, because otherwise, information available to a family becomes stale. Indeed, the finding that *bonding* ties provide useful information for migrants and an

Granovetter (1985, p.490) in saying that “In the family, there is no Prisoner’s Dilemma because each is confident that the others can be counted on”. Indeed, the possibility that a migrant spouse will defect and form a new family elsewhere is a widespread (and apparently well-founded) fear. Sometimes men leave in the middle of the night, without telling their mothers or wives. Along the route through Mexico, I also met women and youths fleeing domestic violence. As a long tradition of feminist literature suggests, households, while more unified than communities, have their own internal power dynamics (e.g. Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994).

³⁶ Indeed, this belief in the relative trustworthiness of foreigners and elites helped to facilitate my fieldwork, even though I hail from the very country to which people want to travel without authorization. Despite the fact that many people viewed the government of the United States as an omniscient and powerful entity, capable of spying and craftiness (“*listo*”), my status as a foreigner in the community often proved to be an asset for fieldwork.

apparent advantage for avoiding violence during unauthorized migration requires an important disclaimer. The dynamism of the Mexican drug war (2006-present) undercuts familial advantages by changing the players and the rules of the game along the route. Following Granovetter's (1973) analysis of the benefits of weak ties, the absence of bridging ties that could more quickly and widely circulate information within the community seems ominous for the safety prospects of migrants in this hyper-dynamic context.

This leads us to the second insight about the nature of social ties: under combined conditions of increased risk and uncertainty, migrants *must* trust their family to help them, but paradoxically distrust the information itself as potentially out-of-date. Consistent with Frank H. Knight's (1921) analysis of economic behavior under conditions of risk and uncertainty, resources conveyed through *bonding* ties becomes more important as the route becomes more dangerous. Despite this dependence on resources from family members, an increased sense of uncertainty undermines confidence in all information. Under conditions of uncertainty, the advice that family members give one another at the outset of the journey becomes very vague, consisting of truisms such as "Be careful" and "remember God" and to "avoid sin". These platitudes are undoubtedly good advice, but not actionable as migrants would like. Thus, family networks often provide financial resources rather than specific information. This situation puts migrants in a difficult bind, and their journeys become more like leaps of faith than carefully articulated travel itineraries. Family networks are important, but not foolproof, resources and their most important role is monetary, not informational.

Explanation of the Findings about Social Ties and Smuggling Markets

To explain the lack of observed variation in migration resources between the two towns, I identify three processes that disconnect ‘community’ and the territory of the town. First, widespread distrust impedes help outside family networks, calling into question the very notion of ‘community’ in rural El Salvador. Second, extensive internal migration within the country connects families across towns, spinning a national web of family-based migratory networks. Third, in the absence of resource sharing within the community, migrant social capital diminishes over time. Combined, these three processes produce a perpetual waxing and waning of informational resources available to migrants across different communities.

Taken together, these processes make family migration history more salient, while undermining the utility of community migration histories. Migrants from families with long histories of more or less continuous departures to the United States are less vulnerable to violence than migrants from families with short or disrupted migration histories. While no unauthorized journey is safe and much violence arises from simple bad luck, a younger sibling is safer following in the footsteps of older siblings than someone who is the first to travel in the family (e.g. male migrant, 4/15/10). These migrants may be safer, because they will likely have more money to cope with emergency situations that emerge en route and the family will have established a continuous social (and potentially retaliatory) relationship with a coyote.

Barriers to Inter-Family Resource Flows

Trust runs in families, not neighborhoods. In both Town A and Town B, kitchen gossip expresses and reinforces deep antagonisms, distrust and ill will that discourage

reciprocity between neighbors. As a result, resources accrue within families, not between them. The narrative of peasant solidarity in the face of political repression, told by scholars sympathetic to the guerilla movement in the Salvadoran civil war, does not hold up in these two towns, both of which fell under military control during the conflict. Perhaps fieldwork in places with high past insurgent activity would reveal present-day inter-family cooperation. However, there are good reasons to doubt that would be the case: widespread post-war disillusionment, continued poverty, persistent inequality exacerbated by migration and dollarization, and gang violence deepen distrust in Salvadoran communities across the country. Julia Dickson-Gomez (2002, p.417) describes similar patterns of community disunity and distrust in a former contested zone, where insurgent activity had been high. Central American criminal violence is now widespread in both rural and urban settings.³⁷ Furthermore, frequent internal migration has blurred the boundaries between communities, knitting together family networks across the country.

In some cases, families do not share information with neighbors because disreputable coyotes threaten people to keep silence about the hardships suffered during the journey (Salvadoran police 3/4/10; activist 11/19/09). Such instances, however, are rare and none were reported in the core of Town B. Nevertheless, it is dangerous to denounce an irresponsible coyote in a way that draws police attention. One returned migrant in Town B, who openly discussed bad coyotes available in the nearby city, explained that people should also be afraid to harm a coyote's business or run him out of town; after all, he reminded me, "this is a very violent place" (male migrant, 2/19/10).

³⁷ For a discussion of the increasingly fratricidal nature of criminal violence in Central America and its relation to post-revolutionary disillusionment see Dennis Rodgers (2009).

Unfortunately, even in the absence of threats, information does not flow freely in either Town A or Town B, primarily because of a belief in ‘envidia’. One migrant defined envidia as not mere jealousy, but a sickness, an obsession, a corruption of biblical proportions (female migrant, 3/29/10). Inhabitants of both A and B used envidia to explain a wide variety of unsavory events and interpersonal conflicts. In particular, neighbors are frequently suspected of envidia.³⁸ However, foreigners and elites are relatively immune from indictment for envidia-motivated behavior toward low-class Salvadorans; it is a plague of peers. Whether explaining the opening of a competing food stand or a recent murder, envidia is a common frame for interpreting behavior, both in the telenovelas and daily life (e.g. community members and migrants, 12/2/09; 12/22/09; 1/16/10; 1/25/10; 3/1/10; 5/6/10).³⁹

Envidia hinders information flows between neighbors in the community and within the extended family (distant cousins, uncles) by undermining information sharing and devaluing information when it is received. The flow of information is tainted by gossip because “people here talk” negatively about one another (e.g. male migrant, 2/26/10). Likewise, in a study of another rural Salvadoran community, Dickson-Gomez (2002, p.422-423) observes that:

³⁸ Based on analysis of this AmericasBarometer data for El Salvador, Cordova et al. (2010, p.150) found that Salvadoran men trust their neighbors more than strangers, whereas Salvadoran women trust strangers more than their neighbors. Youth and education, but not wealth, increase trust (p.150). These findings seem compatible with ethnographic observations: while both men and women believe in ‘envidia’ and feel constrained by potential accusations of it, older women seem to spend the most time engaged in ‘kitchen talk’. Immersion in this particular feminine gossip setting may further erode trust.

³⁹ I thank Froylan Enciso for pointing out that ‘envidia’ is a dominant trope of the soap operas that, perhaps next to soccer matches, constitute the most popular form of entertainment in Mexico and Central America.

Conflicts in the community in the postwar period are generally expressed through gossip and envy (*envidia*), not violence. Gossip is the main form of sanction within the community, and accusations that envy is the motive for such gossip is the main defense....Gossip and envy are a reminder of neighbors' hostilities and, therefore, of the potential for violence.⁴⁰

In interviews, several respondents cited their fear of being accused of *envidia* as a rationale for not sharing information about their journey. They also discounted information about dangers because they believed the talk of danger to be motivated by envy and therefore unreliable. In their view, neighbors want to misinform in order to make migratory success of other individuals less likely. Few reasonable expectations of reciprocity or resource sharing exist outside of the closest family networks.⁴¹

These family networks seem to be shrinking. Perhaps based on a romanticized view of traditional marriage practices and family relations, a general anxiety over the disintegration of the Salvadoran family institutions pervades public discourse; this anxiety may be linked to the family separations and physical distances provoked by transnational migration. Whatever the past may have been like, in this day and age, cousins and uncles cannot be consistently relied on for help during the migratory journey.

⁴⁰ Julia Dickson-Gomez (2002, p.422-423) lists several narratives, ranging from alleged poisonings to alleged corruption, motivated by *envidia*. Interestingly, these same tropes of attempted poisoning by neighbors and hoarding money or work opportunities surfaced during my fieldwork on the other side of the country.

⁴¹ Migrants rarely received financial support from sources outside their family. One migrant in Town B received financial aid, in the form of a loan, from a multinational church group in the United States that she had linked with during a previous migration. She used information gained through family networks to select the coyote. The financial aid received from outside her family network did not originate within the home community or associations based on shared hometown membership, but from multinational evangelical Christian contacts forged in the destination community. One migrant from Town A also reported receiving support from a multinational evangelical Christian church based in the United States (female migrant, 5/20/10). There are rumors that some clergy members of the Catholic Church in El Salvador have informally helped migrants with financial resources to escape political or criminal violence, but I did not receive any firsthand reports of such support beyond the activities of the Catholic shelters and churches along the route through Mexico and the United States.

Nevertheless, there is variation among families, as to how far trust and obligation extends and to whom. In some families, first cousins count as virtual siblings, but in others, only the nuclear family constitutes the core. Generally speaking, however, the more distant the blood relation, the less likely becomes pooled resources.

Sometimes, cousins and uncles in the United States create a dangerous illusion of resources by making promises of support that fail to materialize when the migrant arrives at an agreed upon destination, such as the U.S.-Mexico border. Based on informal conversations with migrants stranded in shelters, cousins and uncles seem generally more likely to abandon their relatives en route than parents and siblings, but this is not universally true. Because family networks are sometimes undependable, migrants must continually negotiate and re-negotiate the blurry boundaries of family trust. In these two towns, far-flung branches of family trees grow gnarled and complex; everyone is related to everyone else in some convoluted manner. Each town traces its modern founding to two competing landowning families, and most residents have some ancestral connection to these families. When people become desperate, these thin tendrils of distant familial ties give migrants occasionally misleading hope of assistance. This hope becomes a font of bitterness and accusations of envidia that erupts when that assistance is not realized.

In a similar vein, Sarah Mahler (1995, p.89) found that Salvadoran migrants discounted negative information about hardship in the U.S., dismissing the person who related these difficulties as “egotistical”. To avoid such accusations, immigrants shy away from sharing negative information. In her 1995 study of Salvadoran immigrant-receiving communities in New York, Mahler traced this “egoism” to the immigrant experience itself, citing stories of solidarity that migrants told about their home

communities (p.95). During my fieldwork in rural El Salvador, I found a belief in “envidia” to be firmly entrenched. This belief underlies norms of distrust connected to patterns of information and resource hoarding, with similar effects on behavior to what Mahler calls “egoism”. The poor but stable rural lifestyle described by immigrants in Mahler’s 1995 study is but a distant memory in contemporary Central America, if it ever existed outside nostalgic reminiscing about the homeland.⁴²

This unraveling of the social mechanisms that underpin solidarity and reciprocity might ultimately be traced to any number of sources: a history of extreme violence (both political and criminal), capitalist economic restructuring, splintering of religious sects, and inequality, as well as the immigrant experience highlighted by Mahler. According to Cordova et al.’s (2010, p.151) analysis of AmericasBarometer survey data, the perception of vulnerability to crime negatively impacts interpersonal trust. Citizens who feel insecure tend to trust their neighbors less than secure citizens. According to the Latinobarometer survey (2010, p.91), El Salvador is the country with the highest percentage of citizens who fear crime victimization in Latin America. Perhaps for this reason, the 2010 Latinobarometer survey also found Salvadorans to be least likely among all Latin American nationalities to turn to a friend when they need information on an important topic; only 30% of Salvadorans indicated that they would seek important information from a friend (p.67). Medical anthropologist Julia Dickson-Gomez (2002) argues that this pervasive belief in ‘envidia’ and expectations of violence result from the transmission of civil war trauma to younger generations through narratives of illness. I

⁴² See, in particular, Mahler (1995, pg. 33) for a description of a dreamy bucolic lifestyle.

can only speculate that the origins of this distrust run deep in the perennially bloody Salvadoran history.

Whatever its source, the belief in envidia disrupts inter-familiar relationships. Since neighbors and close community members bear the brunt of these accusations, envidia does not impede relationships with people outside the community. Envidia does not impede close family relationships among those who share a household. Outside of the household unit, however, elites may be perceived as more trustworthy sources of information than neighbors. As grudges accumulate, the emotional intensity of relationships, their longevity and a history of failed confidences may work to undermine trust, rather than augment it. The collective belief in envidia, which acts as a lens through which to interpret these social interactions, privileges linking relationships to outsiders with limited interaction, relative to bridging among community members with daily dealings. Community relationships lose some of their informational value.

Despite this bleak analysis of community cohesion in rural El Salvador, among close family (i.e. among siblings and parents) information and money usually flow freely, when they are available. As a result, some families develop advantages over the course of their migration history. Family networks continue to convey vital resources for survival in the context of escalating violence along the unauthorized migratory routes.

A Hidden History of (Im)migration

The geographical boundaries of towns do not delimit these family networks. Thanks to extensive wartime internal migration, Salvadoran family networks often span the entire country. Migratory routes from rural towns merge in major cities. As a result, the

resources available in Town B are more dynamic and extensive than I expected, even in a context of extreme distrust at the level of the community.

During the civil war period, people from Town B did not leave for the United States in droves, but the town received many immigrants from war-torn parts of El Salvador. The population of the departments of San Salvador, La Libertad, and Sonsonate increased prior to and during the conflict, while all other areas experienced net emigration (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991, p.93). Building on previous labor migration patterns, Salvadoran households fleeing violence pursued diversification strategies for destinations, sending some family members to the city, others to quiet rural zones, and others to Honduras, Mexico and the United States. When asked to trace his family tree, indicating where he has family in El Salvador, one man exclaimed “better to say which towns I don’t have family members” (United States, 8/9/12). He has family in both Town A and Town B.

Many people who moved to Town B during the war have siblings in towns across the country, in the capital city and in the United States. In town, it is not uncommon to find families with ties to the departments of San Miguel, Chalatenango or Sonsonate. Depending on the cohesion of the family, cousins dispersed across the country may (or may not) communicate relevant information about the migratory journey, share resources or form travel partnerships. Some families in Town B can leverage resources developed in communities with longer migration histories when preparing for their journey. Furthermore, local smugglers also leverage their dispersed family networks.

The conjoining of migratory routes provides evidence of this leveraging. From Town B, the first leg of the journey north almost always entails a detour to the capital city or

San Miguel, where the travel group merges with migrants from around the country, who are recruited by local smugglers from other hometowns.⁴³ In this way, the new migration flow merges into the old routes north. In Town B, the local smuggler works with his four cousins located in other parts of the country (male migrant/friend of smuggler, 2/26/10). Because of extensive cross-country family networks, migrants and their smugglers in towns with short migration histories can diversify their information sources and link with established migratory routes. In so doing, they close the resource gap between early migrating and late migrating towns.

The Erosion of Migratory Social Capital

An erosion of migratory social capital over time also closes the possible resource gap that might have distinguished early migrating from late migrating towns. Family migration networks provide unexpected resources to migrants in Town B. A concentration of resource flows within (but not across) family migration networks undermines the potential for community-level advantages to migrants in Town A. There is no viable mechanism for the transmission of migratory social capital from one family to the next. As a result, as families leave the town and move their core members to the United States, they take their knowledge of the route and relationships with smugglers with them.

The migration pattern in Town A follows a core-periphery movement. The pioneer migrants came primarily from families established in the town center. Just before and during the civil war, those families followed a chain migration model that sometimes relocated entire families. The early generation of movers benefited from an opening to

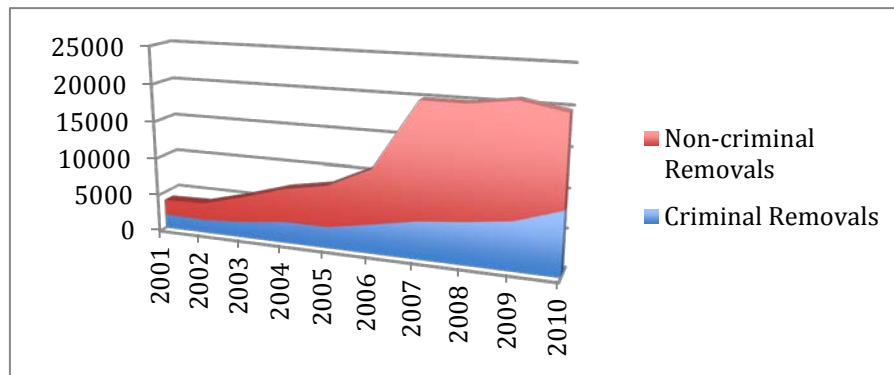
⁴³ San Miguel has a long reputation for lawlessness and independence, rivaling the capital as the country's second city (Salvadoran police officer, 2/25/10).

asylum claims in the United States, and the successive amnesties and suspensions of deportations offered under the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) and the 1997 Nicaraguan Adjustment and Central American Relief Act (NACARA).⁴⁴ Once legally established in the United States, these families often retained their property in the town center, either for sentimental reasons or with an eye to retirement. In the meantime, they rented the homes to families who moved from the surrounding colonias, who were sometimes their distant relatives. Some properties changed hands, and some new families have purchased properties in the town center with the help of remittances from the United States. In general, however, newcomers to the town center cannot access the informational or financial resources of the previous generation of emigrants. Today's Town A is not yesterday's Town A; it is a new mix of families with shorter migration histories who remain relatively disempowered when compared to their landlords.

With the passage of the 1996 Immigration Reform and Individual Responsibility Act, many Salvadoran settlers in the United States were unexpectedly deported (Arana 2005, p.100; Zilberg 2004, p.761). The legislation widened the list of deportable offenses for legal residents to include minor property crimes and drunk driving. Until a Supreme Court ruling in 2001 (*INS v. St Cyr*), the INS even applied the law retroactively in order to deport legal residents with previous convictions. More vigorous post-9/11 cooperation between local law enforcement and immigration authorities dramatically increased the deportations of both unauthorized migrants without criminal backgrounds and legal U.S. residents with criminal convictions to El Salvador, as shown in Figure 4.4:

⁴⁴ 146,000 Salvadorans gained legal status through the IRCA, and the Salvadoran embassy estimates that 129,131 Salvadorans benefited from NACARA (Gammage 2007).

Figure 4.4: Removals from the United States to El Salvador, Fiscal Years 2001-2010



Source: ICE Yearbook for Immigration Statistics 2010, Table 38

In 2011, the United States deported an estimated 15,400 Salvadorans (Ministerio de Justicia y Seguridad Publica de El Salvador 2012); approximately 47% of those deportees had criminal records in the United States, ranging from traffic violations to murder. As a result, a growing number of men from Town A's early migrating families are involuntarily returning to El Salvador. These men occupy large, otherwise empty family homes in Town A.

Despite their wealth and experience in the United States, deportees occupy a position of disempowered migration opportunity. During the waves of U.S. amnesties, opportunities for legal chain migration and the settlement of whole families abroad disrupted family histories of unauthorized migration. These families' relationships with potential smugglers are now ancient history; many of their former guides are no longer in the business. As noted by Spener (2009, p.170) in his study of long migrating communities in northern Mexico, intensified border policing drove some responsible coyotes out of the business. As territory changes hands and crossing fees must be renegotiated with dangerous Mexican route bosses, reputable coyotes may retire. As a

result, the knowledge of families with long migration histories needs to be updated periodically or it loses its value for would-be migrants.

Furthermore, Salvadoran deportees suffer a stigma associated with ‘Americanized’ or ‘Mexicanized’ youth culture, criminal deportation, vice and gang violence (Coutin 2007; Zilberg 2004). As a result of this stigma, families may view the deportee as unreliable and refuse to take loans to fund another journey. As I walked through Town A on my rounds, a handful of these lonely men offered to chat, happy to speak English (a language in which some of them feel more comfortable communicating than Spanish) with someone they assumed would understand them better than the Salvadoran campesinos who are now their neighbors. After being away so long, these men are not at home in Town A (e.g. male migrant, 5/18/10). They expressed intense feelings of social isolation and dislocation;⁴⁵ their involuntary return does not bring migratory social capital back to rural El Salvador.

Known Dangers, Uncertain Journeys, Undaunted Faith

In the aftermath of the massacre of seventy-two Central and South American migrants by a criminal kidnapping gang in Tamaulipas, Mexico in August 2010, potential migrants in Salvadoran sending communities have been bombarded by media coverage of the violence along the route through Mexico. Migrants understand that the route is dangerous and that people have fallen victim to extreme forms of violence. Indeed, many fear for

⁴⁵ In her ethnography of deported Salvadoran youth, Elana Zilberg (2004) examines these feelings of dislocation and the culture clash that occurs upon a migrant’s forced return in greater depth. In her study, gang members raised in Los Angeles describe a harsh homecoming and the sensation of being permanent tourists or aliens in Salvadoran society.

their lives, and prepare for their journey by praying and putting themselves “into God’s hands.”⁴⁶

Migrants overwhelmingly rely on faith in God to plan their journey (Hagan 2008).⁴⁷

While the national and international media coverage has succeeded in increasing fear and prayer, it has failed to provide more specific, actionable information that could be used to devise material, as opposed to purely spiritual, strategies to avoid this violence while migrating. A common refrain among interviewed migrants is that one journey cannot be used to predict the outcome of the next journey; the dynamism of policing and violence along the routes undermines the capacity to predict the outcome of migratory journeys. Only God knows and can protect the migrant. The only thing to do is to “ask God to care for you” (male migrant, 5/19/10):

They know that one suffers, that is not a new thing. One knows that on the route you are going to risk. You pray to God and hope for luck that nothing happens (male migrant, 6/3/10).

In other words, migrants know about suffering and a general context of risk, but they have difficulty judging the probability of specific dangers occurring given the choice of a *particular* route in a *particular* moment. While they may attempt to mitigate their risks by hiring a coyote or finding a trusted travel companion, for the most part, migrants must assume a worldview of ‘uncertainty’ when making specific choices about migration

⁴⁶ Likewise, in her study of Salvadoran immigrant networks, Cecilia Menjivar (2000, p.72) also observed that “almost all my informants- the fervently religious and the less so- included a prayer in their preparations for a successful trip”.

⁴⁷ Salvadorans interviewed for this study are Catholics and Evangelical Christians. The Salvadorans who did not regularly attend a church still self-identified as spiritual and discussed God’s role in their lives. In rural El Salvador, Christianity is pervasive. I found no differences in the information about dangers available to Catholics and Evangelical migrants. Catholics and Evangelicals also hire the same smugglers.

tactics. They must recognize the limits of their ability to know what happens along the route. As Anthony Giddens (1999) states, under conditions of uncertainty

...dangers are experienced as a given. Either they come from God, or they come simply from a world which one takes for granted. The idea of risk is bound up with the aspiration to control and particularly with the idea of controlling the future.

Indeed, the migrants' reliance on faith as a resource is a rational response to incomplete information about the viability of particular tactics along the route. Since immigration police and criminals respond strategically to migration routes, a dynamic situation emerges; a method or route that was safe last week will not necessarily be safe again this week. A phrase repeated countless times in informal conversation as well as interviews is, "every trip is different"; individuals who made multiple journeys stressed the impossibility of generalizing about their experience, because each attempt proved to be absolutely unique (e.g. male migrants, 4/15/10, 3/1/10). En route, new and unpredictable relationships must be negotiated, new directions must be taken, and new tactics must be devised:

Every time someone goes, the trip varies. They might plan to go to the Yucatan and discover it is heavily patrolled. So, they change the route to the Pacific coast and discover other dangers....The trip is unpredictable. Everyone knows that (community member, 1/5/10).

When asked whether anyone can predict who succeeds and who fails in this ever-shifting context, many people return to the theme of luck (e.g. migrants and family, 1/27/10; 2/24/10; 4/15/10):

Only luck is the difference among the dead and the survivors. Nothing matters: men, women, old, young. It doesn't matter. They are all dying. People in this village are dying. There are amputees, people injured, people going to jail, women raped.... (male migrant, 11/13/09)

From this man's perspective, many people seem determined to learn the hard way. Without experiential knowledge, information is not always an actionable resource. Some migrants make no pretense of expectations for the journey, explaining simply that no matter how much they hear about the journey, they "could not imagine it in advance" (e.g. female migrant, 1/13/10). Others express only a vague sense that "it will not happen to me" (e.g. male migrant, 1/16/10). As one female migrant explained about the experience of migration and its consequences for the cohesion of her family, "you don't really think it can happen to you. It is something different when it happens to you. It feels different. You can't imagine how it hurts, and it will always hurt" (female migrant, 1/17/10). She had been warned, but people learn by living, not warnings. One man, frustrated that his advice about the journey had gone unheeded by others, explained that, "the majority here don't believe it because they want to experiment with their own life" (male migrant, 5/18/10). Information is often useless, too vague and inapplicable to the particulars at hand, without the wisdom that comes from experience.

Thus, migrants must assume an uncertain worldview and make a leap of faith to begin the journey without full knowledge of the journey ahead. You must "tighten your pants well" before leaving town and be prepared for anything (male migrant, 3/10/10). Even with supportive experienced family members, the journey is still a dramatic event. Thus, at its outset, migrants reasonably and rationally accept that the future is in God's hands, and they pray that their own resourcefulness will help them actualize His purpose. They go "without expectations...only asking God" (female migrant, 4/28/10).

Beyond El Salvador

What do we learn from the contrast between El Salvador and Mexico? Although both Mexican and Central American migrants pray and trust in God throughout their journey, research on northern Mexican sending communities emphasizes the stability of community-level migration patterns. With a brief comparison to Mexico, we can further speculate about the reasons for El Salvador's divergence from this path dependent model.

First, El Salvador has a very different human geography than a large, heterogeneous country like Mexico. El Salvador is the most densely populated country in Central America (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991, p.85); small and packed with people, cross-national familial networks within El Salvador may be more tightly maintained. It is also the most racially homogenous country of Central America, without a large unassimilated indigenous population in rural areas. Salvadorans have been internally mobile since the capitalist restructuring of the coffee economy in late 1800s (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991, p.86). This internal mobility accelerated in the second half of the 20th century (Hamilton and Chinchilla 1991, p.87). This long and intense history of internal migration contributed to the growth of family networks that span multiple towns across the country and connect the city with the countryside. Small, densely populated post-conflict countries with a long history of internal migration may exhibit more developed cross-national familial networks. As a result, they may exhibit less community-level variation in migrant resources than larger, more sparsely populated countries without intense push-factors for migration.

Perhaps because of this extraordinarily high level of national and ethnic integration, the AmericasBarometer survey indicates no significant rural-urban difference in

interpersonal trust in El Salvador (Cordova et al. 2010, p.150). Salvadorans may simply follow a more urbanized pattern of migration. Research in Mexico suggests that international migration from urban areas generally does not exhibit the path dependence associated with community-level social capital accumulation found in rural zones (Fussell and Massey 2004). In their study of Mexican migration, Fussell and Massey (2004, p.151) found weaker social networks and less migration-related restructuring of local labor markets in the urban environment. Mexican urban zones tend to be larger and more socio-economically heterogeneous, and offer more diverse employment opportunities, than Mexican rural zones (Fussell and Massey 2004, p.168-169). The population density and short distances connecting the urban and rural zones of El Salvador mimics these conditions, thereby further undermining the salience of rural community migration histories.

Second, unrelenting violence and repression may have eroded bridging ties within Salvadoran hometowns to a greater degree than in Mexico. Like other Cold War conflicts in the region, the Salvadoran civil war (1979-1992) pitted neighbor against neighbor. It is difficult to overstate the level of post-conflict insecurity. The UNDP Human Development Report for Central America 2009-2010 estimates El Salvador's per capita murder rate for 2008 as the second highest in the world, exceeded only by Honduras (p.12). Of course, homicides are not the only crimes with an impact on Central Americans. Theft, assault, fraud and extortion are commonplace. According to the 2010 AmericasBarometer survey of the Latin American Public Opinion Project (LAPOP), 24.2% of Salvadorans reported being victims of crime in the previous year (Cordova et al 2010, p.86-89). Extortion, drug trade and murders are common, increasingly so in rural

places like Town A and Town B.⁴⁸ For this reason, many Salvadorans describe their experience of peace as “worse than war” (Moodie 2012).⁴⁹ In this context of perpetual insecurity, the level of distrust and the belief in ‘envidia’ is unusually high.

However, a belief in ‘envidia’ disrupts information flows within other countries. For example, it has been reported among Bolivian migrants as far afield as Spain (Tapias and Escandell 2011). Traces of this distrust may erupt across the globe, even in countries that have not suffered severe inter-cine violence. The presence of these tensions within rural communities may be the norm, not the exception.

Third, the heavily studied migrating towns in northern Mexico represent a special case, rather than a typical case, of migrant sending communities around the globe. Their close physical proximity to destinations within the United States generates a special informational context for these Mexican migrants. Unlike migrants from most parts of the world to the United States, Mexicans only have one border to cross. This unique advantage has encouraged decades of commuter traffic, a ceaseless back and forth across the border with less uncertainty due to the short distance. In her study of religious practice and danger during migratory journeys, Jacqueline Maria Hagan (2008, p.70) found that Central American journeys require longer duration than journeys departing from Mexico, and Central American migrants are significantly more likely to suffer serious problems en route than Mexican migrants. Indeed, it seems that the longer any individual spends along the route, the more likely that they are victimized multiple times.

⁴⁸ I listened to many reports of extortion, drug abuse and sordid stories about local murders during my fieldwork in both Town A and Town B.

⁴⁹ This attitude toward the post-conflict peace, explored by Ellen Moodie (2012) in her analysis of post-conflict Salvadoran crime narratives, surfaced verbatim numerous times in my own interviews and conversations during fieldwork.

For this reason, Salvadorans may be more ‘typical’ of migrants from other parts of the globe than Mexican migrants, because they have a farther distance to travel. Some recent research suggests that safe migration from other parts of the world depends most heavily on family ties. For example, Omar and Trebesch (2010) use Eastern European survey data to examine how the size of the migration flow impacts the likelihood that traffickers pose as smugglers and coerce labor from unwilling migrants. They show that this type of predator often targets migrants from high or rapidly accelerating emigration zones. The size and acceleration of the flow provides opportunities for traffickers to pose as smugglers. Omar and Trebesch argue that *only* family networks, not community networks, provide useful resources to counteract this tendency (p.184).

Finally, times have changed. For the most part, the scholarship that informed my initial expectations relied on fieldwork prior to the escalation of Mexican criminal terrain disputes (2006-present) or the onset of the U.S. economic recession (2007- present). Since that time, Mexican migration has fallen to net zero (Massey 2011). The ceaseless unauthorized migration that characterized the northern Mexican cross-border commute has slowed precipitously. And the upswing in criminal violence across the country is taking a toll on interpersonal trust within Mexican communities, particularly in the war torn north (Miroff 2012). Thus, the golden era of community migration may be drawing to a close, even in Mexico. The uncertainty that the Salvadoran case illustrates may represent a new status quo for migration practices, at least for the foreseeable future, as upheaval characterizes routes and the rules of the smuggling game are renegotiated in Mexico.

Conclusion

The tale that emerges by tracing information in two Salvadoran towns highlights the dynamism of migrant networks as a financial resource, but their failure as an informational resource. Cecilia Menjivar (2000) emphasizes the contingent nature of Salvadoran migrant networks in U.S. destination communities. In her study of the Indian diaspora, Kara Somerville (2011) emphasizes the potential for the transmission of vague or incorrect information via long-distance transnational networks. Similarly, I find that conditions in Salvadoran migrant home communities produce contingencies in migrant networks, and conditions in Mexican transit communities shorten the lifespan of useful specific information. Interpersonal networks are fluid, potentially disrupted by distrust and envy within communities, but often widened or narrowed by human movement between them. In fact, with rampant accusations of envidia between neighbors and cousins, community seems like the wrong word to describe relationships among neighbors in post-conflict El Salvador.

However, it did not take long for some families in the town with a short migration history to adapt to the situation, developing relatively confident tactics to evade the intensifying violence with remittances sent from the United States. This rapid adaptation occurred, in part, because social ties based on close family relations, not place, supplies important financial resources for migration tactics. Furthermore, family provides a potential for retaliation against smugglers in the event of a breach of contract. To the extent that reputation played a role in enforcing smuggling contracts, it was a concern for social reputation, not market reputation, which appeared to dominate smuggler motive.

Furthermore, in the context of rapidly changing criminal violence in Mexico, the information carried through family networks may suddenly, and without warning, outlive its utility. Such failures can have deadly consequences. As any migrant will warn, their social ties cannot guarantee a safe journey. Like Odysseus, they are acutely aware of the fallibility of their relationships and their beliefs about the route, maintaining their faith only in God.

In this sense, the Homeric world is a fitting allegory for the social context that confronts migrants. Odysseus' reputation is synonymous with his charismatic character, not his reliability within reciprocal trade relationships. And after his slaughter of the presumptuous suitors, the potential for familial retribution against his household is his primary concern. However, these social possibilities only loosely guide his behavior. Odysseus' actions more closely align with his perception of divine will and the limits of his wiliness, not a strict adherence to norms and protocols. Indeed, in Odysseus' two decade-long absence, Ithaca became a place where envy and rumor rule, and for men, "each one is the law for his own wives and children, and cares nothing about the others". The important role of his immediate family notwithstanding, the changing and fickle nature of the deceitful social relations he must negotiate privileges the combination of faith and craftiness above all.

CHAPTER 5

MAPPING ROUTES: THE ORIENTATION OF MIGRATION PRACTICE

Introduction

A long while she sat in silence... numbing wonder
filled her heart as her eyes explored his face.
One moment he seemed... Odysseus, to the life-
The next, no, he was not the man she knew,
A huddled mass of rags was all she saw.

The woman was working the coffee fields when she saw the strange, gaunt man lurking behind the trees. He wandered around, staring at her and her children. He had a shaggy beard and mustache, unkempt hair in dirty curls. Mosquito bites made his shoeless feet look like meat, and they were bandaged with rags tied with a belt. Terrified, she picked up her children and ran home. But then he came and stared in her window. She was panic-stricken. He tried the door. She shouted at him to go away, and he shouted back that she was crazy. It was her husband. Like Penelope confronted with her long lost Odysseus, she could not believe him at first, but recognition slowly dawned on her. When he finally entered the house, he slept for two days and ate nothing. His listless body was both thin and swollen, telling her what she needed to know about his journey. It was the first of four attempts her husband made before successfully arriving in the United States.

I interviewed members of this Salvadoran family eight times in their home community over the course of a year, listening as those who had traveled and those who had stayed behind collectively re-imagined the dangerous route. At first, the woman only talked about her husband's experience, later opening up and telling me about the day her youngest son left town on my third visit to her family (3/1/10). He did not come home one night. In the morning, she went to look for him, asking in the streets, but no one

knew where he was. When she returned home, the smaller children were crying. They had found a note that he had written in a notebook. He had left home carrying only twenty dollars. She cried when he left, and she cried again remembering that morning.

In the back room, I heard another cry above the woman's sobs. Her three-month old niece awoke. The baby looked like a newborn, her oversized head on a tiny body and bulging eyes already deformed by chronic hunger. The woman explained apologetically that she knows her niece is hungry, but she can barely afford to feed her own children, let alone her sister's neglected brood. She washed the baby. And she dressed her in a fresh outfit with little booties, donated by some benefactor, but she mumbles that nobody ever gave her anything for her own babies. Her sister gave the baby unboiled water, and it is amazing it survived. The baby is tough. She patted the baby and bounced her knee, but the baby continued to wail with hunger. My own chest grew heavy with the desire to feed the baby, but I dared not reach for the dying thing. Finally, she gave the screaming baby to her youngest daughter, who ran off with her little cousin like she was holding a ragdoll.

After this interruption, our conversation veered abruptly to the news. She had heard about the earthquakes in Haiti and Chile, and she believes *something* is coming for El Salvador. A man passed through town a few weeks ago warning of an impending disaster. He travels the countryside telling people about his visions. She believes him now, after seeing those distant events on the television. But here she stays, waiting for God's will.

In moments like these, interviews instruct not only through words, but experience; ethnographers decipher a tangle of eyewitness observations, emotions and non-verbal

communication that leads to new insights.⁵⁰ These insights would be overlooked if researchers only focused on seemingly straightforward answers to survey questions. Before I left the Salvadoran town, on my way to Mexico to see the storied route first hand, the woman's youngest son drew me a map of his own failed attempt to arrive in the United States. With these contributions, this family was one of many that transformed my interviews into an ethnographic journey. With the help of the stories and images I collected during that journey, I hope to render the lived experience of the transnational migratory route legible for a new audience.

Chapter Overview

This chapter presents the case for an ethnographic method for understanding how Central Americans migrants navigate transnational routes. To do so, I first explain what an ethnographic journey is, and how ethnographers leverage experience, as well as interviews, to understand social reality. Second, I describe my own fieldwork in greater detail. In particular, I explain the premise and protocol for a series of mapmaking workshops that I conducted. Third, I discuss how the maps reveal a transnational imaginary influenced by biblical and popular media depictions of the route. I also discuss what the maps surprisingly, and tellingly, do not reveal; the absence of a clear geographic orientation in several maps hints at the relative importance of social understanding, as opposed to purely topographical information, for navigating the journey. Fourth, I show how the maps recreate a framework for understanding the route that reinforces migrants' commitment to the journey. Migrants have not passively received and internalized biblical and popular media images; they continually reinterpret the transnational

⁵⁰ Clifford Geertz (1973, p.5-6). calls this 'thick description'.

imaginary before, during and after their journey. Finally, I compare and contrast migrant maps to official maps of the route, pointing to how the artwork of migrants challenges the normative foundations of national borders. Likewise, I contend that an ethnographic reading of this artwork broadens our understanding of the construction of knowledge.

An Ethnographic Journey

This text follows an ethnographic journey. In other words, I retrace the micro-practice of migration in an attempt to understand the lived experience of the route. An ethnography ‘en route’, in which the researcher moves along terrain where activities are simultaneously hidden and known, reveals unauthorized migration practices, for which official sources continue to be notoriously inaccurate (Coutin 2005). I map the individual journeys of migrants, retelling their stories in both words and images. Indeed, alternative maps can render hidden practices legible to new audiences by rewriting what Michel de Certeau (1984, p.87) calls the “procedures for forgetting”:

It is true that the operations of walking on can be traced on city maps in such a way as to transcribe their paths (here well-trodden, there very faint) and their trajectories (going this way and not that). But these thick or thin curves only refer, like words, to the absence of what has passed by. Surveys of routes miss what was: the act itself of passing by. The operation of walking, wandering, or “window shopping,” that is, the activity of passers-by, is transformed into points that draw a totalizing and reversible line on the map. They allow us to grasp only a relic set in the nowhere of a surface of projection. Itself visible, it has the effect of making invisible the operation that made it possible. These fixations constitute procedures for forgetting. The trace left behind is substituted for the practice. It exhibits the (voracious) property that the geographical system has of being able to transform action into legibility, but in doing so it causes a way of being in the world to be forgotten.

By taking the reader on this ethnographic journey, I attempt to revive scholarly interest in a method overlooked by contemporary political science: “the act of itself of passing by”. To the extent possible given the dangerous and illegal practices under study,

I undertook a ‘mobile ethnography’, defined by Laura Watts (2008) as “travelling with, and constituting, a moving field site; participating in the relations between things, people and places on the move”.⁵¹ This method for studying migration echoes the experience of migrants. Parallel journeys made by ethnographers imperfectly retread the path of their participants. Despite its imperfections, mobile ethnography reflects the migrants’ own method for knowing the route; both researcher and subject undertake a similar process of information, imagination and improvisation. Participant observation, after all, is a reflexive imagining of what life is like for someone else based on observations made via immersive experience; it is a systematized way of knowing through doing.⁵²

To navigate uncertainty and violence, migrants must leverage social networks for introductions and financial resources. They must engage strangers in a series of performances through which they collectively imagine social relationships and possibilities for movement. And they must carefully observe the contours of their material environment. During their journey, they must constantly re-imagine and improvise upon symbolic and material assets to know the way forward.

⁵¹ Within the field of migration studies, David Fitzgerald (2006) identifies his own ethnography as ‘multi-sited’, because it incorporates both migrants’ home and destination communities. However, a different terminology better fits ethnographic work along transnational routes. The route itself represents a single ethnographic field of inquiry, whose sustained practices constitute a ‘site’, albeit a long-distance one that continually shifts across the landscape. As James Clifford (1997) advises, “In tracking anthropology’s changing relations with travel, we may find it useful to think of the ‘field’ as a habitus rather than as a place, a cluster of embodied dispositions and practices”.

⁵² In a seminal volume on the contribution of ethnography to political science, Edward Schatz (2009, p.5-8) defines participant observation as “immersion in a community, a cohort, a locale, or a cluster of related subject positions”, and recognizes the centrality of this method of understanding through lived experience in a broader ethnographic methodological approach, recognized by its interpretive and empathetic sensibility (p.5-8). In the same volume, Jan Kubik (2009, p.30) reinforces this point, defining participant observation as “a disciplined immersion in the social life of a given group of people”.

Similarly, in the course of my research, I leveraged social networks for introductions and information. I engaged strangers, earnestly performing the professional role of researcher and Church volunteer, as well as the more personal roles of woman, foreigner, friend, mother, wife, customer and tenant, in the communities where I lived. I used tacit judgment, based in part on stereotypes and my own cultural frames, about the reliability of people, their position vis-à-vis the wider community, and how to interpret my interactions with them. I observed the knowledge-based artifacts produced by the flow of people over terrain and time, as well as how people employed them in their own activities. I developed, to the best of my ability, a sense of place. In the process, I learned a great deal about myself, as a researcher and an ethical human being. Needless to say, fieldwork is an improvisational practice (Yanow 2003, p.292).

Ethnographers, like migrants, rely heavily on serendipity. Despite the role of subjectivity and chance in ethnography, neither ethnographic research nor migrants' mobile knowledge are purely "impressionistic"; both require intensive preparation and thoughtful execution (Yanow 2003, p.292). Strict plans stifle creativity, while unstructured data collection provides no basis for convincing communication of the results. Worse, unconsciously collected data can misrepresent reality and reinforce research bias. New ethnographic insights, like innovative unauthorized travel tactics, happen in that mental space between accident and expectation.⁵³ For this reason, Charles Tilly (2006) convincingly argues that ethnography is neither art nor science. It requires a systematic method of observation and description that pure artists may forgo, and it can

⁵³ On the role of accident in ethnography, see Frank N. Pieke (1995).

be judged from a clear set of intersubjective disciplinary standards.⁵⁴ Thus, the work of ethnography is best described as *craftsmanship*. As such, it is a method uniquely suited for tracing the causal and conceptual mechanisms that underlie social and political phenomena (Tilly 2006). By leaving open opportunities for inductive improvisation when unexpected insights arise and thus refusing to lock researchers into a rigid deductive framework, ethnography is particularly well suited for tracing causal and conceptual mechanisms in a fluid, uncertain social realm.

The concept of a discrete beginning and end of a journey interferes with an understanding of the continuous flow of information that shapes dynamic interaction between the material, socio-economic and socio-psychological landscapes traversed by migrants. To understand knowledge generated and transmitted through improvisation, researchers should, as George Marcus (1995) exhorts, “Follow the People”: not just to the places that they are going, but also to the places they happen to go to along the way. The transnational route, from home to destination and back again, becomes the obvious research site.⁵⁵

⁵⁴Laurel Richardson (2000) argues that since ethnography is both art and science, we can evaluate it based on its: 1) substantive contribution; 2) aesthetic merit; 3) reflexivity; 4) impact; and 5) expression of a reality. In other words, ethnography should be a well-written, self-conscious and systematic work that resonates with the reader as a credible and valuable depiction of the ‘real’ social world under study.

⁵⁵In this manner, the move to a conceptual framework of migration *practice* dovetails with a recent methodological challenge for traditional anthropological conceptions of the relationship between physical space and social boundaries. Ethnographers of yesteryear rooted their methodology in the notion of a physically bounded community; the ability to travel to a new location provided outsiders with analytical leverage to understand a habitus hidden from the locals. However, the advent of ethnographies of globalization calls this notion into question by tracing the social construction of the relationship between place and society (Clifford 1997; Gupta and Ferguson 1997; Marcus 1995).

This research design provides the foundation for an “encompassing comparison”, defined by Tilly (1984) as the effort to “select locations within the structure or process and explain similarities or differences among those locations as consequences of their relationships to the whole” (p.125). Geography and practice link the communities of the migration route as part of a larger system of movement in people, goods and services through both the legal and illegal global political economy. These links come into view as the researcher moves across the social and material terrain of the migration route.

Description of Fieldwork

This ethnographic journey proceeded in three stages, divided between Salvadoran hometowns, the Mexican transit corridor, and the U.S. transit corridor and destinations. Given the sensitive nature of the topic of unauthorized migration and violence, purposive snowball sampling was the most appropriate method to find study participants. While snowball samples threaten to guide researchers toward clusters of people with shared experiences, word-of-mouth is the only viable strategy for interrogating the unauthorized migrant community. To offset this limitation, I contacted a wide variety of actors within the communities, including a cross-section of people with diverse life experiences, religious affiliations and political orientations. Forty-four percent of the study participants in El Salvador were women. Interviews with migrants crossing Mexico roughly mirrored the Central American migrant population, male respondents constituting a majority. Participants came from El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala and Nicaragua, in rough proportion to their nationality’s estimated representation in the migratory flow.

During my year in El Salvador (July 2008, and from September 2009 until August 2010), I conducted one hundred forty-three in-depth semi-structured and unstructured interviews of Salvadoran migrants preparing for or returning from their journey, family members, community leaders, police and others.⁵⁶ In El Salvador, ninety people participated in the study, often over a period of several weeks and sometimes over the course of months through multiple interviews. In two Salvadoran communities with divergent migration histories⁵⁷, I focused on both the individual and the community levels of analysis to understand the development of transnational labor smuggling markets.

Living in rural El Salvador with my family and performing volunteer work in a local Catholic convent provided an opportunity for participant observation and social relationships with townspeople in one community, thereby encouraging more receptive responses to interviews and mapmaking workshops. In the immersive ethnographic tradition, I engaged the communities both personally and professionally.⁵⁸ This immersion allowed me to participate in countless informal conversations and daily practices, including listening to real time discussions among family members as they made migration decisions, in addition to formal interviews.

⁵⁶ I wrote fieldnotes, during interviews and whenever possible in the course of each day, following the advice from Robert M. Emerson, Rachel I. Fretz and Linda L. Shaw (1995). I then transcribed these handwritten notes on the computer each night. I did not record interviews. Instead, all quotes in the text of this dissertation have been reconstructed from shorthand. The vast majority of interviews and informal conversations were in Spanish, but I also conducted a handful of interviews in English, in some cases alternating between the two languages. In all cases, the preference of the participant determined which language was used.

⁵⁷ I discussed case selection of these communities and the rationale for beginning the research in El Salvador in their detailed comparison in Chapter 4.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the benefits of immersion for the study of political science, see the edited volume (Schatz 2009).

Following my time in El Salvador, I conducted eleven months of ethnographic work (from August 2010 through July 2011) in transit communities, train yards and migrant shelters in Mexico with migrants from all Central American countries. In that time, I conducted semi-structured interviews with Central American migrants en-route about their ongoing decision-making process. I contacted these people at shelters and in train yards at eleven locales along routes through Mexico, all the way from the southern border with Guatemala to the United States: Tapachula, Arriaga, Ixtepec, Tenosique, Oaxaca City, Lecheria, Coatzacoalcos, San Luis Potosi, Saltillo, Monterrey, and Reynosa.

To facilitate access and gain inductive insights into migration practices, I engaged in approximately five hundred hours of participant observation as a volunteer at a migrant shelter about mid-point along the route through Mexico.⁵⁹ I also accompanied unauthorized migrants on a sixteen-hour segment of their journey atop a freight train through southern Mexico. Finally, I interviewed activists, residents of the local Mexican community, government officials and others about their interactions with migrants. In Mexico, I conducted one hundred twenty-two interviews with one hundred seven participants. The fieldwork along the route through Mexico enriched the initial community-based project by documenting ongoing processes of individual movement and social change along the route.

⁵⁹ In my capacity as a shelter volunteer, I registered several hundred migrants, administering the shelter intake questionnaire about migrants' hometown, nationality, marital status, educational background and experiences of human rights violations. I also taught English, administered a survey of sexual health for the shelter, cooked, cleaned, drove people to the hospital, assisted with security at the gate during the arrival of migrants, accompanied a migrant to file a legal complaint, distributed food and hygiene supplies, collaborated with activists, answered the telephone, arranged Skype calls, attended staff meetings and performed a variety of other small tasks.

In the final fieldwork stage, I interviewed sixteen migrants and family members along routes through the United States. Following the stories of migrants and specific individuals with whom I remained in contact from previous fieldwork, as well as forming a few new contacts with Central American immigrant communities, I made short, targeted trips to Texas, California and New York. Interviews in these locales included questions about the migrants' and family members' perception of the risks of their journey, as well as discussion of their home and receiving community migration history, the sources of information accessed about the route and the ways they fund or discuss the journey with would-be migrants who might be coming after them. I had the opportunity to make only one afternoon visit to a safe house through which a smuggling network moves people within the United States (9/23/11).⁶⁰

The flow of information and re-imagination of the route in the immigrant enclaves within the U.S. constrains migrant decisions in transit. Migrants must maintain contact with friends and relatives in the destination communities. During my fieldwork in Mexico, migrants complained that even after they become aware of dangers in the route, they could not change their travel plans because family members waiting in the destination limited funding. For example, if kidnappings or police raids are occurring on the train, the migrant can only switch to a more expensive form of travel or a new arrangement with a different smuggler if family and friends in the US wire money. If they cannot convince family members in the destination of the urgent need for more funding, the migrants cannot adjust their plans even though they now realize they are in danger; migration strategies thus become relatively inflexible. These final interviews provided

⁶⁰ I mention this visit to emphasize how transnational unauthorized routes extend within the United States.

insights into how people in the destination and along the routes through the United States participate in the social processes of transit.

Mapmaking: An Unexpected Artwork

I supplement participant observation and semi-structured interviews with mapmaking workshops. Elisabeth J. Wood (2003) used mapmaking workshops in an ethnographic analysis of the collective memory of Salvadoran peasant resistance. Building on a tradition of cognitive mapping (Lynch 1960; Powell 2010; Seyer-Ochi 2006), I use similar mapmaking workshops to achieve a slightly different ethnographic goal than Wood (2003). While I also examined the construction of social memory, I sought to understand the construction of the social imagination. For that reason, in the two Salvadoran home communities where I worked, I asked would-be migrants to imagine and draw a map of the route they expected to travel. Returned migrants were asked to remember and draw a map of the route they had taken. Twenty-two people completed the exercise.⁶¹

At its best, visual ethnography is a largely inductive process (Edgar 2001). Therefore, I conscientiously permitted participants to determine the content and form of the “maps”. I loosely followed Tovi Fenster’s (2009) three-step structure. First, I conducted a semi-structured interview that took place over several hours or several days. At the end of this interview, I explained the mapping project and asked if they would participate. People who chose to participate then mapped their memory or imagination of the route in a workshop, either with me present or alone, depending on their preference.

⁶¹ Unfortunately, I could not display all of the maps or images collected during research in this dissertation. However, the entire set is available for viewing upon request, and a future publication will showcase them.

A final interview centered on the map, in which participants were asked to explain the story depicted in their map and their artistic choices.

Beyond simple information, the illustrations drawn by migrants convey the images that underlie the migratory social imaginary. David MacDougall (1997) argues that visual communication may be a “language metaphorically and experientially close” to human experience (cited in Powell 2010). In other words, migrants drew what Ingrid Seyer-Ochi (2006, p.170) calls a ‘lived landscape’, which is also a ‘layered landscape’ with levels of meaning shaped by both natural processes and human practices and connected by shared images.

Migrants’ interpretations of the meaning of a ‘map’ were particularly intriguing. When I originally devised the mapmaking workshops, I had expected the maps to be visual representations of the physical terrain of the route. I initially thought that the maps would convey the topographical information available to migrants in their home communities, and I expected to observe differences in the accuracy of the maps that would indicate which groups of migrants are most vulnerable to exploitation en route. I naively expected that maps would reveal whether migrants from different communities, religions, political parties or genders had “better” information about the locations of dangers and opportunities along the route.

No such systematic differences in informational resources can be gleaned from an analysis of the maps that I collected. The sample size is small, and it includes maps made by migrants with varying levels of migration experience, ranging from those who had never travelled to people who had made multiple journeys. Common themes in the maps emerge across all maps, but no clear patterns linked to the social attributes of their makers can be detected among them. Finally, the maps do much more than simply convey information. Instead, the

migrants' maps give us both the reason and means to rethink the nature of information under conditions of uncertainty, delving deeper into the relationship between the social imaginary and lived experience.

In retrospect, I had taken the meaning of a map for granted. Migrants transformed maps into artwork that conveys both their hopes and memories. These maps can be read as a political performance: a form of protest against immigration policies and violent crimes viewed as injustice. As such, many maps dramatically diverged from my initial expectation that migrants would draw strictly geographical representations of the route. Instead, they interwove the normative aspects of the social imaginary into the material practices of migration. This method thereby reveals the 'mental maps' (Migdal 2004) that organize the perceived relationship between space and social belonging; it shows where migrant maps self-consciously converge and diverge from the official maps that cut space into discrete nation-states. In so doing, it reveals how 'cognitive maps' link to 'tacit knowledge' such that it "enables knowledge to move" for the purpose of navigation (Watson-Verran and Turnball 1995, p.126).

In the two Salvadoran communities, most would-be migrants and returned migrants with whom I spoke do not use written maps during their daily lives, nor did they plan to use a map to navigate their journey north. Migrants instead rely on human guides to negotiate the spatial and social geography of the journey. Migrants who cannot afford guides rely on word of mouth from other migrants and more experienced travel companions, and they learn how to travel north by travelling and encountering new objects and terrain. Converging en masse on freight train yards in southern Mexico as a site for both information and transportation, Central American migrants literally take the journey one step at a time. Following Mexican

migrants along routes into and through the United States, Ted Conover (1987, p.118)

observed the same mode of travel:

As the sun was setting I asked to see a map; soon it would be too dark to read. But they didn't have one. "*Excuse me? No Map?*" Emilio shrugged. Maximo shook his head. Twenty-five hundred miles without a map? "*We know how to go*", said Maximo, in gentle reproach. "*We've done it before.*"

Like these Mexican migrants, Central American migrants learn through the experience.

The migrant maps took a wide variety of forms, expressing diverse interpretations of distance, each commensurate with the unique experience of the participant. Some mapmakers only felt comfortable narrating during the drawing. In the absence of a verbal narrative, some mapmakers felt unable to remember what had happened; they could not figure out where to start drawing unless we could talk during the exercise. Once they began to draw, the migrants sometimes visualized the missing segments of the narrative and added stories that they had previously skipped. In this context, talking and mapping are co-constitutive means of remembering, not just expression. Maps do not just illustrate the memory; they are constructed by the narrative and remembering, and vice versa. This information, whether conveyed visually or verbally, does not exist outside the practice of telling. Information and practice must be interwoven during experience, imagination and memory.

Other mapmakers only felt comfortable working alone, keeping the process of recollection or imagination a secret until they could emerge with the "correct" account of their story. Some participants said that they needed time to collect their thoughts and remember correctly what had happened before their interview or mapmaking session. In Erving Goffman's (1959) terminology, mapmaking occurred "backstage", illustrating how the presentation of the map during an interview represented a carefully crafted "performance".

Finally, some mapmakers understood the exercise as an individual task, while others permitted family members and friends contribute. I left the decision whether to collaborate or work individually to the migrants. The contribution of friends and family did not alter the mapmakers' claims to authorship of the resulting artwork. The level of social engagement during the process varied substantially, depending upon the mapmakers' confidence in his/her companions, and the mapmakers' perceived need for technical assistance. In this manner, the migration mapping exercise, while foreign to participants, parallels other migratory social activities, as migrants balance the need for privacy and trust on the one hand and information availability and openness on the other.

A few maps took the form of collages, with only a loose relationship between distance and events. A few maps seemed like prototypes for board games, with a path weaving its way back and forth across various obstacles or safe places on the page. Other maps took the form of a time-line or storyboard, with no reference to distance at all, simply the order of events. Some maps were a simple array of dots and lines on the page. One mapmaker drew a single manger scene and explained that her trip could be understood in the biblical story of Mary and Joseph searching for a home to have their baby:

Figure 5.1: Migrant Map: We are all Pilgrims



This map illustrates the story of her family (5/7/10; 5/20/10). They left El Salvador in May 1985, when she was fourteen years old. The guerillas had tried to forcefully recruit her brother, and the entire family fled. She travelled on a Mexican visa by airplane to Tijuana. But there, the nightmare began. The smugglers hired to take them across the U.S. border separated young women from their parents in the safe house. Her father rescued her, insisting that the family must stay together, though he risked being killed to do it. She was willing to participate in the mapmaking workshop, because “it is important that people know what people are suffering and that they should be treated better”. She chose to draw her journey as a nativity scene, because she has been an Evangelical Christian since her childhood, and she always thought of the story of Jesus. “Mary had no good place to have her child” and in the journey through Mexico, “You cannot forget God”. She thought Mary and Joseph must have suffered as her family did.

Finally, some maps resembled conventional ‘maps’ with a clear spatial orientation and geographical markers. Two of these mapmakers consulted existing maps in my presence. The first, a long-time resident of the United States, checked an atlas to ensure that he remembered “correctly”. The second, an employee in the local mayor’s office who was interviewed in his place of work, asked an assistant to print various maps from Google Maps to ensure that the locations and names of towns were accurate. Interestingly, both these returned migrants are relatively active in local politics and engage the local extensions of the state bureaucracy

almost daily. The atlas-user is an aspiring local politician and community activist, while the other is a local government appointee.

Some mapmakers drew elaborate symbols that represent values; for example, in one potent image, a mapmaker illustrated an upturned hand holding bread, symbolizing how God provides daily bread and migrants follow His will by searching for it:

Figure 5.2: Migrant Map: Our Daily Bread



The artist began the explanation of his artwork by pointing at the picture of a hand holding bread (2/24/10). This represents the daily bread of Christ; “God gives you bread, but you must go out to look for it.” By migrating, he was obeying the will of God. Near the extended hand is a picture of crying faces with a dream of home and bread. They cry because he must leave his family to help them. There is a small wall separating Guatemala and Mexico to symbolize the level of difficulty in passing the border. At that point in the journey, he had a sense of adventure. In Mexico, he drew guns to symbolize drugs and delinquency. The U.S.-Mexico border looms larger on the page than the Guatemala-Mexico border, because it is more dangerous and difficult to cross. At that point in the journey, he felt the mixture of happiness and sadness, because he knew it was a point of no return. If he succeeded, he would never be able to come home again, and he wondered if he would ever see his

family again. He drew day on one side of the map and night on the other side of the map to illustrate how happiness and sadness, good and evil, get all mixed together during the journey. During the journey, there is no ethical or emotional clarity.

This subset of more conventional maps illustrates national borders and landmarks, as well as locations of personal challenges and home. Colors also play an important role in several of the maps. In one map, a color code represents the different emotions experienced while traversing the terrain. The same person who drew the provocative daily bread image (see figure 5.2) also drew black dollar signs in Mexico, as opposed to the green dollars at home and the U.S., to illustrate the moral “dirtiness” of the activities to earn money there. In one example, the mapmaker, imagining the way forward, used only dark colors in order to represent how uncertain and ominous the journey seemed at its outset. For two mapmakers who imagined the journey, mountains concealed the future, emphasizing a sense of uncertainty by obscuring the view of what the journey might be like or where it might end:

Figure 5.3: Migrant Map: To Travel is Something Ugly



The artist was a young woman who sells Avon. It is a dangerous job, because she rode the Salvadoran buses laden with expensive goods to sell. Given the risk of being robbed and losing the investment or pressed for exorbitant extortion fees to operate, small time entrepreneurship in El Salvador requires great courage. Nevertheless, the young woman said she lacked the courage to make the journey to the United States. In truth, she simply could not imagine herself traveling “in that way”; unauthorized migration requires too much walking, too much hardship. Her uncle left during the war. He was the first in the family to go. Her brother-in-law also went in the 1980s without a coyote. Then, four siblings followed. Each journey was more harrowing than the next. First, her sister went to the United States in 1998. It took eight days. Her journey was comfortable and secure. Second, in 1999 or thereabouts, her brother made the trip. But he had to cross the desert with a girl with a broken foot, and it was harder than her sister had remembered. Third, in 2002, another sister went to the United States. Her travel group was split in two, separated for the fifteen-day voyage. The adventure had become much more difficult by that time. Her sister had to ride in a tiny boat, saw many little animals, and she had to walk long distances. In March 2006, her fourth sibling made the journey. This brother had to cross the desert by foot, and it took him three attempts to arrive before he succeeded. Now with the deportations within the United States, no one feels secure after arrival anymore. Her brother might come home soon. She does not lack the opportunity to go. Her brothers have promised her help and she knows whom to ask, but “to travel is something ugly”. In her map she chose dark colors to symbolize a sense of foreboding. She does not like to walk. There are animals. The ocean symbolizes danger. There is a train and quicksand, and even the sun is not brilliant. A tall mountain obscures the way forward. When she drew this image, she did not expect to leave home (3/28/10).

Figure 5.4: Migrant Map: Maybe A Path Forward?



The artist was a young woman who worked in a tourist café near the beach (3/28/10, 4/19/10). When she agreed to make the map, she had already begun to plan her journey. A first brother had been in the United States for a long time, and a second brother had left recently, followed by a sister the month before our interview. They told her about the journey, that it was very hard. But the most recent brother had a better coyote than the first one, and they thought it was safe enough for their sisters to follow. Nevertheless, imagining the journey proved to be a daunting task for the young woman, and she delivered the map with an explanation that she had changed her mind. It was too dangerous to travel the route. In her map, dangerous animals line the trail, symbolizing the risks of the crossing. A mountain looms ominously in the distance, obscuring the path forward. The journey is uncertain. And she had heard about a new U.S. law that makes it impossible to work if you have no papers. Months later, however, I received word that the artist had undertaken the journey after all. She gave birth to a daughter in Texas.

Migrant Maps: An Expression of a Transnational Imaginary

Some scenes depicted in the maps express a transnational imaginary shaped by printed publications, radio and television broadcasts and artistic communications. Taken together, Arjun Appadurai (1990, p.9) calls these images “the mediascape”. From this perspective, the

Bible has informed a transnational mediascape in the Americas since the arrival of the Spaniards over five hundred years ago. The maps drawn by migrants show that both biblical and popular media representations of the migratory route shape expectations and interpretations of experience. Migrants encounter songs, movies, radio reports and television news programs about the route before, during and after their journey. Migrants post updates and images of the route on *Facebook*.⁶²

Popular Influences

Song becomes a prism through which Central Americans interpret their migration experiences and identity. In a study of popular music in El Salvador, including both the *corridos* tradition that has migrated south from Mexico and recent developments in Central American hip-hop, Roxana Martel and Amparo Marroquín (2007) argue that songs narrate the reasons for migration, and they recount the dangers and social roles that would-be migrants expect to encounter along the route. *Corridos* are ballads, often with rebellious narratives about heroes, martyrs, smugglers, outlaws and migrants, that have engaged in a popular dialogue about Mexican migration, shaping the public imagination of the dangers and players in that drama (Sheridan 2009, p.138-141). In Central America, popular music is also a source of information about the route.

This oral art form is also a dynamic means for migrants to re-imagine the journey en route, as well as at home. As people travel, they discover and adapt new ways to express themselves. Migrants play songs on borrowed guitars in migrant shelters. They write lyrics or perform rap

⁶² When I first arrived in El Salvador in 2008, cybercafés were opening in rural El Salvador and I introduced a few Salvadoran friends to *facebook* to keep in touch. When I returned in 2009, the number of cybercafés had increased, and many young Salvadorans had accounts on alternative networking sites. Along the route in 2010, I watched migrants learn about *facebook* and the internet in shelters and in cybercafés across Mexico. Today, *facebook* has become a virtual mural of the route with photos and songs posted by activists, migrants and even smugglers.

music that they upload to *YouTube* or *Facebook*, crowding around computers in shelters and cybercafés along the route to share their compositions. They raise their voices to praise God and ask for His protection along the route. Central American migrant youth write hip-hop lyrics with social critique of their plight and then publish them online. The style of these amateur videos and songs both mimics and innovates upon commercial hip hop artists from across Latin America, such as the Puerto Rican duo Calle 13, who sing about the injustices confronting this generation of nomadic young people. It describes the experience of those who must travel north “without a route” and “without a map” (lyrics to the 2007 song *Pa'l Norte*, “To the North”).

In their lyrics, hip hop artists, like Calle 13, sometimes explicitly threaten the corrupt authorities that exploit migrants. For example, one young Nicaraguan man, travelling north with his wife and newborn baby, performed a rap about the murder of ‘the 72’ for me (fieldnotes 11/16/10); in an expression of transnational solidarity with other migrants from the region, the song warns Mexicans not to “fuck with Central Americans”. He had also posted it on *youtube* in Arriaga, Chiapas after performing it for a Salvadoran consular official there. Like the painters of the murals that decorate the route, these amateur musicians perform their art to fortify themselves in the face of uncertain danger and collectively re-imagine their purpose in opposition to the state and other violent actors.

Despite the emergence of an innovative hip-hop music scene in Central America, migrants most commonly mentioned the influence of the more traditional Mexican corridos band Tigres del Norte when discussing how they understood their journey. The band’s lyrics highlight the everyday heroism of migrants and coyotes confronting the dangers and racism, and their social critique extends to the plight of non-Mexican migrants (Sheridan 2009, p.141-

148). Consider the lyrics of their most famous song in Central America, *Tres Veces Mojado* (1988, Three Times a Wetback): “A Mexican takes two footsteps, and he is already here, today they deport him and the next day he is returned. This is a luxury that I do not have”. The Salvadoran migrant of the song must cross three borders to arrive in the United States, and the lyrics narrate his ordeal.

Salvadoran migrants frequently relate this song as an accurate depiction of their experiences. It provides them with a framework for understanding the journey, and given its widespread renown in transnational popular culture, it also functions as a structure through which they can communicate their experiences, hopes and fears with a wide audience. In El Salvador, a man contemplating whether he should undertake the journey asked me to sit and watch the classic film based on that song with him, using it to express his own trepidation about migration. The Tigres del Norte produced and starred in this movie version of *Tres Veces Mojado* in 1989. It is an adventure story about a Salvadoran man crossing Mexico that ends with the death of a friend in the desert and his capture by the U.S. border patrol. Alongside the more recent *Sin Nombre* (Without a Name 2009), it is a cult classic.

Several migrants discussed how *Sin Nombre* had impacted their expectations for the journey. The film is a tale of a young man who pays the ultimate price to save a migrant girl from his own gang as they ride the boxcars north. A Honduran man en route to the United States (Ixtepec 3/5/11) explains how the movie informed his fear of the train:

I was thinking about this movie while crossing the river, and when I saw the tracks I thought, “this is where things started to go wrong.”

Similarly, at home in El Salvador, a different young man, still considering whether or not to embark on his journey, explained that *Sin Nombre* inspired some of the images that he drew in his map of the route he planned to take:

Figure 5.5: Migrant Map: A Journey Without a Name⁶³



The artist's father's former smuggler had been harassing the family (2/7/10; 2/11/10; 2/17/10). His father had failed to pay the remainder of his debt and still owed \$3,000 for his journey. His father was not going to pay. In the United States, his father had found another woman and no longer answered his family's calls. The young man thought he might need to migrate to pay his father's debts. The

⁶³ This map and several other maps in the collection show signs of water damage and mud. I stored the maps in the house where I was living in El Salvador during fieldwork, but our humble home was struck by a flash flood. On this occasion, several homes in the community were destroyed, but no one was killed. Natural disasters, such as flash floods, earthquakes, sink holes and mud slides, occur frequently in rural Central America, and it does not take a hurricane to throw a rural community into disarray. The damage sustained by the maps marks them as historical documents, produced in a context of uncertainty and precariousness. The mud on the edges of this map tells a story about the conditions of life in rural El Salvador, which my family experienced first-hand when we lost most of our belongings in the flood. I had only the most severely damaged maps restored by a professional conservator. The rest of them visually testify to the documents' harrowing escape from the river that engulfed the neighborhood.

smuggler was losing his patience. Six or eight months prior, the smuggler sent a letter with a threat. Then, one of the smuggler's five men visited the house. They were given one more year to pay, but the smuggler's man warned that *something* horrible would happen if they did not. He explained that it was not just the smuggler demanding payment. He had a business and must pay many other contacts. In the absence of the father, the family must pay. It could be worse; the young man knew someone who lost his car and his house after taking a loan from a smuggler. As he considered his own impending journey, the young man imagined the route through the movie *Sin Nombre*. He thought it is an accurate portrayal of the reality of migration, because it fit the stories he had heard from friends and on the news. He said that the idea of the truck came from a Tigres del Norte song. Despite having immediate plans to leave town within weeks, the young man did not travel to the United States during my time in contact with him. Instead, he continued to work in the tourist industry along the coast. Decisions to leave are fluid, and not everyone who thinks they will go ultimately leaves, even when their reasons to migrate seem compelling and urgent. This artist participated in the workshop, because he thought the activity of drawing the route might clarify his own choice for him.

In a surreal turn of events, one returned Salvadoran migrant described a harrowing ordeal in which kidnappers forced him to watch *Sin Nombre* while in captivity in Mexico:

Figure 5.6: Migrant Map: Kidnapping and a Movie



In this map, we see the river that marks the border between Guatemala and Mexico. The young man then boarded the train. At the end of his journey, he wandered into the wilderness in an area where he expected to be caught by Mexican migration officials. At that point, he had given up hope of arriving

in the United States and wanted to be deported home. The final image in the right hand corner of the map is the facility where he was detained by migration officials before they returned him.

The lean, dark skinned young man who drew the above map left town in 2009 with three brothers, an uncle and friends from the cities of San Miguel and La Libertad. They did not have a professional guide, but one person had experience traveling the route. He was 19 years old at the time. He felt both exhilaration and sadness at the outset of the journey. In the western bus terminal in Guatemala, he heard a song that says, “when I came from my land El Salvador” [Tres Veces Mojado]. The lyrics about suffering during the journey triggered a melancholy. “The majority of people suffer”, he told me, “with a guide, it is more secure, but people still suffer.”

On the train in southern Mexico, he encountered an armed group that he thinks were the Zetas, a cartel notorious for its brutality toward Central American migrants crossing their territory. They told him to give them \$300 to board the freight train, but they lied; “They do not help you board the train.” He refused to pay, and they robbed him. They kidnapped him and his travel companions. They spent three days in captivity, while the kidnappers asked for the phone numbers of family members in the United States. But neither he nor his friends had anyone in the United States who could pay a ransom. They escaped in the night by removing some wood siding from the house and running away in the darkness. First, they fled to *Grupo Beta*, a detail of the Mexican National Institute of Migration (INM) with a humanitarian mission to aid migrants in distress, but they were turned away.⁶⁴ Instead, *Grupo Beta* gave them the address of a Catholic Church with a shelter. So, they went next to the Catholic Church in Tenocique, Tobasco where the priest helped them escape.

⁶⁴ The Mexican government launched Grupo Beta in 1996, first to help Mexican migrants in the northern border zone with the U.S. and then expanded to serve Central American migrants (García 2006, p.160).

In an ironic twist of fate, his kidnappers had forced him to watch the movie *Sin Nombre* during his captivity. They warned him that the route is dangerous, and they played the movie for him and his friends before they had escaped. The movie is the story of a young man who betrays his gang to save a Honduran immigrant girl on the way to the United States; he dies at the climax of the film, shot by his former friends while she crosses the Rio Bravo. Although the lean young man has no idea why his kidnappers wanted him to see it or what message they had hoped to send, the film still had an emotional impact. His map not only echoes his own experience, but the images from the movie. “The movie”, he told me, “captures the reality”. As bandits and migrants perform common knowledge scripts and roles along the route, experience itself also echoes the movie.

Like stories of returned migrants, none of these movies or songs has an unambiguous happy ending. Even in stories of redemption, like *Sin Nombre*, media depictions of the route share the theme of hardship, loss and persecution. Whether fiction or non-fiction, migration stories of redemptive suffering and endurance abound. In her discourse analysis of all major Salvadoran newspapers from 1985 to 2004, Marroquín (2008, p.36-38) argues that a recurring theme of “exodus to the promised land” shapes the imaginary of the route, such that “the religious element present in the popular culture was reinforced by this journalistic treatment that views the migrant that passes this test [of the journey] as someone that has God as a helper in their crossing”. While many migrants dismiss the television or newspaper reports as false or exaggerated, these popular religious tropes shape expectations and interpretations of experiences (Marroquín 2008, p. 39).

Biblical Themes

Given the small sample size, it is difficult to make generalizations based on categories of maps and mapmakers. Nonetheless, one theme is unmistakably evident across maps and their stories: the symbolism and religious imagery in the artwork reveal how migrants connect their experience to a larger normative critique of political and economic structures. The pervasiveness of Christianity is not surprising, of course. Jacqueline Maria Hagan (2008) documents the multiple ways that religion and faith influence Central American migratory journeys and how migrants interact with the “sacred geography of Mexico”. First, organized religion provides sanctuary along the route with a system of shelters and social networks (Hagan 2008, p.163-164). Second, everyday religious practices provide companionship in the face of hardship and a sense of consistency in periods of change (p.164-165). Third, religious faith provides a lens through which migrants can make sense of the experience, and it provides a sense of belonging under conditions of uncertainty. Finally, Hagan notes that the journey transforms and often reaffirms faith (p.167-168).

The Bible provides a transnational normative orientation that structures interactions among strangers. It also facilitates the dialogue between activists and the public they hope to persuade. From the Bible, migrants and activists draw metaphors, archetypes and authority. Indeed, the prevalence of religious expression also signals the role of religion as a “common language” of the route (Vogt 2012, p.164). References to God and faith become interspersed in everyday speech, permeating expression and making encounters between strangers intelligible, if not always blindly trusted. The vast majority of Central American migrants identify as Evangelical Christian or Catholic (Hagan 2008). However, religiosity bubbles up in conversation, even when migrants do not worship in an organized Church. For example, a

Honduran man described his migration strategy as a constant awareness of the fact that “there is only one God”. He frequently described his path forward as constituted by God’s will, but he admitted that “It’s too hard to be a Christian.... I just like God a lot” (Ixtepec, 12/3/10). Whether they practiced a sort of everyday spirituality or institutionalized worship, migrants repeatedly urged me to turn to the bible to understand their plight:

Look at the bible. It says that here we are homeless. We don’t have a place. Pilgrims. Of all that we are conscious, but one of the things we want is to be stable in a place. That has made us migrate (returned migrant, El Salvador, 5/7/10).⁶⁵

Indeed, the Bible provides a justification for migration and a framework through which to claim the illegitimacy of migration control. It provides the archetypes for the migration narrative, as well as moral authority for claims to a right to migrate, conditional on accordance with these biblical archetypes and allegories. One elderly Salvadoran man (El Salvador, 2/1/10) had watched both his children and grandchildren suffer in the route. He had paid thousands of dollars in ransoms to kidnappers to release them, and then he had received one son deported home from the United States despite being married to a U.S. citizen. The old man explained the justification for his anger:

The United States is an ingrate... Latin Americans have built the buildings and worked very hard. They contribute to the country and the United States treats them this way. The US has no right to treat honest people this way. I understand that the United States must deport and should deport people who cause problems, delinquents. But it should not treat workers this way. The United States has no right. God gave the planet to humanity, not to the US. Read the bible and you will understand.

In this quote, the he recognizes the contributions of Central Americans to the U.S. economy. In an oft-repeated argument, he reasons that their identity as workers, as opposed to

⁶⁵ These quotes convey a strikingly similar attitude to the Ecuadorian immigrants interviewed by David Kyle and Christina A. Siracusa (2005).

criminals, entitles them to respectful treatment.⁶⁶ A Honduran man en route to the United States (Ixtepec 4/14/11) lucidly expressed a similar attitude, but roots his claim in the false social construction of race and nationality:

We are all blood brothers. Are we not all human? Why do we use the word migrant when the earth is for everyone? Why? Racism. To this I say, God created the heaven and earth and human beings. Why separate this land? They are earthly laws, not the laws of God.

In this view, borders are manmade and ephemeral, a product of racism. However, the roles that migrants fulfill as workers and breadwinners for their families are eternal and egalitarian. Many Central American migrants do not view unauthorized migration as “criminal”, at least not in the eyes of a much higher authority than the state: God.

Figure 5.7: They Treated Us Like Criminals



⁶⁶ Amelia Frank-Vitale (2011, p.106) also documents the strict distinction between criminality and migration with interviews among Central American migrants en route.

The artist crossed Mexico by bus with his brother (1/8/10; 1/22/10; 4/30/10). He had been too scared to try the train. Twice they had to pay bribes to Mexican migration officials while riding the bus. Near Mexico City, a migration official kidnapped them and held them in an abandoned house for several days, until his sister sent a ransom of \$800 via MoneyGram. The safe house was dirty and filled with the clothing of the victims who had come before them. However, they were not really frightened until they arrived in Nuevo Laredo. The migrant house there was filled with gang members, drug addicts and other criminals. During the daylight hours, the migrants must leave the shelter and brave the streets, filled with police and drug dealers. They waited several days for their sister in the United States to arrange the money, and his brother chose a smuggler who seemed to have many clients, as indicated by a visible crowd of people waiting for service, and a known name. The smuggler was a Salvadoran man working for the Mexicans. In his shop, he sold all sort of things, both legal and illegal: food, pirated goods, and drugs. They agreed to pay him \$1400 per person to cross the border: \$400 up front and the rest would have been due upon delivery. The migrants helped on another across the Rio Bravo. They walked in the desert for five days in a group of twelve: 10 migrants, 1 smuggler and 1 smuggler's assistant. It was cold at night, and they could not carry sufficient food. In the wilderness, a smuggler's truck was supposed to meet them to bring them to Houston, but migration authorities were waiting instead. All the migrants were captured, but the smuggler and his assistant slipped away. The U.S. migration authorities treated the migrants like criminals. As the young man remembered his treatment at the hands of these officials, he wept at the indignity of it. He only wanted to work, and he has never had any problems with the law in El Salvador, but they treated him like a criminal. They put him in a jail uniform and threw him into a small, cold cell with fifty others. It was so crowded that some people slept on the floor without sheets, and the air conditioning chilled him to the bone. They forced him to sign forms written in English. No one translated the form that described his rights for him. In detention, a pastor visited the migrants for Christmas and brought bags of fruit and chocolate, but later that day, they were transferred to another facility. In the process, the guards made them throw away the gift from the Church into the garbage. To a man of so little means, such waste is a terrible sacrilege. He spent 2.5 months in that facility, and at the time, he had no idea how long they might hold him. When they first captured him, he had pretended to be Mexican. He had buried his documents on the Mexican side of the river before crossing, but the U.S. officials knew from his accent that he was Salvadoran. After seeing the facility, he became frightened that they might keep him forever, and he admitted to where he was from to facilitate his departure. He had been separated from his brother, who had attempted illegal entry for the third time and had been sent for several months to a federal prison. During their captivity, their mother had thought they had died in the desert. During the first interviews, he had sworn never to return to the route, never to experience the injustices again, but months later he confided that maybe he would make another attempt.

Like the mapmaker whose work is showcased above, many returned migrants expressed shock and dismay at being “treated like criminals” by U.S. law enforcement during apprehension, detention (including federal prison time for repeated illegal entry), and deportation. As depicted in the maps, these migrants echo Kyle and Siracusa's (2005, p.167) findings; the justification for their actions lies in the economic and political victimization which they suffer in the global political economy and home community. Migrants illustrate

the difficult choices made for the benefit of their family and their perceived need to adhere to God's law, a universal guide for humanity that supersedes the laws of the nation-state.

Finally, in interviews migrants often use biblical allegory to explain their journeys. In particular, migrants explicitly compare this exodus to the Israelites' crossing the Red Sea. For example, one Salvadoran man (El Salvador, 10/7/09) explained that:

Salvadorans are like Israelites too. They must go but they must also live God's Way. They must find a way to make a community and a home and live by law.

In other words, the migrants searching for economic and physical security in the United States, away from the growing chaos of Central America, follow a mandate from God to found a new community with opportunities to lead a dignified and law abiding life, even if it requires unauthorized migration to do so. Indeed, the rule of law in the United States is precisely what makes it such an attractive place for Central American migrants (Frank-Vitale 2011, p.110). In this sense, migration is god-given, not criminal. Ironically, a U.S. migration official (2/9/10) with many years of experience along the border echoed this allegory:

You don't stop undocumented migration. People have moved since the beginning of time, long before there were borders. Undocumented migration goes back to biblical times... splitting the Red Sea... that's basically illegal migration.

Religious leaders also draw clear parallels between contemporary migration and biblical suffering in their sermons. They appeal to the story of the Israelites in their sermons to migrants at shelters along the route, and they speak adamantly about how the migrants embody the values of Jesus, sacrificing for their families and struggling against poverty. Understood in this context, migrant maps may not provide a geographical orientation, but they most certainly depict a normative orientation that both motivates the journey and is necessary for survival. This normative orientation may or may not be sincere. Religion becomes one of

many scripts in a transnational imaginary of the route that migrants, Samaritans and predators may draw upon. Faith may fluctuate over time. However, this normative orientation provides migrants with an important resource to communicate their suffering and position. It makes the experience legible to an everyday audience versed in the Bible, providing a tool for generating common knowledge of shared practice among strangers. For activists working along the route, this common language also provides a persuasive manner of representing the plight of migrants to the larger public. When faith is resilient, expressed clearly in the images of the maps, it explains much of the single-minded determination that underpins their ‘practical intelligence’ for navigating routes (Barnouw 2004, p.21-26).

Migrant Maps: A Normative Framework Under Construction

This normative framework and shared language is not simply passively received, but continually re-constructed before, during and after the journey. The Bible, popular music, movies and news stories do not simply provide *information* about the route; they provide *inspiration* for migrants imagining the route. As Amelia Frank-Vitale (2011, p.120) points out in her analysis of unauthorized migration as civil disobedience, priests and migrants politically interpret biblical passages, rather than simply parrot them; for example, Padre José Alejandro Solalinde Guerra, a prominent human rights activist and founder of the migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, preaches the gospel from Matthew 25.35 as, “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a migrant and you housed me”, when the usual translation is “I was a stranger and you welcomed me” (p.120). Migrants and other actors along the route actively re-interpret the Bible and other sources of information, rather than take them as is. Whether drawn by a would-be migrant expecting the journey or a returned migrant remembering the journey, the maps are evidence of this conscious

reimagining of the route. In fact, two people explicitly declared their reason for participating in the exercise was a desire to systematically think about how they might undertake the journey.

As people imagined the route during the mapmaking exercise, they shifted their declared intentions, rethinking their decision to stay or go, and thus remaking their relationship to the route. Some mapmakers felt overwhelmed by the journey after drawing it and expressed a now wavering commitment to leaving home. Others, like the man that drew the map that follows, felt an even greater resolve to migrate:

Figure 5.8: Migrant Map: The Poorest People Give the Most



The man drew as he spoke. The borders are clearly demarcated. Various events and resting points are marked by simple x's and squares. He indicated where the United States is, but not label it.

I approached a crumbling one-room mud home at the end of a muddy path (4/11/10).

Three men sat in the shade. I addressed the homeowner, a small muscular man with the build of a jockey. He sat upright on a hammock. A younger man sat on a log. At first the man on the log seemed interested in what I had to say, but he quietly walked away at some point. Finally,

the boy prepared a backpack for an outing and also took leave without saying goodbye. But we were not entirely alone. An old, haggard looking woman worked in the hot sun in the garden behind the house. She occasionally scolded an equally haggard looking dog. When I explained my purpose and the rules of consent, the man agreed to participate and we talked about his journey. I returned a few days later, and we discussed my life at great length (4/18/10). He asked about my sisters, their lives and their husbands. He asked whether there are decent jobs where they live, and he opined that my childless sister works too much. Family must come first. While he confidently offered advice for my sister, he was not so certain about his own plans for the future. His elderly mother occasionally joined the conversation, but I could not understand her slurred speech, probably a consequence of her missing teeth.

The man carefully tore a smaller piece of paper to use from the large sheet. He did not want to waste. He began by sketching the borders in orange crayon: El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico. It took him awhile to figure out the correct spelling of Mexico, writing and then re-writing the word. He did not write Estados Unidos (United States), but he pointed to where it would be at the top of the page.

When he traveled in 2005, there was not a lot of kidnapping. In those days, the worst that could happen was theft, by officials or by thieves impersonating smugglers. Twice thieves impersonated guides and tricked him out of money. Each time, they took his money promising smuggling services and then abandoned him. The first time the man said he would take them all the way to the United States, but after receiving payment he disappeared. The second time, another man approached them in Puebla. He was very well dressed: a nice long sleeved shirt, blue jeans with a belt, boots and a cowboy hat. He said he had been to the United States and

could take them. He took them to a house for several days. Then he took them to a park in Mexico City. But he left them there and never came back. Another migrant said he saw the well-dressed man drive north without them. All together the trickery cost him about \$400.

When he made his first trip, he traveled with two other people: a brother and an uncle. One of his relatives had more experience than he had and helped him ride the train. He tied himself to the train with a belt, so that he would not fall if he fell asleep. He always traveled with at least one other person to keep him alert and watch for dangers, and he never saw an accident on the train. He has heard the stories, but he never saw a woman raped or anyone assaulted or murdered.

When I asked him how he knew how to go, he told me that I must understand that no one is traveling alone. He spread his arms wide to illustrate the mass of people that travel along the train route, and then he pulled his arms inward to show them moving forward in the same direction. “That is how you know where to go”. A Honduran man joined his little band of travelers. All nationalities travel together on the train, and the Mexican people were good to him too. “The poorest people give the most.” The people who live near the train tracks give shoes, food and water:

You do not travel alone. Your little group is not alone. You are with thousands of others. You meet people and little groups form. You help one another. If you do not help people, you will not reach your goal. If you go in bad faith, you cannot get there. If you are hurting people, God will not reward you.

He repeated this philosophy many times during my conversations with him. Through the performance of reciprocity in a burgeoning community of practice, he navigated the route.

Ultimately, he found the migrant house in San Luis Potosi by talking to others:

There are lots of good people traveling for the same reason: to find work. You find other people traveling for the same reason, not to hurt anybody, and you travel with them.

He crossed the border in Texas. The uncle paid for a guide at the border, a guide that a relative of a female migrant in the shelter had used before. It cost \$1800 to cross the border and arrive in Houston. They crossed the wilderness. He has another uncle in Los Angeles, an aunt and a cousin in Houston, and third uncle in Arkansas. But they are not close enough family to help much. They are distant. They were close enough to pay the coyote required for the border crossing, but not close enough to pay the \$7000 it would have cost to travel more safely with a coyote from his hometown to the United States:

If you show up at the border, you can usually get someone to pay, because you have traveled a long distance and shown your motivation.

He traveled for one day less than a month. He made his new home in Arkansas, where he found work. As he reviewed his map, he confused the symbols and places he has drawn, switching them around in conversation. He would like to return to the United States, and he is waiting for the economy to improve. He has heard that there is not much work in the U.S. at the moment, but he expects that to change. And there is still necessity in El Salvador. The last government, when the rightwing ARENA party ruled the presidency, had claimed that with the transition to the dollar, people would not need to migrate anymore. But the government lied. The government claimed that replacing the colon, the former Salvadoran national currency abandoned in 2001, with dollars would eliminate the necessity to go to the United States. But what you earn in El Salvador is not the same, even if it is paid in dollars. He can earn five to eight dollars a day in El Salvador, and he makes that much in an hour of work in the United States. If anything, the dollarization of El Salvador has more starkly illustrated this wage disparity. By the end of the mapmaking interview, he is certain he will go back, and he

asks if I know anyone working in construction. Our discussion and the map renewed his determination to remake the journey, even though the route is more dangerous than before.

This man's resolve to make the journey is, in part, reinforced by a belief that his migration is preordained by God; his journey is a form of resistance to the poverty aggravated by a dishonest regime in El Salvador. He willingly accepts suffering to achieve God's purpose. His sense of class solidarity in the face of violence is noble and dangerous, but not reckless when understood through the prism of his spiritual faith. This normative orientation also finds expression in the artwork of the route through Central America, Mexico and the United States. In the shelters and public spaces along the route, artistically-inclined migrants and humanitarian workers have painted murals depicting the journey.

Imagining the Route through Public Art: Before, During and After the Journey

The route and the artistic expressions of its imaginary extend from Central America through Mexico and the United States, and back again. For example, this mural decorates the home of a returned migrant in El Salvador.

Figure 5.9: San Francisco in Rural El Salvador



I chose to tell the story of this man, because I had been intrigued by this mural which superimposes destination on origin. Bridges connect the San Francisco in the United States, on the left, with the hills of El Salvador, on the right. The story behind the mural illustrates how home and destinations become entangled over time. In some sense, the artist's life bridges these two worlds. (Photo credit: the author.)

The artist fled town to avoid compulsory military service during the civil war in the 1980s (3/29/10). He was thirteen years old, and his cousin was fourteen. His cousin was already on the soldiers' list, and the following year, he would be too; "Back then, you had to pick a side: the guerillas or the army." Or you had to leave. He felt bad about leaving his grandmother alone, but his whole family had to leave. Three sisters made the journey too. His mother had made the decision. She was waiting for them in the United States.

In that epoch, it was easier to get to the United States. An uncle found them all visas for Mexico, and they traveled by airplane to the U.S. border. They had a layover in Mexico City, where his uncle was briefly, but politely, questioned by Mexican officials; they asked for the

bribe in a private room, rather than in front of the children. The necessity of the bribe made the boy feel uneasy, but mostly the journey was fun. In Tijuana, he stayed for a month with a Mexican woman, a friend of the family. She had a commuter visa to cross into San Diego. She had many children, and she took his family across pretending they were her own. First, she took his cousin and sister. But she took a liking to him, and let him stay with her for a bit. She showed him around Tijuana and taught him some English. He was happy there. When they crossed, the woman told the border police that she was going to do her laundry in San Diego. She took him to his mother in Los Angeles.

At first, he was not happy in Los Angeles. He urged me to imagine what the village was like when he left it: nothing more than dirt roads and a small collection of huts. When he came back recently, he could not find his own house amid the new construction. But eventually the United States became his home, and he received a green card. Unfortunately, the lawyer who helped with the petition had told them to lie and say he had arrived before 1980. He was just a kid and did as he was told. Sometime after 2001, they summoned him. By this time, his mom was dead. They asked him to supply school records proving he had arrived before 1980; “there was nothing to do but shut my mouth.” So, they deported him. He repeated to me that he never committed a crime. He denied any trouble with the law, only admitting to a DUI (Driving Under the Influence), which most Salvadorans consider a very minor offense. When I met him, he had a seven-year bar from the United States, where the vast majority of his relatives call home. By then, his family mostly spoke English, as he preferred to speak with me. They are a mix of Mexican and Salvadoran, all living in California.

Living with his beloved grandmother, he was waiting for an appointment in the capital city to get his tattoos removed. With faded tattoos visible on his body and face, he could not

travel without harassment from police or a potentially deadly misunderstanding with a gang member who might think he is a member of a rival clique. He was a distant cousin of most everyone in town, but did not find the acceptance he had among more immediate family in Los Angeles. In town, he was often suspected of involvement in gangs, extortion schemes and threats. He complained bitterly that people in El Salvador did not understand that the tattoos are simply considered artwork in the United States, not gang messages. When he gets the tattoos removed, he should be able to get a decent job speaking English in a call center in the capital, San Salvador. In the meantime, he had started a new family with his girlfriend, who also lived for a time in the United States. Eventually, when his ban against re-entry expires, his sisters might petition for him to return legally. If that does not come to fruition, maybe he will find another way home.

When the mayor's office held an art contest to beautify the town with depictions of local life, the mural of California was his entry. He did not win, but his grandmother defended his choice of subject by arguing that California is very much a part of small town El Salvador, whether anyone likes it or not. The mural conveys a transnational imaginary that gives meaning to migration; California superimposed in El Salvador and vice-versa. The mural is an artifact of mobile knowledge. It is a material trace of a learning process of information, imagination and improvisation that Central American migrants undertake every day; it has been a continuous social process since the civil war period of the 1980s, despite the escalation of violence along unauthorized routes through Mexico. The mural, like the man, testifies to the integration of the village into a transnational circulation of people and practice.

This integration does not only weave together homes and destinations, but the entirety of the long winding route in-between. Murals frequently decorate the walls of migrant shelters,

often with a recurring set of themes that narrate the journey, drawing on themes of religion, transnational solidarity, sacrifice and hope:

Figure 5.10: A Mural in a Shelter: On the Way to the Promised Land



This mural decorates the wall of a migrant shelter in Tecun Uman, Guatemala. It depicts the crossing of the Suchiate river into Mexico by raft, as well as the train and bus. In the shadow of Joseph and Mary, uprooted migrants walk north through Mexico to a promised city in the distance, either in the United States or Canada. (Photo Credit: Encarni Pindado.)

The semiotics of these murals, like those of the maps, is unambiguous. The artwork created by migrants challenges the legitimacy of immigration enforcement. These scenes empathize with the plight of migrants, compelled to follow a difficult path in Jesus' footsteps. They often depict the promised cities of the north, shining and waiting for the deserving migrant who endures and completes the journey. The messages are decidedly cosmopolitan in their appeal to a larger understanding of the Americas and the globe; often showing footsteps trespassing borders, the destruction of borders or simply removing borders all together. The

artwork often depicts the suffering of the migrants through religious imagery with coffins or a cross. Finally, they may contain scenes that vilify immigration policing, placing state personnel in opposition to Jesus. In fact, such artwork is not limited to the walls of migrant shelters. The murals even co-opt the very spaces intended for immigration enforcement. Like the West German side of the Berlin Wall, the Mexican side of the U.S. border wall has become the medium for expressing frustration with government policies that separate transnational communities and put migrants in danger (Sheridan 2009, p.111-137).

Figure 5.11: Mural in a Shelter: Jesus Deported



This mural decorates the wall of a migrant shelter in Saltillo, Coahuila. It depicts a U.S. border guard marching migrants with Jesus in their ranks. (Photo Credit: the author.)

Immigration enforcement is a state making practice; it entails the deployment of violence to control territory. Noting the perpetually shifting boundaries between ‘legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ violence, Charles Tilly (1985) famously compared state making to organized crime. If we “see the state like a migrant” as Kyle and Siracusa

(2005) exhort us to do, the boundary between the legitimate violence of the state and the illegitimate violence of non-state actors becomes illusory. For the unauthorized migrant, both criminal violence and immigration enforcement represent obstacles to be overcome in a preordained journey. The boundary between state violence and criminal violence matters little to the migrant, who distinguishes alternative forms of violence on the basis of life and death, arrival and failure. Because they move to fulfill the will of God to provide better lives for their families, all violence, whether the legal violence of deportation or the illegal violence perpetrated by criminal groups, is unjust.

This normative orientation fortifies migrants so that they can cope with both the uncertainty and certainties of the route. On the one hand, in the face of great uncertainty and danger, when the future must be trusted and success cannot be predicted, a turn to faith and prayer seems rational. For this reason, nearly every migrants' preparation for the journey includes a spiritual component. On the other hand, the only certainty of the journey is suffering. Migrants fully expect to experience fear, hunger, thirst, fatigue and homesickness, and they understand the ever-present possibility of more extreme forms of suffering that result from violence: rape, torture and even death. In some sense, this inevitability of suffering provides a reliable means for migrants to demonstrate their courage, motivation to succeed and their strong desire to help their families, giving the journey meaning as a 'rite of passage' (Massey 1998). When migrants understand suffering during the journey through the lens of righteous sacrifice, the language of 'best case and 'worst case' scenario used to describe other forms of rational, strategic behavior loses its meaning (Hagan 2008). Any outcome is God's

will.⁶⁷ Thus, the migrants' maps illustrate an important source of their steely resolve, the flipside of their capacity for ingenuity in the face of great uncertainty: a belief in the higher justice of their journey.

Despite the unifying theme of unjust violence and just transnational movement, the diversity of the maps produced by migrants underscores what Kimberly Powell (2010, p.15-16) calls the multisensory experience of the visual. Powell succinctly summarizes the methodological implications of this multisensory communication:

More than providing a sense of the physical spaces that we traverse through, maps can shed light on the ways in which we traverse, encounter, and construct racial, ethnic, gendered, and political boundaries.... Understanding the aesthetics of mapping to illuminate and represent critical social, cultural, and political issues might lead to powerful and vivid representations of places that might otherwise prove elusive, hidden, or underrepresented.

In other words, mapping provides a window into a "hidden and known" social terrain. In both migrant hometowns in El Salvador, people who accepted my invitation wanted to make the human story of migration more visible.⁶⁸ People expressed a desire that U.S. citizens

⁶⁷ Similarly, in a study of migrant perceptions of risks during *piroque* (unauthorized boat) migration from Senegal to Europe, Maria Hernandez Carretero (2008, p.46) finds that "The presence of religiosity in assessments of the probability that negative eventualities would occur during a piroque journey was clear through references to spiritual preparation before one's departure. This usually involved doing special prayers, seeking amulets from religious guides, performing sacrifices, or, often, a combination of these. Through such actions, migrants sought help and protection from God against risks....Risk acceptability too appears to be mediated by religiosity to the extent that my informants consistently framed the consequences of piroque migration, whether positive or negative, as the result of God's will. Death was presented not only...as inescapable, but also as determined by destiny dictated by God. A common way of expressing this among my informants was to argue that God had established the time of one's death from birth, so when that moment came, one would die, whether aboard a piroque or sleeping at home. This deterministic understanding of death appeared to make (aspiring) migrants approach the prospects of piroque migration with a relatively fearless attitude or, in any case, to provide a justification for the occurrence of death."

⁶⁸ The majority of mapmakers expressed embarrassment and unfamiliarity with the activity of drawing, but little sensitivity over the sharing of the information. With the exception of a few young artists who seemed delighted to receive the art supplies, participants preferred verbal communication of their stories. Older participants, in particular, expressed shame when handling a writing utensil, and they frequently reminded me of their 'self-taught' status. Most people participated despite embarrassment, but people who declined the invitation to make a map usually cited lack of time or

understand their suffering and their dreams. Despite my protestations that my study would not directly influence American policy, many participants mentioned that they hoped to positively shape the debate over U.S. immigration policy. Migrants created these maps because they understood the expression of their experiences as ‘the right thing to do’. As such, mapping can be understood as a form of political resistance. Their maps convey a message, direct from the hands of migrants to you.

Migrant Maps vs. Official Maps

For this reason, it should not be surprising that migrant maps differ substantially from official maps. While the state has no dreams and memories to convey, no unifying purpose, it still sends messages. In his influential article, David Harley (1989, p.12) explains how cartography, as a form of surveillance, augments the power of the state administrative apparatus⁶⁹. As policing tools, state officials use maps in their daily planning and implementation of border control and immigration policies. As propaganda, maps nationalize territory, naturalize borders, and thereby reinforce the legitimacy of state control over human movement (Black 1997; Harley 1989). Finally, as bureaucratic artifacts, state maps justify expenditure and express efficiency. Thus, state maps may serve a dual purpose, both instrumental and expressive. Drawing on Erving Goffman (1959), Peter Andreas (2000, p.9) argues that, “state practices shape and interact with illegal border crossings and, at the same time, project images and messages to various audiences concerned about such crossings.”

drawing capacity, not fear or sensitivity about the release of personal information. Because nobody declined to speak to me in great detail about these topics, I suspect the embarrassment of drawing dissuaded them. More people declined the invitation in the second sending community where I spent less time and I did not volunteer as a teacher. In that second community, people felt less comfortable and less socially invested in me, because I had not developed extensive friendship networks.

⁶⁹ See also James Scott (1998) for a similar discussion of maps as tools for state administration.

Maps represent one such knowledge-based artifact, produced by states to interact with illegal border crossers and project images of control to a public audience (van Schendel 1995, p.42).

However, impeding unauthorized migration is not the only purpose of ‘official’ maps; some official maps, created by a public-private partnership, seek to protect unauthorized migrants. Thanks to concerted effort by many concerned volunteers, researchers *and* public authorities, many maps are available to migrants along the route. Catholic shelters, and other institutions that serve migrants in passage and advocate for their rights, have devised their own maps to locate human rights violations and warn migrants of the dangers. These maps can be found in murals, presentations, posters and handouts along the shelter system that runs the course of the unauthorized route through Mexico.

Figure 5.12: Map of Risks



A map of risks, on display at a migrant shelter, warns migrants about the dangers in the desert and the locations where many assaults have been reported along the route through Mexico. The map also shows the location of migrant shelters.

Along the routes through Mexico, migrant shelters, academics, human rights organizations and the Mexican National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH), a government agency charged with monitoring and documenting human rights abuses, coordinate the production of educational maps for migrants. In the effort to make human rights violations visible to an international public, Amnesty International (2010) published a map of the route based on research by Rodolfo Casillas in its report. These institutional actors also use maps to raise public awareness of the plight of migrants and heighten a sense of humanitarian crisis. The

former goal is instrumental, while the latter goal is expressive. The two goals often co-exist in the same artifact.

As for their value as a navigational instrument, some migrants request maps from shelters to orient themselves en route. Nevertheless, most information passes through word-of-mouth and experience. To the extent that the social terrain is dynamic, with shifting dangers, maps can have only limited value for avoiding violence. The maps may provide a general orientation, but a route planned by map alone cannot guarantee safe arrival in the United States. Many migrants arrive safely without ever referring to a conventional map.

The more obvious the shelters and routes become on maps, the more visible and thus more vulnerable migrants become to police and criminal victimization. As they become visible to a larger public and their locations become common knowledge, shelters and routes acquire a dual purpose: serving both unauthorized migrants and those who would hunt for them. The resulting struggle over information about and within these locations becomes an important factor in determining migrant survival. While a map may guide people to essential resources, following a trail marked on the map increases vulnerability; well-trodden clandestine terrain thus draws more predators than novel routes. From this perspective, resources provided in fixed locations do not necessarily generate certainty, but can exacerbate risk.

In the global illegal economy, places become a politically contentious site for gathering information with important consequences for human security along the routes. The consequences of this struggle often cut both ways, with publicity facilitating both protection and victimization. In this case, the visual language of migrant maps illustrates a profound schism between their perspective of dangers and the regulatory perspective of institutions that interact with them depicted on conventional maps. The migrant imagination and

institutionalized imagination of illegal migratory routes cannot be reconciled because they present such radically different contour lines of experience: individual vs. aggregate. The migrant imagination and experience cannot be rendered 'legible' in the aggregate. James Scott (1998, p.11) argues that the state requires a schematic form of knowledge, facilitated by a process of simplification. This knowledge simultaneously provides an overall but narrow vision of the social world through the aggregation of standardized, and hence stylized, facts (p.11). In the absence of this knowledge, the state cannot "see" society. In this way, legibility enables central state security functions.

Like the pantheon of Greek Gods that disharmoniously alternated between obstructing and facilitating the journey of Odysseus, the various agencies of the state often work at cross-purposes. The image of the state as a unified actor is belied by the sometimes complementary and sometimes contradictory nature of state practice at the lowest bureaucratic levels (Gupta 1995; Migdal 2001; Migdal 2004, p.20-22). For example, the Mexican National Commission for Human Rights (CNDH) monitors and frequently denounces both the official policies and unofficial practices of the Mexican National Institute for Migration (INM).⁷⁰ Even within the same state agency, we find paradoxical missions. For example, immigration enforcement agencies in both the United States and Mexico explicitly seek to protect unauthorized migrants from harm (through the dissemination of educational materials, the deployment of special teams with medical and humanitarian training, etc) but also attempt to deter those same migrants by increasing the risks of unauthorized travel. Meanwhile, corrupt immigration authorities have created their own practices for the purpose of their own personal enrichment that conflict with both of these official missions, accepting bribes that impair the capacity of

⁷⁰ See for example, the two recent CNDH reports (2010; 2011) on migrant kidnappings.

the state to control unauthorized movement through its territory while physically assaulting and threatening migrants with bodily harm.

At the intersection of these practices, lower level officials in the state bureaucracy develop their own lived experience of the routes as they interact with migrants on a daily basis. As explained by a U.S. migration official, recalling his days on line duty with the border patrol (2/9/10):

But people develop a sense. It's like at the border. The agents can see a car coming from half a mile away. Maybe the mannerisms are just not right. It's just that something doesn't feel right. The agents have a difficult time articulating the probable cause. They just know who to stop.

At this point in the interview, I stopped him to venture a guess about the feeling he was describing, "We might call it tacit knowledge?" But he laughed at my idea, "In law enforcement, we call it profiling." Whatever we call it, Michael Kenney (2007) rightly identifies highly inductive and immersive police activities that require interpretation, such as undercover work, as "sensemaking": a means of creating *metis*-like knowledge for the purpose of law enforcement (p. 83-88). However, in the practices that embody the knowledge these policing activities produce about the routes, the boundaries between state and societal actors become blurred. Individuals pass seamlessly between official and unofficial roles.

This view challenges Scott's (1998) oversimplified monolithic understanding of the state (Hibou 2004). As Joel S. Migdal (2004) explains:

These practices depict a state that is composed of diverse fragments, whose parts often operate in divergent ways. Such practices conflicting with the image of the state, then, are not just quirky exceptions to the rule, corruption or criminality that can simply be eliminated by better policing techniques. No, the diverse fragments represent spatial logics different from that implied in the state's image. The struggles representing the most important social dynamics in today's world are found at the crux of these contending mental maps (p.22).

In these conflicting practices and spatial logics, the state attempts to impose multiple orders on society. However, in an important way, all state and other institutions are blind to the world of migrant experience. The *institutional* imagination of migratory routes hovers above the everyday practices of human mobility, including the everyday practices of policing human mobility experienced by state personnel. As illustrations of fixed resources and dangers along the route, maps provided by institutions cannot convey useful messages about rapidly changing conditions. Therefore, they remain limited, insufficient guides. Their fixity fails to provide “the ability and experience necessary to influence the outcome- to improve the odds- in a particular instance” (Scott 1998, p.318). As Willem van Schendel (1995, p.41-43) describes:

The cartography of illegal flows depends heavily on the persuasive value of the arrow. The arrow is a godsend for those wishing to represent illegal flows in a threatening manner because it is a discursive tool that conveys the motion, stimulus, and target as perhaps no other graphic code could. The arrow purports to make visible what is essentially invisible. It perfectly suggests the velocity of objects or persons flowing illegally, their aggressive penetration of sovereign territories....When it comes to understanding illegal flows, their bold arrows hide more than they reveal....A recourse to arrows feeds on a misconception: that illegal flows cross borders without affecting them or being affected by them. As long as we see borders primarily from the perspective of the territorial state, as its outer skin that needs to be protected from penetration by unwanted aliens and outlawed substances, we will tend to fall prey to arrow disease and the underlying idea that borders and flows are antonyms.

These official maps and their arrows, whether hostile or friendly to the purpose of the migrants, view the route as an aggregate. By focusing at this level of abstraction, the maps and their arrows obscure the tactical improvisation, uncertain detours and social embeddedness of flows across nation-states. To paraphrase Michel de Certeau (1984), this institutionalized viewpoint makes the plight of migrants legible, but only in a manner that obliterates their experience (p.87).

Conclusion

For every Penelope, there is a Telemachus: a young man yearning to follow in his father's footsteps despite his mother's better judgment. Before I met the young man, his mother explained that she is particularly protective of him. Perhaps this was why she did not tell me about him at first, why I did not know of his journey until my third visit. Her older boy is "pure campesino": tough and rugged, aggressive, capable of working the fields and defending himself in a fight. She did not fear for him when he took to the road like his father. The older boy is always in trouble, always challenging her authority. Maybe she did not beat him hard enough, but Lord knows she tried. She beat him until she ran out of strength, even leaving permanent marks on his flesh, but it did not teach him. But this younger boy is not like that. When I saw him, I understood. His eyebrows had been carefully groomed into thin arches, his build was slight and his hands were delicate. He spoke softly, and I too could hear the gentleness his mother seeks to protect.

The young man prepared the map with a help of an artistic friend (4/18/10). They made the journey together, leaving in secret, and they made the map together with the same carefully guarded privacy. In the picture, there are stylistically drawn adobe houses, stop signs, a bus and some Guatemalan artifacts, connected by a meandering black line. His friend works in the school library and reads books in English and Spanish, an eccentric pastime in this small town. The map took a while to complete, because sometimes his friend is moody and unhelpful. I graciously accept the map, late or not, and the young man told me his story again.

He did not tell anyone about his decision to go, not even his mother. If he had told his mother, she would have stopped him. He told her that he was going to his volunteer shift at

the Red Cross, and he spent the night at his friends' house. He and his friend left in the morning. The year was 2009. His friend is older than he and had traveled once before. However, he did not make it all the way to the United States. His friend led the way. They took a bus to Guatemala City. For the first time in his life, he saw people dressed in indigenous costumes. It was a big, strange city, but he felt safe as long as he was with his friend. His friend always protects him.

From there, they went to the border with Mexico. They had a difficult time at the river. A man nearby the river told them to pay him \$10 to cross. But the ferryman exacted his own charge of \$10, and then on the other side another man demanded \$10. The young man and his friend explained that they had already paid, but to no avail. They continued north by *combi* (a system of paid transport in vans across southern Mexico). At Ciudad Hidalgo, not far from the border, they were assaulted and robbed. The bandits knew he was Salvadoran. I asked the young man how he was identified as a Salvadoran migrant to be robbed. He thought about it, and explains that Salvadorans are whiter than Mexicans. He thought the color of his skin was a give away. I pressed him a bit for more ways these robbers, and later the Mexican authorities, knew he was Salvadoran. He paused again, before admitting that he forgot to take off a belt that said "El Salvador" in decoration across it. A smile spread across his face as he remembered it.

Undaunted, he and his friend continued their quest. A man approached them, offering his services as a guide. They gave him what money they had left, and he took them to a house. There, they were interrogated and intimidated, but despite the pressured questioning, both the young man and his friend insisted that they had no relatives in the United States. In fact, his friends' mother lives there, and the young man's father is there as well, but they stuck to their

stories. A big, scary-looking man spent the night in the next room, and the wall was flimsy. So, they did not feel safe and they could not sleep at all that night. The young man might have slept a little, but only because his friend stayed awake. Early in the morning, they escaped. They had to break out, because they had been locked in. After the escape, his friend told him stories about kidnappers posing as smugglers.

The boys explained their desperate situation to a Mexican woman making tortillas. She gave them a bit of money, warned them to be careful and advised them to take a combi to Tapachula, where they could look for work. In the Tapachula market, they asked everywhere for work. But one woman told them that she only hires Mexicans. He became angry, but his friend urged them onward, explaining that it would be best to leave and not come back. Finally, they found another woman in the market willing to give them advice and money. She said that they had better get a place to stay for the night soon, because it was getting late in the day. She told them about the migrant shelter. At first, he objected to the idea, thinking that Mexican authorities must run the shelter to deport people like him. But she explained that Church runs the shelter. He agreed to go, but only with lingering suspicion. The kindly woman put the boys in a cab, and she warned the driver that he must take them exactly to the doorstep of the migrant shelter, not drop them off anywhere else. She paid 50 pesos for the cab. Even when they arrived there, he remained nervous.

They entered the shelter and gave their information to the man registering the arrivals. The next day, they helped with the gardening, making the beds and cleaning, and only then did he begin to relax. The priest was kind. They celebrated the priest's birthday with the migrants and local parishioners. The parish donates clothing and prepaid phone cards for the migrants. Both boys called their mothers, and their mothers sent money. However, the priest warned

them about the gang members and kidnappers who hang out at the corner across from the shelter. The priest warned them not to tell anyone about family members in the United States, including other migrants, because kidnappers send people into the migrant shelters to get information. The man at the door of the shelter cannot tell who they are. So, the young man came to understand that he could not trust other migrants and that it was dangerous to share any information with anyone.

Despite their mothers' pleading to return home to El Salvador, he and his friend used the money their mothers sent to take another combi north. They had planned to go to another migrant shelter, but the police stopped them as soon as they arrived in the next town. The police asked why they were carrying backpacks. The boys claimed to be Mexican, but the police knew better. They took them to the police station in Tapachula for questioning, and the police told the boys that they did not speak like Mexicans. His friend, who is very light skinned, admitted to being Salvadoran. So, the young man also admitted to being Salvadoran. He could not imagine continuing alone.

Figure 5.13: Migrant Map: Two Boys go to Tapachula



On the map he drew, there are no borders. The colors and patterns in the drawing reflect boys' first experience of the indigenous culture of Guatemala, conveying their youthful sense of adventure. Perhaps the map re-imagines the experiences of the boys as they wish it would be. Despite the cheerfulness of the map, the young man swore that he would not return to the route. There are too many dangers.

Thus, after a year of visiting this family, I was surprised by talk of another journey. The father had disappeared again into the United States, and with him, the meager remittances the family received had vanished. Hauled away by the police after a drunken incident and accused of extortion, the oldest son was incarcerated indefinitely with no clear date for a trial. The oldest daughter, a willowy beautiful girl with almond shaped eyes, had begun to date a recruiter for the local smuggler. The mother informed me that if her daughter manages to talk

her boyfriend into taking her for free or with a loan, she would go. She would leave despite all the suffering the route had already caused her family. God willing, he will take her.

Chapter Summary

By recounting these stories, this chapter has sketched a method for reading migrant maps. Official maps and migrant maps can both be conceptualized as knowledge-based artifacts of unauthorized movement. While the state has no unified purpose, given the contradictory commitments to migration policing and the protection of migrant rights, a more general contrast between official maps and migrant maps illustrates the disjuncture between institutionalized ways of knowing the route and the lived experience of it. Migrant maps are traces of lived experience that “reconstitute the procedures for forgetting”. They signal, but do not fully divulge, an experiential knowledge that cannot be expressed in a survey of the route.

An ethnographic journey that embeds these maps in the lives of their artists offers insight into transnational migration. Through artwork and song, both at home and abroad, migrants re-imagine the route and their own purpose. The process of reflexive interpretation and strategic improvisation that propels migrants on their journey comes into view as we move along the route. This process can be illuminated through an inductive fieldwork project, but would be overlooked by a survey instrument that asked only ‘standardized’, pre-formed questions. Now that a methodological framework has been outlined in this chapter, next we will examine the dynamic normative and strategic reorientation that unfolds during the passage from Central America to the United States.

CHAPTER 6

IMAGINING ROUTES: ETHNOGRAPHY OF PRACTICED CROWDS

Introduction

“Ah Odysseus,” Alcinous replied, “one look at you
and we know that you are no one who would cheat us-
no fraud, such as the dark soil breeds and spreads
across the face of the earth these days. Crowds of vagabonds
Frame their lies so tightly none can test them. But you,
What grace you give your words, and what good sense within!
You have told your story with all a singer’s skill,
The miseries you endured”

The King Alcinous rewards Odysseus handsomely for his oration of the miseries he had endured on his journey, told “with all a singer’s skill”. Indeed, Homer describes Odysseus as “the great teller of tales” with a quick wit and an easy charm. In the course of his long travels, Odysseus constructs his own epic, regaling a series of hosts in strange lands with stories from the war and the sea. This self-narration shapes his encounters with strangers along the way, winning them over by sending artful signals about his character, selectively obeying social protocols for civil behavior, and generating empathy for his plight. Odysseus also dons a series of guises that help him reconnoiter places and people before revealing himself. Survival in a potentially treacherous and uncertain social field requires a fortuitous moment for the disclosure of identities.

In all these interactions, the route home is imagined through both words and actions. Impromptu stories, whether told as entertainment or subterfuge, create

opportunities for Odysseus during his voyage.¹ A collective imaginary provides the scripts he uses to dramatize his predicament or conceal his intentions. His improvisation upon these social constructions is central to his successful arrival in Ithaca, because the most dangerous terrain for a foreigner to navigate is not the natural landscape of oceans and tides; it is the social landscape of enemies and potential betrayal.

As people move across an uncertain and violent social landscape, survival often requires a series of *performances*, both in good faith and bad. Erving Goffman (1959, p.15) defines a performance as an activity that alters the understanding of another individual within a face-to-face encounter; it is meaningful practice. Migrants and the people they meet en route reenact a series of social roles, improvising upon scripts to present self-idealizations and define situations accordingly. Strangers come to know each other and shape the context of their interaction through a series of performances, acquiring information about others and negotiating the terms of their relationship (p.4).

In this chapter, I describe performances that constitute the transnational imaginary of Central American migration to the United States. I argue that people collectively make sense of their journey in these performances, and I show how improvisation on this imaginary shapes violence and the prospects for passage. For the

¹ Of course, Odysseus is not alone. A cursory glance at world literature yields many fables of storytellers who save their lives with compelling narratives, firebrand sermons, exuberant wit, fascinating riddles or the capacity to perform a wide variety of roles. For example, the storyteller of *The Arabian Nights* saves herself from the cruel king with “the only weapon she has at her disposal...her knowledge of thousands of stories” (Pannewick 2010, p.220). Likewise, many Central American migrants travel armed only with their wits, a well-timed smile and a talent for making friends.

purposes of this chapter, I focus on the performance of roles derived from two imagined communities: nationality and gender. These two imagined communities delineate victims and perpetrators of violence: foreigners and citizens, women and men.

These imagined communities are partially reconstructed in the route as migrants move through novel settings and interact with strangers. Improvisation on these scripts generates opportunities for survival and movement, giving social and cognitive shape to the crowds and terrain that comprise major features of the route. They restructure the social imaginary of the route over time. These improvisational performances, a form of role shifting or “passing”, are a strategy for coping with risk and uncertainty; but they also increase social ambiguity and intensify uncertainty. The performances re-write the scripts. For this reason, passing both facilitates and complicates knowledge of violence en route.

Methods: Performing Ethnography

Of course, migrants, gangs and state authorities are not the only actors. Academics and journalists also play a part. In Central America, smugglers have passed as journalists (e.g. McClesky 2012). Journalists have become activists. The Mexican and U.S. governments have accused activists of smuggling (Coutin 2005; Frank-Vitale 2011, p.90). While I did not engage in illegal activities, I too improvised upon social routines while in the field, performing the duties of a shelter volunteer as I studied those around me, passing easily between my role as a researcher and my role as shelter staff. Participant observation is a method for knowing through doing. It requires the researcher to thoughtfully assume various social roles and systematically record

subsequent observations in fieldnotes. In effect, participant observers are outsiders who reflexively mimic insiders in an effort to understand them.

In situations where insiders have suspect loyalties, being an outsider is not necessarily an impediment to access. My access to interviews probably depended in part on my participant observation as a shelter volunteer, because it fit within an established, albeit deeply problematic, persona along the transnational routes through the Americas: the white female missionary.² My willingness to forego luxury and live among migrants, working with a Catholic priest in Mexico and a nun in El Salvador, likely connected me to this tradition, thereby rendering my good intentions believable to at least some of those I studied.

Regardless of how my intentions might have been perceived initially, the interview itself is a performance through which two strangers craft a relationship (Denzin 2003). The researcher comes equipped with a script, including introductions, consent protocols and questions; and this script is adapted to the context and course of the conversation. The stories told by participants are usually a mishmash of truth, exaggeration, wishful thinking and lies, but the telling of each story nonetheless reconstitutes identity and emboldens beliefs.³ As they conduct interviews and make

² Indeed, a Salvadoran immigrant living on Long Island often introduces me to her friends and family in the United States by explaining that we met, when I was “living like a missionary” in her hometown, and I suspect she does this for my benefit with the people I meet in her community.

³ Norman K. Denzin (2003, p.66-79) analyzes the way interviews “arise out of performance events. They transform information into shared moral experience.”

observations, academics and journalists collaborate with migrants as they both re-imagine the route, making sense of the violence and suffering during the journey.⁴

Drawing on experiences and interviews along the route, I explore how actors improvise upon the social scripts associated with nationality and gender. Each performance confers information about the actor and defines, in concert with the actions of others, encounters along the route. It is through these performances that migrants navigate the social terrain of the route and come to know one another. Even when performances are dismissed as fantasy or lies, the narratives they produce engage the social imaginary. As they invent roles and identities across the material landscape, these performances reinvent what it means to be a migrant and a man. By

⁴ Fortunately, I did not need an elaborate ruse to survive. The legal status of my journey and the stereotypes associated with my gender, race and nationality set me apart from the Central American migrants with whom I spoke. I never ran the risks they encountered. Journalism in Mexico is a dangerous business with 48 disappearances or killings of reporters since December 2006 (Lauria 2012, p.35). However, a doctoral dissertation is a decidedly nonthreatening endeavor, and I did not run the risks of human rights activists or journalists while collecting data. Nevertheless, on three occasions during my fieldwork in El Salvador and Mexico, I felt sufficient concern for either personal safety or comfort that I willfully deceived people. First, male deportees sometimes explained to me how they miss white women, regaling me with stories of a white girlfriend or wife. When one particularly lonely and destitute young man became aggressive in his admiration, doggedly following me around a Salvadoran town with explicit compliments, I felt like the embodiment of everything he had lost in his deportation from the United States: a living symbol of his rejection from an adopted homeland. My discomfort prompted the head of a local family to claim (improbably) that I was their long lost niece from Canada. I only bothered to set the record straight with interview participants. Second, during a journey on the freight train through southern Mexico, a friend loudly introduced me to male train riders as a nun, in hope of sparing me from lewd comments during the journey. Grateful for his thoughtfulness, I did not immediately disabuse anyone from his false claim. On a third occasion, I impersonated a volunteer at a shelter with which I had no formal affiliation. I did so in an attempt to cloak the interviews I had already conducted locally in the unproblematic registration routine of the shelter: an impromptu performance devised in a moment's reaction to a veiled threat by a man with a gold plated pistol loitering in the shelter compound. I return to this encounter later in the chapter. These were the only performances in which I consciously *pretended* in a role; my other performances as a researcher and shelter staff were quite sincere. As bit players in the migration drama, even writers improvise performances from time to time.

examining how this social interaction is conducted and experienced, we can better understand the violence that endangers migrants during their journey.

Nationality

The eight-year old Salvadoran boy sauntered through the yard of the migrant shelter, showing off his capacity for Mexican language, using an exaggerated “guey” (a Mexican colloquialism) at the beginning of each sentence and mimicking in the cadence of his speech the melodic stereotype of Mexican Spanish. Looking for attention from adults, he exclaimed, “I can speak like a Mexican!” He had been in Mexico for several months now, idling at the shelter while his family applied for asylum because they had been persecuted by criminal gangs in El Salvador. While they still hoped to ultimately arrive in the United States, Mexican asylum would allow them to move through Mexico more safely and work for better wages along the way, blending in with the citizen population without fear of deportation. The boy’s performances in the shelter yard garnered him chuckles and smiles from his intended audience. Nevertheless, he also demonstrated a potentially important survival skill that he was acquiring through play: the capacity to pass as Mexican.

The wider the range of national identities through which someone can ‘pass’, the safer a transnational journey becomes. Indeed, if the boy could have ‘passed’ as American by speaking unaccented English, the border crossing into the United States would have been easier. His mother had considered borrowing the documents of another child and having her son pretend to be asleep as he crossed the U.S. checkpoint in a car with U.S. citizens posing as his parents; but she worried that the border patrol might wake him (12/13/10). Despite some tutoring he received at the

migrant shelter and his father's fluency in the language, the boy's English would not have withstood even cursory questioning. Instead, he would have to risk the dangerous desert crossing when they reached the border.

Unauthorized movement across a terrain requires the negotiation of interpersonal encounters through which nationality is collectively re-imagined by migrants, migration enforcement agents, humanitarian aid workers, kidnappers, smugglers and everyday people living along the route. Information about national membership is coveted by all actors in the migration drama, as leverage for expedient deportation by authorities, identification for criminal predation or a potential signal about worthiness for humanitarian relief. Central American migrants learn to conceal this information, imitating Mexican or American national traits to avoid deportation and criminal victimization. For example, they frequently impersonate Mexicans in order to pass undetected through the migration checkpoints and public spaces of the interior of Mexico. Migrants also develop ways of camouflaging the cultural tells that mark one nationality from another, such as distinctive linguistic traditions, dress and customs. They manipulate accepted national identity markers as they attempt to pass undetected through the nation-state. In so doing, they may evade a variety of violent scenes that pose a danger to Central American migrants in passage:

Figure 6.1: Dangerous Scenes

STEREOTYPED SCENES	ACTORS	FREQUENT SETTINGS	CLIMACTIC ACTIONS
Betrayal	Trusted Travel Companions: e.g. relatives; friends; lovers; compatriots; members of the same gang	Home, Train, Train Yard, Mountain or Desert Trail, Migrant Shelter, Street, Bar or Restaurant, Drop House or Hotel, Destination	Theft, Assault, Murder, Rape, Abandonment, Information relayed leads to a kidnapping, extortion, ambush or police intervention
Stranger Danger	Unknown Migrants and Unknown Citizens: e.g. Samaritans; vendors: cooks, hotel clerks, prostitutes, bar tenders; gang members; guides; train conductors; drivers of taxi, bus, combi; Mexicans, Central Americans and Americans	Train, Train Yard, Mountain or Desert Trail, Migrant Shelter, Street, Bar or Restaurant, Drop House or Hotel, Combi or Bus	Theft, Assault, Murder, Rape, Extortion, Kidnapping, Trafficking, Information relayed leads to kidnapping or deportation
Breach of Contract	Guides and Clients	Train Yard, Mountain or Desert Trail, Migrant Shelter, Bar or Restaurant, Drop House or Hotel	Abuse, Trafficking, Extortion, Abandonment, Kidnapping, Rape, Guide's Imprisonment
Police Drama	Migrants, Guides, Citizens, Authorities	<i>Checkpoints and Inspections:</i> Border, Highway Checkpoint, Bus Stations and Train Yards, Raid: train, drop house, hotel	Deportation, Detainment, Imprisonment, Assault, Extortion of Bribes, Kidnapping, Theft, Rape

Migrants can avoid the violence inherent in ‘stranger danger’ and ‘police dramas’ by successfully performing ‘Mexican’, blending into the general citizenry and avoiding remote sections of the migrant route segregated from citizenry. During these performances, the national tells that ‘out’ migrants include language, ignorance of

common knowledge shared by co-nationals, and physical appearance. Both accents and colloquialisms give them away. Any conversation can expose a foreigner, leaving them vulnerable to deportation or extortion. One man complained that he need only open his mouth to order a bus ticket and, “they will say that I am ‘cachuco’ [an ethnic slur for a Central American in Mexico]...that I am a wetback, an imposter”

(Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/4/11).

Figure 6. 2: Table of Examples of Cultural Tells⁵

<i>Clothing</i>	<i>Word Choice, and Grammar</i>	<i>Behavior</i>	<i>National Common Knowledge</i>	<i>Other Belongings</i>
Decorated with Central American place names	Words that can differ nationally: e.g. drinking straw, belt, soda, money, kid, ‘cool’/good	Staring out the window of the bus to see new scenery	Calendar Facts	Central American currency
Dirty utilitarian style Exaggerated version of Mexican	Mexican slang: e.g. “pinche” Central American Slang: e.g. “puchica”	Nervousness and hesitation Sitting at the back of the bus	Symbols and food Folklore	Passports and identification Some Central American names: e.g. Elmer, Kevin
Name brands not known in Mexico	Grammatical constructions: e.g. “vos”	Lack of eye contact	Political and Social Geography	Backpacks

⁵ This is not an exhaustive list of the examples encountered during fieldwork, let alone all the possible examples of cultural tells. Furthermore, the list changes over time. By the time I learned of these tells, they were already becoming less useful to migration police and criminals, because migrants were learning about them.

The content of conversation can also reveal national identity. National education systems inculcate a collective imaginary of the calendar (e.g. national holidays and work rhythms), symbols (e.g. recognizable flags, anthems, monuments, ethnic foods, and faces), and folklore (e.g. common historical narratives, events and figures). Tells include moments of hesitation that break the natural rhythm of a dialogue about places and people ‘known to be known’ by any Mexican.

The most visible Central American migrants wear a unisex costume, shaped by the physical demands of the cheapest manner to negotiate routes to the United States: denim pants, dark and dirty clothing, sneakers, baseball caps, and backpacks. The style is comfortable for travel on the freight trains and treks through remote wilderness. As discussed by Jason De Leon (2012, p.490) in his analysis of the material culture of border crossing, U.S. border patrol personnel use style of dress, as well as racial stereotypes, to determine whether an individual is a smuggler, migrant or desert hiker. In fact, in the performance of their duties, state authorities acquire a deep knowledge that mirrors the learning process of the migrants they seek to apprehend (ICE agent, 2/9/10). Their Mexican counterparts do the same.

Racial stereotypes intersect with nationality, producing constraints and opportunities for migrants, depending on the color of their skin. In Mexico, a country where the ‘mestizo’ of mixed Spanish and indigenous heritage represents the dominant racial ideology, racial profiling renders blacks most vulnerable to identification.⁶ It is

⁶ Racial profiling also creates opportunities for smuggling. Smugglers sometimes blend high paying Peruvian clients into travel groups with indigenous Guatemalans, because of their similar phenotype (smuggler, El Salvador, 7/5/10). The Peruvians pass as Guatemalan, and if they are captured, they might only need to travel from Central America rather than returning to South America. This minimizes risks for the smugglers transporting them.

not unheard of for Mexican citizens of black Honduran heritage to be wrongfully beaten and deported by Mexican migration authorities. I met one such man who, after receiving a savage beating that shattered his jawbone and a wrongful deportation, had been forced to return to his Mexican homeland alongside Central American migrants and seek legal assistance at a migrant shelter to prove his nationality (Ixtepec, 11/4/10). He had been travelling to visit family in San Luis Potosi when migration authorities intercepted him. Life along the migratory route as the Mexican child of a Central American is a tenuous existence. Abuse and harassment of citizens are the perils of racial profiling along a long-standing migration route, as Mexican Americans in the U.S. southwest can attest.

Criminals also identify potential victims for kidnapping, rape, robbery and extortion by trying to detect the accent, migrant clothing and phenotype of Central Americans.⁷ In part because of racial profiling, Hondurans, and in particular black Hondurans, are most likely to rely on the dangerous train route where mass kidnappings and muggings occur with frequency, thereby avoiding buses that travel through migration checkpoints. The proportion of migrants reporting Honduran nationality on the registration rolls of the shelters has been the highest of any national group since Hurricane Mitch in 1998, often by a very large margin.⁸ One rumor

⁷ As De Leon (p.490) says, “from the perspective of those who encounter border crossers, we see that the clothes, water bottles and cheap sneakers further betray people by broadcasting their vulnerability to those seeking to either apprehend or assault them”, not only at the U.S.-Mexico border but along the entirety of the route through Mexico.

⁸ Olivia Ruiz (2001 p.38), in an analysis of hospital and migrant shelter records in the Soconusco region of Chiapas, found that migrants riding the train were most likely to be recorded as a victim, the numbers of Honduran migrants travelling through shelters surged following Hurricane Mitch, and these poor Honduran migrants fleeing the natural disaster were most likely to suffer an accident or violent incident en route.

circulating among migrants suggests that organized criminal groups particularly seek out Salvadorans, who are known to be better connected to established families in the United States and thus fetch higher ransoms, than the poverty stricken Hondurans, who throng the migrant shelters and crowd the most desperate routes to the U.S. Whatever the preference of kidnappers might be, *any* identifiable Central American nationality invites legal, illegal and extralegal violence en route.

Figure 6.3 A Group of Migrants in Prayer and Mourning



A group of migrants gathers to pray at a cross, marking the spot where a Guatemalan migrant had been recently murdered in Lecheria, Mexico. Notice the common style of dress shared by the crowd and the graffiti in the foreground (Photo Credit: Encarni Pindado).

For this reason, many migrants purchase local name brands and fashions at their earliest opportunity if they leave the train route behind.⁹ The adoption of Mexican or U.S. dress and dialect facilitate survival when passing through densely populated portions of the route, such as the bus lines and urban areas. Migrants may

⁹ In her analysis of the violence against Central American migrants crossing Oaxaca, Wendy Vogt (2012, p.173-175) also documents the practice of “passing” and the various cultural tells, ranging from language to social and political geography and more Mexican sounding names.

also choose to travel without any identifying papers or possessions that might tie them to their homeland. The capacity to pass undetected through migration checkpoints along the highway saves migrants from the treacherous footpaths around them, where bandits frequently lie in wait. As explained by a transgendered Guatemalan migrant, a former circus performer, keenly aware of the power of self-presentation:

My advice, from my point of view, I have seen some people...it seems to me that if you go well dressed, man or woman, whatever...if you are a woman if you go very well put together: skirt, heels, very pretty in bus...they [Mexican migration authorities or police] will not take you off the bus. Avoid the train. They realize that one is undocumented if you go dirty, if you smell bad, if you come dressed in dark clothes, if you carry your backpack and tennis shoes particularly...if you come comfortable, more like those here [in the shelter].... (Ixtepec, 3/2/11).¹⁰

Indeed, this advice seems prudent if a migrant has the gumption and familiarity with Mexican national customs. I met people who had traveled successfully in this way, passing as a Mexican belonging to the general citizen population. Sometimes Central Americans work and beg their way through Mexico on a meandering path over the course of weeks, months or even years. One Salvadoran man, interviewed at a midway point along the route, equated this strategy for *knowing* the route with the social relationships he formed during the journey:

Here [in the migrant shelter] you cannot confide in anyone. You must be prudent. I will stay in the D.F. [Mexico City] for four months or so, and build relationships...I do not *know* the route. It is necessary to meet and communicate with people (Ixtepec, 2/3/11).

In the relative safety of a diverse and anonymous urban environment, where transience is not necessarily associated with unauthorized migration, this man will adopt a strategy of selective social engagement. He compared the challenge to the way

¹⁰ This Guatemalan migrant sold fake documents to other migrants attempting to pass, but fake documents do not seem necessary or advisable if someone performs persuasively. After all, many Mexicans do not carry documents in their own country.

he navigated violence while working as a truck driver in his home country, transporting shipments of seafood along a dangerous route from the coast in La Union to the capital of San Salvador.¹¹ While moving across the country with valuable cargo, the driver must recognize that “there are places you go around because you don’t know the people. You cannot enter there.” In those instances, anonymity complicates mobility. On the other hand, he thought unauthorized crossing of international borders was, in an important sense, easier and safer than trespassing the interior boundaries set by competing street gangs in his neighborhood, because at home he could be easily identified with a community. Sometimes knowing people and being known complicates mobility. Thus, learning new strategies works through an alternation of partial concealment and partial social engagement, both of which require artful performances as the migrant negotiates encounters with potential allies and potential enemies in a transient social field.

One Woman’s Odyssey

A woman who had traveled to reunite with her mother in the United States before the birth of her first child narrated an example of successful concealment and engagement (El Salvador, 5/20/10).¹² This second attempt at crossing Mexico

¹¹ It is important to remember that these seafood shipments may or may not have been contraband. The zone that the man transported across is known for illegal seafood shipments entering from Nicaraguan waters without paying import fees (e.g. Mendoza 2009). The illegal economy is pervasive, and these gray markets proliferate across the globe. Mexico does not have the monopoly on unauthorized routes.

¹² In a break from ethnographic custom, I consciously chose not to give pseudonyms to the interview participants, leaving them nameless. Their anonymity in the text mirrors the experience of the route, as people meet, share stories and part ways without remembering names. They are, in this sense, undocumented; the images their narrative congers linger in the transnational imaginary, but the people they encounter would have a hard time remembering where they heard the story or from whom.

involved minimal suffering and delay.¹³ At the time, she and her underage cousin were four and six months pregnant respectively. A kindly uncle who could speak like a Mexican guided them during their journey.

At six or seven at night, they arrived at the Mexico/Guatemala border. They spent that night and following day in a hotel. Her uncle went to get Mexican documents for the border crossing.¹⁴ They took photos of them, but they did not leave the hotel. They stayed there to memorize their Mexican name, address, who is president of Mexico, how they call the schools (e.g. what is 'primaria'), and other various things. Aside from that, they did not talk much after leaving home. They brought with them only two changes of clothing in a small bag, vitamins, remedies, nothing related to El Salvador. They had to dress presentably with formal shoes, nicely made up. The following day they went across the border.

In Mexico, her uncle bought the bus tickets and did the talking. They were on the bus all day and night. Migration agents would look at the bus, but they never asked for their documents. The girls did not speak in public, except to call quickly home on the phone to say "I'm fine" to their families, and then they would quickly leave the public phone. Their uncle occasionally left them to their own devices. The girls did not want to ask for the price of the food for fear of being recognized as Salvadoran.

¹³ I chose this relatively uneventful story to contrast against more sensational narratives.

¹⁴ Possession of fake documents is not without risks. In El Salvador, I met a man who had served time in Mexican prison after failing to pass a checkpoint with fake documents. He explained that it is difficult to act like a Mexican, even with a fake credential (returned migrant, El Salvador, 5/6/10). His experience in prison challenged the way he understood nationality, "In this route one makes friends with people from different countries that are not forgotten. You begin to feel like you know people. Mexicans discriminate against Salvadorans. But you become friends with everyone. They gave me clothing. In prison if there are only Mexicans, it is sad. You have to have patience to make friends with them".

So, despite ravenous hunger, the two pregnant young women only bought cookies and juice without their uncle present.

Later in the journey, migration agents stopped their taxi and asked where they were from. Her cousin, likely nervous, erred and said “I am from here” rather than the response they had prepared. As a result, they had to get out of the cab, and her uncle had to negotiate an impromptu bribe for their passage. He was angry at the girl for her carelessness. A mistake like that can cost migrants a small fortune in bribes or worse. However, such costly bloopers are common. In particular, the response “I am from here” is a common tell that alerts authorities at checkpoints. It would be a very awkward response from citizens traveling in their home country. The physical manifestations of nervousness, such as awkward phrases, rapid breathing and fidgeting, betray an unauthorized foreigner as quickly as an accent. By contrast, an appearance of calm implies an unquestioned faith in the legitimacy of one’s identity. Such faith in belonging is, in some sense, the essence of nationality.

At the U.S./Mexico border, the uncle knew the young women could not move quickly through the desert in their late stages of pregnancy, but he also knew the procedures of the U.S. border patrol. Swimming alongside, he brought the two girls across the Rio Bravo in an inner tube. He told them not to fear as he pushed them to the other side of the river and left them alone. His departing words were “you are in the US now.” In an improvisation upon the border patrol’s own routines and protocols, the uncle had instructed his niece to search for help along the nearby highway and to ‘pass’ as underage with her cousin when the officials took them so that they would be released into the country. He had told her the patrol would come quickly, and it did.

The subterfuge about her age failed when her mother, contacted by immigration agents in the United States, gave her true age, but she was released to her mother nonetheless.

However, after confusion and ambivalence about her court dates caused her to miss a mandated appearance, she returned home to El Salvador feeling disillusioned. Without a clear understanding of the requirements of U.S. law, she did not register her departure with the authorities; she simply flew home without a plan. As a result, she would now likely suffer legal penalties if she attempted to return to the United States. Her baby was born twenty days after her return to El Salvador; those twenty days labeled him a Salvadoran citizen rather than a U.S. citizen for the rest of his life. When I met her, she was pregnant with her third (unwanted) child. Her uncle had offered to take her again the same way, but remembering the experience of the journey, the woman did not like Mexicans, “in Mexico, they lack the spirit of humanity”. That sentiment had kept her home so far, but she felt listless and unfulfilled in the small Salvadoran town where, among other things, her husband would not permit her to use birth control.

For this woman and others, the experience of ‘passing’ paradoxically sharpens bitter ethnic divisions between Mexicans and Salvadorans while demonstrating the arbitrariness of such cultural markers. Migrants subvert language and dress, and learn to be Mexican or American. Migrants also forge transnational networks of friends and multinational families during their journey (in transit, as well as in destinations), feeding a sense of betrayal at their mistreatment en route; they may be the husbands, sons, fathers, brothers, sisters, mothers, daughters and wives of citizens in the countries through which they transit. This *de facto* cultural and social integration

brings the injustices of legal exclusion and special vulnerability to criminal victimization into sharp relief. Perhaps for this reason, some Central Americans claim that the trauma and disrespect that they suffer during the journey through Mexico accounts for the historic hostility between these national groups in destination communities in the United States; “Because of the way Mexicans treat Salvadorans during the trip, Salvadorans and Mexicans don’t get along” (returned migrant, El Salvador, 3/1/10).¹⁵ Some Salvadorans lament the ‘Mexicanization’ that migration to the United States has brought to their culture as “worse” than its Americanization. Passage has the power to reshape migrants’ sense of nation, self and others.

Of course, not everyone has access to a kindly uncle as a cultural guide. And a kindly uncle or trusted guardian can quickly change his demeanor along the route, becoming abusive or abandoning (or even selling) his charge. Nor does everyone have the dramatic talent, confidence and attention to detail to play the part; migrants miss the signals about how to travel or fail to improvise upon them, repeating stale performances rather than slightly revising them to avoid detection. They lack the

¹⁵ In what might seem ironic to an international soccer fan familiar with the records of national teams, some Salvadorans trace Mexican hostility to their “race” and the mistreatment of Salvadorans by Mexicans along the migratory route to envy about the 1981 World Cup qualifying game in which El Salvador defeated Mexico: “It’s like an envy of the Salvadorans. It is an envy they are burdened with. An envy. They lost a soccer match to the Salvadorans once, maybe that’s where it started. But really every foreigner has a risk in Mexico, but the only thing they have to respect is U.S. citizens, because the US has power. What is El Salvador going to do?” (returned migrant, El Salvador, 5/6/10). In another interview, when I looked slightly incredulous in response to this explanation, a migrant defended this interpretation of thirty years of national antagonisms by reminding me that Honduras and El Salvador fought a “Football War”; “They have hated Salvadorans since then [the World Cup qualifying match]. I worked with Mexicans [in the United States] and they told me about it. They have a spike in their heart!” (returned migrant, El Salvador, 4/28/10).

competence to generate the mobile knowledge necessary to negotiate these social encounters.

As migrants' stories such as this one suggest, national performances require preparation. Lacking the benefit of a Mexican childhood, Central American migrants may practice the correct accent, memorize local facts or prepare the appropriate disguise.¹⁶ Nonetheless, social encounters with strangers in transit cannot be fully planned or anticipated in advance; like social snowflakes, each constitutes a unique interaction with a particular audience.¹⁷ Since no one knows exactly whom they might encounter or under what circumstances along the way, these interactions must be staged and realized in the same moment along the route. Thus, the knowledge of how to perform arises only through an active engagement with the audience rather than a strict pre-scripted routine; it is the culmination of experience, skill, talent and a dash of inspiration. Inspiration reassembles known social stereotypes into a specific performance of nationality in particular situations. When achieved, this knowledge decreases vulnerability to both official and unofficial violence. Unsurprisingly, Central American migrants who successfully perform and thus assume Mexican or American roles are safer.

¹⁶ Cecilia Menjivar (2000, p.72) notes that migrants relay these national scripts home, warning their family members of the tests employed by migration authorities. Unfortunately for migrants, 'passing' is not so simple as memorizing a script and reciting the lines.

¹⁷ Noting the "incapacity of ordinary individual to formulate in advance the movements of his eyes and body", Goffman (1959, p.73-74) explains that "The legitimate performances of everyday life are not "acted" or "put on" in the sense that the performer knows in advance just what he is going to do, and does this solely because of the effect it is likely to have."

Spies, Smugglers and Wanderers: Playing the Migrant

Perhaps surprisingly, a variety of people along the route also find it worthwhile to assume the cultural markers associated with Central American migrants. Why would it serve to camouflage oneself as a member of the most vulnerable national groups along the route? Spies for kidnapers, known as ‘rateros’, befriend other migrants to find out who among them might be the most profitable targets for extortion, watching who receives remittances during their journey and gathering contact information about migrants’ families in the United States. These spies sometimes steer their travel group into ambush, by guiding them to remote locations and then reporting their whereabouts to criminal accomplices. The shelters, train yards, hotels and bars frequented by Central American migrants are full of these ‘orejas’ (ears), some of whom were themselves migrants coercively recruited through kidnapping and threats into the ranks of criminal groups.

Gangs with cliques along the train route, whether they are small franchises of organized Mexican crime groups or Central American street gangs, are often multinational bands of Mexicans, Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans and sometimes Nicaraguans. Predators blend into the flow of humanity moving north and gather information and material resources along the route, learning about migrants by acting as one.¹⁸ A Honduran man repeated a common warning about ‘rateros’, one that echoes the betrayals and mistrust that characterize the villages of Central America (Ixtepec, 3/4/11):

¹⁸ Rumors circulate that police are also traveling undercover as migrants to catch kidnapers (e.g. Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/29/11).

They assault and kidnap. They come as a migrant and they spy on who carries money, who buys food. They hug like a friend, and they stick you with the knife. [He gestured the stabbing motion to illustrate.] You cannot confide in anyone, except the priest [in charge of the Catholic migrant shelter].

Improvisation on the role of the migrant, a leveraging of the material and symbolic resources available only to people in transit along the route, is sometimes an unpremeditated survival strategy that takes them into the business of spying for kidnappers, other trickery (including but not limited to theft) or profit making from their travel companions (ranging from selling drugs to provisioning coyote services). To decrease opportunities for such role-shifting and enhance security, the migrant shelters generally attempt to segregate Central American migrants, Mexican migrants and non-migrant homeless people. To this end, many shelters limit migrants' movement in and out of their compounds, accepting and releasing sojourners only during regulated hours and even locking people in their rooms at night. The shelters generally limit migrants to stays of three-day duration, and may limit the number of permitted visits.¹⁹

As migrants meander along the route for a long period of time or make repeated attempts to cross the border, anonymity erodes and social networks, based on trust and reciprocity, may begin to emerge from their repeated performances along the route. The longer a person spends on the road, the more likely they fall victim to multiple violent events (Hagan 2008). Thus, cultural and social capital does not

¹⁹ Exceptions to the rules may be made under extenuating circumstances, i.e. for migrants awaiting asylum claims, denouncing human rights abuses they suffered en route or volunteering a needed craft or skill at the shelter. Exceptions may also be made for women and children, which may put them in a privileged position to serve as 'connectors' along the route, producing advantages from the wide acknowledgement of their hyper-vulnerability to violence.

accumulate a clear advantage, because the lack of anonymity and transgression of social boundaries produces vulnerability to violence under the strategic interaction around these identities.

These wanderers begin to bridge Mexican communities and the transit flow. Their role as potential ‘enganchadores’ (connectors) makes them both dangerous and helpful to other migrants. They might provide access to reputable smugglers or other useful information about opportunities and danger en route. However, using their contacts along the route, wanderers might also sell migrants to kidnappers or collaborate with thieves. This potential duality renders any advice they give to other migrants suspect. According to some migrants, the fact of simply knowing people along the route casts suspicion on a travel companion. When asked how to identify a ‘ratero’, a Honduran migrant explained (Ixtepec, 3/4/11):

They carry a cell phone. If they have a cell phone on this journey, they are bad people. Suspicious. What would a migrant need a phone for? Who in Mexico would they call? How would they pay for one? Migrants do not carry phones. Who would they call?

Other migrants emphasized class-based tells to differentiate between humble campesinos and potential threats:

It’s very easy [to know who to trust]. By their humility. If someone is very tattooed with eyes that [unfinished sentence coupled with a shifting of the eyes]....One does not believe them. Look for simple, respectful people in whom you can see the desire to arrive (Guatemalan migrant, Ixtepec, 3/4/11).

Expressions of humility and other rural class-markers, such as simple dress appropriate for outdoor labor or including homemade items, simple speech and expressions of religion, serve as a proxy for a lack of worldliness and unfamiliarity with social networks that could include transnational gangs. These markers also signal

a shared goal and normative orientation to the journey, indicating a lack of exposure to worldly vices. In fact, there are innumerable performances of class-based solidarity, even across national boundaries. As a result, many stories of poor Mexicans sharing their modest wealth with Central Americans and unexpected (even life saving) moments of hospitality circulate along the route. Finally, a 'humble' appearance might also make migrants a less appealing catch for kidnappers, who gain the most from the extortion of those migrants with established family in the United States, capable of sending financial remittances.

The tattoos and hip-hop styles popular with urban youth are read as stigmata associated with Central American street gangs, particularly when the individual fits the racial and class stereotype of gang membership. These cultural markers, criminalized in Central America under *Mano Dura* (Strong Hand) anti-gang legislation, indicate exposure to a wider world and sometimes signal access to financial resources that enable the purchase of luxury goods. Urbanized and transnational fashions further complicate traditional Latin American class conventions, an outward expression of the ways that migration has complicated class relations. These cultural transgressions provoke (often unwarranted) fear and unwanted attention from police authorities across the Americas (Zilberg 2010 p.196-199).

Central Americans 'dress-up' in order to perform conventional Mexican class roles, passing through checkpoints along the route without the appearance of desperate poverty often associated with migrants.²⁰ Conversely, unscrupulous people 'dress-

²⁰ De Leon (2012, p.487) says that, "Many undocumented migrants assume that the best way to avoid detection is to 'not look poor', a strategy that can backfire. I once observed a Mexican immigration official board a bus in Chiapas and single out and remove a group of Central

down' to perform a rural class role to infiltrate the route. As soon as the association of class tells with trustworthiness becomes common knowledge, it becomes a resource to be improvised upon, instantly losing its power to predict loyalties or nationality.

Furthermore, both naïve Mexican authorities (many of them drawn from the ranks of campesinos themselves) and Central American migrants frequently misread contemporary fashions, which can fluctuate wildly (Zilberg 2010, p.198).²¹ Therefore, inflexible rules about whom to trust or distrust and *how* to perform class can produce disastrous mistakes.

As a consequence of their potential security threat to other migrants, as well as the damage to their reputation caused by charges of corruption, many shelters turn known people away if they cannot believably explain their frequent visitation. Many shelters also search for national tells, discriminating in reverse and turning away down-and-out Mexicans. They also watch for the cultural tells associated with gang

American migrants whose new wardrobes, fresh haircuts, and shiny sneakers caused them to stand out against the rest of the passengers who appeared to be working-class, underdressed Mexicans." It is unclear how De Leon identified the basis upon which the migration authority identified the group of migrants, and I have personally never heard of Central American migrants looking "too good" or "too rich" to pass as Mexican. However, class intersects with nationality in complex ways along the route. In this case, I believe De Leon's story provides an example of what might have already become a stale routine. As soon as the means for passing are exposed, in this case recently purchased clothing, they lose their utility to migrants; social camouflage only works if the predator is unaware of its possibility.

²¹ Elana Zilberg (2010, p.198) explains the fallibility of "fashion police" with a compelling anecdote: "The police were often barely literate in the semiotics of youth culture. Take, for example, Weasel's first attempt to cross back into the United States at the end of 2003 when he was turned back in Mexico because of his clothing... We laughed uproariously when he told me why he was one picked out of everyone on the bus as an undocumented Central American immigrant passing through Mexico. When he asked the federale (officer) who apprehended him, "Why me?" the man explained that it was because he was wearing old-fashioned clothes that no Mexican wore anymore. Weasel was wearing, as he put it, "a very stylish [1970s style] retro shirt," and as such he was dressed in the height of urban youth fashion." Zilberg also explains that Central American police have become more refined in some of their identifications over time, as they learn to distinguish between jailhouse tattoos and more colorful decorative skin art.

membership. During a registration process, the shelter staff looks for familiar faces, and recognition might lead to exclusion as a suspected smuggler (e.g. fieldnotes 11/6/10). Most shelters maintain a database with photographs that identify suspicious persons, as well as aid in the identification of missing persons and dead bodies recovered along the route. To gain access to migrant shelters, where many unassisted and increasingly desperate customers await opportunities to travel, ‘enganchadores’ (connectors) must pretend to be migrants, earnestly moving north.

Thus, decreasing anonymity and the concurrent maturation of social relationships with locals is a mixed blessing for migrants who spend a great deal of time along the route. On the one hand, friendships and potential business partnerships generate resources for migrants. On the other hand, decreasing anonymity marks them as ineligible for many of the humanitarian resources dedicated to migrants in the route, because those that aimlessly wander the route are no longer perceived to belong to a deserving class of people who are attempting to better their lives. Furthermore, decreasing anonymity undermines their capacity to hide among the nameless and generates suspicion. As a consequence, their recognition enhances their vulnerability to violent retribution from rival gangs (including murder) and accusations of smuggling that can result in severe legal penalties in the United States and Mexico. The migrant-smuggler oral contract generally includes an agreement that the migrants pretend the smuggler is one of them if the group is apprehended by either kidnappers or authorities.

For these reasons, the fact that smugglers, homeless persons and spies for kidnappers impersonate Central American migrants is an open secret. The possibility

that predators might ‘pass’ as vulnerable migrant underscores the ambiguity of identity and the fluidity of relationships en route. People may slip from role to role depending on the performance, and anonymity facilitates such transformations. Social roles are not mutually exclusive, and people improvise upon them under dangerous conditions: changing from smuggler to kidnapper, from migrant to smuggler or from kidnapper to migrant. Thus, people in transit may have multiple or fluid motives for ‘being’ a migrant. They may be moving north, but they may also be profiting from other activities along the way. The potential for hidden agendas sows distrust among migrants and heightens uncertainty along the route.²² This ambiguity also produces anxiety among migrants who must fear false accusations of smuggling or kidnapping, a position far more dangerous than simply being accused of unauthorized entry.²³

An Undocumented Mexican in Mexico and his Honduran Guide

One of the shelters in Coatzacoalcos, Mexico was particularly dilapidated.

Morale among the shelter volunteers was low, and one of the staff decried that the

²² Late at night in the women’s dorm, a Honduran mother, robbed while traveling north with her family by train, lamented, “They are us, same as us. Hondurans, Guatemalans, Salvadorans.” She looked down and repeated this several times; it’s your own *paisanos* [countrymen] that rob. “That’s why you cannot trust people in the shelter either”. She turned to advise the Guatemalan girl sitting next to her, “You don’t know who they are, your own paisanos.” (11/4/10). The Honduran woman’s attackers were “just boys.” The next day, a teenage Salvadoran boy similarly lamented that his own *paisanos* had partnered with Mexicans to assault them with machetes en route; it happened to his family when they had to walk around a checkpoint in Chiapas (11/5/10). I heard many such laments.

²³ For this reason, some people leave their communities alone to avoid any appearance of impropriety in the event that bad luck befall them on the journey: “If you take someone, the family can accuse you of being responsible for them” (Guatemalan migrant, Ixtepec, 3/4/11). One young man told the story of his sister, who acting as a good Samaritan in the United States had helped a migrant. She lost her U.S. residency under charges of being a smuggler despite the fact that she did not get paid. U.S. law does not distinguish between humanitarians and smugglers, giving no consideration to the migrants’ view that “It’s that you always help your own.” She was deported under, what other migrants perceive as, a case of mistaken identity (Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/5/11).

very migrants they served were criminals (6/1/11). He accused them of selling drugs, assaulting their comrades and smuggling from within the walls of the shelter. Fearing that someone would be killed at night, they limited their service to a short respite during daylight hours, and they evicted the migrants after a single meal. Indeed, a man with a gold plated pistol, tucked into his pants but conspicuously displayed, lounged in the afternoon sun within the courtyard. There was no pretense by this man of playing the part of a migrant; the gold plated pistol is a potentially deadly prop for the performance of the *narco* (i.e. a member of a Mexican drug cartel). The staff had resigned themselves to the lawlessness that pervaded the ‘refuge’.

In this unsettling context, I met a migrant who freely admitted that he was not really a Central American.²⁴ He seemed older and more humble than his Central American travel companions. At first, he spoke timidly with a halting cadence that caused me to initially (and very incorrectly) doubt his intelligence, but over the course of the interview, he surprised me with his increasingly confident body language and well-spoken analysis of his situation.

He was from Hermosillo in the state of Sonora, Mexico. I asked when he left home, and he shook his head:

I don’t have a home, and I never did. There was never a house. I was an orphan. I live in the streets. Washed cars [as they pass, stopped at lights for pesos]. I did not even have grandparents. I always lived in the streets....

As he continued, it became clear that he had, in fact, once had a father and mother. But they began new families that did not seem to have a place for him. His

²⁴ I chose to share this man’s story, because among the Mexicans I met passing for Central American along the route, he shared his experiences the most openly and seemingly without reservation.

stepfather became abusive, and beat him with cables. As a boy, he would hide from his stepfather. He could not love his mother because she had never protected him from this abuse, and he reasoned that the vast majority of street people share this background of domestic violence and neglect. He thought that his grandmother might still be in a retirement home in Tucson, but it was too late to find her now. He sometimes lamented the loss of his family, longing for the opportunities that he saw other people enjoy. He knew that somewhere out there he had cousins, aunts and uncles that he had never met. But for all purposes, he was alone.

With a new appreciation of the depth of his homelessness, I rephrased my question; I asked when he left the city of Hermosillo. He replied, satisfied with my new question, “about a month ago”, and he explained his motive for riding the trains along the route. He kept moving, because:

There is much discrimination here in Mexico, when one does not have a job. They don't respect you. They take your money, even your own police. The authorities take your money when you sleep in the street.

Later in the conversation, he returned to this issue:

Sometimes the Mexican authorities revise your backpack and take your money, even if you don't have drugs or alcohol. When people see beggars, they call the police. But begging is not illegal.

The Central Americans and transient Mexicans share a vulnerability to harassment and abuse by Mexican authorities, and in response, his travel group pooled their resources. He trusted his mixed band of Central Americans and Mexicans, even though he had only known his present companions for three or four days and they would go their separate ways soon:

When one goes in the street, when there is a multitude in the street, they unite to protect each other...Mexicans help everyone. We beg together, eat together, share cigarettes, everything, like brothers.

While he felt at ease with his temporary band of brothers, the Mexican man described the discrimination that he suffered in the shelter system, on the basis of his nationality:

In many shelters, they discriminate against you, in some no. When I ask for money in the street, they [people in general] don't value me. I see how they look at me. I have had good jobs....I arrived in a shelter in Tierra Blanca with much hunger, but it was purely for Hondurans and Guatemalans. They are not for Mexicans. They said I could not go there. I can travel without papers in all Mexico, but I also have necessity. I have never liked a shelter.

He had not yet mastered passing as a Central American migrant, but neither could he access his Mexican birthright. The man complained that many potential employers asked him for papers. Unfortunately, he had lost his identification card and lacked the means to replace it: "Now I am undocumented." I asked him what this meant for his relationship to the Mexican authorities.

Sometimes the authorities accuse me of being a pollero. In Guanajuato, we were a group, smoking cigarettes and migra arrived. They have a psychological capacity to tell who is Central American and Mexican... They thought I was the pollero. One wants to help his friends, but it's dangerous. If I help, they think I am a pollero. I've lived with people from Chile, the United States, everywhere.

It was clear to me that the undocumented Mexican man was not the smuggler in the group. The Mexican man's younger, tattooed Honduran companion made the decisions, signaling when it was time to go and indicating the direction. I interviewed this companion, and he seemed to be a more experienced traveler along the route than the native Mexican. The Honduran immediately impressed me with an intimate knowledge its places, grinning broadly as he shared what he supposed were the sorts

of criminal secrets that would help a fledgling writer: “That’s good for your book, no?”

But I was more interested in his personal story. He had grown up alone along the tracks, leaving a broken home in Tegucigalpa, Honduras at the age of 11. On that first journey, his best friend had been thrown from the train. After many adventures and four years of living in Mexico, he arrived in the United States, where he managed to stay for three years before being deported.²⁵ He did not fear a second deportation from the United States to Honduras, because it would be an excuse for an interesting plane ride and then simply a new beginning of his travels. And if they put him in prison for illegal reentry, so much the better; at least he would eat well. But it was unclear whether he would ever again arrive at Mexico’s northern border. He claimed to be on his way north, but he was clearly leading a roving life through Mexico, probably involved in occasional smuggling or some other criminal activity. The undocumented Mexican man confirmed that they would probably head south together for reasons that remained mysterious, perhaps even to them.

As they lose their claims to the status of legitimate migrants and legitimate citizens, these wanderers enter a liminal position within route. They are neither migrants nor citizens. As their faces become recognizable, rival smugglers and gangs may target them as potential competitors or enemies. Authorities may target them as smugglers. They make enemies by lingering on the route. However, these wanderers

²⁵ His narrative also included the fact that he fell in love with a passing Honduran girl, who inspired him to accept the money from his brother to pay a coyote to get to the United States. Otherwise, he had been quite content to stay in Mexico. Women, courtship and unexpected love along the way propel the plot of many male migrants’ stories. Listening to this young man’s story and seeing the teardrop tattooed on his cheek reminded me powerfully of the movie *Sin Nombre* (2009).

sometimes develop social resources that bridge new communities with the route. Mexican families sometimes de facto adopt these Central American men as sons, and Central American migrants may de facto adopt their Mexican comrades as brothers. They may fall in love. They may become fathers of Mexican citizens along the way. They may become gang members or connect to smuggling networks. In the process, they bring news of distant events along the route with them. Thus, they embody both information and danger for others.

Figure 6.4: The Work of Las Patronas



Train riders catch bags of rice and beans in Amatlan de los Reyes, Veracruz. A group of good Samaritans, now famous across Central America and Mexico as 'Las Patronas', provides food and water to migrants. The core of the group consists of three generations of local women from the same extended family who organized spontaneously. They have distributed food to migrants for seventeen years. At many points in the route, migrants experience warm welcomes and Mexican hospitality (Photo Credit: Encarni Pindado).

Improvisation and the Transnational Imaginary

As the undocumented Mexican's story suggests, these improvisations on nationality diffuse along the route, merging national habits and obscuring cultural and

racial boundaries while illuminating the arbitrariness of territorial boundaries. As

Linda Scholssberg (2001, p.1-2) explains:

Because of this seemingly intimate relationship between the visual and the known, passing becomes a highly charged site for anxieties regarding visibility, invisibility, classification, and social demarcationIf passing wreaks havoc with accepted systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility, it also blurs the carefully marked lines of race, gender and class, calling attention to the ways in which identity categories intersect, overlap, construct, and deconstruct one another....The passing subject's ability to transcend or abandon his or her "authentic" identity calls into question the very notion of authenticity itself. Passing, it seems, threatens to call attention to the performative and contingent nature of all seemingly "natural" or "obvious" identities.

Circulating in gossip, advice and entertainment, stories about national performances and the ambiguities that accompany them have profound implications for the human security of migrants and citizens alike. For example, these ambiguities complicate the work of state authorities that rely on national stereotypes to carry out their official duties. Undocumented citizens may be wrongly deported. Passing also renders the enforcement of national boundaries problematic, as citizens and migrants come to share a transnational imaginary.

An Autopsy of Performance

I stared, transfixed by the digital photograph of the dead man displayed on the computer in the office of the migrant shelter (fieldnotes, Ixtepec, 11/4/10-11/5/10). I saw a young man with a tattoo around his neck and the initials ES tattooed in Old English across his chest. His face was swollen purple with dried blood filling his mouth, and he had a large open wound over his eye. His blackened legs twisted oddly. He had been thrown from a train two days prior. On his body, they found the artifacts of a transnational life: an identification card, recording a birth in Usulután, El Salvador

in 1988, alongside a Six Flags 2010 season “Play Pass” issued in California less than seven months before his demise.

The tattoos branded him as a gang member, but something was wrong with the official documents. They did not belong to him. One of the migrants in the shelter, peering over the shoulder of the office manager at the photos, had seen the boy in the photo on the identification cards alive and well on the tracks.

The body had now become a prop in other people’s performances. His death sent a message: to fear the gangs and to obey their rules. And now his corpse played a part in a farcical death of another mysterious young man known along the route only by a nickname, not the words inscribed on his identification cards. That young man only survived a few months longer before disappearing. But the dead man, who lay there on the side of the train tracks, played these parts unknowing.

Later that day, two men arrived, one of them wearing a black vest with the yellow letters AEI scrolled across the back.²⁶ Whispers erupted among the migrants as they watched the office door close behind the police, and the speculative drama unfolding around the body hit a crescendo. Rumors circulated. At one point, someone claimed to know that the dead man was, in fact, Panamanian. But this theory was quickly dismissed; Panamanians do not usually run with the street kids that live along the tracks in Southern Mexico.²⁷ The Mexican police had to identify the body to repatriate it through the appropriate consulate, and they asked the shelter for help. The shelter manager questioned the migrants known to have friends in the gangs, which

²⁶ AEI stands for Agencia Estatal de Investigaciones, the State Agency for Investigations.

²⁷ In all my interviews, I encountered only one person from Panama.

includes most anybody who spends significant time living in the shelter.²⁸ Several of the dead man's closest friends could identify the victim only by his nickname and reputation, not his nationality or family names.

Ultimately, the tattoo of a Salvadoran flag on his arm led to his burial in El Salvador, rather than an anonymous grave in Mexico. Together, shelter staff, migrants, Mexican police and Salvadoran consular officials came to a consensus about the national identity of the body, each performing a crucial role in its identification. They redefined their relationships with one another, in this instance collaborating to know the transnational route and the dangers that lurk along it. In accepting a conclusion, they renegotiated and reconfirmed the symbols and material that delineate nationality.

This process continues in Mexico on a larger scale as forensic teams investigate mass graves of people presumed to be migrants, attempting to identify the proper consulates to carry home the bodies. In August 2010, Mexican authorities discovered a mass grave of 72 migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Brazil and Ecuador, but the nationality of 13 of those migrants could not be identified. Rather than flying home in flag-draped coffins with the bodies of their former travel companions, the remaining 12 were buried in a common grave in Mexico (Soberanes 2012).²⁹ That highly publicized massacre marked only the first discovery of a mass

²⁸ As noted previously, most migrants cannot stay longer than three days. However, migrants who provide testimony about a violation of their human rights are eligible for a visa, and some of these eligible migrants may wait at the Ixtepec shelter for months as the legal process takes its course. Particularly vulnerable people, such as women and children, may also receive special permission to stay for a longer period of time. Finally, some migrants stay longer because they volunteer or become paid staff at the shelter as cooks, construction workers, etc. Each shelter has its own policy about these exceptions.

²⁹ For international media coverage of the return of the remains of eleven victims to El Salvador, including images of the flag draped coffins and ceremony, see

grave of migrants; more mass exhumations and repatriations of foreign nationals have followed.³⁰ The bodies are props in the opening scene of an unfolding drama between competing drug gangs and smugglers, and the discovery of mass graves becomes the set for the next act in which national governments claim those bodies as citizens.

Indeed, the process of repatriating the dead mirrors the process of identifying and deporting living migrants.³¹ To do so, forensic anthropologists search for the informal cultural tells that can help identify nationality, ranging from tattoos to the prayer cards of local saints to national currency (Reineke on BBC 2013). They improvise upon the objects intended for other purposes, things that are carried as an expression of faith, serve as personal mementos, or facilitate economic exchange; they must transform these artifacts into evidence supporting a performance of national sovereignty: repatriation.

<http://mexico.cnn.com/mundo/2010/09/05/presidente-de-el-salvador-dice-que-hay-un-tercer-sobreviviente-de-masacre>.

³⁰ For this reason, human rights advocates, including groups of mothers of disappeared migrants in Central America, have called for a database of missing persons and DNA. The governments of El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have endorsed this plan, but the only institutionalized mechanisms for this process are at the U.S.-Mexico border. Since 2006, anthropologists Bruce Anderson and Robin Reineke have worked to identify the remains found at the U.S.-Mexico border, using a database of 1,300 missing persons reports, personal testimonies and DNA from family members of missing persons, and the possessions of the dead (Reineke on BBC 2013). The Human Rights Coalition/Indigenous Alliance without Borders (2013) claims that between 2000 and May 31, 2013, 2,595 bodies of border crossers have been recovered in the Arizona-Sonora desert. The Pima County morgue in Tucson, Arizona, where Reineke works, stores nearly 800 unidentified corpses of border crossers found in the desert with insufficient information to determine their nationality for repatriation. Reineke is currently writing her dissertation in cultural anthropology on this work at the University of Arizona.

³¹ The fact that this process postmortem repatriation reconstitutes identity and relationships between governments and society has not gone unnoticed by scholars. For example, Adrian Felix (2011) describes the cultural and institutional transnational practice of the repatriation of deceased Mexican migrants, which involves a collaborative effort between social networks and multiple levels of government. Thomas M. Hawley (2002) discusses the cultural politics of identifying dead bodies and repatriating soldiers who have gone missing in action (MIA) during the Vietnam War.

A desire to provide closure to the families of the dead motivates anthropologists and human rights advocates, but in the process, they must learn to read nationality when it has been unintentionally obscured by transnational lifestyles or intentionally disguised to mislead police. Human rights advocates must convince families to collaborate with government bureaucrats and scientists to assign nationality and receive an institutional response (Reineke on BBC 2013).³² As they establish the nationality of the deceased, the participants in this drama redefine the roles of actors along the route, overcoming the contentious scripts that usually attend these relationships. With each repatriation performance, government officials, human rights advocates and migrant families collectively come to an ephemeral understanding of each other.

Gender

The precocious Salvadoran boy, who had spent months at the migrant shelter in Oaxaca, was at it again (fieldnotes 1/31/10). He had found a new way to attract the attention of the adults around him. This time, however, he was performing gender, rather than nationality. On the cement patio outside the shelter office, several people danced to Cumbia music, breaking the monotony of a long evening. The shelter's female attorney picked up a toddler and danced in circles with babe in arms, and a buxom black Honduran woman took the eight year-old Salvadoran boy as a partner.

³² Reineke (on BBC 2013) explains the process, "Because of the highly decomposed nature of the bodies, the calls I make are never as simple as, "I am sorry to inform you..." Instead, it's the beginning of a process that could take months. It unfolds as a kind of negotiation between the scientists and the families. Both sides have the same goal- to find the missing person. But for the scientists, the problem is an unidentified dead body, whereas for the families, the problem is a missing living person. These realities pull them in opposite directions." Neither scientist nor family member intend to renegotiate nationality, but repatriation of the body inevitably requires the imposition of citizenship on the corpse.

But the men gathered around the office began to shout to the boy that he should “stick her against the wall” and the scene morphed from a maternal moment into an overtly sexual spectacle. For her part, the woman seemed game to play along and suggestively shook to the rhythm. The boy, lacking in rhythm but not dramatics, lunged aggressively forward at her with his pelvis, pushing her against the wall as instructed by the male crowd. The grownups laughed, including the woman who was willing to let him try again and again.³³ He was, after all, just a boy parodying male sexuality, not a ‘real’ man. While this performance clearly lampoons gender for the laughter of an idle audience, gender scripts are part of the survival repertoire of all migrants confronted with violence along the route: male and female, adult and child.

The practice of unauthorized migration requires an array of social encounters through which gender is collectively reimagined by migrants, migration agents, humanitarian aid workers, kidnappers, smugglers and everyday people living along the route. Gender provides signals about trustworthiness, merit and vulnerability that can either facilitate movement across the terrain or impede it, depending on the context of the social encounter. At some times, ‘acting the man’ defines a variety of social encounters, negotiating respect while moving across terrain of gendered violence, and at other times, ‘acting the woman’ enables identification with ‘safe’ social roles replete with both material and symbolic resources for migration. People may

³³ Judith Butler (1990, p.138-139) understands the eruption of this laughter as the symptom of a destabilization of identity caused by gender parody: “The parodic repetition of gender exposes as well as the illusion of gender identity as an intractable depth and inner substance. As the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an ‘act’, as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of “the natural” that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status...In this sense, laughter emerges in the realization that all along the original was derived.”

consciously perform ‘gender acts’ to convey these signals or they may simply exude such information as a consequence of an uncritically accepted identity (Butler 1990, p.140).

While social networks carry helpful information, they also convey gossip that limits the capacity of migrants to improvise new social roles for themselves.³⁴ Given the stigma endured by rape victims and promiscuous women, both the survival of sexual violence and the exercise of sexual freedom may require women to disconnect from existing social networks (Arguelles and Rivero 1993, p.269). While the migration literature puts a great emphasis on the capacity of migrants to leverage transnational relationships of trust and reciprocity as a social resource (e.g. Tilly 2007), anonymity can also be an asset.³⁵ To understand how migrants navigate gendered threats to migrants’ human security, we must go beyond networks to examine the performances enacted during the journey itself.

Gendered Violence

Human rights workers, government officials and migrants almost universally cite women as the most vulnerable group of migrants in transit across Mexico. Smugglers have long been notorious for coercing their female clients into sexual relationships during the journey. For this reason, Wendy Vogt (2012, p.252-255)

³⁴ On the role of gossip in the reinforcement of traditional gender roles of the male family provider and female caregiver in transnational Mexican migrant communities see Joanna Dreby (2009); she views “transnational gossip as a form of social control” (p.43).

³⁵ For example, in describing the experience of a Mexican migrant woman who was raped while in the United States, Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez (2007, p.240) notes that “Although she experienced emotional trauma after being raped, geographical distance from her family and a sense of anonymity in a foreign country protected her from potential family confrontations and conflict, and feelings of shame, guilt and moral persecution.” This anonymity cannot compensate for the additional violence and “dangerous spaces” that migrant women must navigate after they have left home, but it can be a resource for survival.

argues that smuggling is an exploitive form of 'intimate labor' in which gender structures the protective services provided by men and the sexual payment expected from women. Indeed, many migrants understand that women must pay for passage with their body at various points along the route, an informal sexual tax for crossing territory leveraged against female migrants by drug gangs, bandits and corrupt officials. Over time, women's undergarments began to litter the secluded footpaths leading around a notorious migration checkpoint known as 'La Arroceria' in Huixtla, Chiapas, such that the name of the place became nearly synonymous with rape. Bandits lie in ambush at isolated points along these paths throughout Mexico, demanding to know how many women travel with each group and raping them within full view of their travel companions. A male Honduran migrant (Lecheria, 7/14/11) explained the incident that befell his travel group while hiking an isolated path in Los Pozos, Tobasco:

Three attackers assaulted us and held us at gunpoint for two hours. They raped the two women who traveled with their partners. They did not want money. It was only to rape the women. Honduran women are known to be beautiful.

In addition to crimes of power and passion, a market for female sexual services produces additional economic incentives for the kidnapping and exploitation of women. The brothels in southern Mexico house multinational staff, trapped by varying levels of economic and overtly physical coercion (Casillas 2005; Kelly 2008; Vogt 2012, p.244). Given the potential profit from sex trafficking, gangs and corrupt authorities sometimes target freight trains carrying crowds of migrant women, clinging to boxcars with their male counterparts in an attempt to avoid the highway migration checkpoints, for kidnapping. Across the globe, migration has served as a gateway into

sex trafficking networks, when traffickers pose as smugglers or labor recruiters, luring women away and abusing them as soon as they have left the protective confines of their homes.³⁶ Central American migration through Mexico is no different.

For these reasons, female migrants are extremely vulnerable to a variety of special dangers during the journey to the United States (Castro Soto *et al.* 2010, p.40). Of course, a preponderance of sociological and anthropological evidence documents how transnational migration is a fundamentally gendered social process (Donato *et al.* 2006). Migrating men and women are unevenly empowered with the potential to both overturn and reinforce accepted gender norms (e.g. Boehm 2008; Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Mahler 1999; Mahler and Pessar 2001; Mcilwaine 2010). Thus, it comes as no surprise that violence along the Central American migratory route is gendered.

Ultimately, however, a study of gender performance en route says as much about men, masculinity and hidden sources of male vulnerability to violence, as it says about the human security of women in transit. Many forms of violence against men go unnoticed as gendered, when in reality, they are shaped by ideas about masculinity. When confronted with violence en route, migrants' improvisations on gender scripts reshape what it means to be a man, as well as rewriting the social script for women.

Estimates of the Scope of Violence

Sexual violence against Central American migrants is real and abhorrent. Nevertheless, the public perception of women's vulnerability to violence is a product of political contestation along the route. Human rights advocacy efforts for immigrants trade heavily on evocative stereotypes, unintentionally reaffirming gender

³⁶ For an overview of global patterns of human trafficking and its relationship to smuggling, see Louise Shelley (2010).

dichotomies.³⁷ Estimates of the frequency of sexual violence circulate in media, academic work and the advocacy community, but ultimately these numbers more accurately convey a subjective sense of the danger to women than an objective indicator of the risks.³⁸ These estimates survive because they are useful for sharing a profound feeling of moral urgency and crisis, not because they are statistically reliable. For example, Amnesty International (2010, p.4) reports that:

All irregular migrants are at risk of abuse, but women and children- particularly unaccompanied children- are especially vulnerable. They face serious risks of trafficking and sexual assault by criminals, other migrants and corrupt public officials. Although few cases are officially registered and virtually none are ever prosecuted, some human rights organizations and academics estimate that as many as six in 10 women and girl migrants experience sexual violence during their journey.

Given the wide range of estimates for the size of the migration flow north, this six in 10 figure for the frequency of sexual violence against female migrants surfaces with astonishing regularity in the media and in interviews with human rights activists. Occasionally, human rights workers and migrants will provide higher numbers. However, the six in 10 figure has become an artifact of the common knowledge of the route (Amnesty International 2010, p.15).³⁹ The Amnesty International report cites Padre Father Heyman Vasquez Medina of the migrant shelter in Arriaga, Chiapas, interviews of representatives of prominent UN institutions and the National Commission of Human Rights in Mexico (CNDH), and a 1999 report edited by Mario

³⁷ Similarly, in wartime, transnational advocacy networks use images of female victims to arouse indignation and spur action for humanitarian intervention, even when male noncombatants are most vulnerable to execution (Carpenter 2003).

³⁸ For a discussion of the political utility of unreliable numbers related to clandestine activities, including human trafficking, see the edited volume by Peter Andreas and Kelly M. Greenhill (2010).

³⁹ Sonia Nazario (2006, p78.) also mentions the six in 10 figure, but she cites a 1997 University of Houston study.

Bronfman, Rene Leyva and Mirka Negroni. In turn, Bronfman, Leyva, Negroni (1999, p.22) cite an interview with the Pastoral de Movilidad Humana-Guatemala, noting that:

In the case of undocumented migrant women, it is estimated that 60% have some sexual experience in her journey to the United States, from rape and coerced sex to *companerismo* [a sexual partnership born of necessity or convenience]. For the woman migrants that pay a guide, to have sex with him can be a form of protection that significantly reduces the monetary payment for his company and sexual assault by male migrants. The *companerismo* between guide and migrant may also represent a type of coincidence of interests between the two, in that sex constitutes the resource that facilitates the woman to achieve her goal of migration (*my translation*).

It is unclear whether the Pastoral de Movilidad Humana-Guatemala conducted a survey to arrive at this statistic. The most likely origin of the number is a survey, either formal or informal, with female migrants at Catholic shelters. Each shelter keeps a registry with facts pertaining to the migrants that pass there, including reports of violations of human rights suffered during the journey. Estimates based on this source are not accurate generalizations about the prevalence of rape for all migrants along the route. First of all, sexual partnership based on necessity, convenience or trickery constitutes an ambiguous zone between consent and coercion.⁴⁰ However appalling and repugnant material constraints and pressures for sexual choices might be, some women in these relationships do not view themselves as victims of rape.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Vogt (2012, p.248) draws on the work of Stephen Donaldson (2004) on prison relationships and calls these “protective pairings”.

⁴¹ Similarly, Kay B. Warren (2010, p.122) notes that efforts to determine the scale of Colombian sex trafficking have been complicated by the fact that the women themselves do not view themselves as “victims”. Of course, the failure of victims to recognize violence for what it is may simply signal the normalization of violence (Hume 2004), as opposed to its absence, but this internalization of violence complicates its measurement. My point is that it is difficult to standardize a measure of rape to calculate an objective numerical estimate of its prevalence.

Second, surveys conducted in shelters likely suffer from a sample bias. The people that stay at migrant shelters, rather than private hotels and houses, are the poorest migrants. They have not usually paid for the most expensive smuggling arrangements from their home country that allow them to pass in private cars through bribed checkpoints on the highway. Some migrants arrive at the shelters seeking security or medical support in the wake of a disaster.

Amnesty International (2010, p.15) also cites a survey by Gabriela Diaz and Gretchen Kuhner. Diaz and Kuhner (2007) find that approximately 26 percent of the women they surveyed in the Mexico City Detention Center, where migrants await deportation, had reported suffering physical or sexual violence in Mexico. While private security guards for the railroad company, smugglers and civilians (including other migrants and known travel companions) also victimize women, Mexican government authorities allegedly committed over half of these crimes. Migrants surveyed in deportation centers may be, as the report notes, reticent to report abuse for fear of retribution while in custody. However, migrants held in deportation centers may be more likely to have suffered violence, since corrupt state authorities appear to be responsible for many rapes and other assaults along the route.⁴² As a Salvadoran man attests (returned migrant, El Salvador, 4/9/10):

I saw officials rape women. I don't know if they were private security from the railroad or police. They wore blue and black uniforms. They ordered all the women off the train. They raped them, and then they let the women on their way. If you try to stop the women from being raped, they'll kill you. That sort of thing happens every day.

⁴² While the practice did not surface in my interviews, both Vogt (2012, p.212-214) and Frank-Vitale (2011) note that male Mexican authorities sometimes force female migrants to strip completely naked and then penetrate them. These authorities pretend sexual assaults are an effort to check migrants' genitalia for drugs.

Indeed, the safest migrants, whether male or female, are probably those that never become available to surveys during their unauthorized journey. These migrants avoid the usual places that unauthorized people assemble might be safest, passing unseen through the countryside and blending into the Mexican population with the protections (however imperfect) afforded to citizens. The Amnesty International report's title, *Invisible Victims*, is thus somewhat ironic. After all, it is the most visible migrants, identifiable as outsiders in illegal transit, who may be the most vulnerable to violence.⁴³ The relationship between visibility and vulnerability complicates estimates of the proportion of migrants that suffer sexual violence. Their very availability for answering questions about their plight, their identifiable status as undocumented migrants along the route, indicates that they inhabit a special class of unusually vulnerable people.

The point is that we know the situation is grave, but we cannot say exactly how many women, as a percentage of the unauthorized migration population, suffer rape. However valuable numbers about rape might be for advocacy and public awareness of the problem, we cannot easily extrapolate from these surveys to understand the experiences of a larger, unknown migrant population. While sexual violence is a clear and present danger to Central American women in transit, no reliable objective estimate exists for the risk at this time.

Despite widespread belief in endemic sexual violence, I did not receive any first-person accounts of rape from victims themselves. This is surprising, because I interviewed women who (according to other reliable sources) had, in fact, been raped

⁴³ Brigden and Frank-Vitale (2011) reflect on the ethical implications of this visibility and invisibility for researchers who document undocumented survival strategies.

during their journey.⁴⁴ I also established a rapport in which they entrusted me with other sensitive information. This dearth of first-person accounts is particularly surprising, because both male and female migrants, as well as human rights advocates, told horrific third-person stories that include mutilation of genitalia or penetration with foreign objects. Some of these stories were eyewitness accounts of atrocities and others were rumors that had attained the status of urban legend. I received many first-person reports of assault, sexual harassment or *attempted* rape. Most migrants, whether male or female, suffered at least a robbery during their journey.⁴⁵

Some victims of rape may have chosen to transform their personal experience into third-person accounts of violence suffered by “a friend” or shape their own first-person narratives into *close calls* to avoid directly talking about their own experiences. The plot turn of the *close call* recurs in the interviews; several women escaped rape at the last moment through an incredible turn of events. Given the stigma and emotions triggered by sexual victimization, optimistic adaptations of narratives would be understandable. Selective silences in narratives are a means for surviving sexual violence, protecting reputation and redefining identity in its wake. These escape stories and stories of the experiences of acquaintances may be true. Or they may be a way for victims to signal the existence of violence without painfully casting themselves in the role of the victim during their interview performance.

The Normative Context of Sexual Violence Against Women

⁴⁴ During interviews about violence, I make an ethical decision not to press for information. I prefer to allow participants to set the terms of our conversation, and I listen patiently.

⁴⁵ Wendy Vogt (2012, p.68) notes the same tendency to provide third person accounts of violence in her interviews with Central American migrants. I am the colleague she cites (p.201-202).

To understand these performances, it is first necessary to contextualize the sexualized risks of migration within the social setting of the home and destination community. The violence *en route* does not represent a rupture in the lives of migrants, but an intensification, exposure and improvisation of gender routines that unfold across the Americas. In many ways, this gendered violence is an extension of sexual and gender norms in Central American communities of origin. As Mo Hume (2008, p.65) argues in the context of urban El Salvador, the demonstration of violence has become integral to the performance of masculine identity, and domestic violence against women reproduces a mythology of feminine chastity and obedience. These norms cannot be understood outside a patriarchal political economy that frequently relegates women in sending, transit and receiving societies to marginalized positions in the labor force, including unpaid and informally paid reproductive and sexual work frequently attended by physical abuse (Castro Soto et al. 2010, p.40).⁴⁶ The vulnerabilities produced by this marginalization across the Americas erupt most spectacularly during the journey with physical violence against migrant women.

Gossip about incest, polygamy and prostitution coerced by poverty saturates small towns in Central America; its frequency and normalcy constitutes a common knowledge.⁴⁷ In my conversations during fieldwork in rural El Salvador, men and women often made allegations against neighbors and others in the community for

⁴⁶ Mercedes Olivera (2006) describes violence against women and femicide in the U.S.-Mexico border region as a product of polarizing economic dislocation.

⁴⁷ I was reminded of these stories when I delivered my son to a local public kindergarten in rural El Salvador and read a handwritten sign outside the door reminding older boys to “respect childhood” and look for their girlfriends elsewhere.

sexual misconduct or predatory behavior toward young women.⁴⁸ Many of these narratives may be fictionalized to damage reputations in the context of other disputes or expressions of envy; nevertheless, the apparent believability of the narratives to the storytellers (who find some social or emotional benefit from telling their stories), reinforced by the frequent sight of underage pregnant girls, suggests a routinization of sexual violence.

Domestic violence, on the other hand, attains a normalcy that is hardly worth commenting on in Latin America, except by a handful of survivors (both wives and children) or when rumors implicate public figures.⁴⁹ In El Salvador, like the rest of Central America, the lack of public outrage about the level and severity of domestic violence does not signal its absence (Hume 2008). Nor does it indicate an ignorance of the prevalence of domestic violence or a lack of public visibility, but instead points to a conscious ignoring (p.67). While domestic violence extends to the elite class, poor

⁴⁸ Such stories included mothers selling the virginity of their daughters to wealthy men, accounts of child molestation, poor women prostituting themselves in front of their children, grown men attacking their teenage relatives within the home, female promiscuity and male polygamy. In only one account, authorities punished the perpetrator of child molestation, a local schoolteacher. For the most part, predatory behavior toward young women receives an official impunity. Instead, alleged victimizers may be punished informally by gossip, and potentially, when a male family member learns of misbehavior toward his kin, violent family retribution. In fact, a nun in one Salvadoran town, the town's most vocal proponent of collaboration with the police during a local crime wave, expressed the belief that there *should* be limits to trust and community engagement with authorities, because the police themselves were so notorious for their sexual misconduct. She cited the rape of a mentally ill woman inside the local police station, and she worried about the safety of all young local girls.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting that I viewed some Central American childrearing practices as "domestic violence" when the participants in these practices understood them as a legitimate form of discipline of children. When my own son had a temper tantrum in the town square, the female vendors shook their heads at my mothering and inquired why I did not hit him. By their standards, I had been gentle to the point of negligent permissiveness and my 'non-violent' parenting constituted, at its worst, a form of abuse.

women have few opportunities to escape it.⁵⁰ Partnerships of convenience are not only conceived along the route, but also under conditions of scarcity and violence at home.

Of course, sexual violence and domestic violence continue after a ‘safe’ arrival in the United States (Arguelles and Rivero 1993, p.265; Gonzalez-Lopez 2007; Perilla 1999).⁵¹ Despite relatively effective institutions for sanctioning sexual predators, in the United States, the Center for Disease Control (2010, p.20) estimates nearly one in five women living in the United States has been raped in her lifetime. And an estimated 44.6 percent of all women living in the United States have suffered sexual violence *other* than rape, including sexual coercion and other unwanted sexual experiences (p.19). Thus, sexual assaults are not aberrations in societies through which migrants cross, but a product of entrenched routines in home, transit *and* destination communities. Sexual violence is not exotic.

For this reason, men and women cope with gendered violence from home through destination and back again. Many of the gender scripts performed in transit have parallel performances at home. In interviews, some women had hoped to escape these violent and oppressive gender scripts by fleeing to the United States, but found them reproduced throughout the journey. The experience of unauthorized migration both increases vulnerability to sexual violence along the route and decreases it by providing an escape route (Castro Soto et al. 2010). Gendered violence constitutes the route, from start to finish, such that navigating it is often less about *avoiding*

⁵⁰ Indeed, the difficult escape from domestic violence in Central America recently (and belatedly) received recognition in U.S. asylum practices (Lieberman 2011).

⁵¹ Lourdes Arguelles and Anne M. Rivero (1993, p.265) document a case of a racially charged rape of a female migrant committed by U.S. border patrol. Sylvanna Falcon (2007 [2001]) documents several such cases and argues that rape is used as a systematized weapon for territorial control along the U.S.-Mexico border.

victimization and more about *surviving* victimization. For many women, migration is a choice between victimization abroad and victimization at home. Thus, the boundaries of sexual coercion and consent are continually renegotiated in home, transit and destination communities, and we should be careful not to treat the route as the only space of violence against migrant women.

Nevertheless, the renegotiation of sexual violence that occurs along the route occurs in a liminal space that alters the visibility of sexual violence. In the context of the route, women find themselves disconnected from protective social structures of home, and in particular, systems of family retribution that punish perpetrators of violence. Both the fear of corrupt officials (who often commit these crimes) and a fear of deportation undermine the threat of legal punishment of migrants' rapists.

Thus, migrant women find themselves in a state of heightened vulnerability to rape that is simultaneously *anonymous* and *public*. On the one hand, far from home, women can sometimes hide their victimization from their family, such that the rape does not become common knowledge in their home. Distance provides deniability, shielding women from sexual stigmata. Instead, they remain anonymous victims of a crime that everyone understands is endemic along the route. On the other hand, rape that occurs during the journey is witnessed by their travel party, rather than hidden behind closed doors. As a public event, this sexual violence often takes extraordinary forms and life-threatening levels of physical abuse.

Race and nationality intersect with gender to produce this *spectacle* of sexual violence along the route, and it is therefore distinct, but not disconnected, from the private victimization suffered at home. In Mexico, sexual predators target Central

American women, not only because their victims are women, but because they are migrants. For example, Wendy Vogt (2012, p.172 & 245) and Patty Kelly (2008) document the racialization of sex work, in which Central American women are delegated to services deemed “dirty” and Salvadoran women are stereotyped as prostitutes. Thus, this practice of gendered violence also becomes a means through which nationality and gender become emotionally inscribed into the lived experience of migrants, as corrupt officials and criminals prey upon migrants.

In this manner, rapists along the route improvise upon the routines of sexual violence in home and destination communities. The proliferation of transnational street gangs, vectors for these practices, plays a role in rising levels of public rape of young women in Central American home communities (Rubio 2011). Thus, just as the normative context of home and destination provide the routines upon which predators improvise, the renegotiation of gender that occurs along the route also diffuses into the societies through which it passes over time, slowly eroding the human security of the marginalized citizens living along it.

Ex Post Facto Justifications for Sexual Violence Against Women

Departure from the scripts associated with accepted gender roles provides an ex post facto justification for sexual violence.⁵² Gender stereotypes and morality

⁵²In a study of rural Guatemalan women, Cecilia Menjivar (2008, p.127) writes that, “Gender ideologies create spheres of social action that not only contribute to normalize these manifestations of violence but also justify punishments for deviations from gender role expectations. This is manifested in imposed demarcations between public and private spaces and in the resultant restriction of women’s movement, as well as in practices that are more directly physically violent, such as abductions of women before the marry (robadas).” Likewise, in the context of urban San Salvador, Hume (2008, p.67-68) finds that “Blaming women for men’s violence is not uncommon, and men often draw upon a repertoire of gendered codes to legitimize their violence and enforce social notions of “appropriate”

legitimate violence against women in Central America and Mexico (Castro Soto et al. 2010, p.43; Hume 2008). In an extension of gendered travel norms accepted in many home communities⁵³, many male migrants explained that women who travel without the protection of a brother, father or husband would be more likely to invite sexual abuse from coyotes or travel companions. Traveling to unknown territory alone represents a transgression of women's traditional roles. Several men explained that without a close relationship to a female victim, a male hero would suffer extreme violence if he attempted to intercede on her behalf. Only fathers, brothers and husbands or lovers, not the women themselves and certainly not unrelated bystanders, have the right to protest.

Several men, when confronted with a situation where a rape seemed imminent, ran away from the scene of the crime, complaining that they had no choice if they wanted to survive; "The guides treated the people well, except for the abuse of a few young women. Not all the guides abused the women, only some...[But he does not know for sure, because] if you see something like that, you must run" (Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 3/29/11). Indeed, despite a widespread belief that male guardianship

behavior for women...The policing of women's behavior is key to this dynamic, and it is popularly believed that men have the right to punish women who deviate from the acceptable notions of femininity."

⁵³I came to a personal understanding of these gendered spatial limitations. As a female researcher frequently walking alone during fieldwork, men on remote rural roads would occasionally ask me if I was afraid I would be "stolen" or kidnapped. At first, I naively thought they were either threatening or warning me. Only later did I realize that it was meant to be a compliment. I felt a strong sense of revulsion at flattery conveyed in a language of gendered violence, but my female Salvadoran friends simply shrugged when I recounted these stories. When I experienced an unexceptional mugging in San Salvador and reported the crime to police, much to my chagrin, the police asked me why I was walking without my husband anyway. And on several other occasions in Mexico, men (many of them traveling long distances alone) marveled aloud that my husband *permitted* me to travel alone. Similarly, Wendy Vogt (2012, p.67), another young female researcher, also reported frequently being asked why her husband allowed her to walk alone during her fieldwork on the route.

is safer for a woman, even husbands or fathers who attempt to protect their wives or daughters from abuse have been assaulted, raped or killed by marauding gangs and kidnappers.

Other men explained their hesitancy to protect female travel companions from sexually aggressive *coyotes* (human smugglers), because they believe that some women want to be coerced into having sex. One Salvadoran man echoed a common sentiment, though rarely explained to me so directly. When I asked him whether the coyotes mistreated women, he responded with laughter before answering (returned migrant, El Salvador, 1/27/10):

Yes. Very humble women are easy to intimidate. But forceful women don't have a problem with their coyotes...The coyote might tell them that he will leave them, and then they go with him. But they don't really have to. They just *want* to do it. Maybe they like him or something. Some women just want an excuse.

This man did not view all coerced sex as rape. In fact, the virtues of unaccompanied women may be suspect. For this reason, some men may not feel compelled to intervene to protect them from sexual predators. Of course, migrants' trepidation to jeopardize their safety for a stranger can be understood when even male relatives of women have been savagely beaten or murdered attempting to shield their loved ones from sexual assault. In reality, even women traveling under the auspices of their male protectors suffer violence en route, particularly at the hands of organized bandits, gangs and kidnappers (as opposed to the unarmed opportunists within the woman's own travel group that also prey on unaccompanied women). However, norms that circumscribe the boundaries of accepted female behavior provide a convenient excuse for non-intervention by male witnesses. Occasionally, these men

may play their gender role in bad faith, knowingly looking the other way when confronted with the rape of a female travel companion.

Surviving Violence through Improvisation

To survive this violence, women improvise upon traditional gender roles. The availability of multiple gender scripts provides a key resource for migrants as they trespass across national borders, negotiate encounters with strangers and navigate a terrain of gendered violence. The performance of gender can facilitate passage. First, female migrants sometimes self-consciously perform gender scripts of virtue; they might dress conservatively and pray auspiciously, such that they demand the respect of their travel companions through an enactment of feminine worthiness. They may seek the support of older, nonthreatening males in the group to play support in this role. In this way, they may perform chastity. One woman recounted how a man in her group, knowing that she was a religious woman, pretended to be her husband, and thereby saved her from a rape at the hands of her smuggler. Several men told stories about protecting *deserving* women, who demonstrated their chastity in their pious and humble demeanor, from sexual abuse by smugglers.

Second, women may perform ostensibly masculine scripts. This survival strategy may include the improvisation of dress, manner and habits commonly perceived as male attributes (Arguelles and Rivera 1993, p.268; Nazario 2006, p.78). In a more subtle gender performance, women may signal sexual unavailability through posturing and bluff. A woman explains the advice she gave to her daughter (returned migrant, El Salvador, 1/19/10):

When you are on the road, you must be strong. I had heard that coyotes sometimes sexually abuse their women clients. I think that happens to the humble, delicate ones. If you have strength of character, you will be OK. I never showed any weakness, never complained. That is the advice I gave my daughter: never show any weakness, be forceful and strong, have strength of character. My daughter is very delicate, very feminine...I told her not to be scared. No one is going to touch you. If you shake with fear, tell them you are shaking with anger. Shout. Be forceful. If it is time to run, be the first to respond to the command. Run faster than the others. Never show weakness. If they try to touch you, dare them and threaten them. Tell them you don't need a man to protect you. And that's what she did. The coyotes tell the women, if you sleep with me, I'll protect you and make sure you get there. When the man said that to my daughter, she said, "My mom is paying my trip. So, you will protect me and get me there. I don't need you."

This bravado does not protect against victimization by gang members, corrupt officials or kidnapers. The safety produced by such a performance is nothing more than smoke and mirrors. However, this posturing may scare away the most timid sexual aggressors among a woman's travel companions, prevent milder forms of sexual coercion by guides, and provide women with a sense of empowerment, strength and calm to cope with emergencies. Unfortunately, such bravado also deteriorates quickly into blaming the victim, thereby reinforcing the misconception that women that have coerced sex with guides do so voluntarily.

Third, some women do enter temporary sexual partnerships with guides or travel companions, not because they are coerced, but because they are truly convenient or desirable. In one instance, a teenage girl cried inconsolably after her advances on an older male coyote were rejected as improper (returned female migrant, El Salvador, 2/6/11). Some guides do not sexually exploit their clients, and some women desire their travel companions. Furthermore, some of these partnerships may be more equal than others, and the woman's primary function in the relationship may not necessarily

be sexual. A Honduran man explains why he partnered with a woman to travel north, rather than a man (Tenosique, 6/2/11):

I don't have money for the bus. But thanks to her, we can go in "puro ride" [only hitchhiking]. With her along, people don't have as much fear and stop to give a ride. With her along, we can eat. If I beg for food, they don't give me anything. If she asks, they give us food....You cannot trust in male friends....but a woman is different. Yes, there is more risk. But they give food to her. When we ask...when a "hembra" [woman/hen] asks. She supports me. I had a thorn in my foot and she took it out for me. On the road, women suffer more.

It would be naïve to think that his female companion's sexual services might not have played a role in the partnership or possibly provided occasional payments for the rides in private cars that he has enjoyed during the journey. However, there is a long list of qualities that make traveling with a woman desirable to men, many of them tied to female archetypes of the innocent young woman or the caretaking mother. Begging, in particular, is a form of street theater that may play on gender stereotypes for financial gain (Goffman 1959). Regardless of where we draw the boundaries of consent under such conditions of deprivation, it would be equally naïve to think that women do not leverage these stereotypes to achieve their goals and manipulate their travel companions en route.⁵⁴

Fourth, some women become predators, in part to avoid further victimization. In fact, some women come to play vital roles in smuggling and trafficking networks, leveraging the innocent and maternal identities associated with their sex to recruit women as clients or pass authorities inconspicuously as couriers.⁵⁵ Women sometimes

⁵⁴ Menjivar (2000, p.71) also discusses how women leverage pity during the journey.

⁵⁵ Robert Brenneman (2012, p.35) describes women playing these roles in transnational street gangs in Central America. However important their role and their capacity to leverage their femininity to subvert the law, women are usually excluded from the decision making hierarchy in such social formations.

play the role of bait, luring male victims to ambush with the promise of sex. Women generally tend the drop houses of both smugglers and kidnapers along the route through Mexico, performing the traditional feminine labors required to accomplish criminal activities: cooking, cleaning, and other caretaking.

Some female smugglers use their gender as a selling point to attract potential clients, particularly young female migrants who fear sexual assault by their guides. Nonetheless, trusting a smuggler on the basis of her gender can lead to a disaster. As scholarship on transnational prostitution rings increasingly acknowledges, female victims of sex trafficking sometimes rise through the ranks to play a role of madam, blurring the boundary between victim and perpetrator in complex ways (Siegel and de Blank 2010, p.436-437). Female migrants may recruit other migrants for smugglers or sell them to kidnapers. In such instances, the boundaries between victim and perpetrator are fluid. Women may leverage traditional gender roles to become perpetrators of violence or simply to escape victimization.

A Woman's Odyssey

Each woman may employ multiple strategies over the course of a journey, switching ably among different performances of femininity. For example, in the courtyard of the shelter at San Luis Potosi, I met a Honduran woman who had both played a maiden in distress and assertively challenged domestic violence. For most of her life, she had played the dutiful daughter and niece, but then ultimately displayed immense independence to continue her journey unaccompanied.

She had traveled with an unreliable uncle told me how she had passed along the route. Articulate and confident, she had very expressive lips, occasionally jutting

sideways or forming a sardonic curl as she spoke. She is on her way to New York City, and I could easily envision her future success there. She had been studying nursing, but could not get a job in Honduras. She had been living with some other young single girls in Tegucigalpa, but her flatmates had too many boyfriends and bad habits. She did not approve of their lifestyle. So, the young woman left Honduras with her uncle and his wife, a trusted travel party. Her uncle had lived in San Luis Potosi for many years and knows Mexico very well. He promised her parents that she would be safe with him, and he promised that he would never abandon her on this route. But the trip had not gone as planned. People changed en route.

Exhibiting obvious revulsion at the memory, the young woman told me that her uncle made her beg for money twice. The experience of that humiliation made her cry. She did not want to beg. They rode two trains through Tobasco to Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, which at the time of the interview in the summer of 2011 would have been very dangerous route segments. The attention she received on the train was awful, “The way men look at a woman, any woman, when they board the train is overwhelming. And the women must pee at the side of the train. The men do not turn away. They watch.” She tried to urinate in a ravine, where she could not be seen by male onlookers from the roof of the train, but as a consequence, she almost missed the train and had to board it moving. She nearly fell. She could not get on. A Salvadoran smuggler on the train ran to her and pulled her aboard before she could fall underneath the accelerating locomotive. After her rescue, she was in shock and did not even feel where her leg had hit the train. She did not know she was bleeding. The pills she took

to stay awake on the train had made her dazed and numb. She kept popping pills out of fear of falling asleep on the train.

From Coatzacoalcos, they went by bus to avoid kidnappers; but the migration authorities caught her uncle and his wife. The two of them had gotten their stories confused on the bus. He had said his wife was from Chiapas, and his wife had said she was from San Luis Potosi. So, they had to pay a bribe of seven hundred pesos each to continue. The young woman avoided capture by clinging to a young man in the seat next to her like a lover. He was surprised by the sudden amorous attention. In explanation, she whispered “help me, help me.” He replied, “So, you’re not from here” and took his cue to play along. As she reenacted the story for me, looking coquettish, I could imagine the flattery felt by the young man; it is not difficult to understand his impulse to cooperate in the ruse.

Their little party of travelers passed along the route in this way and everything was fine, but in San Luis Potosi her uncle changed. He started drinking and smoking marijuana. He began to beat his wife, and there are two things that this young woman emphatically does not approve of: “The first is abortion. The second is hitting women.” So, she stood up to him. She told her uncle that he was not in the right and that he had to stop, but then he attacked her too; “He grabbed me by the throat, with his disgusting [long] nails breaking the skin under my chin. It was revolting. And he threatened me with his machete.” She did not tell her parents. She thinks her uncle’s wife did. Then her uncle’s wife ran away, stealing all the young woman’s belongings, including her Honduran identification, thereby leaving her fully and truly undocumented. After his wife’s departure, the uncle left her at the shelter, explaining

that she would be safe there, and he went north to the Mexican border town of Piedras Negras alone. Her parents will never forgive him, not for the abuse or making her beg, and the truth is that she has a hard time forgiving him too. He had promised never to leave her alone.

Now she is afraid. Along the way, she heard the stories about sexual assaults from other migrants: “They say one woman was thrown from the train naked after a rape.” In another place along the route, they had raped two women just before she and her uncle had traveled past the spot. With increasing news about the kidnappings in the media, the family member who originally offered to pay for her trip has changed his mind, saying it is now too dangerous and she should just go home. But she refuses to go home. She made it all this way. She already suffered so much.

A friend in the United States has promised to arrange for a safe coyote. The first contact she made did not work out. He was a cheap coyote, but he was not a good person. He wanted her to stay at his ranch, alone with him, for fifteen days awaiting the departure to the border. So, he lost her confidence.

While she waited for the arrangements to be made and the money saved, she decided to rent an apartment with an older Salvadoran migrant she met at the shelter. She advised me that is best to stick to mature people, rather than younger people, who she does not trust. She does not even trust other Hondurans. The attackers on the train “come from the same race”; they too are Central Americans, and “It is no wonder why so many towns don’t want the migrants. Bad people come too. Not most people, but some.” One town ran to the tracks, shouting at the migrants “We are calling the migra! We are sending the police!” She asked her uncle why they do that, and he explained

that many Central Americans have done bad things as they pass. Clearly, solidarity among Honduran travel companions does not guard women from abuse; Central Americans also commit a variety of offenses against both Mexican communities and other migrants, cooperating with human traffickers and bandits.

Her story describes how gender shapes a migration journey, generating both resources and risk. As Oscar Castro Soto *et al.* (2010, p.37) argue, gender structures migration journeys, in ways that both limit and facilitate them. Meanwhile, migration journeys also transform gender, restructuring power relations between men and women as they re-negotiate their relationships en route and unlock new resources (p.37). This woman's story illustrates the crosscutting role that gender plays in mobility.

Given the common knowledge of women's vulnerability to violence and their perceived physical weakness, female migrants may have an easier time appealing for help in times of danger or scarcity. In these situations, femininity, properly reenacted, may generate a positive reaction from potential benefactors. While the experience of begging was an unwilling humiliation for this young woman, female migrants may receive resources inaccessible to a destitute man. She could also improvise the role of a lover to pass, in this case without the need to provide sexual services. Indeed, several women extolled their relative ease of passing migration checkpoints without suspicion or with the willing collaboration of chivalrous (or in a more jaded reading, sexually interested) men around them.

Of course, there is no denying the overwhelming gender-specific dangers she faces en route. Women must cope with an ever-present threat of sexualized violence

from both acquaintances and strangers, in private as well as public. Through her uncle's actions, dangers followed this woman from home and erupted as soon as she was far from the protection of her father. Her attempts to avoid or refute gendered violence or harassment compromised her safety in other ways, isolating her from others and prolonging her journey north. Not only did she part ways with her uncle, she nearly fell under a train maintaining her dignity.

Nevertheless, she is improvising resources for a dignified life. When I spoke with her, she was in the process of meeting new people, finding new partners and continuing onward despite explicit instructions to return home. To do so, she engages in a series of gendered performances that define her relationships with newly acquainted men and women, and thereby potentially generate new social networks. Disobeying her former male guardians and finding people willing to accommodate her migratory goals, thereby asserting even greater personal autonomy from her parents, she redefined what it means to be a woman.⁵⁶

Masculinity and Hidden Vulnerability

Migrants redefine femininity during their journey, but they also redefine masculinity during their journey. Both femininity and masculinity provide resources for migrants. And even as human rights groups heighten visibility of female vulnerability, men continue to face hidden risks along the route. While sexual violence is a real and clear danger to migrant women, it is unclear that female migrants are

⁵⁶ In her study of the role of gender in Mexican migration, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994, p.85) notes that women face more obstacles when family resists their migration decisions, because only men are expected to act autonomously. Through migration and settlement women reshape these expectations. Deborah A. Boehm (2008) warns us that the dialectic between migration and gender norms may not ultimately be emancipatory for women. Men reassert themselves and improvise upon their own traditional roles.

more vulnerable than men to many forms of violence, ranging from deportation to homicide. Indeed, some men also suffer rape, but with the additional stigma of homosexuality, they may be even less likely to admit to such victimization. If women have difficulty recounting stories of sexual assault when such violence is widely recognized as a sad reality, many episodes of male rape may simply be unspeakable.

Furthermore, there are several dangers specific to male roles. These dangers arise from a normalization of an aggressive masculinity. As explained by Hume (2008, p.65-66):

Failure to conform to this model means that manliness is questioned....Violence, drinking and womanizing have become so bound up with dominant constructs of maleness that they are seen as natural. This is to be expected. The model of hegemonic masculinity denies men agency, choice, and the possibility of being different.

Regardless of whether men conform to this construction of masculinity in reality, its first consequence is the vulnerability of male migrants to the accusation of being a rapist and subsequent attack by local lynch mobs. All men are rendered suspect for their sexually aggressive tendencies, but foreign wanderers may be particularly suspect. In July 2008, a local mob overran the migrant shelter in Ixtepec with gasoline, a tire, rocks and sticks when a rumor circulated that one of the migrants had raped a local child.⁵⁷ The crowd of townspeople, accompanied by local authorities, went as far as threatening to burn the priest who refused them entry, but eventually dispersed without bloodshed (Mexican activist, Ixtepec, 10/19/10). From the perspective of some Mexican locals, these actions express the popular will and moral outrage against injustices committed by migrants; from this perspective,

⁵⁷ Brigden (2012), Ruiz Parra (2011) and Vogt (2012, p.300), among others, have all retold this now legendary story of the rape allegations and subsequent storming of the Ixtepec migrant shelter.

collective violence is democratic action and the survival of the Ixepec shelter represented a miscarriage of justice, likely the consequence of backroom deals by elites in the capital (Mexican community members, Ixepec, 3/31/11; 4/1/11).⁵⁸ Rumors and local newspaper stories with accusations of migrant involvement in rape circulate with some frequency, and communities along the route fear the roving bands of men in transit, complaining that “they drink, drug and lack respect” bringing prostitution, criminal predators and contamination to the city. The attack in Ixepec was not an isolated attack on a migrant shelter under the pretense of evicting potential threats. In July 2012, locals in Lecheria in central Mexico attacked migrants and successfully demanded the closure of the migrant shelter (Taniguchi 2012). Indeed, a broader vigilantism has surged in Mexico in the wake of the drug war (Casey 2013).

As a Mexican community member sympathetic with the migrants explained, “...the most serious thing is the rape of a girl. It is the worst rumor that you can make. There have been many victims of this type of rumor.” I paused her and asked if someone intentionally generates the rumors to harm the migrants. She answered, “Yes. But the funny thing is that they invent it, and at the same time, they believe it” (Mexican community member, Ixepec, 3/31/11). Migrant men, whether or not they behave according to the masculine stereotypes embodied in such gossip, are most vulnerable to these rumors and the possibility for vigilante justice that lurks within them.

⁵⁸ In her analysis of the increased frequency of lynchings in rural Guatemala since the 1990s, Angelina Snodgrass Godoy (2004 p.623) argues that these ritualistic public performances of justice can be understood as “the unsurprising result of the inevitably truncated, eviscerated forms of democracy more aptly termed polyarchy that contemporary geopolitics have installed in much of the developing world.”

Secondly, male migrants face the possibility of being trafficked as combatants in the drug war. Staff at one migrant shelter claimed that competing drug gangs recruit migrant men as assassins, sending them to clandestine camps for training (shelter staff, 7/17/11). Some of this recruitment is done via a personal invitation, not coerced. Sometimes they select young men living on the fringes of society, Mexican or Central American, because they embody the qualities of toughness and cleverness. Men with military or police experience are particularly sought after. Some recruits may reject an overture to join the ranks of a gang and live to tell the tale, as long as they withstand intimidation and persuasively deny any loyalties to a competing criminal group. However, failed recruitment by a drug gang can end tragically for the migrant (e.g. Salvadoran migrant, Saltillo, 7/19/11).

In the absence of reliable survey data, it is impossible to know how many forced combatants fill the ranks of warring drug gangs in Mexico. Furthermore, similar to the partnerships of convenience between migrants along the route, the relationship between a gang and its membership often exists in a *gray zone* between coercion and choice, victim and victimizer. The level of coercion in this relationship fluctuates overtime.⁵⁹ Furthermore, this violence is not limited to migrants.

As long as the division of labor is traditionally gendered, the drug war statistics will reflect a far greater proportion of male fatalities, because they have been customarily associated with the role of combatant in both criminal and state violence. Of course, these gender scripts are not static. The Mexican State Statistics Agency

⁵⁹ For example, Brenneman (2012) studies the opportunities and motivations of young men who desert their Guatemalan street gangs. He argues that it their choices, beginning with recruitment, are a process that evolves overtime.

(INEGI) projected 120,000 total homicides between 2007 and 2012 (Molzahn, Rodriguez and Shirk 2013, p.13). Of these homicides, the Mexican government and prominent media estimate that organized criminal groups are responsible for approximately 50,000 deaths (p.14). The proportion of murdered women among these known drug war deaths, including known assassinations of female journalists and officials among others, nearly doubled between 2008 and 2011 (Molzahn, Rios and Shirk 2012, p.20). The Violence and Victims Monitor dataset found that 9% of 3,053 murders committed by organized criminal groups between 2006 and 2012 were killings of women (Molzahn, Rodriguez and Shirk 2013, p.29). Neither male nor female victims of this violence were necessarily involved in any criminal activity.

Nevertheless, it is clear that Mexican drug gangs no longer view women as noncombatants and have learned how to leverage murders of women for the spread of terror. Increasingly, they have also recruited women into their ranks of assassins, distributors and couriers (Correa-Cabrera quoted by Martinez 2013); Mexico incarcerated over 10,000 women for federal crimes in 2011, a tremendous increase since 2007 (Cave 2011; Turkewitz 2013). Guadalupe Correa-Cabrera (quoted by Martinez 2013) notes that modernization and economic desperation has brought women into nontraditional roles, including participation in criminal activity, just as it has brought women into the migratory route. However, the social camouflage of lingering gender traditions generates opportunities for women engaged in such activity, helping them move through the population without arousing suspicion. Some Central American migrant women and children, like their Mexican counterparts, are recruited into drug gangs for this reason. The fact that women remain a minority

among violent criminals facilitates the transgressions of the law by a few. Thus, gangs and perpetrators of violence also improvise upon traditional gender roles with deleterious consequences for both men and women.

Thirdly, masculinity may generate pressures for risk taking and belligerent behaviors: drinking, fighting, womanizing, high stakes gambling, joining gangs and other acts of daring can earn men respect among peers.⁶⁰ If anyone is at greatest risk of violence, it is the migrants (usually men) who drink to excess during their journey or seek drugs; migrant men who stumble from the notorious bars along the train tracks regularly receive machete wounds in robberies committed by either locals or transnational street gangs. In Ixtepec, Oaxaca, migrant shelter staff estimated that such attacks come to their attention about once a week (e.g. 10/19/10; 11/30/10; 2/1/11). Men that engage in these behaviors also jeopardize their travel companions. However, these male victims do not fit neatly in the moral discourse reproduced by human rights organizations. These hidden dangers challenge a gendered dichotomy between female victims and male perpetrators of violence.

⁶⁰ On how Central American youths gain respect through gambling and risk taking behavior, including participation in violence and gangs, see Robert Brenneman (2012, p.38).

Figure 6.5: The Mango Run



Young men grab mangos from crates alongside the tracks and then race to re-board the freight train, distributing the mangos to other train riders with cheers as their only reward. Mounting a moving train is dangerous and stories about accidents resulting in amputations legion; yet some people delight in the adventure of it and even jump from car to car for entertainment. Others board moving trains in desperation to stay united with their travel group or leave behind dangerous situations (Photo Credit: the author).

Why do men continue to perform such a dangerous identity? For one, gender roles pervade the route from home communities through destinations in the United States, and tend to be deeply internalized as identities. The social penalty for male noncompliance with violent masculine stereotypes can be perhaps more dangerous than the risks faced by women. In El Salvador, Hume (2008, p.65) reminds us that men unwilling to participate in violence or express emotions, such as fear or sadness, may become victims themselves. Of course, a variety of gender and sexual scripts remain available to men and this ambiguity presents an opportunity for improvisation (Guttman 1996). Indeed, one version of the masculine archetype is the man with the strength, violence *and* chivalry to safeguard his women. However, as mentioned

before, men who attempt to re-enact this guardian role may suffer violence themselves.

Men incapable of convincingly performing heterosexual scripts may face special challenges. Sexual identity and gender identity intersect, as do race and class, but should not be conflated (Sedgwick 1990, p.31). However, in practice, sexual desire for women is often conflated with masculinity and vice-versa.⁶¹ Along the route through Mexico, ‘feminine’ gay men and transgendered persons are subjected to unkind catcalls and name calling, even inside the safe space of the shelter.⁶² These men can be targets for more brutal victimization outside the shelters.⁶³ The possibility of violence is part of both rural Central American and Mexican daily life for many homosexual men.⁶⁴ Just as women flee gendered marginalization and violence in Central America, some LGBT persons or males who do not conform to masculine

⁶¹ Men identified as ‘straight’ also engage in same-sex sexual experiences. As noted in Cymene Howe, Susanna Zaraysky and Lois Lerentzen’s (2008, p.34) study of Mexican transgendered sex workers, literature on Latin American men suggests that the stigma of homosexuality normally applies only to the passive, “feminine” partner. In this social context, the label of ‘gay’ is not only about sexual orientation; it also, maybe even primarily, represents a gender transgression. Likewise, Gutmann (1994, p.238) emphasizes the fluidity and complexity of these sexual identities in Mexico.

⁶² In at least one incident, a transgender person was permitted to reside in the woman’s dorm of the migrant shelter for her own safety, triggering controversy within the migrant shelter where I volunteered (see also Ruiz Parra’s 2011 mention of this same incident).

⁶³ The National Migration Institute of Mexico (INM) has on some occasions segregated homosexual migrants from other migrants, claiming to do so for their own protection. However, human rights activists and migrants charge that such segregation is actually motivated by discrimination against homosexuals and the belief that they might ‘contaminate’ the rest of the population (e.g. García Davish 2012). Vogt (2012, p.208) recounts the testimony of a transgender man who had been gang raped during a kidnapping, and his treatment by other migrants and shelter workers who believed, on account of his homosexuality, that he probably wanted it.

⁶⁴ For a description of violence against homosexual men in Honduras see Johnson (2012) and the OHCR (2012).

stereotypes also migrate to escape violence in home communities.⁶⁵ Just as women encounter continued violence along the route, so too do the men who cannot perform masculine gender scripts or heterosexual scripts convincingly. While tolerance of sexual minorities exists in many communities along the route, the punishment for male transgressions of gender and sexual stereotypes can be terrible.⁶⁶ Meanwhile, assertive, heterosexual men reap respect and camaraderie by demonstrating their masculinity through their escapades with women.

Finally, some performances of manhood can be “all talk”. Boasts, bluster, sexualized joke telling and gendered yarn spinning around a campfire provide a relatively safe way to establish masculinity and its associated authority. A gendered authority, a man’s character, as constructed through storytelling can be a resource for migration. As Matthew C. Gutmann (1996, p.234) points out in his study of multiple Mexican masculinities, “for some men today, ‘the macho’ is also a playful role they can perform on demand.”

An Unlikely Odyssey

⁶⁵ Lourdes Arguelles and Anne M. Rivero (1993) explore how gender violence and sexual abuse force both homosexual and heterosexual Latin American women to migrate to the United States. They argue that migration scholars should not overlook the role of women’s gender and heterosexual domination in the production of new refugee flows, rather than simply labor migration, from Latin America.

⁶⁶ In Juchitan, Oaxaca in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, for example, indigenous Zapotec traditions have survived to create space for a third gender, known as Muxes (Lynn 2002). In urban zones, the LGBT community engages in political contestation for human rights and opens public spaces. Same-sex marriage, an indicator of public opinion, is legal in the Mexican states of Mexico and Quintana Roo. Thus, local attitudes, traditions and social resources vary along the route, but transient LGBT persons face the difficulty of navigating this patchwork of potential hostility and violence may erupt at any time along the migratory route. The route itself is an emergent transnational field with shifting sexual norms, and they must improvise gender performances to negotiate this uncertainty. Indeed, Matthew Guttman (1996) reminds us that no singular, unchanging *machismo* exists over space or time.

The power of storytelling and self-presentation is perhaps best illustrated with a story about a man in a wheelchair who I met in the migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca (migrant in transit, Ixtepec, 2/3/11; 2/4/11). He and I established a rapport, joking together about our respective physical weaknesses: he has had titanium rods in his legs since polio crippled him as a child, and I have suffered problems with the metal rods along my spine since an accident as a young adult. He teased that if only the train had magnets, we could both ride easily north to the United States; “We could just stick ourselves on and go”. I laughed at the image of us pegged awkwardly to the side of the train. The man in the wheelchair had a habit of making people smile, and I was not immune to his charm. Alas, in real life, there are no magnets and the train is not so easy, but he was not worried for himself. He only expressed concern about his girlfriend’s safety, not his own.

Whenever the man talked in the dusty yard of the shelter, an audience would gather, mostly people curious about how someone in a wheelchair navigates such dangers: “How do you go?” He has traveled before, and knows this journey well. He has made eight trips, and arrived successfully in the United States four times.

Before he made the first journey, he had always warned his family in Honduras that he would leave, but only God knew when the time would be right. But then in 2003, the news arrived that an uncle had abandoned his sister and an underage cousin in Guatemala. No one else was willing to go to help them. So, he volunteered. After all, he tells me, “Man proposes, God disposes.”⁶⁷ He sought provisions at his grandmother’s house, and in particular, asked for a new wheelchair. While he was at

⁶⁷ This statement is a Mexican American proverb about accepting God’s will (Glazer 1987, p.162).

his grandmother's house preparing for the journey to find his sister and cousin, his home was robbed and the thieves took everything he owned. It was a powerful moment that made him want to cry, but God knows what he does. The man believed that the robbery was truly "the moment of decision, the moment in which God becomes involved"; he knew in that instant that he would go all the way to the United States, not just to Guatemala to rescue his sister and cousin. He was in his thirties, "I knew of the dangers but it is more difficult when one actually sees it."

He found his sister in Esquipulas, Guatemala (near the border with Honduras), where the uncle had left her. But even with the help of the Guatemalan police, he could not find his cousin. The cousin was deaf and mute. Finally, a tip in a migrant house in Guatemala led him to his cousin. They even located the derelict uncle, who agreed to lead them north again. I paused him for a moment bewildered, "But why travel with such an irresponsible guide?" He knew the way, and he had only abandoned them to avoid trouble with the authorities, because he was traveling with the underage cousin without papers.⁶⁸ But he *was* irresponsible. He took them to a stadium to sleep for an entire week without food while he looked for drugs.

In 2004, on another trip, he saw a man thrown from the train. The murdered man's own travel companions turned on him and demanded money, but he would not pay. So, they killed him. A Salvadoran man interrupted him, perhaps thinking about falls from the train, "What happened to your legs?" The storyteller responded, "To me? Polio." The Salvadoran in the audience took a short turn talking, "I never saw any of that until this last time when they stuck me on the train", and he showed me the

⁶⁸ Under CAFTA, Central Americans can travel freely within Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua. However, minors require a passport and a parent.

wound on his hand, possibly from a small knife. The man in the wheelchair had seen the police threaten and rob people too many times to remember.

His girlfriend sauntered over to us and reminded him of that time a Salvadoran tried to sell her. The man in the wheelchair agreed. *That* Salvadoran worked in a car wash, near where their travel party slept for a night. The man in the wheelchair overheard the Salvadoran from the car wash plotting with a man from a whorehouse, and the next day, the pimp showed up to take her away. She said no, but the pimp insisted. The man in the wheelchair had to intervene, “She goes with me and I am not leaving her”. I interrupted the story again, puzzled by the fact that the woman seems more physically capable of putting up a fight than a man confined to a chair, “Wait. What gave a stranger at a car wash the right to sell her?” This time his girlfriend replied, “...only because I was a migrant.” The pimp tried to talk the man in the wheelchair into leaving her, and they told one his travels companion to reason with him. But the man in the wheelchair was adamant that he would not give her up. She would still be trapped in a brothel if not for his loyalty.

After this tangent, the man in the wheelchair returned to the story of his first journey north, perhaps thinking of his sister. The uncle had been hanging around drug-addled men. They pulled a pistol on his uncle and said they were going to rape his little male cousin, but his sister saved him. She told them to rape her instead, and they did.

At this point in the story, his girlfriend gasped, “Where was it? La Arrocerá?” The Salvadoran man guessed, “Before Lechería?” “No, it was in Coatzacoalcos”, on the other side of the tracks from a migrant house in a remote place where the uncle had

gone to look for drugs. The man in the wheelchair was not there to protect her. He had gone by bus while the others continued on the train. But his sister told him about it when they reunited in San Luis Potosi. There his uncle hired a coyote to cross his sister into the United States. It cost her two thousand dollars. I asked, thinking that it must cost even more for a disabled man, “how much did it cost you?”

“Me? Nothing. I did not use a guide. I had faith in God.” Everyone in our little circle paused for a moment, stunned at this claim. I broke the silence to ask, somewhat incredulously, “But whom did you cross with?” “No one”, he replied. He explained that he wheeled himself through a kilometer of desert across the Nuevo Laredo-Texas border. From the migrant shelter in Laredo, one can see the first town in Texas. From the shelter, he could see the river that marks the border and where he had to go. While telling the story, he spread his hands in front of him so that I can imagine him looking at the view from the migrant house. He showed me how he rolled himself through the desert.

To pass the river, migrants must pay a fee to the ferrymen, but he did not. He made his own boat. By now, the audience listened astonished. He took many empty plastic soda bottles and strung them together like a raft. From other interviews, I knew that poor swimmers sometimes wrap themselves in water bottles as an improvised life vest to cross the Rio Bravo, but the idea of a makeshift raft for a grown man in a wheelchair seemed farfetched. So, again I stopped him to ask for clarification, “How did you know to do that?” He knew one bottle would not sink, and he tested the bottles to see how many were necessary. It was a thoughtful strategy.

After the river crossing, he wheeled himself over a slippery mountain, and to the highway where he could catch the bus. In the wilderness, he happened upon a man who was so impressed by him that he agreed to be his lookout for migration officials, exclaiming only “You have got balls!” The bus stopped at the highway. The bus driver tried to turn him away, because the bus had no ramp for a wheelchair. But he would not accept no for an answer. He climbed aboard and hauled his wheelchair up behind him.

He had been interviewed before, of course. He bragged that a Florida newspaper ran a profile of him once. Once finished with the story of his journey and bragging about his fame in Florida, the man in the wheelchair transitioned into the performance of a Christian-inspired rap about migration. Before we disbanded, his girlfriend prompted him to add one more story. There was a time when the Guatemalan police were after the two of them for a bribe, but he saw them coming and shouted “Get on! Get on!” She climbed on the back of his wheelchair and they sped down a hill to escape. Everyone still listening laughed, probably imagining the unlikely getaway and admiring her unlikely protector.

Nothing in this story was achieved through the manipulation of pity for his physical condition. This man did not beg. He might have been unable to walk, but his strength of will, faith in God and tremendous “huevos” were enough to see him through the journey. Did anyone believe the man’s story about his lone crossing and self-reliance? Maybe. I did not, at least, not entirely. Such partly true stories play an

important function for the teller.⁶⁹ For that moment in which they were captivated by his voice, the audience members re-imagined him as a capable and authoritative man, the lead character of his own drama. His performance, his quick wit and capacity to retrieve a laugh even under dire circumstances, established him as a man with uncanny charisma. He was someone worth getting to know. As he explained to me, “People orient you. You must chat with people. You must be sociable.” In this manner, he guided his group through Mexico, keeping them cohesive and optimistic and reminding them of his ability to lead. He did so despite his physical handicaps, or because of them, improvising upon these material challenges. He converted his crippled body and wheelchair into props for a superbly resourceful persona, temporarily suspending our disbelief. Indeed, the reshaping of his own story through its retelling may even suspend his own disbelief, bolstering him for the treacherous journey ahead. Such storytelling makes visible surprising possibilities for an individual, for the potential of a man, and for the route forward.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ Jason De Leon (2012, p.492) says that “one only needs to spend an hour talking with a group of recently deported migrants to hear a wide range of crossing techniques that range from “rational” (e.g., drinking a lot of water) to preposterous (e.g., a person once told me he almost evaded Border Patrol in the dark by walking on all fours and pretending to be a wild animal).” However, by taking such narratives at face value, De Leon misses the point of storytelling as a performance. Rather than dismiss seemingly improbable stories as “preposterous”, we must analyze what they say about the values, experience and self the storyteller wishes to express.

⁷⁰ In San Luis Potosi, I heard another incredible story, this time from a Dominican man who volunteered in the shelter (fieldnotes 7/16/11). The shelter had sadly closed, and we had ushered the last migrants into the street. I lingered, time to kill before my bus to Saltillo. So, sitting alone in an empty office, we made small talk about the beauty of his home country, his U.S. citizen children living in New York, the story of how he lost his U.S. residency, his successful brother the doctor and his own failed attempt to study chemical engineering, the injustice of the death penalty and, ultimately, how he believes slavery continues in a new form in Haiti and the African American community.

Suddenly, what seemed to me like normal small talk ceased, and he solemnly said, “I want to talk about something spiritual.” He then proceeded to explain that before he left the

Backstage and Front-stage

In many cases gender might be conveyed unintentionally, exuded as a consequence of identity, but some migrants are keenly aware of the power of these stories and self-presentation; they know the value of the information that these performances radiate. A segregation of backstage behavior and front-stage behavior reveals this awareness. For example, seeking to identify an anonymous body for repatriation, the shelter manager called a leader of the local clique of a Central American street gang to the office (fieldnotes 11/6/10). Inside the office, a young Salvadoran man with a lopsided baseball cap and fresh, clean clothes stared at the photo of the dead boy on the computer. I recognized him by the tattoo of two teardrops under his eye; I had seen him in the shelter office before, nervously tapping his foot

Dominican Republic, he had seen a ghost. It was a short, thin woman with short brown hair and glasses in a purple shirt and jeans. This image, of course, fit my description perfectly. He saw her in an abandoned building and she saw him. He paused dramatically, perhaps so that the effect of this news could reach me, and then added “but do not worry. The spirit never dies.”

In the awkward silence that followed, I did not ask for further elaboration, but instead privately thought the man’s words were creepy. Maybe he had a sincere premonition and wanted to warn me. Maybe he believed that we had a deep spiritual connection and spoke figuratively to convey that sense. Maybe he literally believed that we had met on some metaphysical dream plane before and wanted to verify this past experience with me. Whatever the obscure motive for the ghost story, I can speculate that it did not have its intended impact; it did not establish a closer rapport. Instead, it transmitted a sense of foreboding and foreignness to the adventure that lay before me, making tangible a possibility of danger and misunderstanding. It also urged me to get to the bus station a few minutes early.

Such miscommunication is the danger of improvised performance. The Dominican man did not harness a familiar imaginary for me, and the drama that he had intended could not be successful with such a naïve audience, unaware of the scripts he employed. It stalled mid-performance, with the goal of his story, presumably a deeper intersubjective sense of social and spiritual connection, unachieved. We failed to come to a shared understanding of one another. Something important was lost in translation, not from one language to another, but from one social imaginary to another. However, it changed the way I imagined the route and people interacting along it as I moved across the terrain, albeit in a manner that the storyteller had not intended. Whether they are told in earnest or not, incredible stories have an important impact on the social imaginary and relationships along the route, and not necessarily the impact their authors intend.

and glancing at the door (fieldnotes 11/3/10). This time, he seemed to be in mourning. His girlfriend burst into tears and buried her face in his chest. He held her. I left the office, trying to give them some privacy for an emotional moment. Moments later, the youth with two tears and his girlfriend emerged from the office. He walked with his arm looped over the shoulders of his girlfriend with a confident, slow, swinging cadence, almost as though he was so cool that he could not be bothered to walk or even stand. He strutted across the yard of the migrant shelter, any trace of sincere affection for his girlfriend gone. For her part, his girlfriend, like any good moll, seemed unmoved with make-up and face intact, chewing her gum in obvious motions. I could not reconcile this sauntering image with the nervous, compassionate boy that I had met more than once inside the office. The man on the outside of the office showed no sign of the emotional vulnerability I had seen before.

Along the route, migrants who either intuitively or consciously grasp the power of costume and performance seem likely to live longer. Selective adherence to gender protocols, a sort of improvised performance of being a man or being a woman, provides an important resource to people moving across a violent and uncertain social terrain. Overtime, improvisations on gender diffuse along the route. Gender performances circulate in gossip, advice and entertainment, increasing awareness of the possibilities for these performances. Thus, they change the meaning of man and the meaning of woman through the creation of new opportunities for the transgression of gender and territory. However, these improvisations also generate new punishments and stigmas that enforce these boundaries. Ultimately, violence against Central American migrants is sexualized through the collective re-imagining of gender en

route, through men and women's words and deeds during the journey, but in unexpected ways that defy an oversimplified victimization narrative focused narrowly on women's subjugation. The possibility for these transgressions and the ambiguities that accompany them has profound implications for the human security of men and women alike.

Conclusion

In the migrant shelter in Arriaga, Chiapas, a way station where many Central Americans start the train route north, I sat next to a middle-aged man with a faded tattoo above his eyebrow (12/2/10). He said that 'el norte' is blowing hard, and with that way of talking about the wind, I knew immediately that he is Salvadoran. He was in Los Angeles for a while. But, he explained, he is now a man without welcome into any society. It does not matter where he goes. He is always unwanted. He cannot go back to El Salvador, and he cannot go to Los Angeles. Why? I asked innocently. He thought for moment about how to respond. He took his baseball cap off and licked his chapped lips; "You see, I got involved in things that were not good. I knew they were sins, but I got involved anyway. Drugs, and..." his voice trailed off.

This man and many others, waylaid like Odysseus' crew in the land of lotus, is neither a 'migrant' nor a citizen. He no longer feels Salvadoran, Mexican or American. He is neither victim nor perpetrator. He is simply alone and moving through the world. His odyssey is not taking him home nor will it transport him to a better life, but his presence and the presence of scores of other wanderers is transforming the route. I met many like him, a growing class of transnational homeless men.

In turn, these wanderers and migrants must redouble their improvisations, like the mighty Odysseus, to survive an uncertain terrain partly of their own creation. In the course of their long journey from Central America through Mexico and the United States, they must construct their own epic. As people move across the landscape, they make a series of initial social contacts, meeting potential travel companions and engaging in business transactions, ranging from the purchase of food from vendors to the negotiation of smuggling services. This emergent socio-economic landscape is a potential source of camaraderie, goods and services for migrants, as well as providing ideas about migration strategies and threats. Through the performance of these social transactions, migrants skillfully manipulate norms of hospitality in strange lands, entertaining and begging where necessary to propel their journey forward.

Anonymity aids migrants in their passage north, undetected by state authorities, just as being a 'nobody' facilitates Odysseus' escape from the blinded Cyclops. Like Odysseus, held hostage but guided by the lustful nymph Circe, migrants are empowered and constrained by the social construction of sexuality. Similar to faithful Penelope, who outsmarts her suitors during decades of solitude, migrants use the obligations associated with their sex to weave artful schemes, subverting subservient roles to find a modicum of freedom from unwanted relationships. Finally, those shape-shifting Gods with fickle moods, state authorities and gang members, change form to complicate or facilitate unauthorized odysseys; and they sometimes focus their wrath on the good people, humanitarians and smugglers, who speed those journeys to a destination.

Whether purposeful or accidental, conscious or unconscious, migrants must re-enact roles and re-imagine themselves as they undertake their journey. They do so in concert with the people they meet en route. Thus, these performances shape and reshape opportunities for survival, generating new social identities and reifying old stereotypes along the route. People know the route not by reading a map but by performing migration.

CHAPTER 7

IMPROVISING ROUTES: ETHNOGRAPHY OF PRACTICED TERRAIN

Introduction

let no lack of a pilot at the helm concern you, no,
just step your mast and spread your white sail wide-
sit back and the North Wind will speed you on your way.

The goddess Circe guides Odysseus with this advice, urging him onto exploits with faith in both the Gods and his own cunning. She also inspires him to tie himself to the mast for safe passage through the song of the sirens, helping him to forge a new route home. In reality, ancient sailors like Odysseus discovered routes across the Mediterranean, transforming its geography in the process. Their journeys, motivated by war, trade and religion, shaped the possibilities for adventurers that followed. Over time, their voyages converted people to new practices and gave rise to reputations over great distances.⁷¹ These early migrations transformed the material landscape, carving an informational architecture for future transit. They pioneered trails and ports, reorienting communities to the trade they carried and facilitating subsequent movement across the region.⁷² These ancient migrants improvised a variety of

⁷¹ Writing at the crossroads of economics and sociology, Avner Greif (2006) explains the long-term capacity of Maghribi merchants to develop long distance reputational mechanisms routed in social networks and guild associations to facilitate economic exchange and their profound impact on the broader institutional setting in medieval Europe.

⁷² Jeffrey Bentley (1993, p.22-23) describes the “social conversions” that occurred along pre-modern trade routes around the globe: “This point holds true for all early civilizations: Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, and Meso-american. Rulers and traders from the central regions of these early civilizations naturally carried a great deal of cultural baggage on their adventures, and they deposited some of it in the hinterlands that they visited....A second result of ancient encounters between different peoples also survived over a long term and helped to structure the courses and consequences of future encounters.” Unlike contemporary businessmen who travel by air with the convenience of passport, Central American migrants and smugglers must move like ancient traders across great distances along land routes through uncertain terrain. As a result, Central American migrants, like the ancient travelers of early

technologies to ford dangerous waters and to scale mountains. Their success became a beacon to others.

Today, Central American migrants also leave home with faith in God and their own cunning. With Odyssean ingenuity, some migrants tie themselves to boxcars with their belts to prevent potentially fatal falls when the siren of sleep overtakes them on their long journey by freight train. Using this and other daring improvisations to navigate the dangers, these contemporary heroes are remaking their region; they are transforming the North American geography.⁷³ Their odysseys reshape the material and socio-economic landscape of Mexico and the United States. An informational infrastructure for sustained unauthorized migration emerges around popular routes, facilitating opportunities for human movement and cultural change. The artifacts, ranging from styles of clothing to messages scribbled on the walls of shelters, litter the transnational trail and become navigational clues for the next generation of migrants. Their passage becomes a beacon to others. Ultimately, each wave of migrants alters the possibilities for those that follow.

This material process limits the performance metaphor explored in the previous chapter. Erving Goffman (1959), following Shakespeare, is correct that “one man may in his time play many parts.” Migrants’ performances of social scripts define

civilizations, deposit cultural baggage in the Mexican hinterlands of their adventures. These encounters among strangers en route structure the courses and consequences of future migration in the region.

⁷³ As explained by Peter J. Katzenstein (2005, p.2), “regions have both material and symbolic dimensions, and we can trace them in patterns of behavioral interdependence and political practice”. In this chapter, I trace micro-level interdependence and practice among Central American migrants and individuals in the societies through which they pass. Migration practice, shaped by American imperium in Latin America, has both material and symbolic dimensions that make borders porous.

new relationships in transit. Nevertheless, all the world is not a stage. Migrants perform their roles on a *practiced terrain* that cannot be pre-fabricated to order and may change unexpectedly mid-performance. A practiced terrain consists of the places and things shaped by sustained human movement. No stage manager can design the set and props for real world performances, and migrants' interaction with the physical world takes on an improvised character. The props and places migrants discover en route both inspire new skits and bind actors to resonant scripts. The material remnants of migration intentionally and unintentionally transmit information that can be interpreted and improvised upon only through experience.

This chapter explores the nexus between the material and symbolic dimensions of improvisation.⁷⁴ First, I discuss the practiced terrain of the route: the places and knowledge-based artifacts that simultaneously emerge from and inform the practice of migration. A transit political economy constitutes this practiced terrain. In two examples, I explain the role of freight trains *as a compass* and migrant shelters *as an informational oasis* for the poorest, most vulnerable migrants. Second, I examine how migrants spontaneously interact with unlikely materials en route. In particular, I discuss the role of faith in this improvisation. Like Odysseus, migrants navigate by searching for signs of divine will during their journey. I argue that traveling with faith is a rational response to an erosion of useful information that accompanies the

⁷⁴ Similarly, in his study of border crossing, David Spener (2010) documents imaginative ad hoc tactics employed by Mexican migrants in the desert; he identifies an ingenuity born of hope under conditions of economic injustice that extends to hybrid Chicano cultural formations, as well as the material tactics for clandestine journeys. I find that the makeshift tactics described by Spener are not limited to Mexican/Chicano cultural forms. In a study of Central American migration through Mexico, Wendy Vogt (2012) also mentions the "makeshift" quality of migration, because it is a nonlinear process.

sedimentation of material practice. The practice of migration inscribes itself into the landscape of the route and migrants learn to read it. Nevertheless, under conditions of uncertainty, the usefulness of this information is as fleeting and unpredictable as the North Wind.

Material Culture of Migration Routes: Practiced Terrain

To navigate their journeys, migrants take visual cues from their surroundings. Images of places, such as the trailhead, the river at the borders, the migrant shelter and the train yard, provide focal points that orient migrants to the physical terrain. These four examples were common motifs in the maps drawn by migrants. In his classic work on the geographical imagination, Kevin Lynch (1960, p.7) explains that people navigate everyday by these “public images” composed of key forms, in this case, paths, edges, nodes, landmarks (p.8). When rendered memorable by their differentiation from other terrain or symbolic importance, such landscape features guide people great distances. They also provide a basis for common knowledge of the location of migratory routes. The terrain of the route is thus hidden from official view, but easily found by searching for access points defined by public images.⁷⁵

⁷⁵ In this vein, Susan Bibler Coutin (2005, p.198) defines clandestine as “hidden but known.”

Figure 7.1 Migrant Map “What an Adventure”



In this map, we can identify landmarks, paths, edges and nodes. The highway is the path that leads from home, with parents waving goodbye from the curbside. It is also the path that leads through the United States in the north. Landmarks, such as the desert and mountains, orient migrant to the journey, helping judge distance, immediate risk and cultural differences as they move across terrain. The rivers at the southern border and the fence at the border in the north are clearly defined edges. Hotels through Mexico serve as nodes.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ The young woman who drew this map remembered her experience with fondness, as a great adventure (2/6/10; 2/11/10). Her father had paid for special service for his beloved, youngest daughter. Their family still inhabits a section of what was once the main hacienda in town, on the center square, and they still share the surname of one of the town's eminent founders. Over the generations, however, the family fortune and property had been split among siblings and then cousins. Her father had hoped that she would use what was left of the family's money to attend university in San Salvador, but she wanted to travel to the United States instead. She convinced him that the terrible stories about the route in the newspaper were lies. Before her eighteenth birthday, her father paid \$7800, her college savings (sufficient to pay for an undergraduate degree in El Salvador), to a smuggler whose character he judged as sound and whose family lived within striking distance if something went wrong. The adventurous young woman travelled with a group of six girls, ranging in ages from 6 to 19, and their guide, through Guatemala and then Belize. In Belize, police held the girls at

Transit Political Economy

These “public images” emerge from the interplay between a transit political economy, transnational imaginary and the material space traversed by generations of migrants.⁷⁷ The broad publicity of these images points to widespread social participation in unauthorized migration, including the complacency or collaboration of

gunpoint as the smuggler negotiated the bribe in English, shouting. The guide paid other bribes in Guatemala and Mexico. They took an airplane to Tijuana, and their time in hotels was comfortable. The desert, however, was something entirely different. There, human bones served as landmarks that alerted her to the danger she was in. The six-year old avoided it by crossing the border at a migration checkpoint with a U.S. citizen couple that posed as her parents. The other five girls walked. The 11 year old cried constantly for her worn feet. All shared only one bottle of water for several days. At some point, their guide took them to a cave with a shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe and a stash of several water bottles. He prayed, for his own safety as well as theirs; “he was a good man.” When the helicopter circled overhead, he would shout, “get down”, and the girls would dive to the ground like soldiers. Sticks and thorns became tangled in their hair. They crossed the Rio Bravo in an inner tube. On the other side, they had to run quickly to scale a wall with a rope and jump to the other side. Then they had to run across train tracks and into a waiting van. They had only five minutes between the border patrols to get all the girls across. The smugglers hid her inside the seats of the van and drove non-stop to Los Angeles from Arizona. It was hot and uncomfortable. And after bonding during the journey, the teenage girls all menstruated in unison. By the time they emerged from their hidden compartment in the seats of the van, they were covered in menses and their poor guide was too. At this point, the artist and her mother laughed so hard at the memory, gasping for air and shaking their hands in a distinctly Salvadoran gesture translated roughly as “too much”, that I could barely make out her words over the guffaws. But apparently, she delighted in retelling the story about the man’s filthy head and pitiable facial expression. When the emotion died down, the artist returned to her story. The journey from Los Angeles to New York was terrible, because again she was stuffed into an uncomfortable hidden compartment. Upon her arrival in New York, she found that her distant relatives in the United States were much less supportive than she initially imagined, and she did not have the opportunity to attend a U.S. high school as she had hoped. Instead, she struggled with her job as a waitress, working twelve-hour shifts. She was nearly fired for laziness her first week, before she got the hang of it. After all, she explained, she had never worked a day in her life. She had been her “daddy’s baby.” And dutifully, when her father became ill, she returned home to El Salvador immediately. She had to take a loan to buy the last minute return plane ticket, which cost around \$1000. Her father had already lost consciousness by the time she walked through the door, and he died two days later in December 2009. The adventurous young woman expressed a desire to return to the United States, but could not leave her mother behind alone. Instead, she returned to her studies in San Salvador with the support of a brother who she had helped to arrive in the United States.

⁷⁷ Similarly, Lynch (1960, p.7) argues that public images “might be expected to appear in the interaction of a single physical reality, a common culture, and a basic physiological nature”.

Mexican citizens and corrupt officials along the routes (Casillas 2007, p.40). The images become visible to the general public, in part, because migrants interact with citizens during their journey, conducting a variety of social and economic transactions that diffuse information; once such images are public, they flag the location of the route and open informational entry points to the underground flow for newcomers, whether migrants or potential predators.

This socio-economic interaction often transgresses the boundary between legal and illegal, because transnational routes develop a spectrum of supporting informal economic and social activity that defies classification (Andreas 1995; Galemba 2008; Nordstrom 2007). Unauthorized migration routes superimpose themselves on the infrastructure of the legal economy (Casillas 2007); information leaks across these artificial boundaries between legal and illegal domains, linked by socio-economic practice.⁷⁸ In Mexico, for example, the migrant smuggling industry is a much broader socio-economic complex than illegal activity alone (Spener 2009).

On each journey, Central American migrants generally spend anywhere between several hundred to several thousand dollars before they arrive at the U.S. Mexico border, not only on bribes and smuggling services, but on a variety of travel incidentals and low-budget entertainment.⁷⁹ Smugglers and migrants purchase legal

⁷⁸ Unauthorized routes also become superimposed on the infrastructure of other unauthorized routes, at least in so far that drug runners permit the migrants to trespass. For example, street gangs often guard drug shipments for the cartels, in which the unauthorized cargo is hidden in compartments under where migrants sit on the train (interview, Salvadoran official, 4/28/11). At other times, the cartels exterminate the gangs as a nuisance. Cartels also attempt to deter migrants from following drug routes, by kidnapping or killing them, because migration calls the attention of the authorities.

⁷⁹ The multiplier effect of migrant traffic has a profound impact on economic life along the route. During fieldwork, I unsuccessfully attempted to run a survey at a shelter to document

goods and services en route: e.g. pre-paid phone cards, computer time at cyber cafes, room and board, fuel for vehicles, cigarettes, alcohol, Mexican and U.S. currency (often exchanged informally at disadvantageous rates for the migrants), international money transfer (e.g. Western Union, which charges large fees) and clothing. Some male migrants, not immune to earthly temptations, may gamble or pay prostitutes picked up in bars. Purveyors of legal goods and services may employ unauthorized migrants as laborers. Vendors may knowingly provision smugglers for the journey or make extortion payments to criminal territory bosses.

One Salvadoran smuggler, wryly explaining the exorbitant price of a cup of coffee that Mexicans charge his Central American clients, argued that even the laundresses in some Mexican towns were dependent on his human traffic (El Salvador, 7/5/10). He lamented that many people in these towns have no interest in going to school, because they grow up in these businesses. He picked up a small saltshaker on the table between us to show me the size of a coffee that costs a dollar: “and the food they sell the migrants is bad. Expensive and ugly food. Five dollars a plate for next to

migrant expenditures in a transit community and then estimate a multiplier effect for the town’s economic activity. Within a few days of data collection, I abandoned the effort for two reasons. First, questions about income and expenditure are extraordinarily sensitive and truthful answers require an intimate rapport. People do not want to share this information, because they do not want to admit to having access to funds (which makes them vulnerable to robbery or kidnapping) nor do they want to admit to buying alcohol, drugs or other contraband (which makes them vulnerable to expulsion from the shelter). Therefore, I could only gather such information via observation and ethnographic interviews with key informants, methods that violate conventional survey methodology. Second, even honest migrants with scarce resources seemed incapable of accurate accounting of their purchases; the exercise required a level of organizational skill and effort that exceeded the capacity of very tired, hungry and anxious individuals. Frankly, they had more important things to worry about than my survey. Therefore, while I can describe the economic, social and cultural impact of migrants on the transit towns, I cannot provide numerical estimates of that impact beyond the most general impressions of my ethnographic experience.

nothing....it's almost a fraud.”⁸⁰ The Salvadoran smuggler estimated that perhaps as much as 40 percent of the migrant remittances sent from the United States to El Salvador ultimately pave the route through Mexico and Guatemala for family members of migrants in transit, rather than fuel investment in his own country. Of course, despite the fact that he is profiting from the brokerage of these services for migrants, the smuggler's capacity to estimate the overall percentage of Salvadoran remittances spent in Mexico is limited; he simply cannot know the number, and his estimate expresses a subjective sense of injustice at the usurious prices that Mexicans charge him.⁸¹ Nevertheless, he correctly recognized that over time, small communities through which migrants pass orient their economic expectations and prices to the flow of people. In this vein, he explained that Central American “migration has changed the culture, in particular, in Chiapas. Without migration, Mexico would die. It is the commerce of the illegals that keeps it alive.”

⁸⁰In a lament echoed by human rights activists and migrants along the route, a friar at a migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco explained that, “it is a mined countryside. And when there aren't assaults, there are other abuses. The locals charge prices of fifty pesos for a Coca Cola. They threaten to call the migra if anyone complains about the prices” (6/2/11). Such petty extortion drives up prices for migrants along the route. On a panel at an event in Juchitan, Oaxaca (4/12/11), a Mexican human rights official explained: “They leave due to necessity. They deserve dignified treatment. The CNDH is an ally of the good father, good son, good husband.... And the abuses that I am talking about include the people who charge 20 pesos, rather than 8, for a glass of water or 16 rather than 8 for a soda, knowing the person is a migrant. The taxi driver who charges too much and says if you don't pay me, I'll tell migration”.

⁸¹ People, in the United States as well as Latin America, often use percentages to express emotion, rather than objective estimates of fact. For example, one Salvadoran man (10/7/09), who had returned from the United States, estimated that today, unlike when he travelled, “the route is 60 percent death and forty percent survive”. At one point, he argued that only 10 percent survive (11/13/09), and then he estimated the odds of survival at zero. Thus, I interviewed him many times and this percentage changed each time I asked him about it, perhaps depending on his mood.

The relationship between border towns and the paths that crisscross the U.S.-Mexico frontier provides a stark example of the co-evolution of transit political economies, the transnational imaginary and material space. Anthropologist Jason de Leon (2012, p.478) explains that the so-called “trash” that litters the desert landscape is, in fact, the “distinct archaeological fingerprint” of migration practice. He examines the artifacts discarded along the way. In particular, he argues that a collective folklore of migration is defined, in part, by images of these artifacts: dark clothes, cheap worn sneakers, and empty black water bottles, often decorated with religious symbols. These artifacts reveal a routinization of collective suffering and sacrifice by migrants (p.484). As U.S. border enforcement produced geographic bottlenecks in the routes north, key Mexican desert communities (such as Altar, Sonora, a community described by de Leon) became staging grounds for clandestine crossings. The convergence of the stream of people through these communities gave rise to a particular class of vendors that provision impoverished masses in transit (p.484).⁸² These daily economic routines make migration practice visible at the borders.

⁸² Four key differences should be noted between my analysis and De Leon’s archaeological approach. First, De Leon (p.484) emphasizes the oppressive nature of this material culture on migrant choices, creating suboptimal outcomes for survival in the desert, where I highlight opportunities for improvisation of such objects. Second, given his primary focus on migrants’ vulnerability to unchanging but brutal natural elements in the desert, de Leon also emphasizes his capacity to judge the objective impact on physical survival. However, with my focus on the dynamic and uncertain social dangers of migration along the route, I make no such claims. Indeed, I do not draw lines between “rational” and “preposterous” migrant narratives, as he does (p.492); I instead seek to understand what such stories tell us about the people and practice of migration. Third, while he mentions that migrants learn from the visual clues they receive from the material terrain, he does not fully develop that point, instead focusing on the messages that artifacts provide to social scientists, not just other migrants. I focus on how migrants themselves interpret the material culture. Finally, I conduct ethnographic, not archaeological, research; while I keep comprehensive fieldnotes and detailed descriptions of every place I visited, I did not attempt to catalog objects systematically. In future work, teams

In fact, communities much farther south than the Sonoran desert bear the imprint of unauthorized migration. Far from the border zone, in notorious towns such as Arriaga in Chiapas and Ixtepec in Oaxaca, or the neighborhoods in the immediate vicinity of the tracks in larger cities such as Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz and Lecheria in Mexico, transience has become a permanent and visible condition. For example, a young Salvadoran man, struck by the extent of these operations, remembered his journey through Chiapas:

The guide took us to a town in Mexico made by the illegal route. The town's whole existence is to provide for migrants. They cook for migrants, they house them for a fee and sell them what they need for the journey (El Salvador, 2/19/10).⁸³

Along the route, a multitude of small shops (selling inexpensive footwear, clothing and other supplies for the journey), cheap hotels, smugglers' safe houses, brothels, bars and restaurants have opened in private homes near the train tracks, testifying to a reorientation of economic activity by locals. Whenever the train stops in a populated area, women swarm in to sell home cooked food and drinks to the migrants. In these places, the desire to attract new customers motivates many purveyors of quasi-legal or unauthorized services to visibly and forthrightly market their availability, approaching complete strangers, rather than solely relying on word-of-mouth recruitment of clients. Debris of migrants' belongings litters the ground along the train tracks across the length of Mexico, artifacts of a thriving transnational trade route.

of archaeologists should undertake that work at migrant stations along the length of the transnational route, as de Leon has done at the border itself.

⁸³ This young man's map is included in the appendix to this dissertation.

Figure 7.2: Migrant Stations



In this photo, migrants' personal effects litter the area along the train tracks: tennis shoes, backpacks, clothing, a large water bottle and a bottle of beer. At the U.S.-Mexico border, Jason de Leon (2012, p.479) calls these impromptu rest areas "migrant stations". Migrants often leave behind such items when they must escape quickly or are stripped of their possessions by authorities, kidnapers or bandits. Behind this pile of migrants' effects, there is graffiti on wall. Graffiti is obviously not limited to the migratory route, but it is a transnational cultural form, exhibiting hip-hop styles developed in Los Angeles and New York and carried to Latin America by migrants. The tags, i.e. the signatures developed by individuals to express their personalities and status, mark the territory of local cliques of street gangs that roam the train route from Central America through the United States. Graffiti relay messages over long distances. (Photo Credit: Encarni Pindado.)

From the Guatemala-Mexico border to the United States-Mexico border, an unsightly and pervasive moral economy of begging has also come to underwrite migrants' consumption of local goods and services.⁸⁴ While more fortunate migrants rely on remittances wired from the United States to pay for their travel expenses, anonymous begging also provides desperate Central American migrants the means to

⁸⁴ The institutionalization of this transit political economy, including the kidnapping industry that victimizes migrants for ransoms, has also been facilitated by transnational financial flows, money sent via Western Union and Elektra to migrants from U.S.-based relatives as unexpected situations arise along the route through Mexico (Casillas 2007, p.42). For a description of the relationship between the informal transit political economy and Western Union, see Vogt (2012, p.198-200).

move to work in Mexico and the United States. Along the route, shelter staff often ask them to refrain from begging, encouraging migrants to ask for day labor instead; the constant haranguing for handouts antagonizes locals and strains relations between the shelters and their surrounding neighborhoods. It is important for human rights activists and migrants to present themselves as workers, not vagrants, in order to claim moral authority and pressure authorities for recognition as people worthy of protection. Nevertheless, an uncommonly high number of people are obliged to beg while they travel the transnational route, and their visibility marks the pathways north.⁸⁵ Migrants can navigate by following the ebb and flow of hopeful, but otherwise destitute, permanent wanderers.

As I interviewed local vendors, I stopped to chat with a grey haired man with a weathered face and broken front teeth, who had a particularly clear explanation of his weariness of migrants.⁸⁶ When I explained the purpose of my interviews, he interrupted to tell me that he had something to say to the Central American migrants, some of them his customers: “Do not leave your country” (Ixtepec, 11/2/10). Like several of his neighbors in the homes that line streets along the tracks, he sold miscellany through a barred window into his living room. He complained that the migrants say there are not enough jobs in their home countries, but he did not believe it. He asked what I thought, “are there really no jobs in El Salvador?” I demurred, explaining that I did not know exactly what the employment figures were. Perhaps

⁸⁵ The route also draws Mexican drifters who impersonate Central American migrants while begging, leveraging the migrant narrative for sympathy.

⁸⁶ I chose to highlight my conversation with this man, because of the clarity of his expression. However, many other interviews with Mexican community members echo the same frustration. Vogt (2012) attributes these negative local attitudes toward migrants to scapegoating and the social fragmentation that accompanies structural violence.

annoyed by my evasive answer, the man looked at me sideways and continued bitterly:

Some people say that they are only in transit, but one comes after another and there's always one more. It feels permanent even though they are passing through. It's the same. One takes their place.

Under these conditions of permanent transience, Mexican locals adjust their economic strategies to the movement of people along the route, stocking the goods and providing the services demanded by a transient Central American population and the migrants' handlers. The route becomes a rich site of socio-economic interdependence, as well cultural interdependence, though not necessarily good will or trust. Complaints about unauthorized migration as a vector for transnational crime are commonplace in communities along the route. For this reason, some locals do not view migrants primarily as potential customers, but worry instead about the potential for spillover violence into their community.⁸⁷ Shopkeepers, taxi drivers and food vendors in transit towns often claim that they would gladly lose the income gained by catering to unauthorized traffic to calm the social disruptions associated with the largely male and destitute transient population in their midst.

A first-hand experience of ubiquitous and enduring transience has eroded citizens' empathy for vagrants. Drawn by the economic opportunity of transit corridors, squatters from poorer parts of Mexico sometimes build illegal homes dangerously close to the train tracks; they can be evicted on the whims of local politicians or train company officials (fieldnotes, Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11). Thus, the

⁸⁷ Locals also complain that migrants are vectors for disease in their community, and they complain about the unsanitary conditions of some shelters (hygiene varies depending on which shelter) and the train tracks, where migrants frequently throw their trash.

routes pass through unauthorized Mexican communities, home to an already marginalized population with a tenuous capacity to claim their birthright as citizens. The presence of migrants in their midst exacerbates their own insecurity, leaving them vulnerable to the same predation that migrants suffer. For these reasons, some Mexicans living in the transit corridors struggle to rescue their own families from the northbound human flood. While the economic opportunity of transit flows provides a livelihood for many citizens along the route, the sustained vagrancy of migrants also tends to wash citizens' shallow sense of physical security away, leaving resentment among in its wake. After all, the transit political economy is structured by violence.

Economic interdependence produces opportunities for migrants to camouflage their movement in the flow of legal goods and people, obscuring the official gaze (Andreas 1996, p.58; 2003, p.96). However, at the level of social practice, clandestine interdependence also generates common knowledge about unauthorized activities between locals and migrants. Over time, sustained socio-economic transactions give substance to the 'public images' that guide migrants and their predators.

Interviewing Migrants in Arriaga: Before the First Train Ride

In early December 2010, I conducted interviews in the shelter in Arriaga, Chiapas, an early resting place along the western route through southern Mexico, just before the first 100-mile freight train ride to Ixtepec, Oaxaca. The Central Americans I met in Arriaga had already crossed the Suchiate River at the Mexico-Guatemala border. To do so, they had paid the ferrymen to board the makeshift rafts that carry untaxed contraband commerce (ranging from toilet paper to cigarettes) and daily commuters in both directions. Like so many unauthorized activities along the routes

through Mexico, this extensive “free trade” system is visible in daylight (Galemba 2012)⁸⁸; one only needs to look down from the official international bridge or across the banks of either side of the river to get a clear view of this ceaseless economic activity. It is not a secretive practice.

The migrants I interviewed in Arriaga had also already made a long trek along well-trod paths through the wilderness around highway migration checkpoints. That the sole use of these trails is the evasion of migration enforcement is common knowledge, and they therefore attract many bandits and sexual predators. Some of the migrants resting in Arriaga had ridden the combi (passenger shuttle) networks. Drivers of these vans alternate between helping and harming the migrants, providing free information but often extorting exorbitant fees for transport. The majority of migrants in Arriaga had already made multiple attempts at crossing Mexico. Despite having already braved so many dangers, these migrants were still at the beginning of the long journey north, only about 150 miles north of the Guatemala-Mexico border.

The first man who agreed to an interview on an early December morning was short and thin, and his age was not obvious by looking at him (12/2/10). I choose to relate his story here, because unlike many others that I met in Arriaga, it was his first journey north. Thus, he could not draw on any previous personal experience to envision the road ahead. His skin had a smooth innocent quality, but he had a large bushy black mustache that seemed out of place on a youth. His brown eyes were large and round, ringed with equally round, tired circles in the skin below them. He was

⁸⁸ Rebecca B. Galemba (2012) calls the unauthorized commerce in corn across the Mexico-Guatemala border “globalization through the back door.” She examines the moral economy of this “free trade” and the mobilization of peasants to legitimate the practice.

from Nueva Santa Rosa, Guatemala. Three cousins had migrated to Los Angeles, but he had no communication with them. He was the oldest sibling in his house; the four others were still studying. Hurricane Agatha destroyed the properties his family rents, devastating his poor family.⁸⁹ That was what ultimately pushed him to leave. He was traveling with four friends from the same community who had also suffered damage from the hurricane. Relying on word of mouth, the kindness of strangers and God's protection, he and his companions had travelled quickly across Mexico's southernmost state of Chiapas. They had arrived safely at the migrant shelter where I found him.

*The Freight Train: A Compass*⁹⁰

Like many of the migrants who cannot afford door-to-door human smuggling services from Central America to the United States, he left home with only a vague notion of geography.⁹¹ Rather than rely on the North Wind, however, he found the train yards in southern Mexico. He knew that the freight trains would carry him in the right direction. In that sense, the train yard serves as an entry port to a clandestine terrain, where word-of-mouth and the physical space itself can lead a migrant to the U.S. border. The freight train is not only an inexpensive transport vehicle; its tracks

⁸⁹ A volcanic eruption followed by Tropical Storm Agatha in May 2010 hit the municipality of Nueva Santa Rosa, Santa Rosa very hard. According to Major Alvaro Jimenez of the Salvation Army (quoted in Uribe 2010), this dual disaster displaced thousands of people and resulted in the loss of many homes.

⁹⁰ Whenever I discuss the train, I am referring to a freight train, not a passenger train. In the 1990s, the Mexican government suspended passenger service, leaving only freight trains, except for a handful of short novelty lines for tourists and the Mexico City commuter system. At that time, the government granted concessions to a handful of private companies for the continuation of freight service. Migrants ride the freight trains like hobos. Until 2005, this route began in Tapachula, Chiapas, but that segment of the route suffered damages in Hurricane Stan and has been indefinitely suspended. Migrants lament the closure of this southernmost segment, because crossing Chiapas now requires some combination of extensive hiking on dangerous trails and expensive passenger transport.

⁹¹ For example, he mistakenly identified his hometown as located in the northern part of Guatemala. Nueva Santa Rosa is located approximately 70 miles south of Guatemala City.

and equipment are a conduit for information.⁹² For example, the colors and markings of the engines signal the destinations of the trains. If the train breaks down or migrants must flee into the wilderness to escape a migration raid, scattering and hiding among the bushes, they regroup around the tracks as a focal point, using the steel rails to guide their long walk to the next shelter.

It is not surprising that the train has come to serve as a focal point for migrants, particularly near the beginning of the route through Mexico. In Lynch's (1960, p.9) words, the train has a high level of *imageability*:

That quality in a physical object which gives it a high probability of evoking a strong image in any given observer. It is that shape, color, or arrangement which facilitates the making of vividly identified, powerfully structured, highly useful images of the environment.

The source of the train's eminent imageability is two fold: material and symbolic. Firstly, beginning in the 1990s and intensifying with Plan Sur in 2001, the proliferation of highway migration checkpoints pushed an increasing number of migrants to the trains, generating a bottleneck for unauthorized traffic along the tracks (Casillas 2007). The poorest and most vulnerable migrants could not afford to pay smugglers or the bribes to corrupt officials who stop the bus.

The location and sporadic tempo of train service, combined with the increasing numbers of migrants converging on the train, create large crowds of migrants across southern Mexico. From Chiapas through Veracruz, trains run relatively infrequently

⁹² According migrants and human rights activists, the price of riding the freight train has been increasing since 2011, as the street gangs are again attempting to extend and deepen their control of the train route. Their capacity to extort boarding fees, in particular along the eastern route through Tenosique, has increased. Migrants and smugglers who cannot pay may be thrown from the train. Nevertheless, migrants continue to try to ride without paying. It is unclear for how long this trend toward increasing cost of riding the train and the homicides that accompany it will continue.

and unpredictably, as a result of a schedule dictated by the weather, wear on the aging rail network and the logistical needs of the patchwork of subsidiaries of the major railway companies. This unpredictability often produces a backlog of migrant hopefuls loitering around train yards.⁹³ The presence of these crowds illuminates the way forward, and sudden movements in the crowd signal either danger or the impending departure of a locomotive. In this southern zone, the tracks begin in Tenosique in Tobasco in the east and Arriaga in Chiapas in the west, merging in Veracruz and moving migrants to the outskirts of Mexico City before dividing into many alternative routes north.

In contrast to those in the south, trains in the northern half of the country run faster, more frequently and in more directions, thereby dispersing the crowds of migrants.⁹⁴ Because of this dispersion, the train begins to lose its imageability in the north. As the journey progresses, this class of migrants relies increasingly on information transmitted by word-of-mouth or paid guides.

Secondly, the symbolism of “the beast”, as the train has become known colloquially, provokes strong emotions. In the past, the desert at the U.S.-Mexico border represented the most potent popular image of suffering during the journey; but today, the train dominates popular media and folklore in Central America. Legends about the terrible accidents and assaults that stalk its rails circulate widely. Ironically, these harrowing stories orient Central Americans to the train, making the image of the

⁹³ The most dramatic of these backlogs in recent history occurred in Veracruz in June and July 2012 when hundreds (or thousands, depending on whose estimate) of migrants became stranded without resources after a derailment suspended freight train service (Barranco 2012).

⁹⁴ Private security on most trains can be bribed for passage, but some migrants know better than to try to board the most freshly painted engines that connect Saltillo with auto dealers in the United States; the security on that line is too effective for migrants to ride in the open.

locomotive and its relationship to migration recognizable, rather than scaring people away. Thus, the train has taken a central place in the social imagination of the route, thereby becoming a useful, albeit dangerous, arrow that points people north.

Shelters: Informational Oases

Nowhere along the route is the double-edged nature of information more apparent than at migrant shelters. The shelters are the route's most important informational resource for the poorest migrants. In these places, migrants can learn about the latest security threats, receive updates about police movements, discover alternative routes north, find out about job opportunities, watch and mimic tactics employed by other migrants, ascertain their legal rights and form new relationships with potential travel companions and smugglers. In contemplative moments, migrants receive spiritual support, and they listen to arguments by clergy and activists about their ethical obligations and rights.

However, the shelters are also an informational resource for a variety of other actors along the route, some of them with nefarious intent. Spies, known as *rateros*, enter the shelters to retrieve information about migrants for kidnappers; they seek to identify who received money through Western Union, the phone numbers of relatives in the United States, the travel plans of migrants, and the presence of members of competing gangs. Recruiters for smugglers enter the shelter, hoping to advertise their services to potential clients.

Shelter personnel are well aware of these problems. In January 2011, during a period of political activism in response to a mass kidnapping near Chahuities, Oaxaca on December 16, 2010, criminals entered the shelter grounds in Ixtepec, Oaxaca. They

did not disguise their intent to intimidate the staff, boasting of the intelligence they had gathered about the volunteers working there.⁹⁵ These men allegedly found the shelter priest resting in his hammock and warned him: “Do you know why we do not kill you? Because if we kill you, they are going to close the shelter and it is going to be more difficult to find the undocumented. However, with the shelter, you get them together for us” (quoted in Ruiz Parra 2011, translation of quote is mine).⁹⁶ Thus, these places become the site of a struggle over information, as migrants and criminals attempt to conceal their personal data and identities from one another. Indeed, the shelters provide a variety of services to migrants, but information is the single-most important resource *and* danger that migrants confront there.

The mass kidnapping on December 16, 2010 near Chahuities, Oaxaca illustrates how information surfaces in the shelter and transforms the route, as migrants and criminals adapt to it. It had been the first mass kidnapping in Chahuities in recent memory.⁹⁷ Until then, Medias Aguas, Veracruz, farther north along the route, had

⁹⁵An increasing sense of danger and intensifying rumors accompanied the security crisis and political controversy that surrounded the mass kidnapping of December 16th, which led to the deployment of an armed, plain clothes police team to protect the priest. I left the Ixtepec shelter for interviews at other fieldsites on December 15th. An impending event felt imminent to everyone present in the shelter at that time. I returned to Ixtepec on January 11th and resumed interviews.

⁹⁶ Vogt (2012, p.270) repeats a very similar quote from a shelter priest whose life was spared because a street gang did not want the shelter to close. Vogt also describes the ironic symbiosis between migrant shelters and the gangs who prey upon migrants. Her purpose in describing this contradiction is to examine how structural violence undermines solidarity and leads to the corruption of safe spaces by violent actors.

⁹⁷ Of course, the events of December 2010 were not the first kidnapping in the local area; in January 2007, local kidnapers collaborated with corrupt Ixtepec authorities to kidnap 12 migrants and jail the shelter priest, Padre José Alejandro Solalinde Guerra, who attempted to locate and defend the victims (Moreno 2007; Ruiz Parra 2011). Under the watchful eye of Padre Solalinde, international human rights activists and the local military base, the area had not been the site of large-scale kidnapping. Until December 2010, most crime in the Arriaga to Ixtepec corridor against migrants had been assaults on migrants by locals, machete wounds

been widely perceived to be the first danger zone for this organized criminal activity. The migrant shelter in Ixtepec is the resting place for migrants along this passage from Arriaga, Chiapas through Chahuites (where no regular stop exists) and on to Medias Aguas. For migrants, Ixtepec represents a major transition point in the dangers of the route. It is the first train stop in Oaxaca. In Chiapas, to the south of Oaxaca, migrants cope with bands of local Mexicans and Central American street gangs that attack people, raping and stealing, as the migrants trek around migration checkpoints or ride the train. In Veracruz and Tamaulipas, to the north of Ixtepec, migrants face mass kidnappings that can include torture and extortion. Ixtepec is also a bottleneck in the Mexican land routes north, located in the narrow Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The local area has long been the crossroads for both legal and illegal traffic since pre-historic times, supporting a vibrant transit political economy (Bernal Gomez 1996, p.26-28).⁹⁸

When kidnappings in Medias Aguas accelerated sharply after a long rainy season in 2010, the shelter in Ixtepec became an important informational oasis, a point where migrants improvised new routes north. The rains had caused trains to run off schedule, frequently delaying movement of migrants in and out of Medias Aguas. Given the spike in kidnappings at this time, it seems likely that this irregular flow of potential victims produced incentives for kidnapers to ‘binge’ when trains did arrive (Salvadoran migrant, Honduran migrant, Ixtepec, 11/4/10). By the time the trains

from fights outside bars and muggings along the tracks, extortion demands from corrupt authorities, rapes (which appear to be endemic along the route), excessive use of force during migration raids on the train, and robberies by Central American street gangs. Migrants passing Chahuites frequently complained of abusive raids by migration authorities on the train, but not mass kidnappings.

⁹⁸ For more detailed data about the contemporary local economy of Ixtepec, climate and society, see the SAGARPA (2008).

resumed a more regular schedule in November 2010, the backlog of migrants had grown desperate to travel farther north, and the kidnappers had grown desperate to turn a profit.

As kidnappings in Medias Aguas accelerated over the course of many weeks, the Ixtepec migrant shelter staff's warnings to migrants became increasingly urgent. They began to warn migrants of the "certainty" that the next train would be targeted by kidnappers. The priest would run to the trains, shouting the warning of the kidnapping ahead, and he held meetings in the shelter chapel urging migrants to find alternative routes of travel (fieldnotes 11/6/10): "If you're in a hurry to be kidnapped, go to Medias Aguas. If not, come to the shelter!" Among the migrants themselves, talk of the dangers in Medias Aguas began to circulate. Kidnapping victims, once released, would sometimes find their way back to the shelter to spread the word. In the office, a thin Salvadoran man could be overheard pleading with his family in the U.S. for the funds to avoid the next segment of the train route; he cried beseechingly into the telephone, "but they say they're kidnapping!", desperate to convince his loved ones that the money he had requested was not for gambling or other vice (fieldnotes, Ixtepec, 11/19/10).

While many migrants understood the vague contours of the dangers before their journey, they frequently learned the specific locations of danger along the way. The shelter in Ixtepec became a place where this information surfaced and could be exchanged among migrants and with human rights activists; it is also the place where unauthorized migrants may file legal claims against human rights abuses. The shelter is a site where academics, newspaper reporters, government agencies and spies from

organized criminal groups attempt to access information of unauthorized migration flows and individual migrants. In Ixtepec, by mid-December, some migrants had begun finding alternative routes to avoid Medias Aguas (fieldnotes, Ixtepec, 12/13/10).⁹⁹ As a result of its physical geography and the informational site of the shelter, Ixtepec became the fork in the route north.

For this reason, the kidnapping on December 16th targeted Chahuities, a point farther south than usual. Shortly before the kidnapping, talk began to circulate about the appearance of dark Suburbans on the streets of Ixtepec (fieldnotes, Ixtepec, 12/13/10). Some said the Zetas were trying to identify guides at major migrant transit motels in the that town, probably to extort passage fees before they scattered in new directions. Others whispered that the street gang had been attempting to exert more control over its territory in the Arriaga-Ixtepec corridor, and the guides were fighting back (fieldnotes, Ixtepec, 12/14/10). For this purpose, one faction of the local clique of the MS gang might have entered a pact with the Zetas in Veracruz. As explained by a local human rights activist months after the event, Ixtepec is home to “three branches of crime” which had begun to work together: 1) local street gangs, Central American delinquent youth who call the train tracks their home; 2) the Zetas, organized criminals moving down from Veracruz; and 3) corrupt authorities, officials acting outside their legally sanctioned capacity for personal gain ranging from police to local government (Ixtepec 3/6/11). If the rumors are to be believed, the newest pact between these three branches of crime occurred at the nexus of pressure from above

⁹⁹ Migrants began to take busses through the Sierra Madre de Oaxaca or the west coast (12/2/10). An INM agent in a coastal town north of Ixtepec commented that between January and March 2011, they had captured at least twenty-seven unauthorized migrants where it previously had not been a known transit point (3/9/11).

and below. From below, street gangs found it difficult to impose taxation of the train route and sought assistance with their local conflict. From above, Zetas responded to the changing geography of the route and sought to enter new territory.

The result was a tragedy in Chahuities. On December 16th, approximately three hundred men, women and children left Arriaga, Chiapas on the northbound freight train en route to Ixtepec. The Mexican National Institute for Migration (INM) raided the train near Chahuities, Oaxaca, detaining and deporting about ninety-nine migrants. According to the testimony of a Honduran man who arrived at the migrant shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca the following day, INM officials threatened that “within a half an hour, there would be another stop.”¹⁰⁰ This man estimates that two hundred people escaped the raid and returned to the northbound train. However, their ordeal was not yet over. As allegedly predicted by the INM official, a second raid targeted the train. This time, however, civilians attacked the train with machetes and small arms, kidnapping approximately forty people.

In the initial aftermath, the INM and the Mexican government denied that any kidnapping had occurred, relenting only after intense pressure from Central American governments and a transnational coalition of human rights defenders. This coalition transformed the shelter into a public platform for the projection of information about

¹⁰⁰ Laura Sponti, a visiting journalist at Albergue Hermanos en el Camino en Ixtepec, took the initial testimonies on December 17, 2010, which I accessed in the shelter e-archive, along with bulletins released by the shelter as events unfolded. Fernando Batista of the CNDH later confirmed the existence of 18 testimonies (Ballinas 2010). An account given in a statement by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights varies slightly from this version of events, in which the train conductor makes the threat of “trouble farther along” in an extortion attempt. (OHCHR 2011) Several alternate versions of these events circulated in newspapers, and an analysis of these alternative stories will be part of my larger dissertation. My brief retelling in this paper relies primarily on the shelter archives and discussions with shelter staff. For international media coverage of these events, see CNN (2010).

the dangers confronted by migrants. The U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights Navi Pillay criticized the Mexican government and called for a more aggressive investigation of this crime (OHCHR 2011). Based on the testimony of an informer, Mexican police arrested a faction of the local MS 13 street gang involved in the kidnapping on other charges (Salvadoran official, 4/28/11). These arrests lead to a temporary improvement in migrant security. According to interviews and shelter communiqué, the kidnappings were displaced to the route through Tenosique, Tobasco for a time. On February 19, 2011, three migrants at the Tenosique migrant shelter claimed that criminals assaulted the train following an INM raid, marking the beginning of a deterioration of migrant security along route on the eastern side of the country.

The shelter system played a pivotal role in informing migrants of the kidnappings in Medias Aguas, thereby shifting the route. After criminals responded to this shift, the shelter system played a pivotal role in informing the public of the kidnapping in Chahuities, becoming a place where information could surface for journalists, activists and sympathetic policy makers. How and why can this information surface in the shelter? How does it become a fork in the road?

The locations of shelters are relatively fixed and visible. In the 1980s, shelters mostly clustered in the northern border zone, which was the most acutely dangerous place for migrants at that time (Hagan 2008, p.99). At first, these shelters provided a respite for weary Mexican travelers (p.99). As the refugee flow from Central America accelerated, the shelters became the front line for human rights activism on behalf of Central Americans fleeing political violence. These activists and humanitarian

workers, like its sister sanctuary movement in the United States, drew inspiration from liberation theology and their broader Christian faith (Garcia 2006; Hagan 2008).

During the 1990s when U.S. border patrol effectively closed the migration corridor through Tijuana-San Diego and deportations intensified, some shelters in the northern border zone began to cater to Mexicans deported back across the border. These Mexican migrants sometimes returned penniless and became stranded in frontier towns far from their homes.

In the 2000s, awareness of the horrors of the journey from Central America spread, and the number of migrant shelters along the route multiplied despite the fact that they were not exactly legal. In 2008, the Mexican Supreme Court decriminalized humanitarian aid to migrants, which had not previously been clearly distinguished from smuggling under Article 77 of the Population Law. While humanitarian workers and activists still report some harassment from police, this ruling facilitated the expansion and further institutionalization of the shelter system.

By 2012, there were approximately 54 shelters from Guatemala to the U.S. border. Any estimate of their presence is complicated by the fact that new shelters periodically open and others close. Many of them, however, congregate in the most visible corridors of the route, serving the poorest and most vulnerable migrants who travel along the train tracks or linger at the borders. Catholic faith has inspired both clergy and lay people to organize most of these shelters, but they serve migrants from any religion. They are loosely networked through the Church, but not funded by it. The shelters vary in their level of institutionalization, rules, resources, and social organization. Some maintain a permanent professional staff, while others rely

predominately on volunteers with high turnover. Once established, shelters provide diverse services to migrants, ranging from a simple meal to overnight hospice for up to three days (or more in extenuating circumstances), medical care, and legal support. While the relationship with the surrounding community may be friendly or hostile, the shelters become a hub of local economic activity. For this reason, Vogt (2012, p.39) conceptualizes them as depots along the unauthorized route, i.e. places of constant coming and going through which migrants are “transformed into commodities where they were traded, bought, sold and distributed.” As such, the shelter is a hub of in the transit political economy.

Neighbors often distrust what happens within the walls of the migrant shelter, complaining about the criminality and predation that it draws to the community. Likewise, migrants complain that the shelters are beacons for criminals who seek to abuse and exploit them. While distrust is rampant within their walls and migrants’ personal information may be used to commit crimes against them later in the route, the shelters usually offer sufficient physical security to facilitate conversations among strangers without an immediate fear of assault or apprehension by authorities. With some notable exceptions, people remain safe until they leave the sanctity of the shelter grounds. This modicum of security contributes to a relatively relaxed atmosphere, when compared to the train yards at night, and permits more information to surface.

Institutionalized religion facilitates the shelter’s visibility under these quasi-legal conditions, deterring intervention by federal Mexican authorities and deterring the most flagrant assaults by organized criminal gangs. Outside of shelters, there are also informal encampments built by migrants. During exceptional moments, the

federal government has provided temporary migrant camps, most recently during a major backlog of migrants in Veracruz in the summer of 2012 caused by the cessation of train service following a derailment (Barranco 2012). However, the moral authority of the Catholic Church in Mexico creates a political space for particularly open informational oases. In an oft-cited poll conducted by Consulta Mitofsky (e.g. Archibald 2012), Mexicans have consistently ranked universities and the Catholic Church as the least corrupt institutions in Mexican society. Most Mexicans are Catholic, and even criminals fear for their immortal soul. The institutional and normative power of the Catholic Church enhances the power of individual priests to maintain these facilities despite threat.

Shelters that project information of the route to transnational human rights networks provoke additional security guarantees from politicians, and they may receive material resources for surveillance, guards and cement walls. Thus, shelters play a vital role in political contestation for migrants' rights. They provide an access point to the underground for the general public. A multinational cadre of journalists, human rights investigators and activists arrive at the shelters daily to take testimonies from the migrants that congregate there. For this reason, the shelters are not only a platform for migration. Shelters also become a platform for the projection of information necessary for national and international political activism. Unfortunately, this publicity becomes a beacon for covert predators as well as migrants.

Shelter staff will sometimes organize information sessions for migrants to warn them of the dangers ahead. These briefings are sometimes part of the registration process. Staff may also give some carefully guarded advice to the migrants they

perceive as the most vulnerable to abuse; for example, in Oaxaca, there is a bus route that migration does not police, but to give the information more widely would attract both authorities and (more quickly) criminals to the route. Therefore, shelter staff selects the migrants and circumstances under which they share that information carefully. When migrants successfully pass along the route, they relay the information back to the shelter by telephone.

Of course, most of the information passes without intent. People simply tell yarns to kill time. They eavesdrop on gossip. At home, people sit on a porch and watch the world go by for entertainment, learning about their neighborhood in the process. Similarly, the main source of entertainment for the poorest migrants is the conversation and reality drama that unfold in shelters. In so doing, they come to understand the route and its inhabitants.

Migrants also use the shelters to communicate with family and friends in the United States and Central America via telephone or, where available, the internet. Some shelters offer free phone calls, while others provide public phones to be used with pre-paid cards. In this manner, the shelters become a node for transnational information exchanges. Family members of migrants from Central America often contact shelters in search of missing persons.

Figure 7.3: Missing Persons Flyers



Desperate family members search for missing persons at the migrant shelters along the route. Groups of mothers of the disappeared, such as COFAMIDE in El Salvador and COFAMIPRO in Honduras, have called for the establishment of a DNA database to help locate bodies of victims of the journey. Members of these groups periodically join protest caravans along the route, carrying placards with the photos of their missing loved ones.

Importantly, these attempts to access information at the shelter leave a material trace. The sad yellowing posters of missing persons flapped in the breeze of a doorway in the shelter in Saltillo. The dirt yard in Ixtepec was littered with phone cards. On the walls of the now defunct shelter in San Luis Potosi, migrants had lovingly inscribed the addresses of shelters in Mexico and the United States, as well as the contact information for the Denver day labor center Centro Humanitario. They also left behind

artwork, messages of encouragement and their own names, on the walls of the now defunct shelter in San Luis Potosi.

The layout of the shelters differs dramatically from one to the next, depending on the unique history of the place. Often the struggle over information and security drives physical changes to the shelters. Thus, migration shapes the material contours of shelters, and conversely, their material contours shapes the information available to migrants.

Their layout inevitably adapts to new resources and needs over time. Some shelters look like large homes, converted for the task. Others look like secure compounds. Some sprout from congregational initiatives, growing as addendums to existing buildings owned by the Church. NGOs may make large donations to shelters to enable specific projects, like dealing with a pressing sanitation or security issue, depending on their own reading of priorities. Skilled Central American masons or electricians occasionally take time from their journeys north to contribute, either earning wages or volunteering. Thus, migrants themselves have built many of these structures piecemeal over time, and the compounds often expand in a makeshift manner as financial resources, human capital and construction materials become available. The rules and regulations of shelters are also often products of experience, changing and adapting as shelter staff confront new dilemmas and improvise upon old ways of doing business. In this sense, the social and material structure of the shelters emerges from practice.

In turn, the social and material structure of the shelter shapes migration practice. The regulation and physical layout of the place shapes the information

available to migrants during their journey. There is a trade-off between physical security and the flow of information through the shelter. The more isolated and selective the shelter becomes, the less opportunity for infiltration by criminal gangs. However, the regulation of movement in and out of the shelter comes with a steep price for migrants; they become less capable of learning about and adapting to changes in the route.

For example, shelters often segregate Mexicans and Central Americans to minimize opportunities for recruitment by smugglers and infiltration by kidnappers. However, this segregation by nationality also decreases the information available to migrants. It isolates them from the larger community. Shelters also often segregate by gender, because sexual assault is so common. However, the segregation of men and women decreases the information available to the female minority by cutting them off from gossip at night. Indeed, in an extreme case, men and women are locked behind bars in separate wings of the facility at a regulated hour. Shelters often deny entry to repeat customers, who come under suspicion as smugglers or spies. However, in so doing, the shelter excludes the most experienced migrants from sharing their stories with others. In the most regulated shelters, migrants cannot leave to go to the train when they receive information about its immediate departure. They cannot leave to make travel arrangements and re-enter to wait. Finally, and most importantly, migrants may choose not to enter the shelter for fear of missing vital information about the movement of the trains:

Because of the irregular schedule of the trains, there is a need to sleep in the vias and that is where the danger of the attacks comes from (Guatemalan migrant, Ixtepec, 5/14/11).

The train yards at night are extraordinarily dangerous places, and it is a measure of the high value of this information to migrants that they would risk sleeping there to receive it. Thus, the regulation of movement in and out of the shelter is an important security consideration. Movement must be monitored to prevent kidnappings out of the shelter and to prevent the smuggling of guns and drugs into the shelters. The safe space of the shelter requires it, and that safety is key for the survival of an informational oases. However, too much regulation also undermines informational utility of the place. These security regulations undermine the flow of information through the shelter, and ultimately erode the human security of migrants. In this sense, the shelters are a microcosm of the larger problem that confronts Mexico.

Reading the Material through the Divine: Signs on Heracalitus' River

Before the earnest Guatemalan man left home, he consulted only two people. Neither one was a parent. His father had died eight years ago, and his mother lived far from him in Esquintla, a city on the western side of Guatemala. He did not ask her. Nor did he talk to his cousins who had traveled the route before him. Instead, a female cousin who stayed behind in Guatemala warned him of the risks: assaults, kidnappings, murders, and the possibility of falling from the train. Her advice was simply to "be careful." A friend in the United States agreed to help, but his friend's advice was almost as vague: "Take care of yourself. Do not talk to unknown people. Do not sleep just anywhere. Do not walk in the mountains because of snakes and thieves." Of course, the man had to do these things anyway, even though he had not

planned to. He began the journey by asking God for protection, “because it is very complicated to get started with advice like that.” Then he and his companions went in search of the train.

Before they reached the legendary train or even the Guatemala-Mexico border, he and his little travel group ran into a Nicaraguan who joined them for a time. They met the Nicaraguan in Mazatenango, on the western side of Guatemala on the way to Mexico along the InterAmerican highway.¹⁰¹ He knew the way to the train and they did not. The Nicaraguan had no money and they did. They “are all God’s children”, and so they agreed to travel together in a combi [passenger van]. But after a while, the Nicaraguan had a change of heart and decided to go back. He told them, “I have my children and something could happen.” It was hard for the five Guatemalan men when their new friend turned for home. The Nicaraguan was left without money and they were left without a guide. The Nicaraguan cried when he turned to leave them, because they had all become very good friends. They gave him a backpack. It was all he would return home with. They had been united by the purpose of arriving in the United States, but the Nicaraguan had been assaulted while begging in the bus station and had begun to think of seeing his family again. The experience changed his priorities.

I asked how they could trust the unknown Nicaraguan, and the man explained that it was the sadness in his face that had made him trustworthy. His apparent

¹⁰¹ The InterAmerican highway connects Panama City, Panama with Nuevo Laredo, Mexico on the United States border, crossing nine countries on the North American continent. In the Panamanian Isthmus, it connects with the PanAmerican Highway system that links an additional nine South American countries. This highway system, constructed with the help of U.S. Army Corp engineers for U.S. security purposes beginning in World War II (Wood 2011), is a major artery for both authorized and unauthorized traffic in the Americas.

desolation drew them to him. Indeed, visible poverty is a common tell that someone along the route is a migrant. They invited him to join them because he had no money. In return, he had given them the good advice of not talking to others, advice they had received before but obviously disobeyed by talking to their new friend.¹⁰² The Nicaraguan taught them where to find the migrant shelter in Arriaga, a safe place to sleep while they waited for the train, but he was not the only kind-hearted person they had met on their journey across Chiapas. Strangers gave them food and money from the doorsteps of their homes, five or ten pesos for the combi when most sorely needed.

Searching for Signs: Experience, Inspiration and Improvisation

At the point where I met this man in Arriaga, he and his companions expected to board the train. From rumors in the migrant shelter, he knew about the dangers in Medias Aguas, Veracruz, a town on the train route where there had been a recent spate of kidnappings. He and his travel companions feared the kidnappings, but money was short and they did not want problems with the migration officials that patrol the bus lines. Thus, for them, the bus “does not exist.” He seemed so determined in the face of this danger that I asked what could possibly make him reconsider, “What would make

¹⁰² Throughout my fieldwork in El Salvador, Salvadorans often emphatically (and ironically) warned me not to trust Salvadorans. Virtually every goodbye also included a variety of security warnings. At first, I naively understood these parting comments as sincere expressions of concern for my wellbeing. Indeed, some unsolicited security advice might indicate a special safety concern for an uninitiated foreigner, particularly a white woman taking long solo trips across their country. However, as I watched people greet one another, I eventually came to understand the omnipresent security warnings as a ritual for establishing rapport, a way of generating common knowledge between two people about the untrustworthiness of outsiders; security warnings are a performance of interpersonal confidence, as are, under some circumstances, expressions of religious faith. I began to give them too.

you turn back?” After all, one member of his party had already gone home to Central America.¹⁰³

The man answered that, as he travels, he asks God if He wants him to return to Guatemala. If not, the man continues along the route with His benediction, and he believed that God had blessed his journey. There were several times when he and his travel companions had to walk right by migration officials, and they did so with no problem: “It is a sign.” The earnest man would go in search of more signs, listening and adapting his course as God makes His will known. For him, the journey was not only an escape from poverty and violence; it was a process of finding one’s place in the world through risk and sacrifice. No human being could provide the information sought by this man in his wanderings, because God alone spoke to him through the experience of the route. The man did not plan his journey, but instead sought to uncover God’s plan for him. Indeed, devout migrants read the landscape of the route through the lens of their faith, and they attribute their capacity to overcome material obstacles, including all manner of suffering and danger, to divine will.¹⁰⁴

Moments of inspiration or dawning understanding may appear as divine messages (Hagan 2008). However, pious migrants are not the sole beneficiaries of mobile knowledge. All people in this uncertain environment engage in a process of knowing through doing. Divine or not, the oldest handmaiden of inspiration is

¹⁰³ Of course, the Nicaraguan might return to the route. Many people traveling through the shelter system try many times to arrive in the United States. It is not uncommon for people to return home, resolving never to travel again, and then find themselves on the road again after rediscovering their motivation to leave. Neither the dangers of the route nor life in Central America is tenable, and as a result, many people wander from Central America and back again.

¹⁰⁴ See also the in-depth discussion of this point in Hagan (2008).

necessity, and migrants become aware of opportunity through the experiences created as they seek it out. Without experience, the public images that guide migrants across terrain may remain latent in the imaginary, deflating the wind by which people navigate.

Despite the Guatemalan man's self-professed inflexibility about his mode of travel, swearing to me that the bus is absolutely off-limits, migrants frequently break their own rules and devise new tactics along the route. In fact, he himself had already broken many of the safety rules he had set at the beginning of the journey. Migrants must remain open to the *signs* they encounter, learning to manipulate familiar resources in new ways and responding to unexpected situations as they go. In fact, they often surprise themselves with their ingenuity at they cope with surprises and interact with the social or material landscape of the route. As migrants make clear in their interviews, physical experience of the material reality of the route is essential to understand it. It is not just accumulated experience that is important, but also experience of the moment in which the knowledge is applied first hand. As a Honduran migrant (Saltillo, 7/18/10) explains:

I have a feeling that says, "oh man, I don't go there" and I was right. I said that about Huehuetoca. Let's not go. I heard a lot of stuff about that place. Then we met these guys who said they were chased by the Zetas there and they caught one...I don't know. I can smell danger. That is the reason why I never get caught....I am involved in this kind of thing a lot. And God, maybe it's God. I always ask him to help.

This man boasts of his experience along the route, but he also humbly recognizes that something else, maybe divine intervention, happens in the moment making new tactics or a new way forward possible. Improvisation is intimately connected to experience. Migrants use unforeseen resources and manipulate materials

for purposes outside their original intent. As we have already discussed, migrants demonstrate an opportunistic grasp of the most fixed and established features of the material landscape of the route: train tracks and migrant shelters. However, migrants also transform a multitude of tangible *signs* they encounter along the route through more subtle improvisations. In particular, migrants improvise as events unfold, searching for signs through which to navigate and converting them into strategies to achieve their goals. To do so, they rely on physical objects in their path. For example, the architecture of safe houses can facilitate escape, and unlikely vehicles may be used for transport.

Safe Houses

Safe houses are buildings that house kidnapped, smuggled or trafficked people; they are 'safe' for the kidnapers, smugglers and traffickers, not necessarily the migrants. In these houses, sanitation suffers with too many people crammed too closely together, sometimes with unworkable plumbing and insufficient food. Over one hundred people at a time may wait for days, weeks or months in buildings designed for single-family living. Women, some of them romantically involved with male kidnapers or smugglers, often serve as caretakers of these facilities, and sometimes run the operation from a family home.

During smuggling operations, safe houses serve as clandestine way stations, as coyotes make arrangements for the next leg of the journey. Even in these voluntary smuggling arrangements, however, the doors and windows are often locked to limit the comings and goings of clients, preventing them from alerting authorities (whether inadvertently or purposely) to their whereabouts. The dire conditions within

smugglers' safe houses, which may include poor hygiene and sexual abuse, drive some migrants to attempt to escape their own coyotes. During kidnappings, safe houses serve as holding facilities for victims during the negotiation of ransoms, and they may be staging grounds for other criminal activities, such as sex trafficking. In the most tragic cases, such as the much publicized massacre of 'the 72' in Tamaulipas in August 2010, they have become aboveground tombs for murdered migrants.

These safe houses may be located in either isolated rural or busy urban locales along the route to (and across) the United States. Despite limitations on clients' movements in and out, the location of smuggler safe houses is usually common knowledge in local communities and migrant shelters. After all, safe houses are a consumption node in the local political economy, requiring food and other services for the upkeep of a large, confined population. Kidnappings may happen anywhere in Mexico. However, because safe houses are difficult to keep secret and their visibility can lead to raids by competing gangs or authorities, the kidnapers in Veracruz or Tobasco sometimes transport their victims to Tamaulipas, a stronghold of the Zetas in northern Mexico, for more secure captivity. Thus, whether they were trafficked by kidnapers or smuggled by coyotes, many migrants report visiting safe houses across the country, like a series of stepping stones north.

Despite the lengths to which kidnapers go to maintain control in these houses, some migrant kidnapping stories end in great escapes, rather than the payment of ransoms. Given the recent professionalization of the kidnapping industry in Mexico, the continued possibility for any such breakouts or resistance to traffickers is astonishing. Given the publicity surrounding multiple massacres of migrants, the

courage demonstrated by migrants who attempt any such breakouts or resistance to traffickers is equally astonishing.

Fortunately for migrants, two “fixed and established” factors conspire to facilitate escapes. First, the routines and traditions of kidnappers produce opportunities for the liberation of migrants. As the behavior of captors becomes patterned around a daily routine, victims begin to intuit opportunities. In particular, shift changes among the kidnappers and celebrations, which usually involve inebriated guards, provide the key moments for movement. Substance abuse, including both drugs and alcohol, is the norm in kidnapping gangs. For example, a Guatemalan man (Ixtepec, 4/15/11) described his escape during the festivities around the World Cup:

They kidnapped me, but I escaped during the World Cup. They took me to Medias Aguas [a town in Veracruz notorious for kidnappings] in a house. They tied my feet....I was going about begging [before the kidnapping]. I asked for a glass of water and a taco, and they said wait here. They came back and put a gun on me....They hit me and asked about my family. They put a gun to my head....They had me in a locked room, but I climbed out from the roof and I jumped. That’s how I hurt my leg. I asked God to give me the strength to go on.

During his escape, the kidnappers were drunk and watching the game.

Migrants capitalize on these routines and traditions, particularly the almost obligatory drunkenness that accompanies holidays and soccer tournaments. In the story of the desperate man from Honduras described in Chapter 3, Christmas celebrations, during which inebriated guards littered the safe house with empty bottles of alcohol, clued migrants into the behavior of kidnappers during holidays. Migrants then knew to expect similar informality and lack of surveillance on New Year’s Eve. Some migrants capitalize upon these predictable celebrations to make their escape. If the moment

feels right when the party begins and migrants do not lose their nerve, some of them improvise their way out of captivity.

Second, the physical architecture of the safe houses also determines the possibilities for escape. The building is not something that migrants can discern in advance of their capture, which is itself an unexpected event. In fact, the buildings themselves are improvisations by kidnappers. While doors can be locked, the drop sites are not dungeons designed with the expressed purpose of imprisoning people. They are houses built for voluntary occupation with windows and doors, and they are sometimes made of wood or flimsy materials, rather than stone or cement. In a key moment, when the guards' gaze has been diverted and manacles are lifted, migrants may peel away a wall or roofing material. They might sneak out a window. They might disappear into a bathroom and never come out. If they are lucky enough to be on the first floor of a two-story building, they might run away during a military raid on the drop house.

Thus, not surprisingly, escapes from drop houses are always conditioned by the built environment and physical constraints imposed on migrants. The fact that even the most organized and professional kidnappers use makeshift facilities for the containment of sometimes hundreds of victims produces some limited opportunities for resistance. Nevertheless, it is rarely "planned" resistance. Migrants devise only skeletal, short-term escape plans, sometimes only agreeing on a time to rebel or slip away. Crowded living conditions with strangers make coordination difficult and escape plans more likely to be discovered.

Of course, to make use of the key moments produced at the confluence of a fortunate turn of events and a gap in physical constraints, migrants must be escape *artists*. With great finesse, victims must watch and wait for an auspicious moment to rebel or sneak away from makeshift prisons. The intuitive sense of such opportunities is not a science. It takes gumption and cunning, as explained by a Honduran man (Coatzacoalcos, 6/1/11), remembering his success: “I am clever. I climbed out a window in the bathroom. The others were too scared to move. They didn’t want to come with me. Only I escaped.” Not everyone can imagine such a difficult maneuver. Key moments for these actions are produced by routines and traditions, but they may only be intuited in their time and place. Importantly, improvisation and inspiration does not end in captivity. Trafficking victims leverage tangible signs to resist.

Unlikely Vehicles

Tangible signs also identify or mark alternative forms of transportation. Ultimately, migrants move across terrain by whatever means necessary, often following the path of least resistance, which for the poorest migrants, means the least expensive transport: the train. Not coincidentally, the train has the highest imageability as a means of unauthorized migration. However, there are many other modes of travel available to those who have the means.

Journeys often involve a surprisingly diverse array of travel modes. Reports of travel by train, private car, bus, van, secret compartments in vehicles ranging from trucks hauling produce shipments to military transport moving soldiers, walking, ambulance rides, and bicycle are not uncommon. In one story, a woman began to praise God in song in earnest, quietly at first, afraid of annoying her smuggler. Slowly,

the entire travel group joined in, singing for spiritual strength as they travelled across terrain in a van. The smuggler turned around from the front seat and shouted, “What are you doing?” Startled, she explained her faith and need for solace. He thought for a moment, before responding, “That’s good. Keep singing. If we get pulled over, we will tell them we are a church group”. A new disguise was born. Indeed, neither migrants nor smugglers necessarily know how they will arrive in advance of the journey, and opportunities for travel emerge as people make accidental discoveries en route and then leverage them to their advantage.

In fact, methods of travel that would be utterly unimaginable to both migrants and smugglers before the journey reveal themselves along the way. For example, Mexican human rights activists have organized a series of protest caravans along the route. A caravan is an established part of the social movement repertoire in Mexico, drawing on the long tradition of Catholic processions, reenactments of Jesus’ burden of the cross during his crucifixion. These caravans for migrants’ rights follow the route north. During these events, groups of victims of criminal violence, students, family members of disappeared migrants, journalists, activists, priests and nuns, and shelter staff wave banners demanding justice for migrants and an end to the violence. Over bullhorns, they give testimony about the suffering they have endured. Cameras roll for documentaries. Priests perform Catholic mass. Journalists conduct interviews. Such events generally materialize in the aftermath of mass kidnappings and around Easter, when Catholic processions are common. The immediate purpose of these marches is to enhance communication among the migrant shelters, strengthen the growing transnational web of activists, and raise awareness of the plight of the train

riders. Ultimately, organizers intend to guarantee human rights protections and safe migration by calling on the both Mexican legislators and civil society to act.

However, these actions have, on a few occasions, also facilitated safe migration in a more concrete way. They have provided the social camouflage and political cover for unauthorized migrants to move north with the caravan. Migrants, learning of an impending action at a migrant shelter, may delay their departure to coincide with the protest. The protest provides social camouflage by mixing activists, journalists and students with migrants, and providing a context of contested nationality that complicates the usual cultural tells. Perhaps more importantly, the protest provides political cover for migrants moving north. In recent years, government authorities have not dared to intervene with unauthorized marchers, because it would likely provoke media outrage and condemnation by transnational rights networks. Thus, a small handful of migrants have sometimes found themselves travelling north in a very unexpected fashion: as political protestors.

For example, for the protest in January 2011, the Governor of Chiapas personally provided a fleet of vans to transport hundreds of protestors on their march north from Arriaga to Ixtepec, including around 75 unauthorized migrants, to demonstrate his unwavering commitment to human rights (Frank-Vitale 2011, p.83). Thus, 75 unauthorized migrants not only found themselves moving north openly, but also officially escorted by the governor himself. Years of organized political contestation by activists made this unlikely vehicle for unauthorized migration possible (p.83). However, migrants must seize upon such rare opportunities, and not just protests, without hesitation or miss them entirely. And participation in these

events is not without risk, because it destroys anonymity. Indeed, one migrant who had participated in the protest was killed shortly thereafter.

From Public Images to Tangible Signs

These improvisations, supple manipulations of material and symbolic resources along the route, require inspiration. Put another way, improvisation requires the capacity to read and respond intuitively to the subtle signals of experience. To recognize the right moment for an escape, migrants must be acutely aware of their surroundings. They must also locate a window, whether a metaphorical window of opportunity or a literal opening in the wall. To seize upon a surprising means of transportation, they must be open to opportunities as they experience them. Improvisation relies on tangible signs. The experience of these signs can transform both geographical orientation and social identity en route, and they often represent the culmination of lived events and faith-based interpretation.¹⁰⁵

In other words, public images must be *experienced*, removed from the abstract hypothetical and confronted in the flesh with perception, sensation and emotion. Otherwise, there is no conversion of imagery into the signs that change migrant behavior. Signs can bring moral clarity, as well as tactical improvisation. The most important “signs” indicate the right path to follow, which is also a righteous one, but they cannot be understood (or even seen) in advance of the journey. Migrants stumble upon signs along the way. Many migrants feel they arrive at a better understanding of

¹⁰⁵ As explained by Lynch (1960, p.131): “The creation of the environmental image is a two-way process between observer and observed. What he sees is based on exterior form, but how he interprets and organizes this, and how he directs his attention, in turn affects what he sees. The human organism is highly adaptable and flexible, and different groups may have widely different images of the same outer reality.”

God's will through the experience of material reality and their immediate needs. Even the minority of Central American migrants who does not explicitly embrace Christianity along the route felt an analogous sense of fate when confronted with the uncertainty and danger of their journey. Whether devising unlikely transport or escaping the calamity of captivity, the need to recognize signs, rather than follow a premeditated course, makes sense for migrants navigating the unknown and coping with the unexpected.

Saber and Conocer

The Spanish language provides a useful tool for understanding the type of knowledge necessary for understanding these signs. As a derivative from Latin, it offers a distinction that has been curiously lost in English: *saber* vs. *conocer*.¹⁰⁶ On the one hand, "Conocer" is *to know through familiarity*; the experience of a person, place, thing or practice is necessary for this knowledge. It is an experiential knowledge. On the other hand, "saber" should be translated as *to know of or about* a person, place, thing or practice in the abstract; no experience is implied. Migrants almost universally stress this distinction in their interviews, using the contrast between knowing as 'saber' and knowing as 'conocer' to describe their difficulty in forming clear expectations and planning a journey. You simply must experience the route, to understand it.

In interviews, the dialogue shifted between the two types of knowledge. Though it bears some similarities, the distinction that migrants make with the shift

¹⁰⁶ Bertrand Russell (1911) famously points to this linguistic structure, inherent in Latin, Greek, German (*wissen* and *kennen*) and French (*savoir* and *connaître*), to differentiate between 'knowledge by acquaintance' and 'knowledge by description'.

between saber and conocer is more refined than crude concepts of ‘book smarts’ and ‘street smarts’, which imply that an individual might accumulate know-how. Under conditions of uncertainty, the human capital of ‘street smarts’, however useful, has its limits; it may expire without warning. Instead, migrants echo what Elaine Scarry (1985) calls “the fact of pain’s inexpressibility.” Until violence and suffering en route happened to them, they could not fathom the true meaning of the consequences of migration. Even if they were well informed about the risks in advance, they did not *know* the danger. Outside of the moment of suffering, that level of understanding is inaccessible. It has to happen to you first.

Of course, suffering is not the only inexpressible moment. People know other people through face-to-face acquaintance. They also know joy, and they come to recognize opportunities through their experience of them. Street smarts, a well-honed talent for making these recognitions in a particular cultural setting, does not hurt survival chances. But it is insufficient under conditions of uncertainty. Migrants do not know the way forward until they engage with the circumstances that produce opportunity. They must experience all the emotions and sense-making that those circumstances inspire before changing course.

Heraclitus’s River

The devout man with the bushy mustache had made a kindly impression on me. After meeting him, I hoped against the odds that I might hear from him again. It was an unlikely prospect, but I did encounter six migrants at multiple locations during my research. Before I left Mexico, I also received rumors about the whereabouts and activities of various migrants indefinitely moving along the route.

After my return to the U.S., I maintained contact with some Salvadoran families that span the United States and El Salvador. A handful of tech-savvy migrants also found me after their arrival in the United States. So, it was possible that I would see or hear from the Guatemalan again. Alas, years passed and I never received any communication from him or the vast majority of the people I met en route.

Dynamic conditions and the obscurities of anonymity along the route complicate the view of an ethnographer as much as that of migrants. Put simply, the route, as I knew it during fieldwork, had changed even before my own act had come to a close. Thus, I could not predict the likelihood of success or failure of the earnest Guatemalan man, and I still wonder about his fate. Whatever ultimately happened to him, the possibility of violence haunted his journey. The testimonials of kidnapping victims remind us that the information provided by the material infrastructure of the route cuts two ways. Ironically, migrants read the artifacts of sustained migration to orient their journey, but these same artifacts can betray their location. The utility of information about the route is fleeting and unpredictable.

The material infrastructure of the route generates a human security paradox. If migrants can learn by moving along this terrain, so can the authorities and criminals that hunt them. Oases draw predators. The combination of the routes' "hidden but known" qualities produces a geographic vulnerability to criminal violence (Coutin 2005, p.197; Coutin 2007, p.105): a predictable place to prey upon people in the shallows of the law. When migrants can travel among citizens, they share in the (highly imperfect, but relatively strong) security guaranteed to citizens. However, migrants and some smugglers continue to follow the clandestine terrain of the route,

moving amid a critical mass of unauthorized travelers, because they lack the information or financial resources to navigate in the open.

Thus, the practiced terrain of the route provides both a resource and a danger for migrants. As information condenses in material form around the transit political economy and landscape of the route, it becomes visible to a variety of strategic actors. For this reason, the unauthorized flow of people can be aptly described by Heraclitus's famous metaphor of a river that can never be stepped in twice. The sedimentation of material practice paradoxically erodes the utility of the information it deposits along the route; as a result of strategic interaction between migrants and criminals, the most tried and tested places of passage potentially become the most insecure. As a consequence, uncertainty flourishes along the banks of a sustained flood of migrants. The train tracks, the isolated mountain and desert trails, the chain of migrant shelters, and the transit towns through Mexico become violent places. Every journey, like each footfall in Herclitus's ever-changing current, is unique.

Conclusion

The landscape of the route changes with the passage of people. At the same time, it signals a way forward. The rules for reading those signals are never fixed. Migrants do not know if violent actors lay in ambush along the trail. Mexican locals also learn to read the socio-economic landscape of unceasing transit, orienting their economic activities to the wanderers in their midst, but in so doing, risking the wrath of state authorities.

Indeed, Homer warns of the potential dangers of hospitality when Odysseus inadvertently draws the wrath of the Gods upon his Phaeacian hosts.¹⁰⁷ The assistance they provide the stranded stranger provokes the Gods to “pile a huge mountain around their port”, thereby preventing the Phaeacians from assisting future wanderers who stumble upon their civilization. The Phaeacians had read the rules incorrectly, and the fabled Odysseus accidentally closes the route for the sailors that follow his course, leaving behind a material landscape suddenly and irrevocably altered in his wake.

Early adventurers inscribed their odysseys into the physical terrain, not through the provocation of Gods, but by the simple fact of their travel. Sailors skirted unknown coasts, trading or stealing foreign goods when they made landfall, unintentionally leaving archaeologists with a rich record of their voyages. By the dawn of the medieval period, roving vagabonds, prophets and shepherds circulated great distances by land, carving dirt paths into the hillsides with their frequent footsteps (Braudel 1995[1966], p.47). A material infrastructure for maritime and land commerce formed around these popular routes, facilitating opportunities for trade and cultural change (Braduel 1995 [1966]). The valuable artifacts they transported along these routes

¹⁰⁷ Bernard Knox (1996, p.44) explains the significance of this Phaeacian anecdote in Homer’s epic: “This is the end of the great Phaeacian tradition of hospitality and help for the stranger and wayfarer. This action of Zeus casts a disturbing light on the relation between human ideals and divine conduct. If there is one stable moral criterion in the world of the *Odyssey*, it is the care taken by the powerful and well-to-do of strangers, wanderers and beggars. This code of hospitality is the one universally recognized morality...Of all the many hosts measured by this moral standard, the Phaeacians stand out as the most generous, not only in their regal entertainment of Odysseus, but also in their speedy conveyance of the hero to his own home, a service they provide for all wayfarers who reach their shore. And now they are punished by the gods for precisely this reason...”

became clues about how and where to travel for the next generation of migrants.¹⁰⁸

The Mediterranean landscape itself tells their stories.

Today, the North American landscape tells the stories of the Central American migrants who move across it. They navigate this landscape with the material clues that they encounter. These clues orient them geographically and provide the props for social performances en route. By analyzing migration practice in detail, emphasizing the interplay between migrants' faith and the physicality of the journey, this chapter probes the interaction of the material and symbolic dimensions of the route. I have given an ethnographic account of practiced terrain, examining how migrants read and respond to their surroundings. The social and material landscape of the route is a product of the strategic practice that it conditions, and the reliability of the messages it provides travelers is always problematic. Migrants must navigate this uncertainty with

¹⁰⁸ These artifacts are more durable than the breadcrumbs of children's fables. Jeffrey Bentley (1993, p.41) notes an example of the transmission of information by traded objects along global routes around the ancient world; around 128 B.C. Han ambassador Zhang Qian deduced the existence of a safer route through India after observing Chinese products for sale in Bactria. In Bentley's analysis, the desire for trade largely drives social conversion along routes established for economic exchange. In contrast, Mary W. Helms (1988) emphasizes how intellectual, social and religious motives have driven trade in foreign objects and travel throughout human history, giving rise to trade routes over time. She argues that travel has long been a rite of passage for religious elites: "Travel is fun; travel is exciting, often dangerous; travel provides tactical or esoteric knowledge, valuable experience, and a variety of material goods. Travel also can give a measure of individual freedom and of personal renown. In addition, the experiences of travel can place the traveler in a peculiar position or endow him with a different aura or status not only while he is adventuring but when he returns home" (p.78-79). Like the tourist trinkets in circulation today, the tangible objects transported along ancient routes were valuable as curiosities and visible representations of the prestige of well-travelled people. A key difference between the ancient examples illustrated in Homer, Bentley and Helm's work and the contemporary context, perhaps, is the democratization of this rite to the masses that engage in unauthorized migration, rather than restricted to an economic, political or religious elite. Today, unauthorized migration routes are trade routes for labor and other goods, driven by both profit and social motives. They are travelled, not by kings and princes as in Homer's epic, but by the most marginalized workers in the global economy.

faith and experience, rather than relying solely on preexisting scripts and rehearsed scenes.

CHAPTER 8

LIBERALIZING ROUTES: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Introduction

And to no one- no man, no woman, not a soul-
Reveal that *you* are the wanderer home at last.
No, in silence you must bear a world of pain,
Subject yourself to the cruel abuse of men.

Homer's Iliad is the story of a reluctant adventurer, forced to leave his beautiful young wife and newborn son behind. The sequel, the Odyssey, narrates his difficult return home. In the Iliad, Odysseus attempts to avoid going to war. He feigns insanity at the approach of his sworn ally's messenger, but the ruse fails when Odysseus breaks character to save his infant son's life. In the Odyssey, we learn that our exiled champion struggles for twenty years to find his way back to the place from which war had torn him unwillingly. In that time, he silently bears a world of pain, but perseveres in his quest homeward. Even after he arrives in Ithaca, he is fated to roam again in penitence to Poseidon.

The story of contemporary Central American migration is more Odyssey than Iliad. More than three decades of personal, social and economic transformations along the transnational route animate contemporary Central American migration. Migrants, traveling a well-trod but increasingly unpredictable passage, tell stories of perpetual wandering and longing for a home, not a direct and glorious commute to the gates of Troy. Like Odysseus, these wanderers must suffer the cruel abuse of men in silence, outside the protection of the law. And like Odysseus, arrival does not necessarily imply

the end of their travails or travels. Buffeted by unexpected calamities on an indefinite journey, these migrants sometimes become permanent wanderers.

In this concluding chapter, I briefly point to the implications of this Homeric telling of Central American migration for contemporary liberalism. First, I provide a story to illustrate the argument of this conclusion. Second, I restate the argument of the dissertation, walking the reader through a review of the chapters. In so doing, I outline the process of information, imagination and improvisation that constitutes mobile knowledge, a concept that draws on the ancient Greek idea of *metis*. Third, I revisit the role of risk and uncertainty in the odyssey. Mobile knowledge is the means by which migrants navigate a world of risk *and* uncertainty, but this learning process also produces social ambiguities that exacerbate uncertainty. It thereby complicates governance.

Finally, I argue that policymakers must acknowledge the baffling complexity and uncertainty of this transnational social reality. I argue that the simultaneous legal exclusion and de facto socio-economic inclusion of migrants along the routes through Mexico and the United States highlights the contradictions of liberalism, even when migrants are transient rather than settled. Whatever the merits of borders might be for national security, liberal domestic orders cannot be sustained with punitive and pervasive internal policing of transnational flows. The focus on the process of mobile knowledge and policing that unfolds along the unauthorized routes cutting *through* nation-states, as opposed to a myopic focus on the borders that divide them, challenges us to confront the very real human security crisis these contradictions helped to produce.

A Story of Impossible Return

Whenever a migrant along the route greeted me in perfect English, learned over the course of many years living in the United States, I was reminded of the long road home that Odysseus had to travel. These frequent encounters with English speakers underscore the illusory nature of boundaries between home, transit and destination in lived experience. Lived experience engenders cultural hybridity. Indefinite journeys, which migrants sometimes undertake without real hope of settling in the United States, complicate the very idea of destination (Coutin 2005). Somewhere along the way, home, abroad and in-between become confused. On my last night in the shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca, as I was preparing to travel homeward to Ithaca through the migrant shelters, I met a black Honduran woman who reinforced impression for me (6/30/10).¹⁰⁹ As I listened to her impeccable English, I was struck by the irony that we were both trying to go home. Her adventure was an Odyssey of impossible return, not an Iliad of departure.

Her gently graying hair had been styled into a crew cut and a baggy shirt concealed her breasts. If not for her voice, I would have assumed she was a thickly built man. She had the kind of smile that always seemed to be winking at you, and I liked her immediately. She had lived in the United States most of her life. As a young girl, she had tired of her dependence on her younger sister's translation from Spanish to express herself in public. For this reason, she had forced herself to learn English well enough to rival any native speaker. When we met that night in the migrant shelter, her mother, sister, and whole family were still in the United States. She alone had lost her legal

¹⁰⁹ I chose her story of many similar stories of people returning home to the United States, because it was a moment of inspiration for me personally, bringing the similar stories into focus.

residency and had been deported to Honduras after “a few” drunk-driving incidents. She told me all this with a smile.

Of course, the smiling woman’s family did not understand the violence unfolding along the route, and she was not going to tell them; “They would worry so much. They know nothing about this.” Her mother did not know that she had been robbed and abandoned. The smiling woman had paid a hundred quetzals, about thirteen dollars, to cross the Guatemala-Mexico border with a woman in a taxi without inspection. This low-budget female coyote took her to Puerto Madero, Chiapas and introduced her to people with a boat. The smiling woman paid them to take her to Puerto Escondido, Oaxaca. About ten other people rode on a small boat with her. They were from all over Latin America, even a few people from Brazil. The boat encountered a storm and big surf, before the captain dropped them on a beach that he proclaimed to be Puerto Escondido. The migrants disembarked the little boat in the rain, but found themselves stranded on a desert island. The smiling woman laughed incredulously while telling the story, “Can you believe that? I was left on a desert island in Mexico! I would have never guessed. I was on an island in the ocean! There weren’t even trees. It was just sand.” For the smiling woman, this utterly implausible adventure belonged to the plot of a far-fetched television sitcom, not real life, and certainly not *her* life.

The island where the smugglers abandoned the migrants was small, and the migrants easily walked its circumference. Luckily, it was raining and they were able to collect rainwater to drink. But she had no food for several days. Finally, some fishermen rescued them; “You should have *seen* the looks on their faces.” The fishermen informed the migrants that they were still only a few miles north of the border: “We didn’t even make

it out of Chiapas! And they had collected 3000 pesos [approximately \$240 dollars] from each of us. That's a lot of money. I think they drop people on that island."

The loss of her spending cash had been difficult. The smiling woman had her U.S. credit card with her, but it did not help. She had been shocked to discover that, "These tiny little towns don't have ATMs! There aren't banks!" As she shouted this, I hushed her and hastily explained the danger of boasting about owning a credit card or bank account.¹¹⁰ Ever more alarmed by her apparent unfamiliarity with the ways of the road and her obvious foreignness in rural Latin America, I asked her how she managed to find the shelter. The smiling woman explained that some other migrants told her about the shelter in Arriaga, Chiapas, and she followed them there, where she learned about the train.

The experience of the train had been no less surreal than the desert island. She saw people clambering to the top of the boxcars, and she saw one of them fall. There was a big group of Guatemalans with a smuggler, "...and they scurried up there like monkeys. There weren't even ladders all the way to the top." She could not fathom how they did it. The tops of the cars were slippery, and she was too scared to climb up. Instead, she found a place wedged below, between two boxcars. She had just a tiny ledge, and she had to hold on for dear life. She tried to tie herself to the train with a belt. She was shaken the

¹¹⁰ During my fieldwork, I generally assumed that migrants knew the dangers and the route better than I did, and as a result, I did not directly answer many questions about the safety of the route. As a shelter volunteer, I would sometimes provide information that I could obtain online about migrants' legal rights. More than once, I printed out information about asylum, and on another occasion, provided a map of the train route. I often provided contact information for the Catholic priest, and encouraged vulnerable people to speak to him directly. However, in this case and a few others, I felt there was an ethical imperative to intervene with some limited safety advice in the context of the interview. I recognized that any advice could be expired by the time I gave it, and I provided this disclaimer.

whole time by the vibrations of the train. At this point in the conversation, she demonstrated how she sat, with her hands up, holding onto some bars overhead. She even fell asleep that way, because she was so tired: “It was 12 hours in that position!” Another migrant would shout at her, “Don’t fall asleep! You’ll fall!” And she would wake up.

From Ixtepec, where I met her, she wanted to go to Tijuana, Baja California on the U.S. border. From there, she expected that she would try to enter with her (now obsolete) green card. She had heard a rumor that it would take six months for her loss of the green card to get into the U.S. Border Patrol’s computer. I doubted whether her passport and green card were likely to survive the journey, and I warned her that it sounded like a fool’s errand. Because she seemed so unschooled in Central American and Mexican street life, I encouraged her to consult the shelter priest about safety precautions.

However, it was clear that she did not necessarily think her plan would work, and I had the impression that she was still searching for a better idea. What else was she going to do? Nobody in her family knew about contemporary dangers or maintained contacts with smugglers. They had all lived in the United States legally so long that their information about the journey had expired. She had devised this idea on her own. She would try to pass as a legal resident. In an important sense, she was impersonating her past self.

Remembering the smiling woman as I write this dissertation, I can easily imagine that her odyssey took her to many other unexpected places on a winding and uncertain path, though I am unsure whether she ever returned “home.”

The most desperate migrants are become transnational vagabonds across Central America, Mexico and the United States. In “transit”, they sometimes become uncertain about the distinction between home and passage; their destination may not be clear to

themselves. And because of harsh socio-economic realities in their birthplace, they become vagabonds long before they ever embark on the migrant road. Because of harsh legal realities and mass deportations in their adopted countries, they may be forced to lead vagabond lives long after they have arrived.

Across Central America, nation-states have not provided the basic physical stability that, in an important sense, defines home. Whether they make the journey or not, many Central Americans are, in an important sense, strangers to community life. Under long-term conditions of scarcity and insecurity, envy and rumor have taken root, expelling people onto the routes without communal resources. A cycle of poverty, insecurity and lack of upward mobility make Central Americans outcasts in their own societies.¹¹¹ For this reason, the Catholic Church has openly expounded a conditional right to migrate, a right based in the fact of Central American governments' failure to provide a homeland (Hagan 2008).

The pioneers of Central American migration, like the smiling woman I met in Ixtepec who had first gone to the United States decades ago, were unwillingly torn from their birthplace by violence and economic turmoil. Deportees travel the unauthorized routes in desperation. Citizenship may officially mark them as Salvadoran, Honduran or Guatemalan, but their families, jobs and lifestyle reveals a de-facto membership in a transnational society of the Americas. Their odysseys have produced a mismatch between their place of legal domicile (Central America), their physical location (in transit through

¹¹¹ Juan Gonzalez (2011) persuasively argues that these political, social and economic conditions that push migrants from Latin America are themselves a product of U.S. foreign policy in the region, a "harvest of empire."

Mexico) and the place where they feel they belong, or at least, where they feel they might have the opportunity to build a home (the United States).

As they struggle to find a home, some migrants accumulate days, months and even years stranded in perpetual transit through Mexico. These people become embedded in relationships and practices along the route from Central America through Mexico and the United States. Transnational sojourners transcend easy dichotomies between citizens and foreigners, settlers and migrants. Their fluid stories complicate the demarcation of distinct spaces of 'home', 'transit' and 'destination'. They improvise new directions, shaping these spaces in their odyssey. This personal transformation is mirrored by a broader social transformation, as the improvisations of migrants reinvent cultural scripts and reorient the economy in societies of transit. Sustained human movement sweeps citizens and foreigners, settlers and migrants, into its domain. It spawns new practices and relationships, diversifying the social space of the route, generating new associations, and thereby creating new challenges for the states that would seek to impede these flows. In uncertain times, the continuity of these flows depends on the ceaseless cultural change described by this dissertation.

Summary of Argument

This dissertation examined how migrants cope with escalating policing and criminal violence in transit from Central America. The sustained practice of migration informs migrants' behavior along a dangerous route, not only through social networks, but by carving a transit political economy and transnational imaginary. I argued that migrant decisions are rational, but must be viewed as part of an experiential process of information-gathering, imagination and improvisation en route. Under conditions of

uncertainty, migration and vulnerability to violence in transit cannot be fully understood by focusing at the moment that migrants first decide to leave; we must travel the route with them to understand this ongoing learning. Once we travel the route, tracing the footsteps of migrants, we reveal a transnational social process that transforms foreigners and citizens alike.

Chapter 1 *Introducing the Migrant Odyssey* described the risky and uncertain nature of the violence that migrants must navigate as they cross Mexico. It explained that the migrant route was analogous to the ‘dark wine sea’ travelled by the Homeric hero. Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant (1975, p.222) describe the deep sea of the Ancient Greeks as uncertain:

In this chaotic expanse where every crossing resembles breaking through a region unknown and ever unrecognizable, pure movement reigns forever. Disturbed by the winds which blow across it and by the flux and reflux of the waves, the sea is the most mobile, changeable and polymorphic space.

Likewise, the Central American migration route through Mexico has become a mobile, changeable and polymorphic space. It is a transient region characterized by violence and strategic interaction between migrants, criminals and the state. Like the fickle flux and reflux of the waves, dangers en route change rapidly. Migrants shift their goals and loyalties without warning. Both the ancient sea and the contemporary unauthorized route are the natural home of a *metis*-like knowledge.

Chapter 2 *Theorizing Migration* embedded migration decisions in practice. Wise Odysseus and his equally crafty bride Penelope do not fall into a habit of hubris in the face of grave danger. Similarly, migrants freely admit that they cannot accurately predict the risks of the journey. For this reason, they are rational, but do not make rigid plans for

the journey. Under conditions of uncertainty, information cannot be stored and accumulated as 'social capital'. This chapter pointed instead to an experiential learning process, called mobile knowledge, through which migrants convert information with *imagination* and *improvisation* en route. In so doing, it explained the creativity of migrants.

Chapter 3 *A Veil of Brown and Gray* described, in greater depth, the polymorphic context in which this creativity emerges. It outlined the ambiguous and uncertain social structure of the journey, introducing the shape-shifting cast of criminals that confronts migrants along the route. By explicating the relationships between these actors, this chapter more clearly illustrated the bewildering complexity and fluidity that confronts migrants on their journey. For Central American migrants, like Odysseus, the dark path homeward is a potentially deadly contest with a variety of capricious characters.

Part two of the dissertation begins where I began the study: with expectations derived from conventional approaches to migration. To study how migrants respond to this uncertain social terrain, Chapter 4 *Informing Routes* asked: What do migrants know about the routes before the journey begins? And where does this knowledge come from? To answer these questions, I compared and contrasted two Salvadoran towns with different migration histories. Surprisingly, I found that my original expectations did not hold; useful informational resources did not accumulate in a town with a long migration history, relative to the town with a short migration history.

In fact, the high level of insecurity and distrust that characterizes these towns reinforces the Homeric allegory. In this fragmented social reality, social mechanisms imperfectly enforce smuggler-migrant contracts, and market reputation plays a less

significant role than the threat of retribution. Furthermore, while migrants in both towns were keenly aware of dangers, they lacked specific information that would guarantee a safe arrival, because “every trip is different”. Thus, the chapter provided a picture of the moral economy of local smuggling markets and the social networks that support it. In so doing, it presented null findings based on expectations derived from conventional approaches to migration.

Chapter 5 *Mapping Migration* explained the surprising findings of a mapmaking exercise conducted with Salvadoran migrants in these communities of origin. We might have expected maps written by migrants before and after their journey to exhibit the most vital geographical information for surviving the adventure. Furthermore, we might expect to see differences in maps from communities with these divergent migration histories. However, it is a shared and pervasive normative orientation of migration, not a geographic orientation, which looms most prominently in the illustrations.

Thus, this chapter began to sketch an alternative approach to understanding migration. It outlined a research method that parallels the migratory experience. It described over two years of fieldwork from rural villages in El Salvador through transit communities in Mexico and into the United States. It explained how I traced migration practice with a pragmatic mix of participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews, and mapping workshops with migrants. A juxtaposition of migrants’ maps against official maps of the routes illustrated the ‘mobile knowledge’ best accessed through ethnographic insight. Using images drawn by migrants in their maps of the route, as well as narratives from interviews and popular media, this chapter also

examined the relationship between the migrants' normative and geographical orientations to the journey.

Part three of the dissertation turns to how migrants navigate the route in practice. Given the dearth of specific, trustworthy information that might guarantee safe arrival, migrants must continually re-imagine the route and themselves during the journey, performing their own epic as they move across terrain. Chapter 6 *Imagining Routes* discussed how imagined categories become 'scripts', influencing social dynamics in the anonymous crowds that form along the route. At the same time, however, migrants subordinate social rules to new purposes. In other words, they improvise upon these scripts, and thereby re-imagine roles in the performance of migration. As they do so, they develop new goals, reinterpret their opportunities and encounter previously unknown constraints through the prism of their identity. Thus, this chapter explored how migrants navigate the social terrain of the route, reimagining nationality and gender in passage.

Of course, these violent odysseys are not an abstract exercise. They are flesh and blood trials through which migrants must pass. Migrants encounter objects, obstacles and visual clues, and they experience violence first hand. For this reason, in Chapter 7 *Improvising Routes*, I analyzed the material terrain of the route, examining how migrants leverage material resources in surprising ways, subordinating physical objects to new purposes. I asked: how do migrants take cues from their material environment as they travel the route?

Using participant observation and interview materials, I discussed the imageability of the route. In particular, the train route serves as a compass and the migrant shelter fulfills the role of an informational oasis for the poorest, most vulnerable migrants. However,

visible places also serve as focal points for criminal predators and police. Stalked by criminals and cops, migrants move across terrain with faith, searching for signs of divine will. In the process, they construct both the material and social reality of the route.

Risk and Uncertainty

Both extreme risk and uncertainty characterizes this material and social reality. The risks of the journey include frequent rapes, robberies, deportations, and even deaths. The dangers of the journey are legendary, but this violence may happen unexpectedly, in novel forms, and at the hands of trusted companions during the journey. Thus, migrants do not practice migration in a world of risk alone. In a social context of fluid relationships and continual improvisation on settled roles, the past cannot predict dangers for migrants.

What may not be a problem for a social science vantage point, produces an intractable issue for decisions made *in practice*. Unlike the intellectual world of the social scientist, the migrants' world is uncertain, as well as risky. As Frank H. Knight (1921, p.154) acknowledged, social scientists can reduce uncertainty by grouping instances into a category of events. While a researcher may move to a higher level of abstraction to make broader classifications and predictions about events, a migrant cannot do so without losing the utility of the question: which path should I take to get there? Moving away from the particular and toward the general undermines the utility of knowledge in practice. Migrants must assume that unknown unknowns lurk around each bend in the road; they must expect the unexpected.

Furthermore, the journey is unpredictable, because it is potentially *transformative*. As they move across the landscape and confront violence, migrants learn about themselves,

their desires, their fears and their goals. In this sense, the process of mobile knowledge transforms the journey into a pilgrimage; it becomes an odyssey that reformulates identity en route. People change in surprising ways when confronted with novel, violent situations. Their destinations may change. Migrants cannot know about the experience until they have lived it, and they leverage mobile knowledge to navigate this risk and uncertainty. They use imagination and improvisation to conceal their identities, transform the social roles available to them, and discover new paths forward. They subvert expectations for their performances to their advantage. In so doing, they shape a new society in their wake.

Migrants are not the only people who participate in this transformative process. As they interact with citizens along the route, mobile knowledge cannot be contained. A larger social conversion unfolds, as transnational routes become transmission belts for newly improvised practices and roles (Bentley 1993, p.22-23). As a result of the possibility for surprising personal and social transformations, the route becomes an increasingly ambiguous place. Possibilities for concealment and betrayal complicate trust and render the behavior of travel companions unpredictable. Local communities both trade with and prey upon the transients in their midst, producing uncertain loyalties among migrants and citizens alike. Under the constant barrage of new faces and intensifying violence along the route, the social roles and relationships that underpin both settlement and migration become unmoored.

The combination of risk and uncertainty forcefully calls mobile knowledge into being. Risk alone does not require mobile knowledge to navigate. Under purely risky conditions, people may judge future events with some sense of reliability and make more

definite plans. Nor does pure uncertainty require mobile knowledge to navigate, because the stakes may be low and luck may be played without peril. However, a world of risk *and* uncertainty is a world of imagination and improvisation, not only information.

Implications for Liberalism

Any inalterable plan for traveling across an uncertain terrain would be foolhardy. Furthermore, rigid top-down policies aimed at controlling territory have proven to be equally foolhardy (Scott 1998). Everyday people have responded to these policies by improvising upon social scripts and re-imagining roles. The mobile knowledge inherent in this imagination and improvisation blurs the real-world distinctions between citizen/foreigner and settler/transient upon which liberal justifications for sovereign borders rest.¹¹² In other words, mobile knowledge produces hybridity, giving rise to new and unpredictable cultural re-combinations that subvert imagined communities. This ambiguity destabilizes the dichotomies that organize the liberal conceptual map and complicate liberal governance. These complications recall our attention to the unresolved “liberal paradox” that James F. Hollifield (2004, p.885) identifies as the clash between sovereign borders and liberal ideals of global socio-economic integration and universal rights.

As this dissertation makes clear, this paradox between national sovereignty and liberalism is not restricted to the border. Research on smuggling and unauthorized migration usually focuses on borders as the primary site of policing and danger for migrants (e.g. Andreas 2000; Cornelius 2001; Cornelius 2007; Dunn 1996; Eschbach et

¹¹² This dissertation also hints at the impact of mobile knowledge on related dualities, such as state/society, domestic/international, public/private, markets/violence, legal/illegal, victim/perpetrator and local/global.

al. 1999; Heyman 1999). However, as uncertainty and risk increase, the route meanders. Growing numbers of people have become transnational wanderers with only transitory destinations within the global south, vulnerable to a variety of abuses (Cave 2012).

This process is not limited to the Americas. It is a challenge to a global society of liberal states that have implemented heavy-handed restrictions on transnational flows. For example, Michael Collyer (2007; 2010) similarly describes how policing has generated increasingly “fragmented journeys” for migrants in transit to Europe. In that context, academics have begun to document the relationship between intensified policing and physical dangers (not limited to violence) to migrants at the borders of the European continent (Carling 2007; Spijkerboer 2007; Grant 2011).¹¹³ Medecins sans Frontieres (MSF) has documented a rise in Sub-Saharan migrant injury from criminal violence along routes through Morocco to Europe (2005; 2010a), including a special report on sexual violence suffered by these migrants (2010b). Collyer (2007) links this criminal violence to a de-facto bilateralism in the European-Moroccan relationship, which led to a “spatial reconfiguration of migration control”: augmented patrols within Moroccan territory as well as at the borders (p.671-673).¹¹⁴ As a result, transit spaces became increasingly violent places (Collyer 2007; Hess 2010).

In this global context of intensified migration enforcement and violence within transit states, the impact of borders is not restricted to the territorial margins of nation-states. The new migration enforcement strategy targets the arteries of the migration system as it

¹¹³ For a review of the burgeoning literature on transit migration and the ‘new’ geography of migration in the European context, see Collyer, Duvell and de Haas (2010).

¹¹⁴ At this time, there is a richer interdisciplinary literature on transit migration into Europe than is available in the United States. Interestingly, Sabine Hess (2010) traces this interest in ‘transit migration’ and migratory routes into Europe to studies commissioned by the IOM on Turkey in the context of EU-expansion debates.

crisscrosses the heartlands of nation-states, not just their frontiers: federal governments confer border enforcement authority upon local and state police, encourage information sharing and cooperation between law enforcement agencies for these tasks, require identity verifications for employment and services, conduct immigration and drug raids within their territory, establish internal inspection checkpoints (many miles away from the border along major highways and at major domestic transit hubs: bus stops, train stations, etc), extend roving areas where border control agents may function, and increase criminal penalties for both smugglers and migrants.¹¹⁵ Legal residents face deportation for non-violent crimes. Etienne Balibar (2004, p.109) eloquently summarizes these changes:

Sometimes noisily and sometimes sneakily, borders have changed place. Whereas traditionally, and in conformity with both their juridical definition and ‘cartographical’ representation as incorporated in national memory, they should be at the edge of the territory, marking the point where it ends, it seems that borders and the institutional practices corresponding to them have been transported into the middle of political space. They can no longer function as simple edges, external limits of democracy that the mass of citizens can see as a barrier protecting their rights and lives without ever really interfering with them.

Of course, the edges of citizenship have never really been defined in practice (Bosniak 2006, p.4). Despite the essentialist rhetoric of fixity necessary to construct the ‘imagined community’, nation-states have always been porous entities born from common ‘pilgrimages’ (Anderson 2006, pgs. 53-58; Greenblatt 2010, pgs. 1-23).

¹¹⁵ Here, I am describing the situation in the Americas. Balibar (2004, p.111) explains a similar transition in Europe: “...there is another aspect that has been forced on our attention by the problems relative to the treatment of asylum seekers and the modalities of control of so-called clandestine immigrants in Western Europe, which pose serious problems for the protection and institution of human rights: the system of identify verifications (generally occurring with the territory) allowing a triage of travelers admitted to and rejected from a given national territory. For the mass of humans today, these are the most decisive borders, but they are no longer lines.”

‘Societal security’, defined by Ole Wæver (1993, p.23) as “the sustainability within acceptable conditions for evolution of traditional patterns of language, culture, association and religious national identity and custom”, has always been an appendage to that process of national mythmaking, never a reality. Long before ‘globalization’ became a buzzword, state survival depended on the capacity to harness transnational trade, capital and migratory (and as Stephen Greenblatt (2010) shows us, cultural) flows to their advantage.¹¹⁶ Even smuggling of ostensibly illegal goods has been manipulated by states for power and resources across history (Hibou 2004, p.352). Cultural and social changes have always accompanied both licit and illicit flows. As explained by Greenblatt’s (2010, p.6) manifesto for the study of cultural mobility, “the reality, for most of the past and come again for the present, is more about nomads than natives.”

Nevertheless, when the policing of transnational flows could be relegated to a peripheral border zone, away from the core constituency of the state, the dual fiction of liberal democratic governance that respects human security with controlled national boundaries could be better sustained. Moderating his earlier (1987) stance, which espoused the abolition of borders, Joseph Carens (2010), draws on the settler/transient distinction to negotiate this paradox. He argues that unauthorized migrants should be granted full rights if they lay down roots in an adopted country and have lived within that society for a period of time. Indeed, the extension of citizenship to migrants who have social ties in the United States would significantly diminish the necessity of clandestine travel for many of the most desperate and vulnerable people. However, along

¹¹⁶ In this vein, Rey Koslowski (2002) argues that human migration has long played a vital role in world politics, shaping the fate of states and the reach of empire since pre-modern civilization.

contemporary routes, the very notion of settlement has been so undermined that disentangling rooted migrants from transients becomes a difficult task. In this context, any threshold for settlement is arbitrary. As Linda Bosniak (2010, p.85) correctly points out, such a system potentially legitimates the same sort of permanent transience that the revolving deportation door currently perpetuates.

And what about the obligations of transit states to migrants? As citizens and migrants mingle, they become loosely linked by the shared practice that emanates from the routes. They need not be entrenched in reciprocal relationships or years within the United States to be integrated into this regional system. In an important sense, Central Americans have been integrated into the transit political economy and transnational imaginary long before they ever leave their birthplace. Where they might make a home is unclear from the beginning, and the boundaries of membership are too fluid for the state to mandate.

In this context, restrictions on the rights of aliens necessarily limit the freedoms of citizens (Caren 1987, p.253). After all, citizens and migrants engage in economic contracts and interact in a broader social context, and internal immigration policing limits their capacity to do so (p.253). Furthermore, when people are linked by practice, a deterioration of the human security of citizens who live along the routes coincides with the deterioration of the human security of migrants. For example, a Mexican community leader living along the unauthorized migratory route explains his opposition to a migrant refugee camp:

We are not xenophobes. We are tired of the authorities assuring that they are going to construct a definitive shelter and they do nothing. We are not against the migrants, but it's just that with them come organized criminals like Los Zetas or illegal traffickers (quoted in Chavez 2012).

Along a transnational route embedded in the transit society, migrants and citizens, settlers and transients, suffer together. As cultural tells and national distinctions become illusive, the restriction of territorial access to foreigners without the infringement upon citizen rights becomes impossible. Mobile knowledge moves, and communities are continuously re-imagined in the process. The markers and materials associated with nationality become diffused, corrupted and co-opted. Internal policing of sustained human migration applies arbitrary cultural markers to a brown and gray social reality. Consequently, race and gender, stereotypes of cultural difference used to profile suspected migrants and smugglers, re-emerge within the liberal polity. These illiberal categories thereby come to constitute citizenship in practice. Whatever the merits of external border enforcement might be, the boundaries between foreigners and citizens, settlers and migrants, cannot be impartially upheld along transnational routes through the interior of the nation-state. Because of its implications for citizens, let alone its implications for a universal valuation of all human beings, this heavy handed policing of transnational flows *within* transit and destination states cannot be justified in liberal democratic states.

Now that the state security apparatus recognizes the transnational clandestine routes that run through it and vigorously attempts to control them, the contradictions inherent in the dual fiction of liberal societies with closed borders have surfaced in the extreme form and frequency of violence, both legal and criminal, along the routes. The eruption of these contradictions, in the deaths and violence suffered by migrants, as well as the harassment of citizens by both citizens and officials along routes through Mexico and Morocco, represents a challenge for the delicate bargain between nation-states and

individuals. When migrant destination states, such as the United States and European countries, promote *internal* policing to their neighbors, such as Mexico and Morocco, they are exporting an illiberal politics.

Ultimately, this illiberal politics of migration control undermines both national and human security. Liberal scholars who defend migration policing sometimes justify their position by pointing to the Hobbesian reality of the international system (Cole 2000; e.g. Whelan 1988). Clearly, democratic states have a duty to protect their citizenry from dangerous global politics and guard against the dislocating effects of transnational flows. However, the illiberal politics that destination states export to transit states actually exacerbates the Hobbesian reality of the international system by undermining the possibility for democratic governance. The policing of transnational routes, as opposed to the policing of borders between countries, creates a Hobbesian-like reality within the domestic realm of the state. Perversely, and thanks to this internal policing, the borderlands now extend indefinitely across destination, transit and sending countries.

Of course, this violent restriction of transnational movement is not the only option for the governance of population flows in a global society. Phillip Cole (2000) examines the internal contradictions of closed-border liberal egalitarianism and its de facto acceptance of a Hobbesian view of sovereignty in the international system. Against the Hobbesian justification for migration policing, he argues that sovereign borders are not the only institution available to protect liberal orders. Instead, he points to the international human rights regime as a nascent alternative solution to democratic governments' legitimate need to cope with negative consequences of transnational flows (p188). Indeed, an invigorated international and transnational collaboration to safeguard the migrants' rights

and provide greater official access to global mobility would be a boon to the human security of migrants and citizens alike, as well as a liberal intervention on behalf of national security properly understood.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both migrants and citizens suffer from a mismatch between the lived reality of migration and the nation-state. As people make these uncertain journeys, the mobile knowledge they construct destabilizes social boundaries. On the one hand, Bosniak (2006, p.140) trenchantly argues that egalitarian inclusion is a worthy abstract ideal for which liberal societies must strive. Nevertheless, she recognizes that in practice, its fulfillment is complicated by inevitable contestation over internal boundaries of obligation and belonging, a chronic political destabilization (p.140).

On the other hand, national borders might be a worthy abstract ideal for those committed to their protection. Indeed, migrants themselves hope to escape from Central America across the U.S. border and into a realm of law and order, a realm with the promise of economic, emotional and physical security. In so far that the border shields the United States from harm, migrants want it to remain intact. They go to the United States, because it is different than, but connected to, their birthplace.

However, when that quest for sovereign and separate national worlds involves *internal* migration policing, it is inevitably complicated by ongoing the improvisation and imagination of everyday people. Migrants' perpetual movement along the route and their increasing vulnerability to intense forms of violence reveal the harm caused by state attempts to fix these boundaries *within*. In the United States and Mexico, the simultaneous social inclusion and legal exclusion of thousands of immigrants contributes

to the human security crisis along the unauthorized routes. A cycle of deportations, perpetual movement and desperation conspire to produce a permanent underclass of transnational homeless people, outcasts by law and made vulnerable by exclusion from it, but regionally integrated along a transnational route. In this way, the U.S. and Mexican governments fail to meet their obligations to both the citizen and the non-citizen members of their societies. These societies have become intertwined in practice, despite intensified immigration policing.

In contrast to this regional integration into a transit political economy and transnational imaginary, the continued failure to provide a semblance of national socio-economic integration and physical security for Salvadoran, Honduran and Guatemalan citizens in their birthplace undermines the value of citizenship in Central American countries. National regimes of inequality, corruption and disorder undermine the social contract. There is no home there. In this situation of permanent transience, the attempt to forcefully impose borders *within* states leads to an illiberal and violent socio-economic interdependence and the denial of basic rights to North Americans of every nationality.

From the Mediterranean to the Americas, Homer's ancient wisdom remains relevant for these violent and uncertain times. When Odysseus arrives in Ithaca, disguised as a beggar, the loyal swineherd Eumaeus takes him in, explaining that hospitality is a matter of divine obligation: "It's wrong, my friend, to send any stranger packing- even one who arrives in worse shape than you." As a boy, Eumaeus's own slave had conspired with foreign sailors to kidnap and traffic him into slavery; he thus intimately understands the ease with which anyone can become an outcast. Of course, there are risks to welcoming foreigners into your home, as the Phaeacians could testify. The good swineherd

undoubtedly recognizes the possibility that both friends and foe may travel in disguise. But Eumaeus also knows too well that the distance between citizen and slave is not far to travel. Because the Gods play unpredictable tricks with fate, he chooses to live by an egalitarian ethos. He grants Odysseus hospitality, and thereby unwittingly plays his role in the salvation of Ithaca.

Not unlike Odysseus and Eumaeus, migrants and citizens share precariousness along migratory routes. Mobile knowledge transcends boundaries, generates social ambiguity, and complicates policing. Governments along these routes cannot guarantee the most basic rights of citizens without including migrants, let alone live up to a utopian egalitarian standard of respect for universal rights for all mankind. For this reason, it is time for policy makers and civil society groups across the globe to take Eurmaeus' admonishment seriously. Acknowledge the lived reality of migration and guarantee hospitality to transnational wanderers. Allow them to find a home without bearing a world of pain in secrecy.

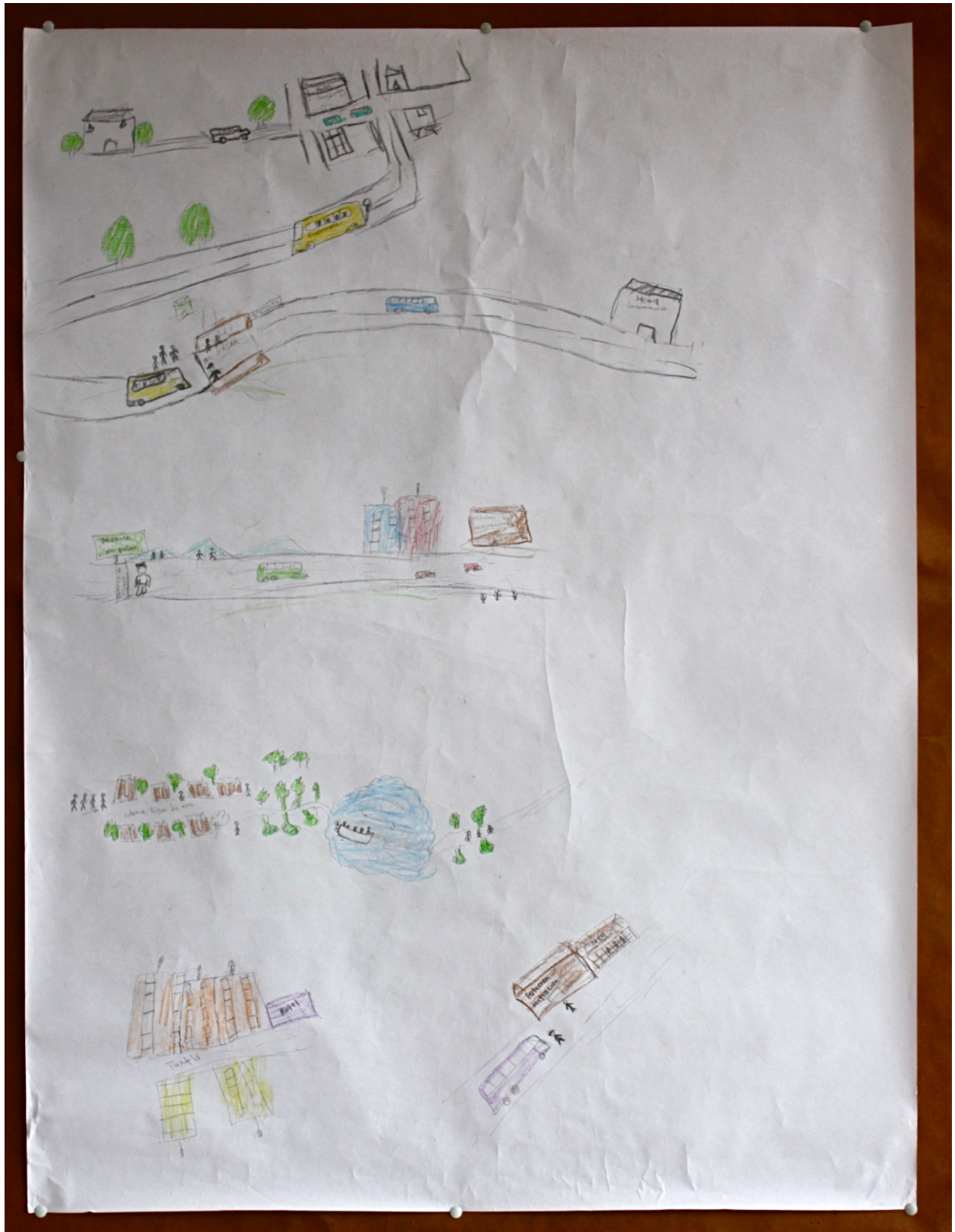
APPENDIX

The full set of twenty-two untitled, uncaptioned migrant maps follows this page, each given its own page for display. Unfortunately, some of the finer details have been lost in the digitization of these maps, an issue to be resolved for future publications.

Water damage and mud on some of the maps is the result of a flash flood that struck my home during fieldwork, where the maps had been stored temporarily. No one was killed in the flood, but several neighbors lost homes and automobiles. The damages to these historical documents remind the reader of the precariousness of life in rural El Salvador. While the original copies of a few of the maps have been restored by a professional paper conservator, I have left the mud in the images for this reason.

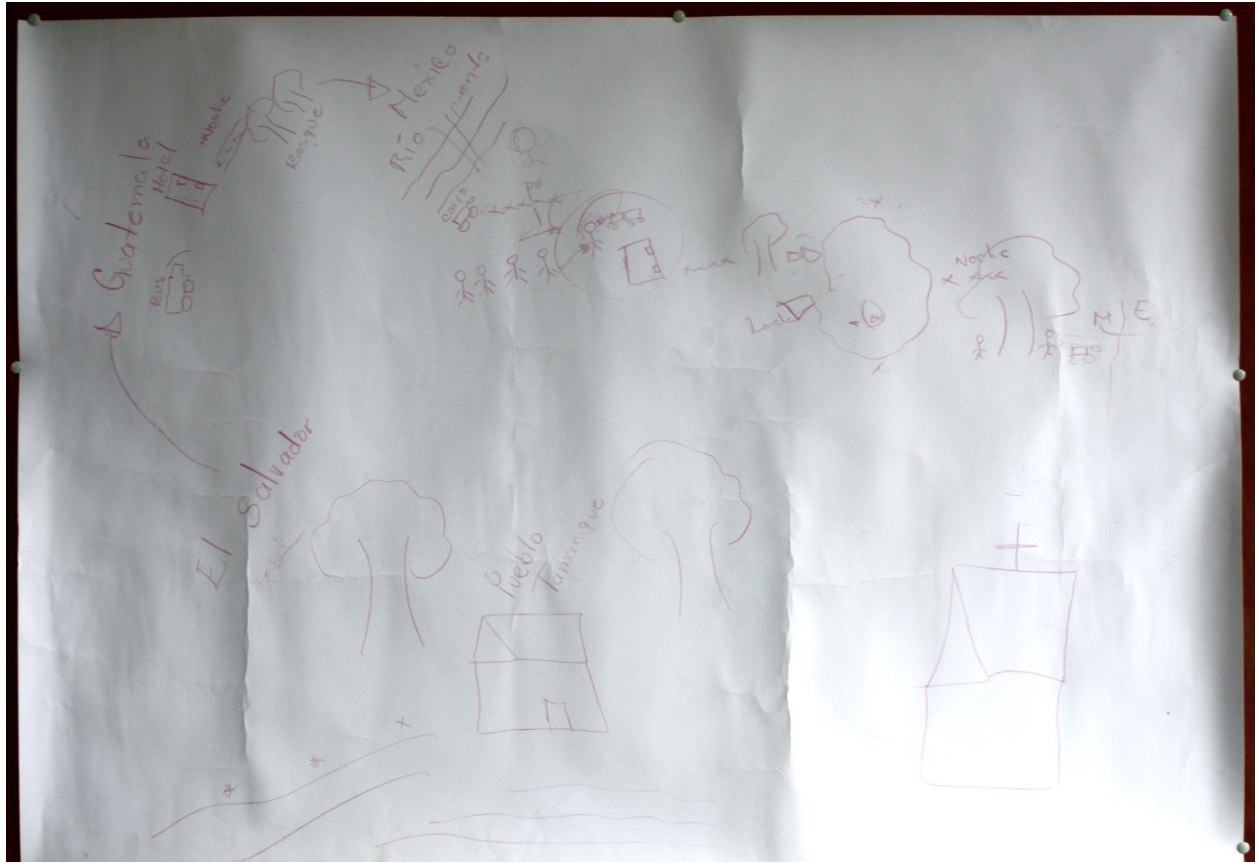
All maps are available for viewing upon request. These maps and their accompanying narratives will be made available on a website at a later date.

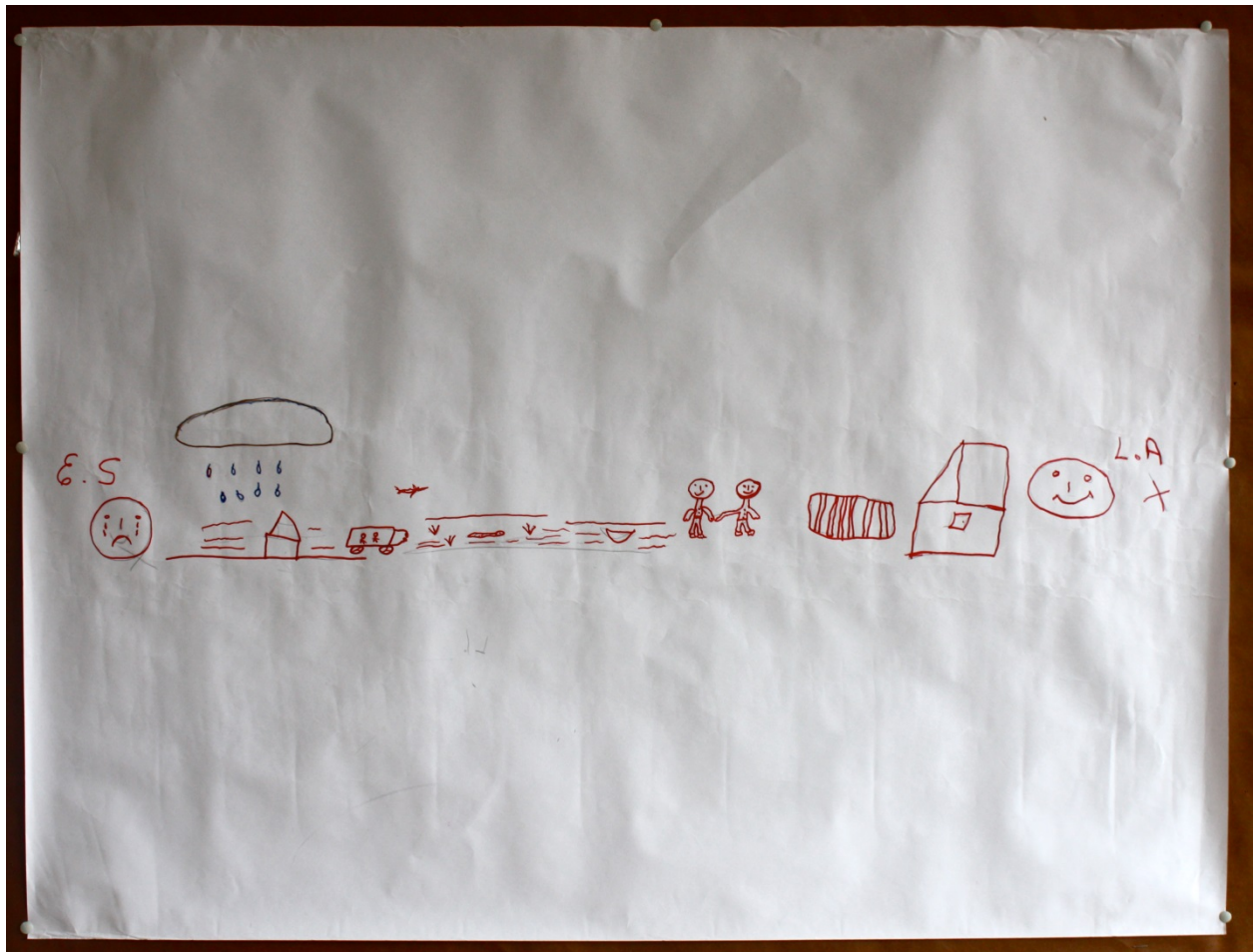


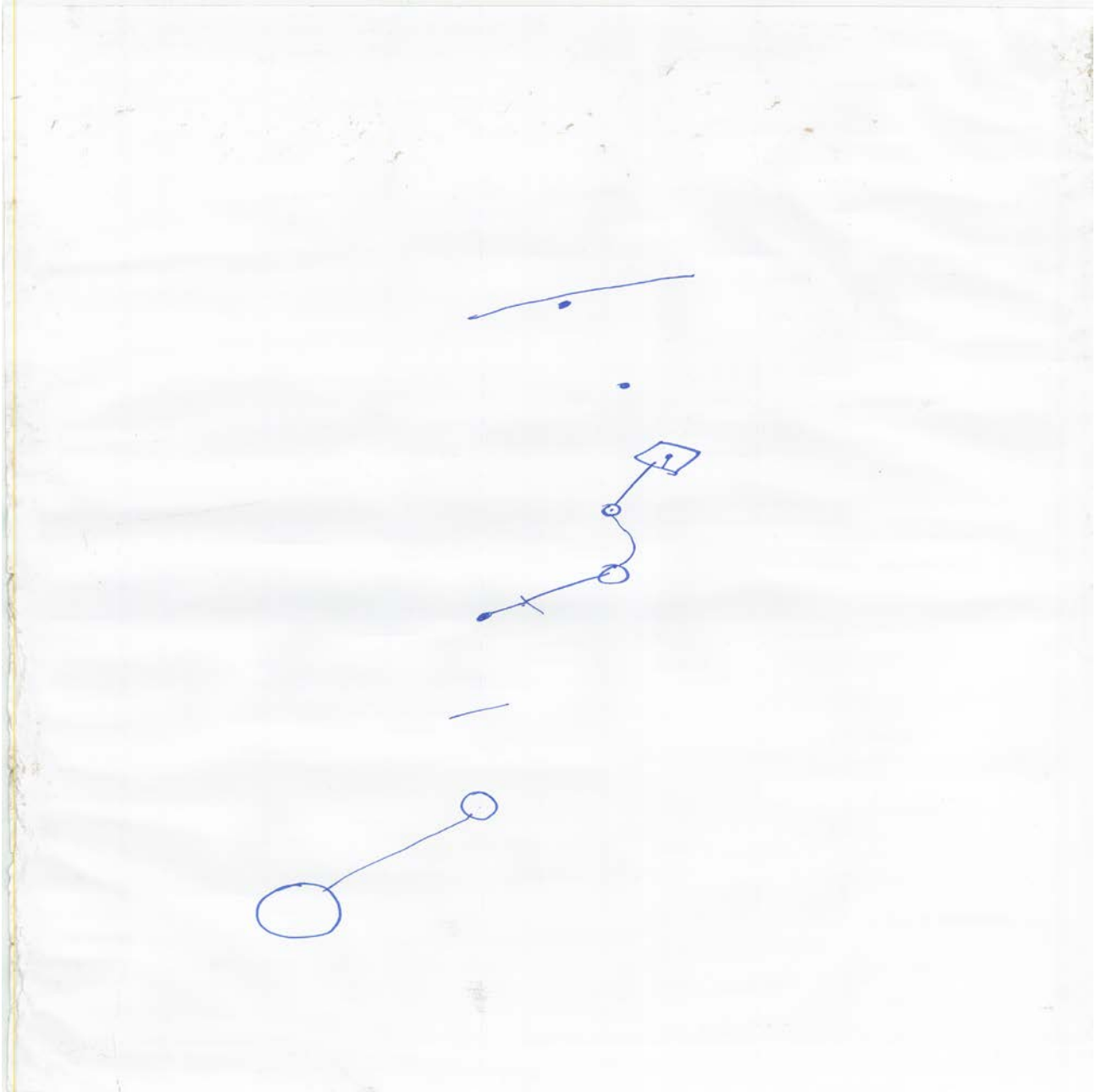


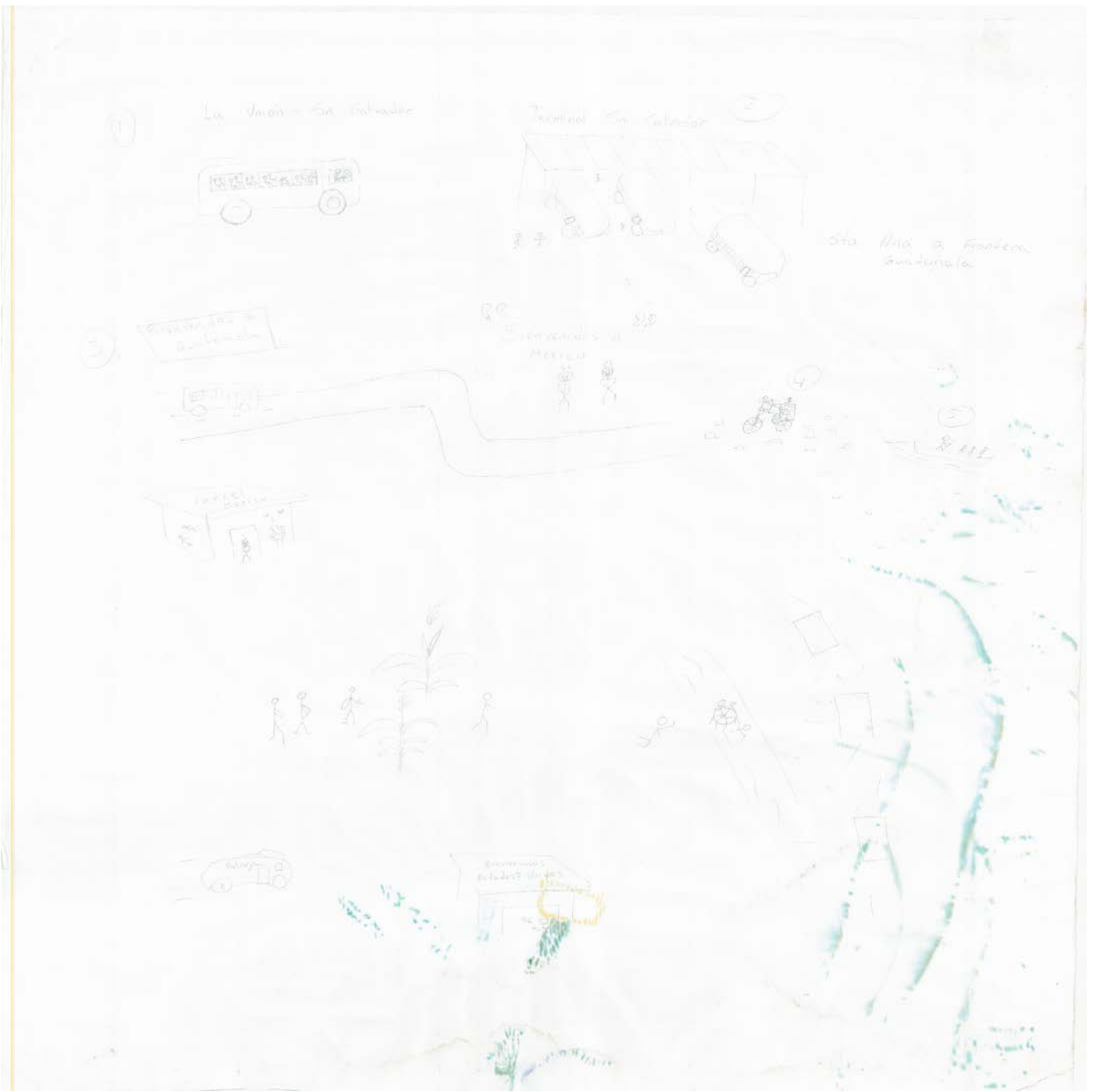


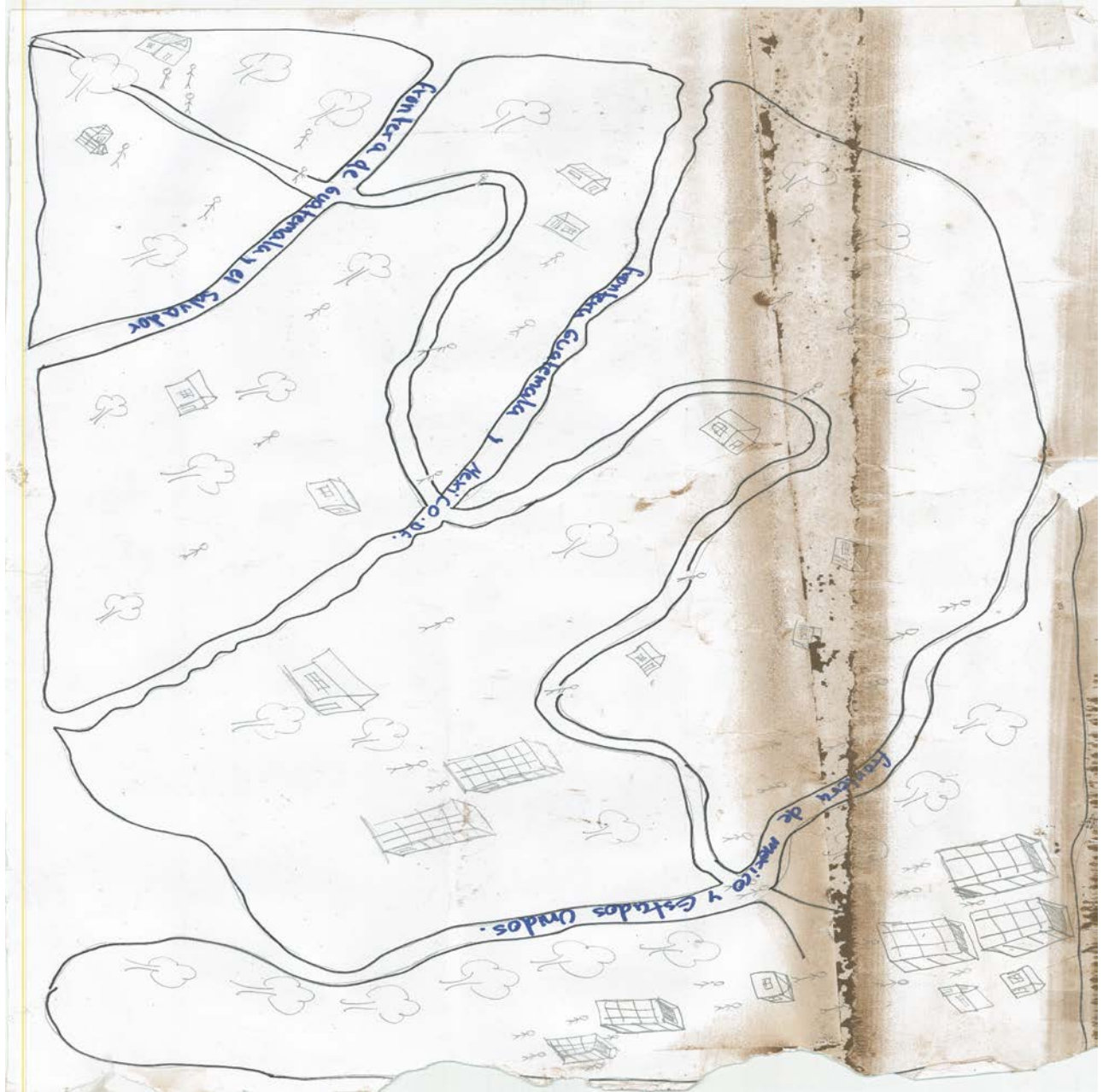


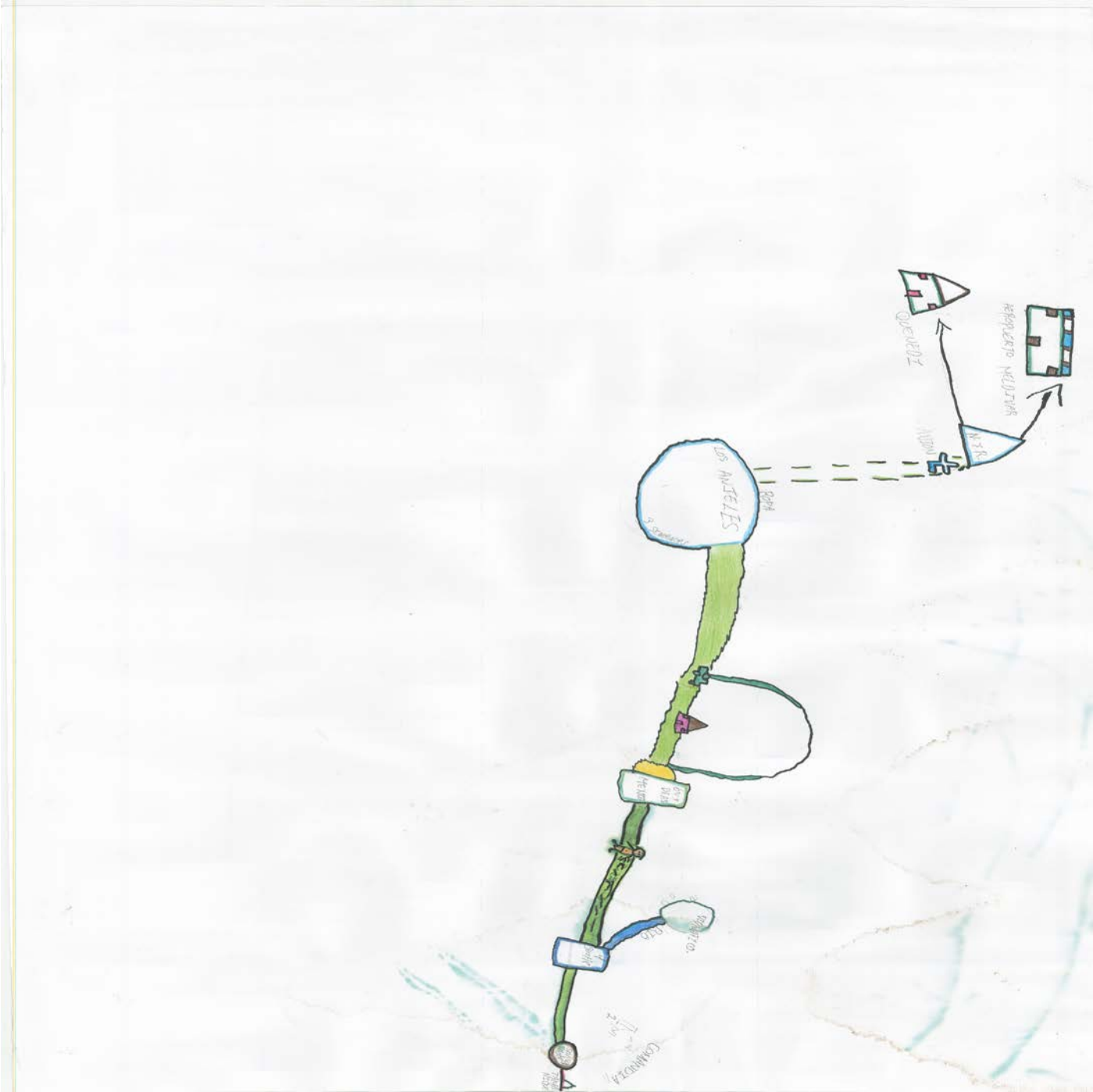












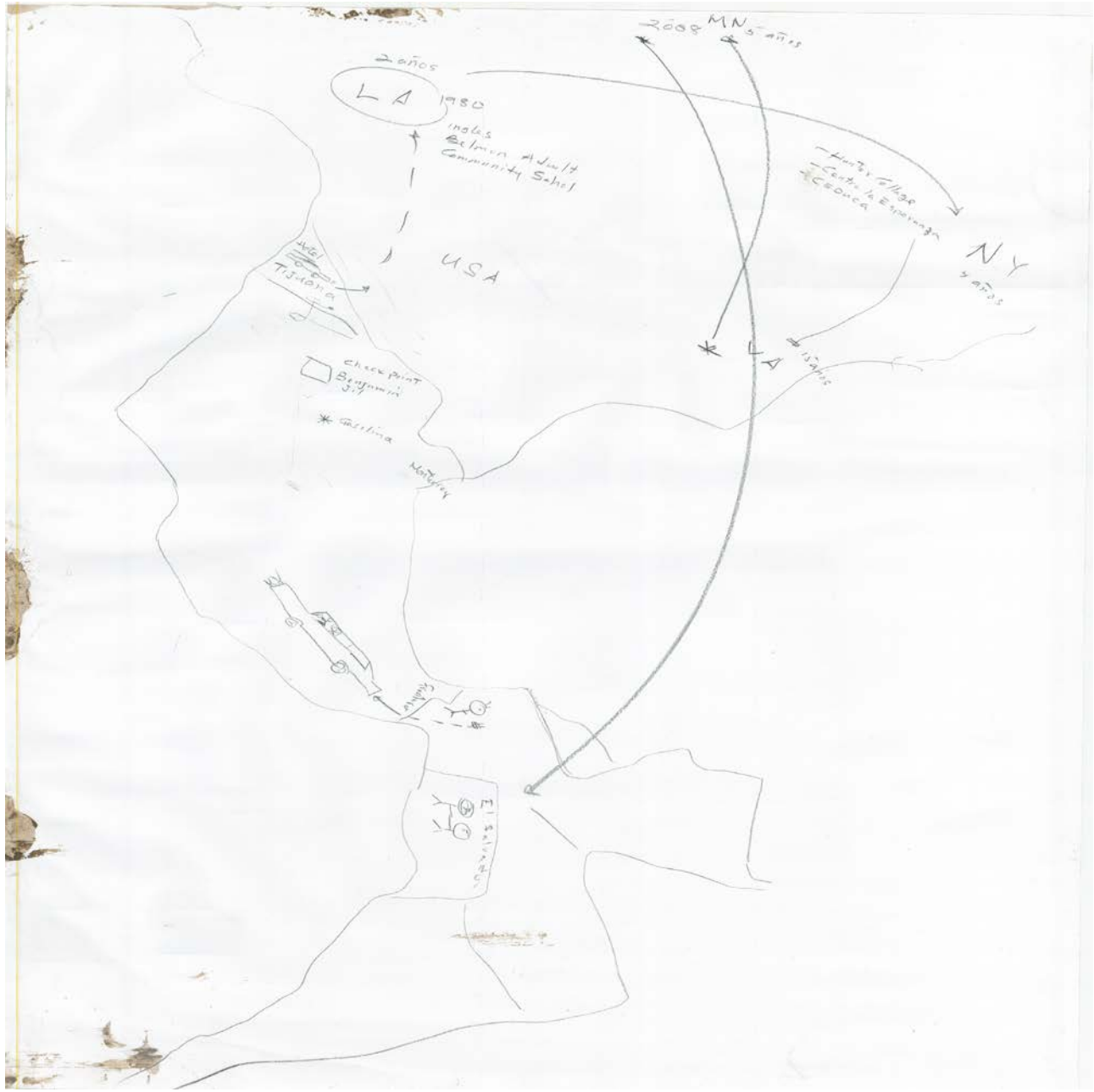






"DIBUJO DE LA MIGRACION"















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