



# *Cuentos y consejos*: Migrant agency in the FM4 Paso Libre

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## Abstract

This project uses ethnographic methods to detail firsthand experiences inside a migrant and refugee shelter in Guadalajara, Mexico, that shed light on undocumented migrant agency. In the context of heightened securitization of migration throughout the country's interior, I analyze the shelter as a paradoxical site of surveillance and solidarity. While I address how the shelter performs security preoccupations of the state, I argue that it is also a space where affective ties between migrants are cocreated and amplified. Against discursive and visual portrayals of migrants as criminals or suffering victims, my experiences reveal that migrant intimacy and agency are actualized through the exchange of memory, desire, and survival strategies.

**Keywords** Surveillance · Transit · Desire · Agency · Migrant shelter dispossession

## *Cuentos y consejos*: Acción migratoria en Paso Libre FM4

### Resumen

Este proyecto utiliza métodos etnográficos para describir, de primera mano, las experiencias vividas dentro de un refugio para migrantes y refugiados en Guadalajara, México, las cuales arrojaron luz sobre la acción migratoria con personas no documentadas. En el contexto de un aumento en la securitización migratoria en todo el interior del país, analizamos el refugio como lugar paradójico de vigilancia y de solidaridad. Aunque abordamos cómo el refugio lleva a cabo las obsesiones del estado con la seguridad, argumentamos que también es un espacio donde se crean y se amplifican colectivamente los lazos afectivos entre migrantes. En comparación con las representaciones discursivas y visuales de los migrantes como criminales o como víctimas sufridas, nuestras experiencias revelan que la intimidad y las intervenciones con los migrantes se materializan en un intercambio de memorias, deseos y estrategias de supervivencia.

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**Palabras clave** Vigilancia · Transito · Deseos · Acciones · Desalojos · Refugios para migrantes

The summer of 2018 was marked by an intensifying current of forced immigration from Central America to the United States in which families, rather than single adults, transited Mexico in search of asylum at the US border. In response to a so-called humanitarian and national border security crisis, the Trump administration sought to dismantle the asylum system by implementing devastating immigration protocols, including the “zero tolerance” policy.<sup>1</sup> In a further display of power, the National Guard was deployed to US border cities, where eighteen-foot thickets of concertina wire—a razor-sharp material usually found only in battlefield or prison settings—became part of urban landscapes.<sup>2</sup> This spectacularized show of force was also manifest in ballooning tent cities and border slums where, under the Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP), asylum seekers were relegated by the Trump administration to wait in Mexico for an undetermined time for their cases to be adjudicated. The MPP, despite the pro-immigrant implications of its name, represented another iteration of Trump’s wall. Within this context of mounting border frenzy, I joined a handful of full-time employees and other volunteers at a migrant and refugee shelter known as the FM4 Paso Libre in Guadalajara, Mexico. There I performed a dual purpose: aiding migrants during a complex time and gathering their migration stories. In the process I was also challenged to reflect on my own roles as a functionary of control, an academic observer, and an ally.

This article explores the shelter as a site of solidarity and refuge as well as of surveillance and control. By contrasting the official recording of information that takes place during the intake procedures with the unofficial, intimate recordings exchanged between migrants, I aim to highlight the role of migrant agency in resisting damaged-centered research and state humanitarian structures that construct migrants as victims.<sup>3</sup> Following Eve Tuck’s call to suspend frameworks that document pain

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<sup>1</sup> Passed in April of 2018 by former attorney general Jeff Sessions, the “zero tolerance” policy was one of several increasingly restrictive policies that was intended to deter migrants from entering the southern border of the United States. Under this law, undocumented individuals were charged with illegal entry. Individuals traveling with children were separated from them. The policy, which resulted in the separation of thousands of children from their parents or guardians was terminated in June 2018 after widespread criticism.

<sup>2</sup> That people on the Mexican side of the border later cut down the tumbleweeds of wire for use on their own properties underscores the porous sovereignty of the nation-state, in spite of its performance of sovereign power.

<sup>3</sup> Although the terms “migrant” and “refugee,” and “asylum-seeker” are often used interchangeably, there are distinctions among them. A refugee flees their country because they are at risk of or have endured human rights violations or persecution and must seek safety outside of their country because their own government cannot or will not protect them from these mortal dangers. Every refugee is first an asylum seeker, but not every asylum seeker will be granted refugee status. An asylum seeker is a person who has left their country for the above reasons, but who hasn’t yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting for a decision on their asylum claim. A migrant is a person whose movement is not propelled by fear of persecution, and who can return to their homeland if they want to. I use the term migrant/s broadly to refer to asylum seekers, economic migrants, and to those who do not fit into traditional legal categories.



and loss in the service of political and material gains, I attend to the creation and exchange of *cuentos y consejos* (stories and guidance) as well as to expressions of longing and desire that unfolded between migrants within the FM4 Paso Libre (Tuck 2009, p. 409). While much of the literature on transmigration focuses on conditions of terror that propel people's movement, I complicate this inquiry by asking what people miss about the places they have left behind. By sharing my observations of solidarity and agency, as well as my conversations with migrants about the physical and affective hardships entailed in leaving their homelands, I show how—through acts of care as simple as sharing a cigarette or gesturing the sign of the trinity over another's forehead to invoke protection—migrants affirm one another's humanity. This affirmation, which also takes place through the exchange of stories and advice, disrupts dispossession, or the process of physical and symbolic erasure through abjection. By attending to such ephemeral but meaningful exchanges, academics can resist the erasure of individual and collective agency that can be overshadowed by pathologizing frameworks of pain and victimization.

This article contributes to a growing body of literature on migrant agency in the face of heightened securitization, including Vogt's (2018) ethnography of violence and intimacy along the migrant trail. Her long-term, multisited, and grounded fieldwork explores how migrant bodies are implicated in economies that profit from their mobility. I draw from her analysis of transit as a site of social struggle and resistance to focus on the exchange of survival strategies within the FM4 Paso Libre as an example of migrant agency. John Doering-White's (2018) research on how shelter workers navigate humanitarian protocols to protect migrants while acknowledging the presence of "human smugglers" informs an analysis of my own subject position as privileged outsider desiring allyship, who also performs the role of the state by searching and surveilling migrants. In the context of enforcement-first initiatives to curb northward migration from Central America, Doering-White's work also influences my understanding of how shelters both reinforce and resist dynamics of "compassion and repression (Doering-White 2018).<sup>4</sup> Tuck's (2009) call for an epistemological shift towards desire-based research influences my effort to document not only the painful aspects of migration, but also those experiences inflected by solidarity and hope. Against dominant epistemological frames of recognition that perpetuate stereotypes of the migrant as criminal or victim, my observations reveal those "human qualities" of migration, including moments of levity, alliance, and ache, that are often excluded from policy, media, and academic discourses (Lovato 2018).

This article is divided into three sections. In the first section, "Reflections and subjectivity," I discuss my epistemological point of departure during my time at the FM4 Paso Libre and the methods that guide the writing of this piece. In the second section, "From 'vertical' to 'arterial' border," I provide an overview of the politics of migration governance within Mexico and the policies that have facilitated the

<sup>4</sup> Didier Fassin (2005) describes this as the process by which the state promotes a discourse of hospitality and care toward noncitizens on humanitarian grounds, while at the same time intensifying immigration controls.



expansion of shelters across the country, while also exacerbating the violence that these shelters respond to. In the third section, “Inside the FM4 Paso Libre,” I transport readers into the FM4 Paso Libre. This includes an exploration of my complicity in and resistance to dynamics of “compassion and repression” that govern this space and my observations of migrant agency and care. I close by proposing a focus on desire over damage as necessary to a decolonial approach to migration studies.

## Reflections and subjectivity

As a light-skinned Mexican American, my nationality and experience crossing borders has been one of privilege. To have the time to do fieldwork, to be able to return home at the end of the day—to have a place to return to—are other dimensions of my privilege. So, too, is the institutionally sanctioned authority of belonging to the academy, especially when it comes to questions of representation. To work against the colonialist legacy and uneven power dynamics of ethnography, my epistemological point of departure during my time at the FM4 Paso Libre was one of “relocation, co-presence, humility,” of proximity over objectivity (Conquergood 2002, p. 149). During my fieldwork I strived to engage Dwight Conquergood’s embodied and vulnerable approach to ethnography as “one of the ears and the heart” that is formed “in solidarity with, not separation from the people” (p. 149). Gathering on the patio with men, women, and youth during the lull of the day, where we exchanged platitudes and stories of place, working side by side in the kitchen, and playing mini soccer matches were among the ways I enacted what Donna Haraway calls “a view from the body” in contrast to “a view from above” (Haraway 1988, p. 592). This echoes Walter Mignolo’s call that “academic ‘knowledge and understanding’ be complemented with ‘learning from’ those who are living and thinking from colonial and postcolonial legacies” (Mignolo 2000, p. 1). I also draw from Noelle Brigden’s manifesto on ethnography, which rejects a presumptive impulse to “give voice” to marginalized actors. An embodied methodology, she argues, opens contexts to listen to those voices that have long been sounding their own narratives (Brigden and Mainwaring 2021, p. 200).

In writing about the people at the FM4 Paso Libre, I draw from a critical ethnographic methodology to address translation as a practice that is inherently incomplete. Transferring stories that were shared with me onto the page and into the academy risks reinscribing asymmetrical relations of power that may replicate colonialist dynamics. “English,” as Judith Flores Carmona points out, “is the dominant language in academia; the language of currency and power” (Carmona 2014, p. 114). In addition to what gets lost in the process of translating from Spanish to English, is the problem of having to perform this translation in service to the academy, is the issue of sharing experiences that observers like myself have never lived. Critical ethnography asks that researchers not only respond to the injustices we observe within the geographies of our research, but that we “make the ethnography an accessible, readable, text” (Carmona 2014, p. 114). These two actions involve a process of *acuerpamiento*: the body-to-body labor of “learning of a situation by living it in the flesh” and then documenting, transmitting, and linking what was learned into



thoughtful, heartfelt, sustained action (Taylor 2020, p. 2). I did not arrive at the FM4 Paso Libre for a weekend, never to return again, in the service of a sensational news story. Building connections and trust with the people I met, and using my body, speech, and writing to support migrant dignity, are ways I justify the inevitable risk of incompletely translating the experiences of others. As Suzanne Oboler argues, the question of whose reality is valorized and legitimized through the retelling of people's lives shapes and reshapes our understanding of Latino studies: "Like oral traditions and storytelling, our printed words too, remind us of some events at the expense of others," she states, "of some ways of (re)membering the world and our experience; of people's lives—at the expense of others" (Oboler 2009, p. 407). I am interested in the connective force of sensual knowledge as that which can exceed language, the translatable, and impulses to quantify and objectify. I am interested in the "at the expense of others." Contrary to translating the experiences that were shared with me in the FM4 Paso Libre from their vernacular into academic discourse, this article is for the community with whom and which I worked, even while negotiating the discourse of academia.

Volunteering at the FM4 Paso Libre meant participating in surveillance practices that govern shelter protocol. As a "gringa-Mexicana," I was aware of how my subject position—as someone from two countries that are responsible for draconian border and immigration policies designed to reject undocumented individuals—might be threatening. Volunteers have the power to refuse migrant entry, which required that their bodies, many of which had been subjected to violence, be subjected to touch, through search. My attempts to mitigate the uneven power dynamics of these searches included asking for people's consent before I placed my hands on them, diverting attention away from the search by making small talk, and reminding myself of the larger scope of my work there. The four days that most migrants stayed in the shelter gave way to sustained interactions that allowed me to build trust. When stories were directly shared with me, I usually waited until a subsequent encounter with that person to ask for permission to write about their experiences. In addition to sharing my subject position as volunteer, ally, and academic, I promised confidentiality with respect to their identity and reassured them that there was no consequence for refusing my request. Many were curious about why I would ask permission to write about them and wondered why anyone would be interested in their story in the first place. Others were curious about what I was writing about and why. It may be that, because of my position of authority within the shelter, they felt pressure to accede. While I have no way of knowing whether this was the case, usually my request to write about their experiences yielded even deeper conversations about migration and home.

## From "vertical" to "arterial" border

For Central Americans, the US border they seek to cross is not geographically fixed to the two thousand miles of boundary extending from the Playas de Tijuana to the Gulf Coast. Rather, the entirety of Mexico itself is the border. The border exists within pueblos cradled in the cuffs of valleys and along those long stretches



of highway that expand into the horizon, connecting copper and opal mines and cities all the way to the cement factories and *maquiladoras* of the industrial north. The intensification of US-funded securitization projects into Mexico's interior since the mid-2000s has transformed the country, from what was formerly characterized by Central Americans as a "vertical border" into an "arterial border (Vogt 2018, p. 54).<sup>5</sup> That is, state-bordering practices are no longer exclusively fixed to the territory of the nation-state, but cat's-cradle the entire country. Gloria Anzaldúa famously described the border as an "open wound where the third world grates against the first and bleeds"; for Central American migrants, the entirety of Mexico is now a border and a wound (Anzaldúa 1987, p. 3).

In the same way that the 1994 passage of Operation Gatekeeper channeled migrants along the San Diego–Mexico border into remote geographies, efforts to stop migrant movement into and across Mexico have had a parallel, if not intensified, mortal effect.<sup>6</sup> For Central American migrants traversing Mexico, the most severe threat to their survival is not desert heat or fast-flowing rivers; it is other humans. Criminal organizations engaged in kidnapping and extortion constitute part of the "migration industry," or the profitability that migrants represent to individual and state actors (Vogt 2018, p. 5). Perhaps owing to this profitability, the serious and frequent victimization of migrants has been historically ignored in state policy and discourse. Not until the 2010 massacre of seventy-two primarily Central American migrants in the border city of Tamaulipas was the Mexican government forced to confront its failures to protect the rights of the undocumented (Vogt 2018, p. 3).

The scale of the Tamaulipas tragedy, combined with public outcry by faith-based and civil society organizations, led Mexico's congress to amend its 2008 Migration Law, which decriminalized irregular migration in Mexico. Effusive in its commitment to defending migrant and human rights, the 2011 law also decriminalized aide to unauthorized migrants and officially recognized shelters as spaces of sanctuary.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it granted undocumented migrants who were witness to or victims of a serious crime while transiting Mexico the opportunity to apply for humanitarian visas. These visas provide recipients a one-year window, renewable for as long as the case remains open, to legally live and travel within the country so long as they

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<sup>5</sup> The deepening of securitization during this time included such initiatives as the Secure Fence Act of 2006, financed by Congress to augment surveillance and technology along land and maritime borders, as well as to implement seven hundred miles of additional fencing along the US-Mexico border. The Merida Initiative, formed in 2007, is a bilateral agreement between the United States and Mexico to combat criminal organizations and cross-border trafficking. A four-pillar strategy was created in 2011 to expand securitization between countries. The third pillar of the initiative, titled Creating a 21st Century US-Mexican Border, focused on immigration enforcement in Mexico, with attention directed toward its southern border.

<sup>6</sup> Operation Gatekeeper was a government enforcement strategy launched in 1994 along the California section of the US-Mexico boundary. The militarization and surveillance of this geography was intended to deter migrant crossing. Rather than deter crossings, it had the effect of funneling migrants into remote territories, where their endurance was pitted against the wilderness.

<sup>7</sup> While Mexico has a long history of faith-based organizations providing shelter to Central Americans fleeing civil war, this amendment reduced the chances of shelter workers being prosecuted as smugglers for humanitarian work.



cooperate with police investigations (Galemba et al. 2019, p. 65). On the surface, these were welcome strides; however, in reality, the process has been flawed by corruption, impunity, and a lack of resources and coordination on behalf of Mexico's government (Galemba et al. 2019, p. 62). Although the new migration law streamlined access to humanitarian provisions, state emphasis on techniques of territorial control, border surveillance, and the policing of migrants paradoxically undermined provisions put in place to protect them. The implementation of the Southern Border Plan (SBP) in response to the so-called unaccompanied minor crisis in 2014 further exacerbated these tensions.

Echoing a rhetoric of compassion codified in the new immigration law, the stated goals of the SBP were to protect the human rights of migrants in transit while increasing security measures at Mexico's southern border. This included the state's targeting of transit routes.<sup>8</sup> Rather than protect migrants, the SBP had the contradictory effect, rendering them extra-vulnerable to commodification across local and international economies (Vogt 2018, p. 5). As Vogt argues, laws and policies enacted to govern unauthorized migration through a focus on national security rather than human rights push migrants deeper into "spaces of non-existence" (Vogt 2013, p. 765). These spaces, which are marked by subjugation, exclusion, and restriction, are also premised on the erasure of personhood (Coutin 2003, p. 29). Migrant un-incorporability (that is, their bodies literally cannot belong) into the nation-state becomes a condition of their disposability. The disciplinary force of sovereignty enacted through policies like the SBP, laws, and negative cultural representations contributes to conditions of nonexistence that operate through the *basurizacion* of migrant bodies (Huerta 2018, p. 1). This "trashing" refers both to abjection—the action of casting or throwing out—and to the physically and psychically violent experience of being made abject, of having one's dignity and sense of self stripped to the breaking point of nonbeing.

Within this arterial network of securitized border apparatuses, the FM4 Paso Libre provides migrants a momentary space of existence in Mexico, which has become the most dangerous and violent country for migrant transit in the world (Huerta 2018, p. 3). The FM4 Paso Libre is a reprieve from the circuitry of border-like conditions that span Mexico's interior. Run by a handful of paid full-time employees and a cadre of unpaid volunteers, the FM4 Paso Libre is one of ninety-six shelters (also known as *casas de migrante* or migrant houses) situated along the migrant trail. Many chose to become employees and volunteers because of their Catholic belief that migrants, regardless of their legal status, possess inherent human dignity that should be defended. Some lived in proximity to the shelter and were concerned for migrant safety in the context of growing hostility toward their presence in the city. Others were activists, professionals, and students completing high school and college internships. The FM4 Paso Libre, subsidized primarily through

<sup>8</sup> A key example was a crackdown on cargo trains, the most popular form of migrant transportation because no documentation or money are required for passage. While increasing the speed of locomotives was framed as a humanitarian effort to protect migrants from potentially mortal risks of riding the train, accelerating the locomotives made them even more lethal.



international organizations and individual donations, is considered among migrants one of the most “deluxe” *casas de migrante* in Mexico. Inside the warehouse-sized interior, painted with colorful murals, is a living room setting with plush couches and a large television. There is also a small library, a pool table, and a designated play area for children, filled with toys. Throughout the week a rotating schedule of invited guests offers workshops and activities on art, cooking, and dance.

While the FM4 Paso Libre provides a place of respite, it is not free from contradiction. Like the majority of *casas de migrante*, it is situated in proximity to thoroughfares of migrant travel. Despite how these spaces of care form a base of migrant movement, their presence also funnels migrants along the same routes, making them hyper-visible to state enforcement and organized groups intent on exploiting them. In an effort to prevent “human smuggling,” shelters simultaneously perform the security apparatus of the state by surveilling migrants who enter the shelter. Against an idealized perception of sanctuary, these are not utopian zones of solidarity and protection. As interstitial spaces, they exist in the geographic in-between of Central America and the United States, of the physical distance from this shelter to the next. They are not settings where people can engage in long-term place and identity making, nor are they stations of return. Despite this, solidarity is manifest through the active, intimate participation of volunteers whose copresence and advocacy affirms the work of belonging for and with each other. It is also manifest between migrants, who challenge notions of victimhood and nonbelonging through the exchange of story and survival strategies toward the goal of freedom of passage—*paso libre*.

### Inside the FM4 Paso Libre

The majority of migrants arrive in Guadalajara by rail. Disembarking from the cargo train known as El Diablo at those places in the tracks where it is forced to slow down, the heels of their feet sting from the first contact with ground in sixteen hours. Two blocks away they will find shelter. This location passes by word of mouth. It is a tip given by those who work the informal economy selling miscellany along the tracks. The FM4 Paso Libre is one destination point on a pocket-sized map handed out by volunteers at every *casa de migrante*. The shelter derives its name from a type of imagined visa that allows people, irrespective of origin, to pass safely and freely (*paso libre*) across nation-state territories. Tucked in between houses of a residential neighborhood, the property visually distinguishes itself from the other homes. Its external swing doors are painted a black so shiny you can almost see your reflection. They are emblazoned with the logo of train tracks extending toward a vanishing point circled by the words FM4 Paso Libre. This image is graphed beside white block letters that announce, “Centro de Atención de Migrantes y Refugiados.” Inside the fortress-like doors, the foyer smells like instant coffee and sweat, like sweet bread and the astringent tinge of disinfectant.

It is here that a volunteer announces the conditions to enter and the protocol that everyone must follow during their stay:

- You must be a migrant.





- You can stay four days and three nights.
- No drugs are allowed.
- Weapons, if you have them, must be registered with your belongings, where they will be stored in a locked room for you until you leave.
- This is a space of respect. Violence will not be tolerated.
- Once you enter the FM4 Paso Libre you cannot come and go as you please. Your first exit from the shelter is your last.

As I would learn, many were pursuing survival through migration because droughts along Central America's dry corridor, a belt stretching south through Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, had become deadly that summer. Others were fleeing the devastation of hurricanes that brought a tidal merging of sea and rain, sand and mud. Apart from families, the majority were young men whose migration was propelled by economic despair and political instability caused by US-backed wars, decades of free-market policies, and violence by transnational gangs. Following a mandatory pat-down of their bodies, they are asked to remove their belongings from their backpacks upon arrival at the FM4 Paso Libre. The purpose of these searches, which take place at every *casa de migrante* in Mexico, is to project a sense of security and, relatedly, to distinguish migrants from human smugglers.<sup>9</sup> Although the process is ostensibly meant to protect staff and "legitimate" migrants from predatory forces, these moments of semi-surveillance speak to the collision of humanitarian care with repressive practices, a process that mirrors the framework of the SBP in how it reinscribes an oversimplified logic of transgression and legitimacy. It also obscures smuggling as a consensual agreement and, in so doing, removes agency from migrants who often carefully strategize their passage, saving money over time to hire a *coyote* or *pollero*.<sup>10</sup> Before migrants can receive a meal, a change of clothes, or make the one phone call they are allotted, they must complete an involved intake procedure. The withholding of these amenities, including a hot shower, is another example of how humanitarian care within shelters is premised on conditions of control.

That summer I worked eight-hour shifts, four days a week. Arriving at the FM4 Paso Libre just after sunrise, most of my mornings were dedicated to conducting a one-on-one interview with migrants about their migration histories. After uploading

<sup>9</sup> Doering-White (2018) describes how shelter workers rely on referential cues, like the condition of a person's clothing, what they carry with them, or whether they are clean-shaven, to determine who does and does not belong.

<sup>10</sup> The word *pollero* connotes not only the individual who keeps and sells fowl but can also mean "gambler," and the relationship of migrants to this figure is often characterized by temerity, uncertainty, and risk. Within Native American mythology, the coyote assumes the shape-shifting role of trickster, scavenger, thief, and survivor. Within the animal kingdom, what makes the coyote so remarkable is its ability to navigate, survive, and adapt to a wide range of environments. This combination of trickery and deftness with relation to geography is why "human smugglers" are called coyotes. When it comes to a question of their own survival, human coyotes will often gamble their *pollos* (chickens), abandoning them. In addition to their criminal reputation or their performance (like that of like Wile E. Coyote) in Western cartoons as the bad guy, among the undocumented, coyotes are also viewed as allies, heroes, heroines, and saviors, without whom reunion with family in the United States would not be possible.



their photo into a database, I asked a series of scripted questions that included their age, where they were from, profession, destination, whether this was their first journey north, and their reasons for migrating. This information, which is shared between all *casas de migrante* in Mexico, is also used by the state to measure patterns of migration and its governance. Although their responses were often succinct to the point of terseness—they were exhausted and needed to complete the process in order to access the shelter—there were times when more was shared. I was told by a *campesino* from Guatemala how he could no longer endure the constant thirst of *la sequia*.<sup>11</sup> It dried his throat. It dried his land. He had worked the fields his entire life, but his cattle and beloved horses now looked like marimbas because they, too, were starving. One fifteen-year-old boy from El Salvador witnessed his brother get shot by a gang and was now in its crosshairs. He had an uncle he was trying to get to in Baltimore but did not know where Baltimore was. “Is it close to Chicago?” he asked. Another woman from Honduras, traveling with her three children who ranged in age from two to eleven, told me her husband had tried to set her on fire. Shifting her daughter on her lap, she lifted her sleeve to show me the purple, waxy skin. Identifying marks like these are also cataloged during the interview. I typed the location of burns and birthmarks, tattoos, and missing body parts—the visible and the visibly invisible—into the computer. While this information would ultimately be converted into depersonalized data, I approached the questions as an opening to engage an epistemology of “the ears and heart” that humanized what would have otherwise been a transactional encounter designed to fulfill shelter protocol governed by the state.

One Salvadoran woman recently deported from Salt Lake City proudly told me the abundance of freckles on her face and arms were inherited from her grandmother, whose nickname was Pecos. A fifteen-year-old boy from Nicaragua told me how in anticipation of his sister’s birth he tattooed the first letter of her name onto his hand. “But then she died,” he told me. “So, like her, this will never be complete.” The details I share here are not recorded on the government form. Nor are the wounds that have yet to scar—the bandaged hand cut while jumping off the train, the laceration on their torso from where they were recently attacked by thugs. In the small room where we could hear each other breathing, I officially documented the places on their bodies that had already scarred. The information is used to repatriate them should they die en route. Just as migrants entering the FM4 Paso Libre are searched, the corpses of migrants who have died while transiting Mexico are also examined for “informal cultural tells,” like tattoos, that may help identify nationality (Brigden 2016, p. 346). While efforts by the state to repatriate migrant corpses demonstrates compassion for the closure it provides to family and community of the deceased, it also belies the state’s investment in the dead over protecting the living (Brigden 2016, p. 346).

As a state-sanctioned process of documenting the undocumented, the intake also serves the purpose of identifying those who do not belong in the shelter. These are individuals who have broken rules at previous *casas de migrante*, who have done

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<sup>11</sup> Drought.



drugs, started a fight, gotten caught stealing. They are people rendered so abject that they tried to commit suicide while in the shelter, which becomes another site of their exclusion. They may also be *polleros* masquerading as migrants and using the space as a recruitment base. The intake form serves as surveillance, underscoring the place that migrant shelters occupy in legitimizing policies like the SBP. If “human smuggling” is a crime against the state and not against the person being smuggled, then anti-smuggling efforts within the shelter function to protect the state, not migrants. Yet, as Doering-White observes in his research, many volunteers at shelters like the FM4 Paso Libre recognize that “human smugglers” may represent the most viable way for migrants to reach their destination and will tacitly accommodate the presence of *polleros* (Doering-White 2018, p. 438). I recognized this dynamic while monitoring the one phone call that migrants are permitted to make.

Though volunteers are instructed to listen in on migrant communication to make sure they were not coordinating passage with a *pollero*, there are no instructions about what to do if suspicions rise about such coordination. Like other volunteers, I located lacunae in shelter protocol that allowed me discretionary space to practice solidarity. In this case, not intervening in migrants’ communication provided them the agency to choose who to call. After dialing the numbers given to me, I would hand over the receiver and turn my back to offer a semblance of privacy. Sometimes nobody answered, and I would bend shelter rules by allowing them to try another number. Other times the person whose voice they most wanted to hear was unavailable, and so they settled with talking to a cousin or a brother-in-law. In the room that was only slightly larger than a phone booth, I listened to voices catch with emotion from the inflection of home as they told their mothers, their sisters, and their sons that they were okay, that they had made it to Guadalajara, Mexico. Before they could fully relax into the call, ask after loved ones, take in the soundscapes on the other end of the line that are so familiar they can feel the vibration of them like warmth in their bones, 180 seconds passed. When the call was over, I would give a thumbs-up to signal the remaining time—the length of a sigh. When they returned the receiver to my hand, it was sometimes wet with tears (Walsh 2021, p. 134).

Much of the literature on migration addresses the terror that propels people’s movement. Excluded from these accounts is migrant desire, the bend of longing for those tangibles and intangibles that form the umbilical cord of belonging that connects one to place. In Spanish, the word *añora*, which has no English equivalent, connotes the ache of yearning for something that has been lost or that was never fulfilled. For the *campesino* fleeing drought, the ache was for his beloved horses. For the young man from Nicaragua, his stillborn sister. In the kitchen where migrants and volunteers work side by side, the experience of *añora* was also activated through the senses. The pungent sting of the onion that collectively burns everyone’s eyes, the thick sweetness of mango, the earthiness of cilantro, evoked connections to place. I listened to one woman in her late thirties recall how, when she first arrived in the United States, the glossy supermarket fruit and plastic packaging on the meat were the strangest things she had ever seen. She said that it was not until she returned to her pueblo that she realized how much she missed the smell of wood smoke on tortillas and the signature flavor of spearmint in her mother’s chicken broth. A boy in his mid-teens talked about watching telenovelas with his grandma,



how she always fell asleep when the news came on. He remembered sitting on the rooftop of his house with his dog, watching neighborhood foot traffic: “If there was a way to bring him with me, I would have.” Another boy, also from Copal, said he did not miss anything about home and that one thing he would not miss about Mexico was the spicy food. He is one of a handful of people that I ended up keeping in touch with over social media after my time at the shelter ended. Half a year after we met, he messaged me from North Carolina, where he was working construction, to tell me that he was homesick for his friends, for soccer, for his mother’s handmade tortillas and beans. He told me that when we met in the shelter, he had been away from home for only a month. It was not enough time, he said, to realize how much he would miss the feeling of being loved.

These insights about migrant intimacy and resilience contradict dominant epistemological frames of recognition, including policy, media, and academic discourse that often perpetuates stereotypes of migrants as criminal or victim. Within the FM4 Paso Libre, the seemingly mundane act of braiding another’s hair, sharing a bag of pumpkin seeds, or trading memories is an act of care and possible solidarity. Moreover, the sharing of *cuentos y consejos*—story and advice—is also a form of agency-building and alliance. Against portrayals of migrants as helpless, Tanya Basok et al. underscore tools of creativity and resistance employed to lessen precarity along the migrant trail. They argue that “techniques of self-preservation,” like how to stay alive on the train, or how to evade *la migra* and crooks, help facilitate migrant movement and, in so doing, frustrate the impact that migration controls, criminal networks, and physical dangers have on their ability to continue their journey (Basok et al. 2015, p. 88). Migrants learn from their own mistakes along the way, but, as Basok et al. point out, they also learn from observing and talking with others (p. 88). This is consistent with storytelling and survival strategies that were shared at the FM4 Paso Libre by migrants while playing pool, sitting on the patio, or casually talking in the long lines that form to access one of two computers in the shelter where they logged in to Facebook and momentarily transported some part of themselves back home, even as their physical distance from who and what they left behind was growing. The tips, which were sometimes shared with me, were often logistical. They could also be deeply personal:

- Dress in layers to stay warm. When you get close to the border strip them away. That way you do not look dirty, which is how the *perros* can tell you do not belong.
- Do not eat too much food—no matter your hunger—because your stomach is not accustomed to being full and any intestinal problems will make riding the train that much worse.
- Sew money into the cuffs of your pants, the armpits of your sweatshirt; keep some in your pockets and in your shoes for the cops and thieves to find, and only cut open your seams when there is no other choice.
- When you get to the Rio Bravo, study it before you swim across it. The silt can suck you in and then the current will swallow you whole.
- The gangs do not respect age. It does not matter if you are an old man. If you cannot pay their toll, they will force you to pull your pants down and hold onto



your ankles and they will paddle you until your ass and thighs are purple and bleeding.

- When they take your infant from you, the physical ache of your breasts that signals his hunger is the most painful connection through absence that you will ever feel. Knead your breasts to release the pressure. Knead them to sustain milk-flow in anticipation of his return. Kneel and knead, releasing the milk to the cold floor like a prayer (Walsh 2021, p. 137).

By considering the generative role of desire in coloring the in-between space of the FM4 Paso Libre, I add to the research of Basok et al. on how Central American migrant experiences of im/mobility are shaped by precarity. Desire manifests not only in migrant routes—the wish for home, for arrival, opportunity, and belonging—but on literal bodies and through connections that were at times as subtle as they were poignant. Within the FM4 Paso Libre, the invocation of home and homesickness, of talking about that which is left behind, is an active praxis of keeping close, not of mourning loss. It is a refusal to lose and be lost to.<sup>12</sup> The dialogic exchanges that unfold within this space speak to endurance, and micro-practices of survival. They offer a glimpse of migrant determination and personhood that resists the relentless institutional disavowal of both.

## Disrupting dispossession

The borderlands that Anzaldúa famously compared to an open wound now spread through the entirety of Mexico. The unmarked graves that span Mexico's interior, the bodies severed by the trains that cut through the country, the bodies buried in desert sand, swallowed by rivers, or left to languish in the stalemate of detention centers and border slums, constitute something worse than a disappearance. With disappearance is the acknowledgement of having existed. With disappearance is the possibility of return, recovery, and recording, as in to “pass again through the heart,” to re/member (Galeano 1989). In contrast, dispossession is the process of erasure—a stripping away of every trace to the point of obliteration. Its opposite is not possession or accumulation, as Angie Morrill, Eve Tuck, and the Super Futures Haunt Collective write, “It is unforgetting. It is mattering” (Morrill et al. 2016, p. 5). Within the FM4 Paso Libre, embodied expressions of agency represent a form of *autodefensa*, self-defense, and *auto-cuidado*, self-care, that both practically and symbolically disrupt the dehumanizing force of dispossession (Huerta and McClean 2019).

The FM4 Paso Libre registers both flow and beat—movement and the tracking of it—through the control of bodies, time, connection. Engaging a “view from the body” allowed me to listen to and learn from the people I met. Against a romanticized portrait of solidarity, by surveilling and reporting on them, I also engaged a “view from above.” While a self-reflexive methodology did not relieve this tension,

<sup>12</sup> A special thanks to Jade Power-Sotomayor for this insight.



it increased my awareness of ways my positionality as volunteer and ethnographer were entangled in power dynamics that complicated and at times contradicted those roles. Prior to cooking shoulder to shoulder, joining hands to give thanks before a meal, or sitting across from one another at the banquet tables where we ate, I participated in the safety and security network that the state provides via this space. In addition to the physical search of their bodies and the few belongings they carry with them—the neatly folded shirt that smells like sweat and soil, the stocking cap damp from rain, a Zip-loc bag with aspirin, a toothbrush, and a rosary—migrants themselves are documented. This includes the official recording of name, origin, identifying characteristics, and photo, which feeds the state apparatus of control. The searches, which projected a concern for safety of people entering the shelter, were also paradoxically premised on the assumption of migrant criminality. My aping of state surveillance practices, during intake interviews and while monitoring the one phone call migrants could make, are additional examples of my complicity within a network of control. Official searches of people whose physical being radiated heat and chill and exhaustion was a condition of my access to unofficial, affect-laden, unofficial recordings, some of which were shared with me.

Attending to the sensuous as that “which is integral to our humaneness” not only gives way to a more complex understanding of migration that extends beyond narratives of pain and damage, but potentially creates the conditions for new forms of synthesis, solidarity, and desire that resists colonialist practices of objectification, not only in the FM4 Paso Libre, but also in academic scholarship (Tuck 2009, p. 417). As activist-scholars, academics, and policy makers this calls for us to use our legalized and privileged positions to engage a hermeneutics of *acuerpamiento* that also accounts for sensual knowledge. This requires pushing against the boundaries of our disciplines in ways that move beyond the conceptualizations and abstractions of “standard” academic language to express that which cannot be quantified in government intake forms, policy reports, or the articles that we manufacture in a quest for tenure: the thirst of the *sequía*, the taste of spearmint in soup like home, those moments of quiet long enough to hear the release of a sigh, the contraction of a stomach growling from hunger. The prefix “trans” connotes movement and change, without which agency would be impossible. Attention to the interstitial space of the shelter and to the way desire, uncontained by borders, travels across place and time, enriches an understanding of transmigration as that which exceeds the stasis of damage by encompassing *añora*, alliance, and hope.

A focus on the ephemeral connections that unfold in the in-between space of the FM4 Paso Libre allows for a deeper understanding of migrant desire and agency as looking both forward and back, as rooted and routed. My presence within the FM4 Paso Libre also challenges the reader to consider this space as a metaphor for the research that we do, in terms of our implication in networks of solidarity and surveillance. As the arterial border continues to span Mexico, shelters are nodes of resistance that pulse with solidarity and intimacy through stories shared within a paradoxical site of vigilance and reprieve from brutal journeys. Despite security preoccupations of the state that influence their practices, *casas de migrante* are by and large spaces of connection where, through the sharing of story and acts of care, alliances are forged. They are spaces of respite, of momentary pause from the



propulsion of the train, of the wear of pavement and earth against a body that has traversed thousands of miles by foot. They are a reminder of the possibility, as the name *paso libre* suggests, of a more expansive world not confined to borders and fences, exclusionary ideologies, and exclusive claims to history on which nation-states are founded. It is within this context of “social death” or “non-being” that the unauthorized (those who are literally “not allowed” to be present) are “broken by the law” that migrant claims to people and place and the corresponding experiences of the brutal and the sacred, the beautiful and the mundane, must urgently matter (Athanasίου and Butler 2013, p. 19). At this fever-point of bordering and exclusion, of detention and deportation, the *cuentos y consejos* shared in transit form an intimate and arterial cartography of migrant memory that resists notions of unincorporability, and, in turn, the dismemberment of erasure.

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