A *pueblo* that walks together: trust and bonding among Central American transit migrants in Mexico

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the role of social networks, trust, and bonding during the transit of Central American migrants in Mexico. It has two main research questions: first, do existing social networks of Central American transit migrants in Mexico help them overcome the journey through this country? And second, can and do new social bonds, trust, and cooperation emerge in this context of extreme scarcity, stress, and violence? It draws on over five months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork on the southern border of Mexico in Tenosique and Palenque; in the northern border in Saltillo and Nogales, and in Tucson in the United States.

The dissertation finds that most migrants do not receive emotional help or resources from their kinship ties while in Mexico. It is possible to form social ties with strangers that yield solidarity during volatile contexts, in contrast to what most authors have observed. Migrants on the road form what I call a "transient community of *migrantes,"* an accidental community that gives everyone a *migrante* collective identity, a common narrative, and a sense of belonging. This shared understanding favours solidarity, even when migrants do not trust each other. Male migrants react to the violence and stress by forming closer groups that I call *familias del camino,* road families. These *familias* quickly create trust and deep bonds and provide practical support for each other. These ties are solid and enable cooperation but are also temporary. These bonds had not been defined previously by the literature. While most authors had assumed that kin or kin-like ties are most useful while migrating, I show that during transit, social networks with non-family members become more relevant. Migrants who travel with their families react to the violence by attempting to reproduce a safe domestic sphere while migrating. In the reproduction of power dynamics that defines the realm of the public and the private, patriarchal gender identities are also reproduced and through those, men are depicted as protectors of the family and women as vulnerable.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Sometimes, when everything is calm on *el camino*, the migrant trail, you get lulled into a false sense of safety. When raids haven't happened for a few days, when no one has died or fallen off the train, and when relatively healthy migrants arrive, you start thinking that things surely couldn't get worse. You play cards, listen to stories, learn to cook rice like the nuns do, and attempt to dance *punta*. You make plans for tomorrow; you'll bring a couple of backpacks and a pair of pants for a man who lost his. You'll bring some snacks for lunch to share with your favourite migrants.

You arrive at the migrant house the next morning and everything is eerily quiet. The hustlers outside of the house are nowhere to be seen but their rubbish and the cardboard they sit on are still there. Someone burned a bunch of things and there is still smoke around. You ring the bell of the migrant house and an armed guard opens the door. He won't let you in and won't explain what is happening. When you are finally let in, you see two panicked nuns, several wailing women and children, around thirty fatigued and scared migrants, and no breakfast. What happened?

La Migra[1] came last night. It shattered the sense of peace. It showed that not even the migrant house is safe from the power of the state and that of criminals.

Often, the people who live around the migrant houses or the train tracks rent rooms to the migrants or let them sleep in their backyards or entrances for a small fee. Some people pay for the room if they arrive late at night and the migrant house is closed.

[1] How migrants colloquially refer to the personnel of the Mexican National Migration Institute.

Estrella had arrived at eight and since she could not stay at the migrant house, she paid 50 pesos (3 dollars) to stay in a neighbour's spare room with her family.

> "What happened", Estrella[2] tells me between sobs, "is that in the middle of the night four trucks came. Then men with long guns came out and started knocking on everyone's [Mexican inhabitants of Palenque] doors. The neighbours had to open their doors and show that they did not have any migrants inside. Me and the children [her daughters are six and thirteen] went down and hid with the chickens. The chickens did not make a peep. They were scared too. The men with guns took out all the migrants and lined them up in front of the trucks. They beat them, they took their things, and then they took them." Someone asks, "Were they agents of the National Migration Institute?" Estrella says, "Well, they were not wearing uniforms, they wore all black".[3]

The migrants that survived the raid ran towards the migrant house and begged the nuns to let them in; they did not want the men to come back and take them. The nuns were scared too and chose not to open the door. They did not want any "bad" migrants to take advantage of the situation and come inside. The survivors ended up hiding in treetops, in chicken coops, or behind cars until the nuns opened the house to let them in at 7:00 am. Then I arrived.

That event really affected me. It was my second week doing fieldwork and I had started to feel comfortable with observing and interviewing. I had written in my field notes: "Although migrants suffer a lot when they transit, I am surprised by the amount of laughter and flirtation that I find here. They still have time to relax and have fun when they are safe."[4] The event made me realise that migrants were under threat continually

[2] All the names of the interviewees are pseudonyms unless explicitly noted.
[3] Interview: Estrella, July 1st 2015, Palenque.
[4] Field notes, Alejandra Díaz de León, June 2015, Palenque.

and that they could never really let their guard down. When I shared my insight with a pair of young Guatemalans that had not been caught by the raid, they looked wearily at me and told me that they *knew that,* they never let their guard down, they were always stressed, and they were always aware of the possibility of dying and getting deported. It was me, a visitor, who did not get that. It was just *me,* a novice, who had been lulled into a false sense of security. For everyone else, the stakes had always been high; playing cards, cooking, and dancing *punta* did not distract them from the menace. They knew they were never safe while they were in Mexico.

Every year around 400,000 migrants attempt to cross Mexico without papers on their way to the United States; most of them come from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Mexico is a difficult country to cross (Rodriguez Chávez et al., 2011). Since 2014 (Presidencia de la República, 2014) the Mexican government has implemented checkpoints on the highways coming from the southern border, increased the number of National Migration Institute agents, created more detention centers, and improved its use of technology to detect undocumented migrants (Boggs, 2015). Criminals take advantage of the migrants and cartels and gangs extort, rob, and kidnap them. Crossing Mexico is anything but straightforward for these migrants. They must adapt their journeys and their modes of transportation to the obstacles they face. Often, they must walk for days in the jungle, or are forced to spend weeks in a migrant shelter. For these migrants, the transit through Mexico is long and challenging; it takes weeks or even months to arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border and start the final stage of their migration process.

The literature on migration has shown that social networks are fundamental in helping migrants prepare and succeed in their migration process. Studies like Singer and Massey's (1998) have shown that first-time migrants who can avail of social networks

are more likely to successfully cross from Mexico to the United States and less likely to get hurt while doing so. The information and material help that they obtain makes all the difference. However, most of these studies assume that migrants are crossing from their country of origin to their country of destination without a "transit" period.

By focusing on the experiences of Central American transit migrants in Mexico, my dissertation examines if social networks, bonding, and trust emerge and remain during a transit that is long and dangerous. It has two main research questions: first, do existing social networks of Central American transit migrants in Mexico help them overcome the journey through this country? And second, can and do new social bonds, trust, and cooperation emerge in this context of extreme scarcity, stress, and violence?

It is important to understand the role of trust and bonding in transit, especially when this stage of the journey is becoming increasingly long and precarious for migrants worldwide. While the displacement and movement of migrants and refugees has increased, wealthy countries have become less welcoming. Since the late nineties both the European Union and the United States have enhanced the surveillance and control of their borders, while simultaneously extending migration control not only within their territories, but beyond them as well, to countries such as Morocco, Libya, and Mexico. Consequently, the journey for transit migrants has become more difficult and more dangerous, with the risk of violence and deportation starting earlier in their trajectory. A migration process that in the nineties took less than a week can now take up to a month. It is essential to study what strategies and connections migrants use to survive in this new, challenging scenario. As the conditions in migrant-sending countries keep deteriorating and the border control policies of destination countries become harsher, more and more migrants will become "trapped" in transit countries. Understanding how they survive and adapt to these new challenges can provide valuable information

for civil society organizations who strive to protect and improve the conditions of migrants.

The increase in control and dissuasion practices in Mexico and the constant presence of criminals, cartels, and gangs mean that while they are crossing the country, migrants are under a constant threat of deportation, or worse, violence. This stress and uncertainty, on top of the scarcity of resources, the absence of private spaces, and the mistrust of everyone, can potentially change the way in which migrants relate to each other; particularly, as strangers. In a situation where anyone could be a hustler, a kidnapper, or a free-rider, how do migrants decide whom to trust? Is it better to be alone or does loneliness increase vulnerability? Literature on social capital and social ties rarely asks these questions, since most of the research on bonding and trust is conducted among people who are not in peril and who live in relatively peaceful places. This research explores whether trust, bonding, and cooperation can be created and sustained in violent scenarios where most of the people are strangers to each other and where formal and informal mechanisms of control are completely absent.

By using the experiences and narratives of the migrants to understand how they view the road and react to it, I move away from top-down perspectives of migration. Putting myself on the ground, with the migrants, I observe the road through their eyes.

Contributions of this research: social networks, trust, and cooperation in transit migration

In this investigation, I focus on migrants who are transiting through Mexico to arrive in the United States. I chose to focus on this specific moment of the long and difficult transit process because it allows understanding of how migrants relate to their social

networks and create new ties under the strain of the road. In this section I will define transit migration and show why this step of the journey is the most challenging for migrants and their social ties.

Central American migrants in Mexico are in neither their country of origin nor their destination country; they exist in an "in-between" space where they have left but have not arrived. They are transit migrants. Most of the research on migration has focused on why people migrate, how they integrate into their destination societies, and what happens to them on returning to their country. Scarce attention has been paid to the experience of migrants while they migrate – as if the transition from their home country to the destination were easy and fast. Most of the world's migration is done to nearby countries or regions. However, the world's economic powers like the United States, Europe, or the Arab countries of the Persian Peninsula attract a great number of migrants from further away.

Migrants must cross one or more countries to arrive at their destination. Depending on the country they cross, they can have a variety of legal statuses, and the state and citizens deal differently with them. Papadoupoulou-Kourkoula (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008) defines migrants in transit as people who are in a new country and who intend on going to another to reside there (temporary or permanently). However, there is no consensus on how much time a migrant might stay in a country "transiting" before he becomes a migrant there. On the contrary, most of the scholars in migration believe that the concept of "transit migration" is highly ambiguous, that is has been politicized, and that it does not improve our analysis of migration.

Defining when someone is on transit is challenging because people do not always have a straightforward migration trajectory. They move when they can – for example, when

they hear a rumor about regularization in another country, when they are deported and want to go back, when they feel they were safer in the previous country. Such continuous and unpredictable movements make it impossible to categorize a migrant as in transit with certainty. Nor can settlement always be considered the opposite of being in transit (Collyer and de Haas, 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008). There are many migrants who remain but who don't forget their objective to go to a third country, and who might eventually move.

Defining and studying the transit migration process is vital to better understand this stage of the migratory journey and the reactions of the government and the society to transit immigrants. I propose that we should define migrants in transit not by the amount of time they spend in a territory or by their intentions but by the interactions and connections they have (or do not have) with the local population. By this I mean that the fundamental difference between transit immigrants and immigrants as we know them is that the former have no networks with or connections to the population, territory, or institutions of the country they are crossing. They are literally just passing through. In contrast, settled migrants usually have or make connections with locals or older migrants, they get jobs and get involved in some formal or informal institutions (such as getting a driver's license, going to church, or joining a group), and they occupy a permanent or semi-permanent place of residence.

This difference is essential because it potentially changes the dynamic between population and transit migrants. Permanent migrants are a minority group in a country, and have a certain dynamic within the society. Although their position may be very precarious, they are a known and established presence. This group can potentially organize itself to improve its position or demand rights from the state. Members can probably identify themselves and they likely know many more people in the same

situation. The social and work networks and even the discrimination that they experience all help reinforce a group identity.

In contrast, transit migrants only share a common destination. They do not have time and they do not need to know the people of the transit country or most of their fellow travelers (although they might form stronger ties, as my research shows). They need to get through the country or countries as safely and quickly as possible. Recently, the experience of transit migration has been documented across the world by civil society. Reports have clearly shown that migrants are more exposed to violence in the transit country closest to their destination – for example, the countries in the north of Africa (Doctors Without Borders, 2013) and in Mexico (Boggs 2015; Castañeda 2015) through the north of Africa and Mexico to become very dangerous for these migrants.

This research aims to understand the process of migration and transit from the point of view of the migrants. Although in recent years research on migration in transit to Europe and the United States has grown (Basok et al. 2015; Casillas 2008; Düvell 2012; Pitea 2010) there are still gaps in the knowledge of the transit migration process and the experiences of the migrants. Migrants in transit are isolated from their networks; they are crossing through a country that considers them illegal and that strives to stop and deport them; they are often prey for traffickers, mafias, drug cartels, or ordinary people who continually exploit and victimize them. They are in a constant state of precarity, feeling vulnerable, exposed, and continuously stressed by the threat of violence coming from state and criminal actors and from the geography of the territory they are crossing. The transit stage of the migration process is thus one of the most difficult and violent experiences that a migrant can experience. It is in this situation that migrants need more migration-specific cultural capital and more help from their social networks to survive and arrive to their objective.

This research adds to the nascent body of literature (Collyer and de Haas, 2012; Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008) revealing that transit migration is a distinct part of the migratory process. During transit, especially when the journey is long and challenging, migrants use different strategies and resources compared to other stages of the journey. This thesis shows that migrants are often at their most vulnerable during transit as they are separated from their networks and in a strange country that often does not want them there. By studying transit with a focus on social networks and trust, it is possible to discern how the strain of the journey and the length of transit affect the way in which social networks are maintained and created.

Social networks and trust in transit migration

The literature on international migration usually assumes that kin or kin-like ties are critical in helping migrants leave their countries and settle elsewhere (Liu, 2013; Portes, 1998; Singer and Massey, 1998). My ethnography challenges these findings by demonstrating that during transit migration, pre-established social networks do not help migrants. In transit, these migrants are completely alone. Yet, my findings also show that social networks are still relevant in transit migration even if traditional social networks are not. Instead, migrants are able to form strong social networks with others in their same situation; I call these groups *familias del camino*, road families. By identifying and describing these *familias del camino* – a new underexplored type of important tie that helps migrants survive their trajectories – my research seeks to contribute to the literature on social networks and migration.

So far, there has been a paucity of research on how social networks perform in contexts of violence (with the exception of (Berg Harpviken, 2009)). Previous studies on community reaction to catastrophes have outlined that, during times of crisis, people tend to become more selfish and focus on helping only their closest kin (Chong et al., 2011; Erikson, 1995, 1979). The behavior of transit migrants in Mexico challenges these observations: far from becoming individualistic, migrants in transit in fact form social groups with strangers and help each other out along the way.

Most of the scholarship on social networks has observed social groups when already formed and performing (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988); scholars rarely take into account the conditions under which such groups are formed (Smith, 2008; Tyler and Melander: 2011). This is often because they observe groups in stable environments where people become members naturally, by being born, for instance, or going to the same school or living in the same area. Few authors have asked how groups between complete strangers are formed, especially under dangerous circumstances. This ethnography contributes to the understanding of bonding and of social network formation by observing how migrants in transit who are isolated from their social networks manage to form strong bonds with strangers.

My research focuses on how vulnerable individuals who lack both time and information decide whom they can trust. Like other ethnographies dealing with this topic (Desmond, 2012; Gambetta and Hamil, 2005; Smith, 2008), I determine which signs and signals migrants observe in order to decide who is trustworthy and who is not. I also show that, often, trusting comes as much from observation as it comes from instinct or from the need to find someone to identify with. My findings add to research on trust in dangerous settings, extending the parameters of this topic to include for the first-time mobile populations.

This multi-sited investigation allowed me to observe the dynamics of smaller migrant groups (*familias del camino*) and those of the whole migrant community (transient community of *migrantes*). Having observed that all migrants in transit shared a common identity and a similar narrative, I expanded Malkki's (1995) concept of "accidental community of memory" to not only the shared understandings of the migrants but to how this collective identity affects the way they behave towards each other. I defined all the migrants that were migrating at the same time as a "transient community of *migrantes"*, a sort of accidental community that not only builds a common identity but creates solidarity among all the members. This community has: a) clearly defined membership; b) unspoken rules and norms; c) solidarity without trust and; d) it exists beyond its members.

This transient community of *migrantes* challenges the distinction between strong and weak ties that the literature on social networks and social capital tends to use (Granovetter, 1983; Liu, 2013; Putnam, 2007). The ties that I identified are neither weak nor strong but are, for many migrants, one of the most significant aspects of crossing Mexico. The sense of belonging, of support, of shared history and solidarity are fundamental for surviving on the road. This community exists without a practical objective and was created spontaneously. By identifying the concept of transient community, I provide a framework of analysis for studying community and camaraderie in other mobile populations or in other transit migration routes.

With this ethnography I problematize the idea that social networks are the most efficient social arrangement and are always positive for all the members of the group (Field, 2008). With my research I establish that families are not always the best group to survive a crisis, as they all share the same information and often refuse to seek help from outsiders, making themselves even more vulnerable. Similarly, I join a growing

number of researchers (Rosales, 2014; Toma, 2016) who show that being part of a group does not yield the same benefits for women as for men. The families that I studied usually relegate the women to an invisible private space and prevent them from interacting with other migrants.

Gender and transit migration

My ethnography focuses on women migrants and families that migrate together, exploring how they maintain and build social networks while they transit. Until recently, most of the studies on international migration have focused on the experience of male migrant workers, studying their decisions to leave, their settlement, and their return. If women were considered in these analyses, they were understood to be the wives or girlfriends who were left behind or who migrated for the sole purpose of joining their husbands or boyfriends. The agency of women in the migration process was often overlooked (Mahler and Pessar, 2006). Luckily, scholars such as Mahler and Pessar (2006) have focused on the female migration experience. These studies are a rich source of information that show that women often migrate without family reunification in mind. Some migrate by themselves to work, like Filipino nurses (Choy, 2000). Sometimes, the motivations for migrating are still gendered, such as fleeing an abusive husband (Gamburd, 2000) or getting away from community gossip (Brettell, 1995). These studies also reveal how women draw on their networks and resources to integrate and find a job in the new society (Liu, 2013; Toma, 2016). Focusing on migration's effects on the gendered division of labour both inside the families and in the communities of origin, they indicate how women's goals and strategies change as they spend time in their new countries (Buijis, 1993).

Studies that focus on women migrants have also led to the study of how migrants develop and maintain ties to their home country (Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2001; Morawska, 1996). Along these lines, scholars like Asakura (Asakura, 2014) have studied distant motherhood and challenged the idea of a "proximity motherhood" as the only type of motherhood possible (Asakura, 2014). However, to my knowledge, the issue of how gender roles and family dynamics change during transit migration in a violent context remains unexplored.[5]

In this research, I will add to the literature on female migration in two ways. First, I will analyse how women who migrate by themselves tackle the transit process and use their social ties and resources to improve their journey. I will also describe how they relate to the wider – mostly male – *migrante* community. Secondly, I will analyze not only individual migrants but also families who migrate together. This will allow me to understand if traditional family dynamics can survive the stress and threat of the journey. Many studies on gender and migration (Fouron and Glick Schiller, 2001; Mahler and Pessar, 2006) have shown how women's perceptions of their gendered roles change after moving to another country. Often, after moving, women who had not previously been employed find jobs outside of their homes and form new ties to a wider community. This newfound independence challenges the gendered roles of their society of origin and, while creating tension, also frequently empowers the women. Women in transit do not have the opportunity to get a job and to settle, since their intention is to arrive at a different country. However, they are faced with a different context and with new challenges when they are migrating. They have to alter their strategies and perhaps

[5] Although there is a very interesting study about how families engage in "family display" in destination countries (in this case, the United Kingdom) to present themselves as a "legitimate" family in the eyes of the State and their neighbours (Walsh, 2018)

their beliefs in order to overcome the journey. In this research I ask if the process of transit affects women's perceptions of their gendered roles and the way they relate to their families.

Research design

This research follows the migrant route through Mexico. I spent over five months doing fieldwork. My multi-sited ethnography started on the southern border of Mexico in Palenque and Tenosique (during June and July of 2015), moving next to the northern border, at Saltillo (September and August of 2015). Finally, I completed my fieldwork in Nogales, the Sonoran Desert, and Tucson in the United States (April and May of 2016). Moving along the route allowed me to see how migrants arrived at Mexico and prepared for their journey. I observed their physical state, preparations, and travel companions and learned about their moods, hopes, and plans. I later flew to the northern border of Mexico and waited, without success, for some migrants I had met. (I learned that the journey is long and challenging and you seldom re-encounter the people you wish to.) I interviewed migrants who had arrived at Saltillo and observed how they looked, who they joined, what they had learned, and how they had survived. Moving allowed me to understand how the transit affects the migrants. In Nogales I met the migrants on the verge of reaching the United States. I learned how this new border had a whole new set of rules, and how the migrants had adapted to them. In Tucson and the Sonoran Desert, I hiked the desert, went to Operation Streamline hearings, and to Church gatherings. In this way, I learned what awaited the people I had interviewed and met.

Every stage of the fieldwork was facilitated by a different actor concerned with migrants and migrants' rights. In the southern border of Mexico, I was able to join the Undocumented Migration Project and the Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económicas (CIDE) anthropology field school. They facilitated my research by providing lodging, food, advice, and contacts in the migrant houses (La 72 and J'tatic Samuel Ruiz García). In Saltillo, a colleague of mine from when I was working at Insyde, a migrants' rights organization, assisted my fieldwork in the Casa del Migrante de Saltillo. In Nogales, a member of the Samaritans allowed me to shadow him when he hiked in the desert and volunteered at the Kino canteen and the Juan Bosco migrant house. These contacts gave me valuable advice, showed me around, and provided me with invaluable background information about the places I was visiting.

I interviewed mostly men (see Appendix One), the majority of which were from Honduras and of the ages of between 16 and 25[6]. Although most of the migrants in transit in Mexico are men, violence and poverty in Central America have forced many women and children to take *el camino* and attempt to cross Mexico by themselves or with their families. Through this research, I acknowledge that the ways in which men, women, and families experience their migration trajectories are different and that they all have a unique perspective. I take a critical perspective of social networks and social capital by asking if all members of a social network benefit in the same way from participating in the association. I ask how women and families experience the road, and what additional obstacles they must face because of their gender.

[6] A detailed description of my interviewees is provided in the Appendix One.

Organization of the chapters

The second chapter begins with a literature review of the concepts of social capital, social networks, social networks in migration studies, and trust. I show how most of the extant literature has researched trust and bonding in contexts of peace and among people who have common ties to others. I then discuss the authors that have dealt with trust and bonding in times of crisis, especially during natural disasters and emergencies.

In chapter three, I describe how the conditions in Central America have deteriorated and have pushed people from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala to flee their home countries. Using quotes and stories from the migrants I interviewed as illustration, I outline how state corruption, gang violence, job precarity, displacement, and poverty have forced thousands of migrants to leave for the United States.

In chapter four I describe the contours of my multi-sited ethnography and discuss my methodology in depth. Here I explain why I carried out a multi-sited ethnography, how I gained access to the migrants in each place, and how I conducted my interviews. I also consider the opportunities and challenges that each site posed.

The chapter opens by focusing on the southern Mexican border and moves north thereafter. I describe the migratory policies that Mexico has implemented to hinder and deport undocumented migrants as well as the implications for the strategies that migrants use. I discuss my fieldwork in the migrant houses and neighborhoods of Tenosique and Palenque. Shifting the narrative to the northern border of Mexico, the chapter delineates the border area in Nogales and Saltillo and the physical and emotional conditions in which migrants arrive after weeks on the road. I then discuss my fieldwork and my access to the Saltillo migrant house and the Nogales *comedor*. Contrasting both regions, I delineate how the migrants are affected by the journey. Next

I explain how crossing Mexico is merely the first leg of the migration process as the migrants join Mexican migrants in their efforts to overcome the U.S.-Mexico border and the dissuasion policies that the US government has implemented. Following this, I describe the last stages of my fieldwork in the Sonoran Desert and in Tucson. It was here that I learned of the final challenges that the migrants have to face when attempting to arrive at the United States. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the advantages of doing a multi-sited ethnography when studying mobile populations.

In chapter five I discuss how, contrary to what the literature on community and trust would suggest, most migrants form *familias del camino*, road families, as soon as they arrive in Mexico. Chapter five unpacks how the migrants are affected by the aggression and dehumanization they face as soon as they arrive in Mexico and how, in turn, they react not by isolating themselves but by looking for "brothers". I reveal how migrants decide who is trustworthy by using a mix of strategic thinking and "gut feeling". Like traditional social networks, road families provide emotional support, information, help, identity, and resources to the members of the group. The chapter also discusses group longevity, and the ways in which members show they trust each other. These social networks – notwithstanding that they are not of the kind predicted in the literature – are crucial for surviving the migrant journey.

The first and second sections of chapter six analyze, respectively, those migrants who choose to go by themselves and the wider *migrante* community. Again, gender plays an important role in this chapter. Men who go it alone do so after having experienced a particularly traumatic event in transit, usually kidnapping. Women become loners because they believe men are problematic, rowdier, and might rape them. In the second section, meanwhile, I advance the concept of the transient community of *migrantes* – an imagined community that is formed by everyone who is transiting at the same time.

I discuss the origins of this community, its characteristics, and how migrants engage with it, ultimately showing that solidarity can thrive without trust and that migrants can form a community even while on the move.

In chapter seven, I analyze families that left Central America together, considering the gender dynamics of the road and the perception that male migrants have of women who migrate. This chapter expounds how women are punished for leaving their private sphere in Central America. Further, it details how the experience of being undocumented and unwanted in a country affects the masculine identity of some migrants and how they react by exerting more power in the only place where they have control: their families. I describe how families create a private sphere within which women are kept. In order to protect the women, the families become inward-looking (as the literature on catastrophes would suggest). Pursuing this notion further, I advance that one of the consequences of this isolation for the families is that they are separated from up-to-date information about the route; this makes them more vulnerable to violence and less likely to avoid it. As the chapter shows, then, women do not benefit from being part of this social group, and families are not the social arrangement best placed to cope with transit migration and its concomitant, ever-changing rules.

Concluding the dissertation, chapter eight outlines the main findings in relation to the theories outlined in chapter two, and points at new research paths and unanswered questions that might inform future research. The Appendix Two contains a detailed description of my interviewees and the Participant Information Sheet I gave to gatekeepers and people interested in my research.

This research was done in a context of extreme violence and stress for the migrants. I hope that when people finish reading it they end up with a confusing mix of anger and

hope. Anger because people are being forced to cross thousands of kilometers and overcome unspeakable obstacles to save and improve their lives. Hope because among the horrors they live, they always choose to share with each other their sodas, their sandwiches, their medicines, and their knowledge.

Chapter 2: Social networks, bonds, and trust in migration

Nogales, Mexico is situated south of Arizona and the Sonoran Desert. There, in the *Comedor* (canteen) of the Kino Border Initiative, is where the Mexican migrants who have been caught and deported and Mexican and Central American migrants who are still in transit converge to have breakfast and lunch. Besides free food, the *Comedor* provides free international phone calls for migrants. Some days, I was the one making the calls and chatting to the migrants who were waiting for their turn.

The calls between Mexicans and Central Americans differed in two main aspects: who they called, and their reason for calling. Mexicans, in contrast to most Central Americans, already had existing connections in the United States. They were calling to ask for money to get a new smuggler to cross the desert – and most of them got it. Their ties had their backs. Central Americans, on the other hand, almost never had ties in the United States and thus had no help to cross. They called their families in their home countries to let them know they were going to have to *jugársela en el desierto*, take their chances in the desert, because they did not have any money or help. One of the most important differences between Central American and Mexican migration is the fact that Central Americans, unlike Mexicans, migrate without the help of their social networks.

The social networks of Mexican migrants consist of family and close friends that have successfully arrived at the United States and settled. These ties are often willing to help the new migrant with information about crossing the border, with finding a smuggler or a place to stay when they arrive, and with helping them find a job. Scholars (Liu, 2013; Palloni et al., 2001; Tilly, 2007) have shown that these social networks are

fundamental in sustaining international migration. In contrast, the social networks of Central American migrants consist mostly of people who are still living in their home countries. When they do have family or friends in the United States, they usually refuse to help them cross Mexico or simply do not answer their phone calls. In essence, most Central American migrants do not have social ties with people in the United States and thus cannot get help from their social networks to migrate. However, they still attempt to cross Mexico to arrive at the United States and many of them succeed.

With this research, I aim to find out the role of social networks in transit migration. Are social ties still important? Who do migrants in transit associate with? Broader immigration literature puts much emphasis on social networks in shaping migratory flows and integration into host societies (Massey et al., 1990, 1991; Ryan et al., 2008). These rich networks of family and kin-like friends encourage the new migrant to cross, provide information and help, and help him settle when he arrives to a new place. This research asks if, during transit, social networks are still relevant and useful.

Social networks not only help migrants migrate and settle, but provide certainty and facilitate cooperation between its members during difficult and dangerous circumstances, like irregular migration (Berg Harpviken, 2009). These ties provide information about the route, money, and even help when crossing. Singer and Massey's (1998) article showed that having the help of a family member or friend increases the likelihood of migrating successfully and decreases the chances of getting hurt when crossing clandestinely from Mexico to the United States. Migrants in transit are the most vulnerable since they have to overcome journeys of weeks or even months in a situation of irregularity through countries they are not familiar with. During these vulnerable circumstances is when migrants are in dire need of help from their contacts

to complete these difficult journeys. Studying how they use their social networks and form new ones becomes fundamental, then.

Similarly, if migrants are forming new ties in order to survive the journey, it is relevant to learn how they choose their new acquaintances while they live in a context of uncertainty. While with kinship networks trust is usually implied, with complete strangers, trust becomes fundamental to network-formation and cooperation. This research, then, looks at how strangers build trust and social networks that lead to cooperation during the very vulnerable stage of transit migration.

Extant research on social networks, trust, and social capital looks at social networks and bonding as resources for facilitating migration, creating migration patterns, and migrant integration (Liu, 2013; Palloni et al., 2001; Portes, 1998; Ryan et al., 2008). Yet, it does not focus much on how bonds, trust, and networks are formed especially in a context where previous networks are not as helpful or are unable or unwilling to help. It is important to understand how individuals and groups react when resources are scarce and they feel threatened and vulnerable. Do the links that thrived in peaceful situations remain strong? Can new ties be formed among strangers? How do people survive when they become separated from their networks in a dangerous context? So far, these questions have not been looked at carefully by migration scholars.

This chapter presents a detailed and critical review of the literature on social networks, social capital, trust, and bonding to show the gaps that exist in the research. It shows how this literature is for the most part gender-blind and typically disregards the context in which the actors are acting. I also discuss the few existing studies that have dealt with trust, bonding, and cooperation in violent and dangerous settings, and how my own research builds on these studies and further develops this line of inquiry.

Social networks and social capital

Social networks have been theoretically equated with social capital (Putnam 2007: 137). Pierre Bourdieu defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1986: 248). The concept is instrumental because it focuses on the benefits that individuals get by participating in groups. For Bourdieu, social capital is the product of the effort of its members to keep useful and long-lasting relationships that could eventually yield benefits for themselves. He suggests that "[t]his is done through the alchemy of consecration, the symbolic constitution produced by social institution and endlessly reproduced in and through the exchange which it encourages and which presupposes and produces mutual knowledge and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986: 87).

According to Putnam (Putnam, 2007), social capital is fundamental for enhancing trust and creating social networks. Trust is a prerequisite for social networking. Once established, networks create a reputation system that minimizes individual defection and they create a norm of generalized reciprocity, thus increasing the trust of the group. In this way, a relationship of exchange that will be mutually beneficial is formed (Putnam et al., 1993). Once there is a network, the individuals reap emotional (Leslie and Grady, 1985; Richardson et al., 1991; Ryan et al., 2008), informal (Chatters et al., 2002; Stoller, 1985), and instrumental and practical support (Granovetter, 1983; Tietjen, 1985) from members of their group. Having ties with a community is very beneficial. Coleman (Coleman, 1988) emphasizes the role of these social structures in facilitating reciprocity, enforcing norms, and transferring resources and information, and has defined it as social capital.

According to Mark Granovetter (Granovetter, 1983), there are two types of social ties: strong and weak ties. Strong ties are the links with family and close friends; weak ties are the links with acquaintances that move in other social circles. The information provided by strong ties is more homogeneous; everyone in the group knows the similar things. Weak ties, because they are heterogeneous, can provide new information that the individual would not have gotten any other way (Granovetter, 1983). Analogously, Putnam described the links between people like oneself as bonding ties and the links with people different from oneself, bridging ties. Bonding ties are good for "getting by" while bridging ties are good for "getting ahead" (Putnam, 2000). Weak/bridging ties are the ones that promote wider trust and cooperation in the wider community. Along the same lines, Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 2000) argues that bridging social ties increase the "radius of trust" in a community and creates greater social capital for everyone. Many authors including Putnam (Putnam, 2007), Coleman (Coleman, 2001), and Fukuyama (Fukuyama, 2000) assume that strong social networks produce valuable social capital that increases cooperation and trust within a group.

However, recent studies have shown that social networks do not always generate benefits for their members (Portes, 1998). Sometimes, kin associations are unable or unwilling to help people in vulnerable circumstances (Desmond, 2012). Often, the most vulnerable members of the group do not gain as much from participating in an association as others (Rosales, 2014). In some cases, strong ties only help perpetuate a cycle of abuse and prevent the members from getting out. Conceptualizing social networks as a form of social capital ignores who benefits from the networks and to what degree. In many cases of exploitation, only the members of the network with more power benefit from the exchange (Cranford, 2005).

Social networks, social capital, and migration

Although most of the original literature on social capital assumes that it is rooted in local communities and neighbourhoods, studies of migration and migrant communities show that spatially dispersed networks are also critical for individuals. Social capital theories do not consider the dynamism and versatility of migrant networks. "Both Coleman and Putnam regard mobility as a key barrier to accessing and maintaining social capital. As Putnam notes, it takes time for a mobile person "to put down roots'" (Ryan et al., 2008: 686). Immigration studies show that this is not the case.

The networks theory argues that people usually migrate because they have a tie with someone in the country of destination (Massey et al., 1993). Even if this relationship is weak or distant, when they arrive, they usually find a community of people who receives them and who advises them on how to act (Liu, 2013). Being part of this community means having some social capital that reduces the costs and risks of moving (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2002; Massey et al., 1993). Social ties bind migrants and non-migrants in a web of social roles and interpersonal relationships, these personal networks are outlets of information and social and financial support (Hernández-León and Zúñiga, 2002; Boyd, 1989). These ties also affect the decision to migrate (Boyd, 1989; Tilly and Brown, 1967), the direction and persistence of the flows (Massey et al., 1993), and the shape of settlement and incorporation patterns (Massey et al. 1991; Tilly and Brown 1967). Networks become stronger as more migrants use them and form part of them. Once a strong network has been established new migrants can then benefit from this increased "social capital" when they decide to emigrate (Massey et al. 1991).

Settled migrants look for emotional support through texts, messages, or calls from their families in their countries of origin (Ryan et al., 2008). New migrants use emotional and economic resources from their contacts in the source and the destination country

(Boyd, 1989). Migrants are sometimes very involved in the decision-making process of their families back home, and they provide economic, social, cultural and emotional support (Portes and Landolt, 2000). Migrants can also experience social control through networks linked to their communities of origin (Morawska, 1996). Migrant networks become less stable over time. Since migrants are on the move, they establish and sometimes break relationships.

By analysing migration from a network perspective, it is easy to "appreciate that contemporary migrants travel across geographic space and national borders but, at the same time, often remain within known networks" (Melero Malpica, 2008: 36). A migrant is less vulnerable if she has a network to rely on; her community creates a security net. Even when these groups exist in racist or xenophobic countries, the migrants have each other. Therefore, we can observe niches of migrants from the same community in certain areas of the countries where they settle (Portes, 1998).

These social ties also provide information and shortcuts for the migrants. Tilly and Brown have shown that migrants without experience need networks and kinship relations the first times they migrate (Tilly and Brown, 1967). Migrants do not have to empirically learn the skills they require to migrate; they can rely on the expertise of others. However, once migrants gain more experience and spend more time in the new country they start relying on their own abilities and other sources of aid in solving problems (Tilly and Brown 1967).

Audrey Singer and Douglas S. Massey (Singer and Massey, 1998) proved the importance of networks and experience when migrating. They interviewed Mexican migrants about their experiences of crossing the northern border of Mexico to the United States. They found that the probability of getting caught decreased for first-time

migrants if they had networks. The members of their network would either help them to cross themselves or would advise them on how to get a good and honest smuggler that would get them there safely. Having the help of an acquaintance not only increased the probability of success; it also made the migrants feel less vulnerable (Singer and Massey 1998).

Networks theory has been very useful in explaining why migrants leave their country and how they find material and social support when they settle. Massey and Singer (1998) showed that networks are also very important while crossing the border between Mexico and the United States. In general, new migrants learn "the rules of the game" from their acquaintances. If migrants know the rules and the rules remain the relatively stable (like in the U.S.-Mexico border), they have fewer chances of being exposed to violence. Migrants with networks do not need to experiment to learn how to behave in each situation. Networks are a great substitute for experience (Singer and Massey 1998). The creation of migration-specific social capital through experience and through social ties increases the likelihood of a safe and successful migration.

Social networks, trust, cooperation, and social capital in transit

Social networks in transit

My study of Central American migrants through Mexico will analyse how social networks are created, sustained and used during transit in Mexico. As I showed in the introduction, transit is a distinctive part of the migration process where migrants are vulnerable and often separated from their networks. This study will contribute by showing how new ties are formed and trust is created and sustained among strangers in

challenging circumstances and by outlining the negative impact of social networks, including how women and men are benefited differently from their membership to a group.

Massey and Singer (1998) published their research before 2001, the year the migratory laws in the U.S. started to become even harsher.[7] The study was focused on Mexican migrants crossing from Mexico into the United States, not on Central American migrants crossing Mexico. In Mexico, there has been an increase in the number of Central American migrants transiting in the last decades and the border control strategies have made the migrating process longer and more dangerous. When in 1990 crossing through Mexico took around a week according to interviews with migrants, now it takes at least a month (much more if they are hurt or kidnapped along the way). Migration in transit has become more relevant than ever, and it is important to study the role of social networks for transit migrants – in the case of Massey and Singer's study, Central American migrants in Mexico. Since they did not consider Central Americans, the study does not reflect the variety of reasons they have for leaving their countries, including poverty and violence. Additionally, they did not consider that social networks would refuse to participate in helping the migrants.

Their study did not take into account the "expiration date" of the migration specific cultural capital that is created. For how long can a migrant say that the information they have about *el camino*, the road, is useful? This is a relevant question because if the

[7] In 2001, after 9/11, the United States redefined migration as a security threat and created the Department of Homeland Security and passed the PATRIOT ACT and the Secure Border Initiative. Later, in 2005, the House of Representatives passed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (HR 4437), the Real ID Act, and the Secure Fence Act. To learn more about how these policies have made migrating to the United States more dangerous and have increased the number of deaths see: Jason De León (2015), "The Land of the Open Graves: Living and Dying in the Migrant Trail", University of California Press.

actors – the police, the migratory agents, the criminals – on the road frequently change their strategies, whatever knowledge a migrant gets will soon become useless. The distance they must cross in Mexico (over 3,000 km), the presence of many non-state criminal actors (like cartels and gang members), and the constant changes in policy of the Mexican government, mean that the road is less stable and predictable, even for experienced migrants. In Mexico, migration-specific capital devaluates fast. It is important to understand how Central Americans use their networks, tackle the road, and adapt to the changes that a weak state and a variety of non-institutional criminal actors create. This study will build on Massey and Singer's (1998) idea and will expand the research to Central American transit migrants. It will evaluate if there is migration-specific social capital to be learned, how long does it last, and how well migrants in transit transmit it. It will also analyse why transnational social networks are not as important in transit through Mexico as they are when crossing the U.S.-Mexico border.

There is a growing number of authors that have analysed and described Central American transit migration, and sometimes settlement, in Mexico, especially in the Sonosuco region of Chiapas. Carmen Fernández Casanueva's ethnographies of Hondurans in Tapachua and Huixtla (Chiapas) study the social interactions of migrants who perhaps intended to transit but decided or were forced to stay in Mexico. She shows how they create new social networks with Hondurans and with Mexicans in order to survive, settle and become part of the community (Fernández Casanueva, 2017, 2014). Other authors have shown how social ties help migrants find jobs in Chiapas (Blanco Abellán, 2014), how knowledge is transmitted by new acquaintances (Wilson González, 2014) and how social networks make migrants less vulnerable to the unpredictability of migrating to Mexico (Castillo Rivas, 2014). All these findings

show that the use and creation of new ties is fundamental when settling and learning how to succeed and adapt in Mexico for Central American migrants.

Research on Central American migrant to and through Mexico has also highlighted how Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have different migratory histories that affect the number and quality of the ties that migrants can use. While Guatemalans in Chiapas are able to find jobs and migration specific cultural capital through their friends and family (Blanco Abellán, 2014), Salvadorans and Hondurans have to create new ties if they want to survive when they migrate, as they do not have strong social capital in Mexico or in the United States (Castillo Rivas, 2014; Fernández Casanueva, 2017; Menjívar, 2000). These studies focus on people who have decided to settle and form new ties, while mine will follow the migrants through Mexico to see how they fare. However, it is relevant to observe that migrants seem to usually have the impulse to form new ties in order to survive a difficult situation when they are surrounded by strangers. Forming ties had been mentioned as a survival strategy by Basok et al. (Basok et al., 2015)

Throughout this research, I will take a critical look at the assumption that social networks always produce positive social capital for its members. Cecilia Menjívar's ethnography (Menjívar, 2000) of Salvadorians in the United States, for example, shows how Salvadorian informal social networks are limited by the structural context around them and thus, limit the members in how much they can help each other. Although the majority of her informants were able to obtain help to migrate -in contrast to what Carmen Fernández Castañeda (2017) observed about Hondurans- they did not receive they help they expected when they arrived at the United States. The social ties were simply exhausted and unable to provide. My research will inquire if social ties

are able and willing to help Central American migrants through Mexico.(Fernández Casanueva, 2017, 2014)

Formation of groups in vulnerable situations

In both the general theories of social networks and in the studies of networks and migration the focus is on already existing ties. Little attention is paid to group formation[8] and studies focus on how groups perform instead. It is important to understand how strangers bond and become acquaintances, friends, and family because the circumstances in which the group is formed can tell us a lot about the types of members it has, its objectives, and the way they cooperate – or not – to achieve them. Knowing how groups are created is especially important when studying contexts where people end up isolated from their usual social networks, for example in catastrophes, emergencies, wars, and violent situations. Groups are indispensable to recruit resources for survival; understanding how they form and perform is fundamental to learning how human beings attempt to survive in peaceful and violent settings. Scholars (Desmond, 2012; Smith, 2008; Tyler and Melander, 2011) have already asked these questions for vulnerable populations, such as homeless youth and the urban poor who are facing evictions. In this research, I am looking at the equally vulnerable population of transit migrants.

Of course, some people are put into their groups naturally; families, communities, schools, and jobs are natural environments for the creation of bonds. The relationships

[8] With the exception of a brief mention in Jason de León's ethnography about the accidental families that migrants form when crossing the Sonoran Desert, "The Land of Open Graves" (2015).

of individuals are determined by their place of birth, family, social status, and occupation. They form ties with the people they are frequent. For Coleman (Coleman, 1988), the family is the origin of the social networks and then these expand to the surrounding community. For Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986), people were born into the group/social category that would form their social capital, then the mutual exchange, the knowledge, and the recognition cement the identity of the members of the group. In this case, he assumes a long-lasting relationship where individuals have time to build bonds and reinforce each other's behaviours. Bourdieu also argues that physical, economic, and social proximity are fundamental to establish and maintain a social group (1986).

Physical proximity and having something in common seem to be the most important requisites for group formation. Hilary Smith (Smith, 2008) explored the formation of "street families" among homeless youth. According to her interviewees, these self-supportive networks naturally emerged from a shared sense of the homelessness experience. Homeless youth tend to form ties with those who share this commonality and who are physically closer to them (Smith, 2008). This is perhaps why the social groups of homeless youths tend to be heterogeneous in age, gender, role, and housing status in contrast to non-homeless youth who usually relate to people their age (Tyler and Melander, 2011). Similarly, Desmond (2012) has observed that the "disposable ties" that poor people form are created in places where they are able to gather such as bus stops, homeless shelters, or churches.

In their ethnography of the formation of social networks among homeless youth, Kimberly A. Tyler and Lisa A. Melander (2011) observed that most of their interviewees reported that they initiated the first contact with strangers who would become their friends. This is an interesting finding because young homeless people

assumed the risk of engaging with a stranger to form a social link. They do not have much choice when it comes to network selection, even if they form strong ties and eventually trust and help each other. Their vulnerability and isolation forces them to act socially and form bonds with people they would normally avoid. Their precarity pushes them to take the risk and talk to strangers with the hope of forming a group that will provide emotional support, information, and resources (Tyler and Melander 2011).

My research will add to the literature on network formation by analysing how people who are separated from their usual networks form ties and cooperate in a context of constant threat and violence. Most of the literature on social networks and social capital (Coleman, 2001; Granovetter, 1983; Singer and Massey, 1998) has only focused on how these bonds provide benefits to the members of the group. However, few authors (De León, 2015; Tyler and Melander, 2011) have studied how vulnerable individuals who are in a very weak position overcome their mistrust and manage to form ties with strangers they know nothing about. My research on social network formation of Central American migrants in Mexico will allow understanding of what individuals think about when they are deciding who to form bonds with. It will help outline what conditions and spaces facilitate the creation of social ties.

Groups, however they are formed, have a set of explicit or implicit rules that guide and limit the behaviour of the members. According to Bourdieu, the younger members are socialized to the norms and ideologies of the group by their social relations. This ensures the continuity of the group's traditions (Bourdieu, 1986). Singer and Massey (Singer and Massey, 1998) showed that Mexican migrants to the United States acquire migration-specific social capital through their ties with more experienced migrants. These new migrants are socialized to the rules of the migration process and later, when they became experienced, they too transmitted the rules. In this research, I will show

how migrants understand and transmit the rules of the transit migration process to each other by forming new social networks and joining a wider community of migrants.

Trust and cooperation among strangers

Transit migration complicates the general ideas about trust and social networks because the social ties and bonds that migrants form during their journey are with strangers with whom they have no ties in common. This means that migrants hope that their new acquaintances will not harm them and will act in their interests even if they have no way of making sure they are trustworthy. When relationships are uncertain, trust becomes important (Foddy and Yamagishi, 2009).

There is debate about how trust is developed and maintained between strangers. Some authors believe that trusting is a personality trait, a cognitive bias, based on interaction with the person or her reputation, or even on the role that the "trusted" person occupies. Finally, some researchers agree that people act trustworthily because the incentives are right. either because they align with the interests of both actors or because there are social norms that, if broken, incur a cost (Habyarimana et al., 2009).

Foddy and Yamagishi (2009) have argued that trust develops from the relationship between interactants, especially if they share a group membership. "Evidence is extensive that categorizing people into one of two mutually exclusive groups (even arbitrary groups) can lead them to hold more favourable evaluations of their group relative to the other and to distribute resources in favour of the intergroup" (Foddy and Yamagishi, 2009: 18). These positive responses appear not to depend on continuing

interactions with a specific person or on specific information about the shared category but just on the self-categorization as group members.

The authors found, through experiments, that positive sentiments for the other are not a necessary condition for trust. “The one similarity required is a shared belief that group members will act on the basis of a norm of generalized group-bound reciprocity” (Foddy and Yamagishi, 2009: 20). Even group members who believed the members of their own group had a bad reputation still expected a better treatment from them as they were part of the same collective. So even when people do not have positive feelings for their group but they know their group members will identify them as one of their own, they trusted that their group would act favourably towards them.

Trust in strangers of the same group facilitates forming new relationships. However, trusting is always risky as people who choose to trust put themselves in a vulnerable position. Initiating cooperation, showing vulnerability, and showing trust can initiate a potentially beneficial relationship with strangers but can also have negative consequences for the individual if the trust is misplaced (Foddy and Yamagishi, 2009). Therefore, in situations where there are social institutions in place that decrease vulnerability, trust is easier to create.

In the absence of formal institutions, people must use their own cues to form an opinion about a stranger. Gambetta and Hamil (Gambetta and Hamil, 2005) showed in an extensive ethnography of taxi drivers in New York and Belfast that they must balance trusting that their clients will be “good” with the need to get fares. To do that, they use a combination of experience, skills, and statistical bias to decide which client looks trustworthy enough to risk picking up. This ethnography also shows how taxi drivers protect themselves (through using screens, being ready to fight or being meek, and

keeping in contact with other units) to minimize the risks they face. In other settings, such as in urban poor neighbourhoods, people pay attention to how clean the clothes of the other person are and, the type of language they use and how religious they seem to be (Desmond, 2012). Poor people who are down on their luck also learn how to "signal" that they are looking for a friend by exchanging small items, thus showing they are to be trusted and judging if the other person can be trusted if he returns the favours (Desmond, 2012).

Despite all the risks that trusting someone new entails, ethnographic and experimental research has shown that trust between strangers can exist and cooperation can flourish without the need to create social ties, even from a disadvantaged point of view (Binder and Jackson, 2011; Gambetta and Hamil, 2005). Thus, a shared social tie is not indispensable to create trust and cooperation, in contrast to what Putnam (1993) had established.

Even between strangers and in the absence of formal institutions, there are informal rules that encourage trustworthiness and cooperation and punish defectors. Self-governed groups develop their own institutions to solve collective action problems. One of the most common mechanisms of control is reputation. Reputation can sustain cooperation, especially if there is repeat interaction between the members of the group (Ostrom, 2009). Unfortunately, when groups are big and people do not have the opportunity to know the background of someone, incentives to cheat can outweigh the opportunities to cooperate since a cheater knows he will not carry with him that reputation in the future (Gosh and Ray, 1996; Kranton, 1996).

The threat of punishment is another way in which groups can prevent cheating. The mere presence of an in-group punishment mechanism reduces the incentives and the

likelihood to cheat, thus stimulating good behaviour among members of the group. This facilitates exchanges and sustains the group reputation (Kimbrough and Rubin, 2015).

Closure of the social structure is important not only for the existence of effective norms but also for another form of social capital: the trustworthiness of social structures that allows the proliferation of obligations and expectations. Defection from an obligation is a form of imposing a negative externality on another. Yet, in a structure without closure, it can be effectively sanctioned, if at all, only by the person to whom the obligation is owed. Reputation cannot arise in an open structure, and collective sanctions that would ensure trustworthiness cannot be applied. Thus, we may say that closure creates trustworthiness in a social structure (Coleman 2000: 25-26).

Once trust is established, people can start working together to achieve an objective. Trust is essential for ensuring cooperation between strangers or for people who meet infrequently because – as shown earlier – there are few opportunities to punish the defectors (La Porta et al., 2000). Low trust induces defensive behaviour and that can translate into non-cooperation (in the commons dilemma) (Brann and Foddy, 1987) while higher trust generates higher levels of cooperation. Trust is also important for group performance; “A group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust” (Coleman 2000: 19). Kristian Berg Harpviken (Berg Harpviken, 2009) showed in his ethnography of social networks in wartime Afghanistan that social ties can provide the members of their group with information, security, and money in dangerous times. With these three basic resources, refugees could flee quickly and safely.

Even in open groups where people come and go and reputations cannot be formed, some sort of solidarity and cooperation can exist if the conditions are right. Indirect reciprocity (helping someone because a different person helped you) generates feelings of solidarity and unity among a group of strangers. Most of the time, the increased solidarity comes with increased trust and feelings of affection even in the absence of common values or prior history (Molm, Collett, and Schaefer 2007). Yet, when the link between solidarity and trust has been observed, the actors were rarely among strangers and their lives were not at risk (with the exception of the ethnographies on homeless youth).

As previous research has shown, trusting always involves putting oneself in a vulnerable position; it always includes risk. Individuals are willing to put themselves in a vulnerable situation if they believe there are weak incentives for others to take advantage; for example, if they want to continue cooperating, if the objectives are similar, or if there are control mechanisms limiting the behaviour. Lab experiments such as the ones performed by Foddy and Yamagishi (2009) and Kimbrough and Rubin (2015) have studied how people decide on someone's trustworthiness in low stakes experimental situations. People have more time to make up their mind and have less to lose if they make a mistake. Ethnographies such as Gambetta and Hamil's (Gambetta and Hamil, 2005), Harpviken's (2009), and Smith's (2008), on the other hand, look at high-stakes situations where actors have to decide quickly if they trust a stranger. My research will contribute to the study of trust by following these ethnographic studies in the case of Central American migrants.

Trust and social ties during difficult conditions

Besides Carmen Fernandez Casanueva's research (2017) there are no studies that specifically deal with how social ties and trust are established and maintained during the strain of transit migration. Authors agree that trust is a central component in most aspects of everyday life. However, when a crisis surfaces, trust and estimating trustworthiness become even more important as there is more uncertainty about the behaviour of other people and the institutions that control behaviour. A crisis comes up when there is a threat and there are not adequate resources to respond to it – for example, during a storm for which a community is not prepared, or during a migration process where the migrant faces unexpected violence. During a catastrophe, there is a heightened risk while at the same time, people depend more on each other. Consequently, trust becomes even more valuable and determining who is trustworthy becomes even more important (Webb, 1996). During a disaster, people readjust their views on loyalty and betrayal, friendship and treachery. An emergency is unique for creating and destroying trust. Trusting becomes more difficult because the cost of being deceived is higher. Despite all these, authors have documented several instances where strangers are able to create new ties with strangers during these stressful times (Desmond, 2012).

Most of the literature on social ties and trust during violent and stressful settings has been done by scholars who study the effects of catastrophes such as hurricanes and flooding on the communities that experience them. In general, most authors agree that when a community goes through a violent situation, trust and bonds among the community members are severed – weak ties disappear – and strong ties inside the family become deeper (Erikson, 1995). In a situation where there are scarce resources,

the increased information asymmetries between people provides excuses to break social contracts (Picou and Martin, 2007). The displacement of people and the material and human losses lead to a state of emergency where the formal and informal rules that governed the community become useless. People become focused on the survival of the members of their closest network (Fogleman and Parenton, 1959). Fleming *et al* (Chong et al., 2011) observed this happening in Chile after the 2010 earthquake and Erikson (Erikson, 1995, 1979) has observed this in multiple communities after natural disasters. Sometimes, during emergencies, gender roles became more traditional and men took on the role of "protector and authority figure" of the family (Fogleman and Parenton, 1959).

Kristian Berg Harpviken (2009) is one of the few authors that has analysed how actors use their social networks and how these perform while fleeing violence. He studied the role of social networks when people escape situations of war, thus becoming forced migrants. After years of fieldwork in communities in Enjil in Afghanistan, he concluded that "social networks are critically important to people who contemplate, plan or carry out flight in war situations" (Berg Harpviken 2009: 167). He discovered that individuals who were deciding to leave had a variety of reliable sources of information and did not need to rely on brokers or incomplete information. Most of these migrants had time to make the decision to leave and to revitalize networks that might be useful for them. They also had time to gather assets and decide who was leaving and staying.

When making the decision to leave, the displaced people in Enjil could collect funds within their local family network without asking for a loan from acquaintances living abroad. This strategy turned out to be for the best because the migration and the war had impoverished the acquaintances that could have helped before. In the case of these

displaced people, they revitalised their existing networks when deciding and preparing to flee. In the exile, they continued to thrive while new networks were built (Berg Harpviken 2009).

Although Kristian Berg Harpviken did not study the transit of the refugees, he showed that networks are still important for people who are migrating in situations of stress and violence. Social ties did not disintegrate, and people did not become individualist and selfish, looking after their survival only. However, in this case, the families decided to flee almost as a unit and they arrived at a place where members of their network had already settled. These forced migrants were rarely separated from their connections during the whole process. In contrast, most Central American migrants are most of the time isolated from their pre-existing ties while in Mexico.

Groups can sometimes be formed in contexts of uncertainty and violence and once they are formed they generate self-identification among strangers. This is especially true after experiencing a traumatic experience that shows individuals that they share a common fate with the people surrounding them, like survivors from a wreck or migrants in transit (Drury et al., 2009). This sense of belonging encourages everyone to act in the group's best interests, even when they do not know each other personally. Researchers observed this happening with the survivors of the London bombings of 2005, for example (Drury et al., 2009).

Similarly, Liisa Malkki observed that people living in refugee camps had shared understandings of their situation and formed an "accidental community of memory" that was not anchored in a local or national community but that was "less explicit and often more biographical, microhistorical, unevenly emerging sense of accidental sharings of memories and transitory experience" (Malkki, 1995: 91). For her,

“accidental communities of memory” can be formed by people who have experienced war together; by people who have lived in a refugee camp, or by people who fled a revolution, for example. In all these cases, the event brings people together who might not otherwise have met in the regular course of their lives. They all understand that they lived through a unique experience that only those who were there will be able to understand: their now shared and transient history.

This self-identification generates feelings of solidarity among a group of strangers. Most of the time, the increased solidarity came with increased trust and feelings of affection even in the absence of common values or prior history (Molm, Collett, and Schaefer 2007). This solidarity can be observed when members of the new group share resources and provide emotional support for each other. This help becomes fundamental to overcoming vulnerable situations (Tyler and Melander, 2011). The small groups that young homeless people form share money and resources and provide advice, support, and protection to each other. Social groups are one of their most important assets. Having peers who protect them makes them less vulnerable to violence. In short, social ties can be created to cope with a hostile environment. This research asks if migrants are able to generate feelings of self-identification and reciprocity with strangers in their same situation and if these ties are useful to overcoming the dangers of crossing Mexico.

A complementary explanation for the solidarity and help among people who survived catastrophes is the karmic investment theory. Converse, Risen, and Carter (Converse et al., 2012) have shown that when “uncertainty is high and personal control is lacking, people may be more likely to help others as if they can encourage fate's favour by doing good deeds proactively” (Converse, Risen, and Carter 2012: 1). According to them, people connect bad outcomes to moral failings and good outcomes to good behaviour.

Therefore, when they are expecting something to happen beyond their control they "invest" in good behaviour to tip the balance to positive outcomes.

Negative aspects of social capital

It is also imperative to understand that social ties and social capital do not benefit all the members of the network in the same way. Some members even get negative capital when they participate in a network (Portes, 1998). Studies have shown that in general, migrant women benefit less from ties than migrant men. Hellermann (2006), for example, has shown how women who migrate by themselves are sometimes unable to get help from their networks who regard them with mistrust because they are breaking the established gender norms. Sorana Toma's (Toma, 2016) research on Senegalese women's labour market outcomes in Europe found that men are less willing to help women of whose migration they do not approve. Children also inhibit migrant women's labour participation as women are still considered to be responsible for childcare and house duties. Therefore, these women become more isolated and have weakened social networks and less social capital. In contrast, women migrating independently are more likely to work than those who move in relation to their partner. Hellermann (2006) similarly documents the suspicious and exclusionary attitudes with which "single" women migrating from Eastern Europe to Portugal are confronted in their co-ethnic communities.

Researchers have also found mainly negative human capital returns for female workers (Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Rosales 2014), especially when traditional gender roles are reinforced even after migrating. For example, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo (1994) found

in her study of networks among Mexican domestic workers in the Bay Area that sometimes the new migrants were exploited by their more experienced fellows. Similarly, Zhou and Logan (Zou and Logan, 1989) found negative social capital for women working in the New York City Chinese enclave; their findings show that men were improving their condition at the cost of women's opportunities. These studies not only show that social networks do not always have a positive effect, but illustrate how networks operate in gendered ways to produce differences in outcomes for men and women (Rosales 2014: 2565). Part of the issue might be that women tend to draw on female networks and that female networks are isolated. The labour markets are also segregated so less-established female networks are not useful if women want to progress.

In her study of the Los Angeles janitorial industry, Cynthia Cranford (2005), for example, showed that employers often recruited new workers by using the networks of their current employees. However, employees who helped hire their family members and friends did not always tell them about the difficult conditions they lived in, probably because they were embarrassed or did not want to worry them. This allowed the employers to find new vulnerable migrant workers to exploit in the decentralized, de-unionized context of this industry. Similarly, Rocío Rosales (2014) showed in her study of Mexican street vendors in Los Angeles that although social networks facilitated migrating and finding a job for the newcomers, they also had disadvantages. Out of fear and embarrassment, migrants who had already arrived did not tell people back home that they were exploited and abused by their employers. This lack of information perpetuated the cycle of abuse by allowing new migrants to arrive and be exploited as well (Rosales, 2014). Thus, if those who are part of the network are themselves exploited or lack resources to help their kin or if they are unwilling to

transmit resources and support to the rest of their ties, social bonds will not yield social capital and might even produce negative effects.

Since most of the research on social capital and social networks has assumed that social ties always yield positive results, it is important to research the formation, performance, and outputs of social ties with a perspective that acknowledges the potential negative impacts of bonding, as Portes (1998) has cautioned. It is also important to research social networks and social capital with a gendered perspective, as women are often the most disadvantaged by their participation in social networks, especially in traditional societies like those of Mexico and Central America. A research design and an ethnography that observe *all* the aspects of group formation and performance will enrich the literature in social capital and will provide better information about who benefits and when from the group's capital. My research attempts to contribute to this literature by taking a gendered perspective and by analysing the social networks of transit migrants with a critical eye that does not assume positive outcomes.

It is therefore important to consider how women are affected – positively or negatively – by their ties in destination and origin while they try to cross through Mexico. This research will cover the gap in the literature by considering the ways men and women build social networks and use them to survive the road. It will also observe how the dynamics of families that migrate are affected by the transit and the constant threats. It will study how women and men use different strategies to form bonds and to get help while they are in Mexico. This will add to the growing body of literature that intends to show that social networks and social capital are not gender-neutral and that there are differences in how men and women benefit from their ties.

Contributions to the literature

This research will advance the literature on social networks and migration by asking if social networks are still relevant in transit, when the length of the road and the time it takes to overcome it increase. Few authors have observed and documented how strangers become a group in challenging situations. This study will add to studies on group formation by studying how social groups are created between strangers in contexts of violence and instability, like the transit migration through Mexico. Similarly, it will add to ethnographic studies on trust among strangers during uncertain situations by analysing what makes strangers trust each other and how groups of people who do not know each other develop trust and even solidarity. Research on social capital and social networks usually assumes that links to others provide positive outcomes. This investigation will take a critical perspective and will ask if ties are always an asset for the members of a group.

Chapter 3: The beginning of the journey

Luis did not imagine that he would spend his daughter's second birthday surrounded by nuns, volunteers and migrants in Palenque, Mexico. He did not think that Jonathan, his oldest son, only five, would spend his day running around a migrant house, not in his backyard. Luis had a truck, he had bought it last year, and a motorcycle. He and his wife had a house that was good enough for them in Honduras. Jonathan was going to start school soon. And then, the Maras, the gangs, came. He owed them money or he had angered them… it did not matter, they had to leave because Luis knew they would die if they stayed. That's how Luis and his family ended up staying six months in the migrant house in Palenque while they applied for a visa that would allow them to move through Mexico (their plan was to eventually get to the United States).

Mayra, a mother of one, told me that she also left Honduras as a response to the violence and the poverty she experienced. She told me that she decided to go to the United States by herself to be able to earn enough money to send her son to a good school and to eventually move him out of the dangerous neighbourhood where they lived. "Yes, we are poor but I don't know if I would have left just to make money. I left because if I earn enough money I can have him move to a safe neighbourhood or even with me to the United States. Honduras is poor and very dangerous."[9]For Mayra, and many like her, poverty was not the only reason behind her leaving her country. Poverty she could have taken: it was the violence that made her decide to finally take the step and leave.

This chapter discusses the history and current context of the migration of Central Americans to the United States. Central American migration has not received as much

[9] Interview: Mayra, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.

attention as Mexican migration, perhaps because of the smaller number of migrants or perhaps because of the size of the region. However, the flows have increased substantially since the 1960s and will most likely continue to increase as the conditions of some Central American countries deteriorate.

I present a historical analysis of the migratory flows, showing how macro factors such as poverty, unemployment, natural disasters, and violence interact with individual decision-making and kinship networks to create and sustain these flows. I subscribe with Massey, Durand, and Malone when they say, "international migration originates in the social, economic, and political transformations that accompany the expansion of the markets" (Massey, Durand, and Malone 2003: 21). However, as Kristian Berg (Berg Harpviken, 2009) showed in the case of wartime Afghanistan, widespread political and criminal violence not only has the expected effect of forcing people out of their homes; it also changes the way they migrate.

In the case of Central America, it is important to consider political, economic, and social reasons to migrate as well as generalised political and criminal violence. Often, all these factors are interlaced and one affects the other, like Melissa's story shows. Distinguishing between "economic" and forced migrants becomes impossible. It is essential to know under which circumstances migrants make the decisions to leave. By doing so we can understand the way they plan and fulfil their journey towards the United States.

This chapter provides the context of the migrants' departure with the intention to understand how they tackle their journey in Mexico. To do that I start by analysing the consequences of the civil wars in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala, when most flows originated. Then, I follow by searching for the factors that fomented migration

after the peace process, mainly the liberalisation of the markets and natural disasters. It will finish with an account of the current situation of Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, the countries that send the most migrants to the United States.

It will be evident by following the history of the migration that it is impossible to make a clear distinction between violence and poverty as reasons for migrating in these countries. These two factors have been intertwined for decades and scholars, migrants, and policymakers agree that one cannot be fixed without tackling the other.

Beware of the train. Most migrants took the train when I interviewed them in 2015.

Civil Wars in Central America

Before the civil wars started in Central America, migration to the United States was negligible. Central American countries did not have a guest-worker program like Mexico. When people relocated, they tended to go to other countries in the region or

to the south of Mexico. The wars forced migrants to move further away to escape the death squads and/or the military. Mexico and the United States had suddenly become good alternatives for those who could escape.

The civil war in Nicaragua started in 1979 when the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSFNL) waged war against the Somoza dictatorship. After Somoza left, the Government of National Reconstruction took control of the government. Despite having started as a collation of moderates and leftists, the moderates were pushed out. The remaining members passed laws that restricted civil liberties and increased the security apparatus to keep the Contras, the counterinsurgency supported by the United States, under control. In 1990, the civil war ended when the National Opposition won democratic elections. The United States lifted the embargo they had maintained for years and helped rebuild the country.

The eleven-year struggle left fifty thousand wounded, three hundred thousand homeless and thirty thousand dead. Over half a million Nicaraguans had left the country; most of them went to the United States. In 1970, there were 16,125 Nicaraguans living legally and irregularly in the United States. By 1980, one year after the conflict started, 44,166 people had migrated and by 1990 the number had almost quadrupled to 168,659 (Stoney and Batalova, 2013).

In 1979, a military-civilian junta overthrew the government of El Salvador after years of protest following fraudulent elections in 1972. The agencies of Salvadoran national security used violent methods to eliminate the rebels and the dissenters, mainly the FMLN. Privately funded paramilitary groups or “death squads” helped the armed forces control the population. Many Salvadorans thought to have ties with the insurgent groups were tortured, raped and killed. The government also used the “scorched earth”

strategy, whereby they burned the plantations and killed the animals, to starve the populations that supported the insurgents.

After years of confrontations, in 1984 the Christian Democrat Duarte was elected with help from the United States. Immediately after his election he negotiated peace with the FDR/FMLN. The toll of years of conflict was thousands of dead, over half a million displaced, and over one million living in other countries. In the United States alone the population of Salvadorans grew from 94,000 in 1980 to 465,433 in 1990 (Stoney and Batalova, 2013).

Most of the refugees in the United States were peasants and unskilled workers. Many were unable to find jobs in the US market. These high levels of unemployment made them easy targets for recruitment to inner city gangs. Later, in 1993, these gang members would be deported to El Salvador causing the current security problems.

In 1954, the CIA sponsored a military coup in Guatemala that overthrew the democratically elected government of Jacobo Arbenz Guzman. Various guerrilla groups formed with the objective of challenging the military leaders. In 1982, the four principal guerrilla armies formed the Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity (URNG). The government tried to control the population and erode the support the URNG had by providing food to people in exchange for joining civilian defence patrols. The army also burned fields and killed cattle to destroy the guerrillas' food supply.

Mayas were targeted under the accusation of helping the rebels. Entire villages were burned and whole communities were slaughtered. Survivors fled into the mountains or crossed the border towards Mexico, where they could find refuge among similar cultural groups. From 1978 to 1984 approximately 100,000 Guatemalans were killed

and 40,000 “disappeared”, 750,000 people were internally displaced and over a quarter of a million people fled the country (Garcia, 2006). In 1960 there were only 5,381 Guatemalans living in the USA but by 1980 the number had increased to 63,073 and it had reached almost a quarter million people (225,739) by 1990 (Stoney and Batalova, 2013).

Migration during the civil wars

Before the conflict and even in the earliest stages of the civil war, Central American migration to the United States was not frequent even though some migrants lived in Washington, San Francisco, New York and Miami by the late 1970s. “As the wars escalated, these smaller northern populations served as magnets, encouraging further migration” (Garcia, 2006). The census of 1980 showed that half of the 94,448 Salvadorans and 63,073 Guatemalans had arrived at the country in the last five years. In 1977 more than seven thousand Salvadorans and five thousand Guatemalans were apprehended at the border (Garcia, 2006). It was estimated that over a million migrants had arrived to the USA due to the wars in Central America (Garcia, 2006).

The United States only granted asylum to a small portion of the refugees that had arrived. Some entered with visas and overstayed but most got there irregularly through Mexico. The route through Mexico started to gain relevance. Migrants experienced a crackdown on immigration control in the United States in the early 1980s (Stoney and Batalova, 2013). The government had increased border control and was preventing many refugees from entering the country. However, as Cornelius and Salehyan (Cornelius and Salehyan, 2007) have shown, increasing border control in the United

States and increasing dissuasion policies in Mexico did not deter migrants or stop the flows.

The wars in Central America pushed thousands of migrants to the United States. Some returned after their countries were pacified but many remained. These first migrants established the networks that would later facilitate the migrations of their friends and families in the economic crises of the nineties and in the current climate of violence. The number of Central American migrants living in the United States grew from 48,949 in 1960 to 1,133,978 in 1990[10] (Stoney and Batalova, 2013).

After the wars

The civil wars had lasting effects in Central America. Although the governments transitioned to democracies, state institutions still had low levels of legitimacy among the population (Darby and Mac Ginty, 2002). Crime was rampant. In El Salvador in 1994, there were 9,135 deaths by violence. The average of deaths during the war was 6,000 (Pearce, 1998: 590). In Guatemala, "criminal activity resulted in 6,229 dead and 10,127 wounded in the first eleven months of 1997; 1,231 people were kidnapped or otherwise disappeared during the same period" (Pearce, 1998: 590). In Nicaragua not only did violence rise but some demobilized fighters armed themselves again.

The three countries became dependent on humanitarian assistance. Poverty remained very high in the nineties, especially in rural areas. In 1990, fifty six per cent of the

[10] The term "immigrants" (also known as the foreign born) refers to people residing in the United States who were not U.S. citizens at birth. This population includes naturalised citizens, lawful permanent residents (LPRs), certain legal nonimmigrants (e.g., persons on student or work visas), those admitted under refugee or asylee status, and persons illegally residing in the United States.

population of El Salvador were considered poor (Pearce, 1998). Most of the population in Nicaragua, Guatemala and El Salvador had very insecure livelihoods, including those from the middle class. According to the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) four of the six extreme poverty focal points were in Central America: El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua (Klien, 1995: 36-37).

Economic changes in the nineties

Up until the eighties, the Central American countries had relied on an agro-export model. However, in the 1980s the model failed, finally collapsing in the 1990s. The governments liberalised the markets to increase development and join the globalised markets. The production of coffee, bananas, sugar, and cacao for exportation was no longer a viable way to make a living for local producers. Big multinational companies took on the production of non-traditional exports such as flowers and fruits (Hurtado, 1999).

The liberalisation of the markets caused the abandonment of primary crops. This lead to dependency on the importation of staples from developed countries, eroding the food security of the poorest in Central America (Hurtado, 1999). Many families were forced to sell their lands and work for the big landowners or move to the cities (Segovia, 2004). Poverty augmented in rural areas despite the fact that overall poverty diminished between 1990 and 1995 in Central America (Hurtado, 1999).

Another blow to the region's economy came from the collapse in 1989 of the International Coffee Agreement. Local coffee producers could not compete with the international markets. Many stopped producing and sold their lands. Some peasants

found jobs on the new plantations; they complemented their income with things they could grow in small parcels (Hurtado, 1999).

Because of the sub-employment and unemployment in Central America, migration to neighbouring countries and to the United States intensified. In the 1990s 1,133,978 migrants from Central America were living in the United States; however, by 2000 the number had almost doubled to 2,026,150 (Stoney and Batalova, 2013). Daniel Reichman's (Reichman, 2011) ethnography in La Quebrada, Honduras showed that the breakdown of the coffee agreement led to increased migration to the United States, especially for people who had family or friends already living there. This was the case in many regions of Central America during those years.

Natural disasters

During the late nineties, just when the countries were recovering from years of war and economic crises, natural disasters forced more people to relocate. "In some countries, the devastation struck societies that had begun to overcome the setbacks and stagnation caused by years of extreme violence and confrontation" (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ECLAC, 1999: 3).

In October 1998 Hurricane Mitch stalled over Honduras and Nicaragua killing more than 10,000 people, affecting 6.7 million and causing as much as $8.5 billion in damage (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ECLAC 1999: 101). By the time it hit Central America, it was a tropical storm. It produced heavy rains that led to flash floods and landslides that killed thousands of people. Its

effects were greater in Honduras and Nicaragua but also affected El Salvador, Guatemala, Belize and Costa Rica (Pielke Jr. et al., 2003).

Nicaragua had an estimated loss of a thousand two hundred and twelve million dollars with 2,515 people dead, 885 disappeared, and over 36,368 damaged houses. Damage to the agricultural sector was not as critical as the damage to housing and highways. However, the rural population was affected, especially because they depended on primary activities to survive and earn money. Both export products and food staples were damaged (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ECLAC, 1999). The destruction of the crops meant that permanent and provisional jobs in the fields were lost, pushing peasants without land into an even more vulnerable position. Many had to relocate to urban centres or migrate abroad (FAO, 1999).

In Honduras, the prolonged torrential rains affected almost all the 6.2 million inhabitants. Over ten per cent of the population lost their houses or had to abandon them; people living in illegal settlements and riverbanks were the most affected. In addition to the loss of infrastructure, food crops were devastated in Honduras, affecting mainly the poorest families. Many lost their livelihood. Small farmers saw their crops rendered useless, their land flooded and their animals lost. Meanwhile in the cities, water swept through small businesses leaving people without the tools to do their trade. Companies closed and many people lost their jobs. The disaster meant that many were forced to relocate to the urban centres or to other countries (United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean ECLAC, 1999).

Three years later, in 2001, El Salvador was hit by three major earthquakes, which resulted in the displacement of around 1.3 million people. In addition 1,100 people died

and several hundred houses and buildings were damaged or destroyed (Messick and Bergeron, 2014). This too had the effect of sending thousands of migrants towards the United States.

Violence and poverty as a push factors for Central American migrants

The civil wars, the liberal economic policies, the structural adjustments, and the natural disasters of the earlier decade had weakened the governments of Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador. In parts of Guatemala and El Salvador the state had no control. Under these conditions poverty and inequality grew – especially in the urban centres – and violence took hold of the countries. They haven't been able to recover from these crises since despite making some improvements in their Human Development Indicators (HDI).

It is difficult to distinguish between violence and poverty as reasons for leaving Central America. Poverty increases the vulnerability to violence as poorer people are more likely to live in dangerous areas where crime is rampant, and their sons can be recruited into a gang. For many young people, too, joining a Mara or a Cartel can provide the access to resources and prestige that they lack. Marlo (17 years old), a Honduran migrant I interviewed expressed how it is impossible to distinguish between economic and crime-related reasons for migrating:

> I came to the United States to get out of the poverty I live… because…. because only poor people suffer the violence in my home state…. if you come back with money, if you are not poor, then you can move to a place without violence. You can move to a gated community, you can pay

> someone to protect you. Being poor makes you a target for the Maras, the police, the kids… I came to the United States to protect my family.[11]

Over 31% of the population of El Salvador lives below the national poverty line (World Bank 2015). In 2014, its Human Development Indicator[12] was 0.66, slightly higher than after the end of the civil war. It is the country with the biggest increase in HDI, especially because illiteracy decreased, the percentage of homes with drinking water increased and child mortality decreased (PNUD 2015). Despite this success, El Salvador was severely struck by the 2008 financial crisis. The HDI stopped growing, the PIB only grew 0.5% per year and income poverty increased, returning to 1998 values. Forty-four per cent of the population in 2012 was sub-employed and 7 per cent was unemployed (PNUD 2015).

El Salvador has a weakened state capacity unable to provide services such as healthcare and education to the poorest people. After the liberalisation policies of the nineties, the contribution of the rural economies decreased, and many farmers moved to the cities. The service sector was unable to absorb this new batch of labourers. The newly arrived lived in marginal barrios without sanitation, water, or roads. Some people are unemployed and many earn less than the minimum salary, especially young people (Savenije, 2007). Darlin (31), a Salvadoran migration in Saltillo told me: "In first place [I decided to migrate] because of the economic situation and second because you cannot find a job there."[13]

[11] Interview: Marlo, 8 September 2015, Saltillo.
[12] The HDI is a composite index that includes life expectancy, education, and gross national income per capita. It goes from 0 to 1 where the higher the number, the better. El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala and Honduras have a medium Human Development.
[13] Conversation with Darlin, June 2015, Palenque.

El Salvador is also one of the most violent places in the world because of the rampant poverty, the sub-employment and the weakened rule of law. In the 12 years after the 1992 peace accords an estimated 49,317 individuals were killed (Richani, 2010). Under these conditions the opportunity costs of crime declined, and criminal groups took advantage. When the United States started deporting migrants, many of them gang members, the stage was set for them to take over the local gangs. Between 1993 and 2003, the United States forcibly repatriated an estimated 130,000 Salvadoran immigrants. Many of them were members of the Mara Salvatrucha and the 18 street gangs; 43,000 had a criminal record. The biggest gangs are the Mara Salvatrucha, also known as MS13, and the Pandilla 18. Between them they represent 97% of all gang members.

Honduras also has a gang problem. Most gang members live in Tegucicalpa and San Pedro Sula. However, gang activity has reached almost all regions of Honduras. This creates a class divide between those who can afford to live in gated communities and pay mercenaries to defend them and those who are vulnerable to the gangs. These two gangs spread in the marginal barrios, taking advantage of the limited capacities of the state to enact the rule of law (Savenije, 2007). Their scope of activities has skyrocketed and the membership has increased substantially, outnumbering the police force in 2007 (Richani, 2010). Since 1990 narcotrafficking gained traction in El Salvador, increasing the violence.

In early 2000, Honduras suffered from a similar economic and social situation as El Salvador despite not having experienced a civil war. In 2012 over 66% of the homes in Honduras were below the line of poverty and 40% lived in extreme poverty. Despite the fact that the economy has grown, 54.1% of the population are sub-employed and

3.6% are officially unemployed. The HDI of Honduras in 2014 was 0.606; ranking 131 in the world (PNUD 2015).

In the cities finding a job that pays enough to eat is hard. The new rural migrants have an especially hard time.

> Santiago: I couldn't find a job there. It is difficult, the situation in Honduras. Well, I live in the capital and it is difficult. Also, outside, outside of Tegucigalpa it is difficult the job is bad and I came from Progreso. The need to work…
>
> Luis: I want to prosper. Help the family, the children. And without jobs you know that back there in Honduras in the capital if you don't work you don't eat. There the situation is difficult. One has to work if one wants to eat. The kids, the milk, the things…
>
> Santiago: All is bought, all, all….
>
> Luis: Life is difficult there.
>
> Santiago: You need money for everything. [14]

In 2013 the murder rate in Honduras was the highest in the world, with 79 murders for each 100,000 inhabitants (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2015) . According to the UNODC and civil society organisations the violence is a consequence of the rise in organised crime and drug trafficking after the coup and the subsequent lack of law and order. There was an increase in gang activity, the police were slow and inefficient to respond and corruption was rampant in the country. Many organisations have reported links between the police or the military and organised crime and gangs (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2015).

[14] Interview: Santiago, 29 June 2015, Palenque

The violence and the gangs have forced many young Hondurans to flee the country. Jose Juan, a 14-year-old Honduran migrant explains why he left:

> They convinced me [his parents]because to tell you the truth, I didn't want either, I didn't want to stay there because there are a lot of Mareros and maybe one… just for hanging out with, just one, well, like they say if I hang out with a bad person one can become a bad person as well. Back there, there is a lot of evil, you can become one of them. Even if you don't want it but at the end, young people are like that. I'm telling you that I avoided that and left to find a new future. Maybe here I'll do better, I don't know…. I want to live life like there because there is a lot…. I don't know, I don't get used to life back there. What happens is that well all the time they are talking about dead people, about robberies and, and I would like to be apart from that.[15]

The generalised violence has led to an indiscriminate possession of guns. It is estimated that there are between 800,000 and one million firearms in the country. In Honduras 82% of the murders in 2010 involved the use of a gun. Another consequence has been the increase in private security forces. The United Nations has calculated that there are around 60,000 private guards in Honduras in contrast to only 14,000 police officers (Naciones Unidas, 2013).

As in El Salvador, when the United States deported gang members from Los Angeles, the local gangs were changed. They became more violent to establish their presence and gain control of territory. Their numbers increased rapidly (Savenije, 2007). Young people are particularly vulnerable to gangs. On the one hand, they are harassed and threatened by the Maras or they are forced to collaborate and join them (most people

[15] Interview: Chato, 2 July 2015, Palenque.

join the Maras when they are between 11-20 years old). On the other, state forces target them because they suspect they might be involved with the Maras.

Many migrants leaving Honduras are young men who escaped after being directly targeted by the Maras. Marlo, a 17-year-old migrant, stated his reasons for leaving:

> They wanted to force me to become part of a gang where they… they extort, they kill, all those things they do. And I in that instant decided not to do it and I made the decision, something I've never thought about and decided to leave my country for the United States. It was not a decision…. How can I say it? I was forced.[16]

Poor people who cannot pay protection but who have a small business or a job must pay an *impuesto de guerra* or "war tax". Many migrants report that the *impuesto de guerra* is often higher than what the person can earn. When someone cannot pay he or a member of his family risks being killed. *The impuesto de guerra* is an example of how poverty and violence work together as push factors. Paying these rents impoverishes already sub-employed workers, bankrupts poor people's small businesses, and causes everyone to live in constant fear. Eventually many flee. Some do it with their families, including children, and some migrate to be able to send money back and help their families relocate to a safer zone or at least pay the *impuesto de guerra*.

Guatemala is still struggling. Its HDI is 0.581. Sixty-two per cent of Guatemalans lived in poverty and 29.6 lived in extreme poverty by 2011 (PNUD 2015). In 2011 3.52% of the Guatemalan workforce were unemployed and 21% sub-employed (Redacción, 2011).

[16] Interview: Marlo, 8 September 2015, Saltillo.

After the peace accord in 1996, many of the old regime security structures and some of the new regime security apparatus became part of the organised crime of the country to compensate for the loss of income that the peace agreements brought. The state suffers from rampant corruption and reduced coercive authorities. This weakened state, paired with a privileged position as a transit route for drugs to the United States provided the conditions for drug dealing to flourish (Richani, 2010).

As in Honduras, the solution of the upper and middle class to the insecurity is to hire private security guards. The poorest people must coexist with crime and pay their rents to the criminals. Don Goyo (55 years old) told me about his reasons for leaving; "as soon as you get hired by a business and start working they [the gangs] ask you for a percentage of your earnings…. If you don't give them that money, when you get out of your job they kill you."[17] Eventually they ask for so much that it is impossible for some to pay. They decide to leave.

According to Richani (Richani, 2010), three main clusters of organised violence operate in Guatemala. First the drug dealing cartel structures, then the Maras and finally organisations that conduct specialised criminal activities. "By 2005 the National Council of Youth (Consejo Nacional de la Juventud) estimated the number of gang members to be between 170,000 and 250,000 from a total of 3.8m youths in Guatemala" (Richani, 2010: 448). The average age of initiation is 14.5 years. Gangs are the lower end in the organised crime chain but they are the most numerous. International gangs have not absorbed local gangs in Guatemala as much as in Honduras and El Salvador (Savenije, 2007).

[17] Interview: Don Goyo, 2 July 2015, Palenque.

Nicaragua has gang activity but does not have international gangs such as MS13 and Barrio 18 (Savenije, 2007). Compared to the rest of the countries it is safer. It is still an important region to cross drugs from Colombia to Mexico. However, the police seem to be doing a good job in not getting completely infiltrated by the criminals and in being able to detect and stop some shipments.

Differentiated migration trajectories

The political, economic, and ecological history of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have led to different migration patterns for each country. This has affected the direction of the flows, the number of migrants, and the quality of the social networks that each nationality has available.

Guatemala

Since Guatemala and Mexico share a border, both countries have a long history of seasonal migration to the southern region of Mexico. Since 1870, men migrated to Mexico to work on the fields under exploitative and unregulated conditions, at the beginning of the XX century, women started to migrate to work as domestic workers and to join their families (Nájera Aguirre, 2014). However; during the decade of 1960, the migration to Mexico and to the United States started to increase as people fled the poverty, the land displacement, and the autocratic regimes that ruled the country (Paredes Orozco, 2009). As more Guatemalans moved to the United States and to the Chiapas, their networks grew stronger. These strong ties strengthened the flows and diversified the occupations of the migrants in Mexico and the United States (Paredes Orozco, 2009).

These strong ties that Guatemalans have built in Mexico and in the United States and the fact that there are several generations of Guatemalans have had time to establish themselves in those countries, mean that Guatemalans have very strong social capital when it comes to migration. Many are familiar with at least the southern area of Mexico and are able to "pass" as Mexicans if they need it. They also have a deeper knowledge about migrant routes, and many are able to take advantage of the help of their families. When they arrive at the United States, Guatemalans are greeted by a strong community that strives to find jobs for them and to help them settle.

El Salvador

The most important flows to the United States from El Salvador started in the 1970s and increased during the country's civil war, where the Salvadorian population in the United States almost quintupled (Menjívar, 2000). Salvadoran migrants in the United States are ethnically homogeneous, compared to Guatemalan migrants, where many indigenous Maya migrate. Over 10% of the population of El Salvador lives in the United States, so much that the United States is considered "the fifteenth department of El Salvador"(Coutin, 2007: 4). In 2015, 1,352,00 Salvadorians lived in the United States and most lived in California. Of them, around 600,000 were undocumented in 2015. Most work in services, construction, and production and transportation of merchandise. Their mean yearly income is 42,000 dollars per year, significantly lower than the national mean of 51,000 (Batalova, 2017).

Although they are a relatively poor migrant group in the United States, Salvadorians living in the United States maintain transnational ties to their home country by visiting, if they can, and by sending remittances (Edwards and Ureta, 2003). They have also created a strong community in the United States. The established migrants

transmit migration specific cultural capital and information to the ones still in El Salvador, facilitating new waves of migration, as the networks theory has explained (Palloni et al., 2001). Studies of Salvadorian social networks in the United States shows that Salvadorians, like Mexicans, can draw on their social networks to help them arrive and settle in the United States (Menjívar, 2000, 1997).

Honduras

At the beginning of the XX century, Honduras approved an Immigration Law that strived to facilitate foreign investment in the country; especially banana and mining companies that brought workers with them. This ties with American companies and workers jump started Honduran migration to the United States, especially to New Orleans, where a Honduran community remains.

Even though Honduras did not experience a civil war, like its neighbors in Central America; according to Carmen Fernández Casanueva (Fernández Casanueva, 2014), the migration patterns of the citizens were affected nonetheless. The refugees that fled to Honduras from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua shared their information about the United States and about how to arrive there with the local Hondurans. This knowledge allowed some Hondurans to migrate to the United States. When in 1980 and 1990 Honduras suffered economic and ecological crises, more migrants left, using the social capital gathered by those that had left before. After Mitch, in 1998 the flows incremented once again, with families becoming more strategic by choosing to send a family member abroad in order to get remittances (Sladkova, 2007).

Sladkova shows how the creation of a narrative of migrant success in the United States added to the violence and poverty of the country often leads people to migrate (Sladkova, 2007). Honduran migrants, like Salvadorians and Guatemalans, also hope to use their networks to migrate and settle. However, as Fernandez Casanueva's (2017) and my own research have shown, Hondurans receive less help than other migrant groups. This is perhaps a consequence of the relatively new flow that leads to weaker and more strapped social networks in the United States.

Reactions of the United States and Mexico to the forced migrations

In the United States, Central Americans did not get refugee status after the wars and the natural catastrophes; yet, they got Temporary Protected Status or TPS. According to U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Service "a country may be designated for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) when conditions in that country temporarily prevent the country's nationals from returning safely, or under certain circumstances, where the country is unable to handle the return of its nationals adequately"(United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, 2017). Once a country is designated for TPS the nationals who are residing in the US at the time might be granted protection regardless of how they accessed the country. There were an estimated 212,000 Salvadorans, 64,000 Hondurans and 3,000 Nicaraguans benefiting from TPS in 2014. El Salvador got its first TPS in 1991 for the civil war and then again in 2001 in response to the earthquakes. Honduras and Nicaragua got it in 1999 in the aftermath of Mitch (Messick and Bergeron, 2014).

Since 1990, the United States has granted the TPS to nationals of some countries that have become embroiled in a conflict or suffered a national disaster. TPS is not a grant

for permanent status in the United States although people that hold a TPS can apply for legal residence in the country through other means (such as marriage). The TPS provides a protection against deportation and a permission to work in the USA for a limited period of time. Once the humanitarian emergency is finished, the US can end the TPS for that country. President Donald Trump ended the TPS for people from El Salvador on the 8th of January of 2018. He will give the 200,000 Salvadorans until the 9th of September of 2019 to leave the country before starting to deport them (Miroff and Nakamura, 2018). The TPS of Honduras is valid until 2020.

The TPS and the fact that many migrants already had networks in the United States facilitated the migration of thousands of Central Americans to the United States after 1999. In 1990 1,134,000 Central Americans lived in the United States. By 2000 the number had almost doubled to 2,026,200 and by 2010 it had almost tripled to 3,052,500. Between 2000 and 2010 Central American immigrants were the fastest growing segment of the Latin American immigrant population according to the Migration Policy Institute. The top three sending countries are El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras (Stoney and Batalova, 2013). The structural factors as well as the networks that were already established maintained and strengthened migration to the United States.

Asylum applications from Central America to the United States have increased in the last years due to the intensification of the violence in the Northern Triangle.
However, the rate of approval of asylum applications varies greatly depending on the state of the United States where the application is made. Wola's analysis shows that the judge that an asylum seeker gets determines if their application will be successful, not the merits of the case (Meyer and Pachico, 2018).

Compared to the United States, relatively few Central American migrants want to stay in Mexico. However, for varying reasons, a higher number of people are applying for asylum in Mexico. Mexico's Commission to Help the Refugees (COMAR) has a backlog of cases that date to 2016. According to Mexico's Human Rights Commission (CNDH), the COMAR has only responded to 40% of the applications and has left the applicants in precarious conditions. As a consequence, over 2,400 individuals have dropped their applications (CNDH, 2018). According to the NGO *Sin Fronteras*, the main challenges for asylum seekers in Mexico America are: 1) there is no due process; 2) the period of time when people can apply is too short (only 30 days after entering the country); and 3) COMAR does not have enough personnel and enough offices through Mexico (Ureste, 2014). This situation forces those who are forced or choose to stay in Mexico, to live without legal documentation.

Conclusion

El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala are small and the Maras and the organised crime have influence in almost all the regions. People who are threatened or targeted by the Maras cannot always just relocate to another district in the same country. The impossibility to do this comes from a mix of poverty and violence. Poverty limits them because most are unskilled workers who will not be able to find a job and a place to live if they move, especially if they go with their families. Violence pushes them out because the Maras have presence in most of the region; the targets risk being victimised again if they don't flee further away. In interviews, especially in the southern border of Mexico, many migrants who had left because of the violence still feared that the Mareros had followed them from Honduras and El Salvador to finish them off. They

might be right. At least they are right in noticing the presence of gangs in the south. A stroll around the towns in the southern border of Mexico shows the tags of MS13 and Street 18.

The history and the current context of migration from Central America, as also revealed in my interviews, confirms that, as in other parts of the world, it is important to consider economic factors and violence as structural factors that push people to migrate (Cornelius and Rosenblum, 2005). Violence and poverty are often interlocked as reasons for leaving the country. In the broader immigration literature, it is frequently argued that the poorest do not often have the resources to migrate (Van Hear, 2014, 2004), but many Central American migrants in Mexico were from the lowest economic strata in their countries. People are forced to leave their homes with the purpose of saving their lives and their families, either by relocating to the United States or by migrating to save money and pay for security back home. Networks then facilitate more migration; the more migrants there are in the United States, the more migrants go, as the numbers of Central American migrants over the years show. As these migrants are not simply economic migrants, we should not expect them to use their resources – their knowledge, their networks – in the same way as economic migrants do. Studies in Mexican migration to the United States have shown the important role of networks and skills in facilitating the decision to migrate and the migration process (Boyd, 1989; Flores-Yeffal and Aysa-Lastra, 2011; Massey et al., 1993). In the following chapters, I show how Central American migration relies much less on their established networks than Mexican migration. This does not mean however that they do not rely on other people or new associations to gain information about the journey and to try to overcome the obstacles they face. Although the reasons for leaving are not merely economical,

they are still vulnerable migrants embarking on a dangerous migration process who need emotional, practical, and monetary help to succeed.

Chapter 4: Conducting ethnography through the transit map of Mexico

I approached the study of Central American transit migration with the intention to learn from the migrants themselves how they experience their transit and how they form ties and bond throughout the road. I observed how migrants behaved and took notes detailing my observations and interpretations. In addition, I let migrants give me their own interpretations for how things worked. For example, when I met Chucho, a Salvadoran migrant fan of the soccer team Chivas who ran the room where the donations were distributed to the migrants, I thought it was very nice that he spent most of his time volunteering in the house. For the migrants, he was an *abusivo* who took advantage of his position to barter for favours and who took the best soccer jerseys for himself. Contrasting my perception to the migrants' views allowed me to document their experiences while still giving them the opportunity to tell me their story in the way they wanted.

To follow the migrants on their route, I decided to do fieldwork in multiple locations. This allowed me to sense how the context and the migrants changed throughout the time and space. My fieldwork was done in places where impermanence is the norm; thus doing ethnography in only one place did not make any sense. Since one of the most important characteristics of transit migrants is their movement, I decided to do a multi-sited ethnography to "follow the people" (Marcus, 1995). For migration scholars, it is important to place the research at different points of the migration trajectory. The field in this case is a "conceptual space." I use David FitzGerald's definition of ethnography as including in the broadest sense "methods of intensive interviewing as well as participant-observation." (FitzGerald 2006: 2)

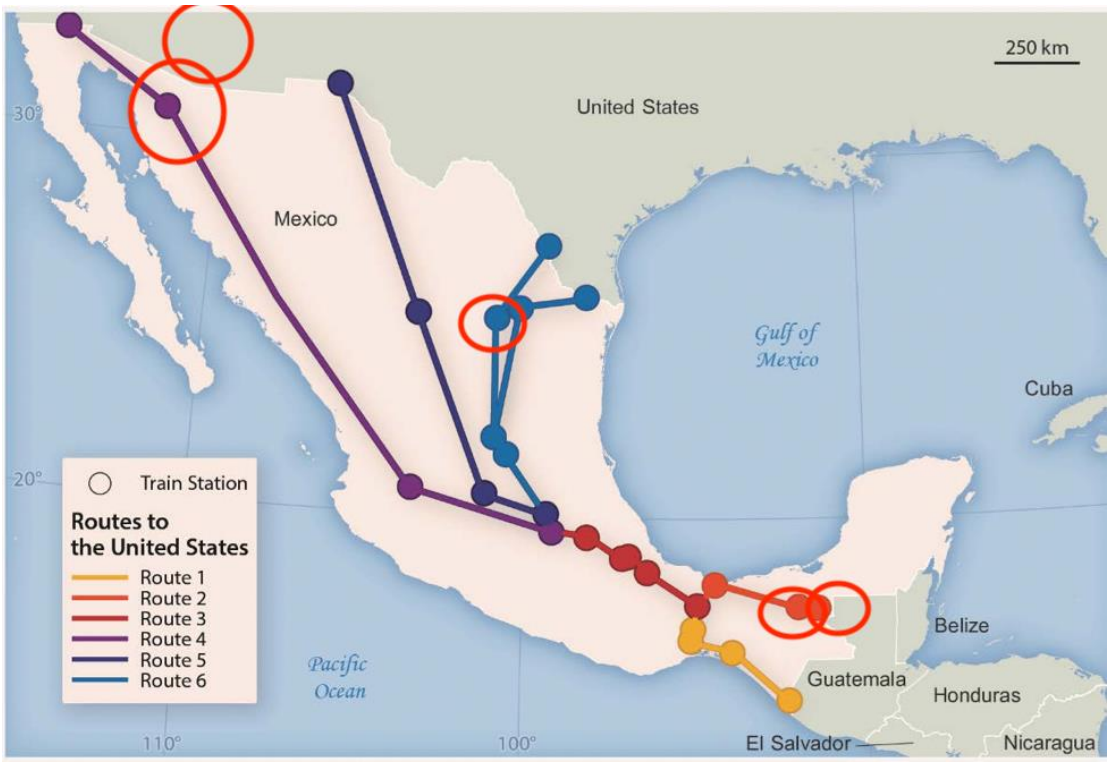

Image (Basok et al., 2015) with my field sites marked with red circles.

I chose the first field sites in the southern and northern border of Mexico before leaving for fieldwork but I remained open to adapting my research strategy and to adding new sites after making new connections or learning new information. In the end, I performed a two-stage multi-sited ethnography where the last two places I visited came up as a direct consequence of having been to the first field sites. This allowed me to "follow" the process I had become familiar through second hand information – the transit migration – but allowed me to be open to the unfamiliar. Multi-sited ethnography allows researchers to study sites that are linked to each other, since cultures are no longer discrete units (FitzGerald, 2006). In this sense, I linked the northern and the southern border of Mexico and the U.S.-Mexico border, two sites that have strong links in the narratives and histories of migrants.

I spent time in migrant houses and canteens, plazas, churches, and train tracks. I also hiked the Sonoran Desert and crossed the Usumacinta River to go to Guatemala. The "norm" in my fieldwork sites was not stillness but movement, with migrants staying for some hours or at most, some days. I thus observed the flows of migrants, the patterns that were repeated by the migrants who arrived and who had stayed every time a new cohort of migrants approached. I witnessed how the permanent inhabitants of a place (volunteers and townspeople) reacted to migrants. I was also able to talk to hundreds of migrants and to perform 48 in-depth interviews with male and female migrants from Honduras, Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. Starting in the southern border and then doing another stage of fieldwork in the north allowed me to "follow" the Central American migration flow. It also let me observe if the way migrants acted and reflected about their journey changed with time and with experience.

I chose to not observe trail migrants directly throughout the route because my presence would have made them more visible and thus more vulnerable to extortion or violence. I did not want the migrants to have to take care of me when they were in a situation of vulnerability and constant threat already. Finally, I did not believe I would be safe if I took a journey where people frequently die or disappear. Depending on what the gatekeepers allowed me to do and on the conditions of each site, I performed ethnography, participant observation, and semi-structured interviews. I also took detailed notes and pictures. I have stayed in contact with many of these migrants through Facebook and I could virtually follow their journeys, their deportations or their settlements, and, in some cases, their deaths.

This three-stage multi-sited research design allowed me to engage with migrants in several periods of their journey. I could compare the places, the mood, and the people. I saw how the mental and physical state and the plans of the migrants changed after

crossing Mexico. The sharp contrast between the southern border and the northern border allowed me to be surprised and curious about differences between the borders that I might have missed if I had moved with the migrants. Moving between places and groups allowed me to gain knowledge about the migrants and the particularities of their hometowns and displaying that knowledge allowed me to reduce the social distance between my interviewees and me. Showing that I had been in other migrant houses and had been on the road with other migrants also allowed me faster access to their groups and stories (FitzGerald 2006 had already noted this advantage).

This research design let me gain access to vulnerable and difficult to get populations while minimizing their exposure to violence. Unfortunately, moving from the south to the north without the migrants meant that I lost track of most of them and I interviewed new people in every site. I was following the "flow" because following the people proved impossible.

I formally interviewed 48 migrants in total (see Appendix One for a complete breakdown) and had conversations and took detailed notes of interviews with many more. I had access to all 152 of the interviews that the researchers from the Undocumented Migration Project did while I was in Palenque doing fieldwork with them. I listened to some interviews to get context but I did not transcribe them or quote them directly in this research. However, some of the insights that I learned come from listening to the interviews. I formally interviewed thirty-eight men and ten women. However, I had important conversations with women in less formal settings. This proportion reflects the proportion of the migration flows.

I also added to the appendix a copy of the Participant Information Sheet that I provided to all gatekeepers before starting my research. With the migrants I used verbal consent,

recorded in the interview. I saved the audio of the interviews and the transcriptions in a safe computer protected by a password and I have changed all the names of my interviewees and details that could identify them in the text. I did not use any software to analyse the interviews.

The Migration Map of Mexico

Central American migration through Mexico started in the 70's, when thousands of people fled American dictatorships and took refuge in Mexico or the United States. Starting in 1973 and continuing throughout the next decade, thousands of people from Nicaragua, Salvador and Guatemala fled the conflicts in their regions by moving towards Mexico and the United States (Castillo 1999). Mexico, although a signatory to the Convention and the Protocol of Refugees of the United Nations, did not have refugee as a legal concept until 1988. The country improvised a response with the first influx of Guatemalan refugees in 1981 to 1983 by letting them stay in the country, close to the southern border (Castillo 1999).

Since 1986, when Mexico joined the GATT,[18] the country had attempted to reduce tariffs in trade with the United States. To convince its neighbour of its ability to increase trade but control migration, Mexico also cooperated with the United States government to increase the controls in its southern border. The U.S. helped with information, training, and money to stop migration through Mexico (Dunn 1996). In 1988, when President Salinas came to power, the migratory control in the border became more

[18] The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, replaced by the World Trade Organization in 1995.

visible and the deportations and expulsions of Central Americans increased by 500% (Flores 1993). By the beginning of the nineties, Mexico expelled hundreds of thousands of migrants for the first time (126,440) (Castillo 1999).

During the nineties, Mexico aligned its migratory policies with the objective of deterring and preventing Central American migration to the U.S. (Flores 1993). The government established the Beta group in 1990 with the intention of patrolling and preventing crime in the border. The official role of the Beta group was to protect unauthorized crossers on the Mexican side of the boundary. From the U.S. perspective, this was an effort of the Mexican government to curtail illegal migration because the Beta groups targeted smugglers and arrested them. The cooperation between the two agencies and the two countries became evident when the Border Patrol donated radios and equipment to the Beta groups. The two agencies often conjoined in apprehending suspected criminals in the border region (Nevins 2010, 164).

The south of Mexico

The first step of the long migration journey for Central Americans is arriving at the border between Mexico and Guatemala. To do so, most Honduras and Salvadorans take a bus that takes them to a border town. Although they cross Guatemala legally, Hondurans and Salvadorans are sometimes stopped and extorted by Guatemalan authorities. Some of the migrants that I interviewed had been forced to pay a quota when their bus was stopped. Anyway, the real migration process for them starts when they finally cross to Mexico.

Most of the Central American migration to Mexico goes through Chiapas and Tabasco. There are many routes that the migrants can take to get to the U.S.-Mexico border. Some people choose to do a part of the journey by sea, in small dinghies that follow the coast of Chiapas and get off at Oaxaca. From there they can go to Ixtepec and then to Veracruz. Then they can go to Oaxaca and then Puebla through Mexico City. Some choose to go next to the Pacific sea either by train or by bus. My field sites on the southern border were on Tenosique, in Tabasco, and in Palenque in Chiapas. Most migrants I met planned on going from there to Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz and then to Mexico City, where they could take a train to any crossing point in the northern border. Most of them had crossed the River Usumacinta to come into Mexico and had taken a *combi* or walked for days to arrive to Tenosique and then Palenque or to Palenque directly.

Usumacinta River seen from Mexico and the little boats used to cross it; on the other side is Guatemala, photo of the author, 2015.

The River Usumacinta covers a great part of the border between Guatemala and Mexico. I visited Frontera Corozal and took a boat to cross to Guatemala for two dollars. The town on the Guatemalan side, La Técnica, was a street lined with houses

where people changed *quetzales* and *lempiras* into dollars and Mexican pesos; it had a couple of cheap restaurants and stores where migrants could buy what they needed to survive in Mexico. Since this was not an official crossing point, no one approached me to ask for my passport at any point. I never saw a Guatemalan or Mexican border official.

Migrants have the same experience. When they get to a crossing town they buy the last items they will need – usually a hat, mosquito repellents, and socks – and they hire a raft. Sometimes they are overcharged for the raft and end up paying up to 100 dollars to be able to cross. If they are going with a guide, they might have a car waiting for them when they arrive at Mexico after five minutes on the raft. If they are going by themselves, they start walking next to the highway to get to Palenque. The three-hour bus ride takes them around four days if everything goes well. If they must avoid a checkpoint or run from the National Migration Institute[19] (INM in Spanish), it takes them longer. When I took the *combi* to the border, I counted three INM checkpoints between the border and Palenque. Migrants must walk on the mountain to avoid a checkpoint and it takes them around half a day or even a day to walk around it. When they can, they try to follow the highway. It is common to see the hunched figures of three or four men walking with their small backpacks, their worn sneakers, and their caps on the side of the road. In my bus ride to Frontera Corozal, I counted 12 migrants. Twenty years ago, before Mexico implemented the Plan Sur, arriving to the northern border took only three or four days as migrants could take buses to the northern border of Mexico; now in three days they can only get to Palenque.

[19] The National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración) is part of the Mexican Federal Government and depends on the Ministry of the Interior (Secretaría de Gobernación). It deals with the foreigners who want to stay temporarily or permanently in Mexico.

Plan Sur

Mexico's first attempt at containing the migration flows that came from the southern border was in 2001. The government established the Southern Plan (Plan Sur in Spanish) "as part of a Mexican strategy to placate the United States to negotiate better conditions for Mexican migrants" (Sheridan 2009: 89). Santiago Creel, Mexico's Secretary of the Interior echoed: "in exchange for better conditions for Mexicans working in the U.S. our government is prepared to increase measures aiming to arrest foreigners in the country heading for U.S." (Sheridan 2009: 89).

The intention of the Plan was to improve Mexico's ability to control the migratory flows coming from Central America. The Plan meant to prevent the crimes attributed to Central American migrants crossing Mexico. It was backed by the U.S. authorities who worked along with Mexico and the Central American governments to implement it (Jaramillo 2001). It meant to "strengthen the presence of the Mexican state in the combat against organised crime" (Gabriela Rodríguez Pizarro 2002). The idea was to fight the smuggling of migrants and to enforce the human rights protection in the south border in an "environment of respect to the law" (Casillas 2002). Between June 4 and June 17 2001 Mexico deported 6,000 migrants.[20]

The way the Plan was laid out and explained to the press linked migration with crime. The media gave a sensational portrait of migrants. This increased the impression that they were a threat to the country (Gabriela Rodríguez Pizarro 2002). The fact that the army was enforcing the roadblocks also signaled that stopping migration was a matter of national security. In 2007, for example, the head of the National Institute of

[20] http://www.worldpress.org/0901feature22.htm

Migration stated that undocumented migrants who were waiting to cross to the United States affected the "social fabric of the border states and become a serious problem". Similarly, the local media, especially in the Southern border, linked migrants with delinquency in the region.

After that, the violence that Central Americans experienced in Mexico increased and the economic and personal integrity costs of migrating escalated. Migrants endure institutional maltreatments; they suffer from abusive behaviour while they are in detention centres before getting deported. In some cases, there are no doctors in the facility, women and men are mixed, and children are not properly taken care of. Sometimes migrants stay for many days waiting to be repatriated. They do not have access to legal advice and they are not told about their rights (Sin Fronteras 2005). Occasionally, the agents of the National Migratory Institute abuse them (Gabriela Rodríguez Pizarro 2002).

The local population also takes advantage of the migrants. They overcharge for food or for shelter, they discriminate against them, and they do not let them access public spaces. Some people protest outside shelters and try to close them to keep the migrants out of their towns. This happened to the migrant house in Lechería, close to Mexico City (Jiménez Jacinto 2012). Some people are scared by the presence of migrants; they fear that they bring crimes and violence with them (INSYDE 2009).

Migrants are also vulnerable to organized crime; the criminals are often colluded with all levels of authorities. These groups extort, rob, kidnap, kill and sexually assault the Central American migrants with impunity. Between 2008 and 2009 The National Human Rights Commission of Mexico discovered that 9,758 migrants had been kidnapped. By 2010 11,333 more victims had been kidnapped. Once they are

kidnapped they are tortured to reveal the number of their family members in the U.S. Then they call their relatives and ask them for ransom. Sometimes the shelters for the migrants get attacked. When migrants report the crimes (which they seldom do), they are sometimes ignored by authorities or sold back to the criminal groups (CNDH 2011; Amnesty International 2010; Centro Pro Derechos Humanos 2010; Centro de Noticias ONU 2012).

As the flows increased and became more visible, advocacy institutions and the civil society also reacted and attempted to protect the rights of transit migrants. Numerous migrant houses started appearing along the different migrant routes and several civil society organizations started pressuring the government to improve the protection of the rights of the migrants. In 2011, the National Migration Law was passed. The rights of migrants – regardless of their legal situation – were protected for the first time. According to the law, migrants could access medical services, education, criminal or civil justice. They should also be informed of their rights and about the possibility of asking for refugee status. Another important improvement is that the law explicitly states that people who help migrants with goodwill and without the intention of profiting will not be considered guilty of a crime (Secretaría de Gobernación and Instituto Nacional de Migración, 2011). This in theory would protect human rights activists from threats (Morales Vega 2012).

Regrettably, the law did not affect the way migrants are treated in Mexico. Civil society organizations report that the violence has not decreased. Migrants are still victims of robberies, kidnappings, abuses, and murder. The state officials continue to work with members of organized crime. Members of civil society organizations are still harassed and threatened. It might take the law some years to start yielding results. Unfortunately, Mexico's recent immigration policies like the Southern Border Plan, which will be

explained later in the chapter, show that the enforcement of the border has just become more restrictive and thus more violent against irregular migrants.

A common injury of migrants is huge blisters in their feet, photo of the author, 2016.

Palenque and Tenosique

Some of the first towns that migrants find after crossing the border are Palenque and Tenosique. Palenque is relatively small and like some towns in Chiapas, is famous for its imposing Mayan ruins. About ten minutes from Palenque there is a very small, poor, village called Pakal-Na. The train tracks going north from Tenosique go right next to this town. This is a very convenient place for the migrants to get on the freight train because it stops here, so they do not have to run to catch it. Catching the train while it

is in movement is dangerous and migrants risk getting hurt, losing a foot, or dying if they attempt it.

About two blocks from the train tracks there is a migrant house, Jtatic Samuel Ruíz García. Migrants mostly arrived directly to Pakal-Na but occasionally they went to Palenque and stayed in the courtyard of the church in the middle of the town, a more dangerous strategy as there were more agents of the National Migration Institute and police officers in Palenque. In Pakal-Na there seemed to be the understanding that the authorities would not disturb migrants or migrant house volunteers in the area around the migrant house. Migrants generally felt safer being in Pakal-Na.[21] In addition, they were closer to the train tracks and were thus able to take the train when it left.

Palenque and Tenosique were great field sites because both towns were the first places where migrants rested after starting their migration process. They were also in the area where the Mexican government had been implementing the Southern Border Integral Programme since 2014. Being in the southern border allowed me to see how migrants prepared for the journey, what expectations they had, and how the Southern Border Integral Programme had affected their migration experiences.

The "Southern Border Integral Programme" was implemented in the southern states of Mexico in the summer of 2014. According to the Federal government, the Programme meant to protect the human rights of the irregular migrants in the southern states of Mexico and to combat the criminal groups that take advantage of them (Presidencia de la República, 2014). As part of the Programme, the government increased the

[21] During my stay in Palenque, the National Migration Institute performed a raid in the guest houses and the streets around the migrant house picking up migrants and detaining them. After that, we learned that the tacit truce between the authorities and the migrant house could be broken anytime.

monitoring of the areas with more migrant flows, increased the agents in those areas, hired more federal police to prevent crimes, and improved the procedures to deal with immigration (Barragán, 2016).

To "protect" the migrants, the government also increased the speed of the freight trains thus making it impossible for migrants to get on top and get hurt. To catch kidnappers and smugglers, the government increased the checkpoints in the highway, making it impossible for migrants to get into combis, vans, to go to the north. The strategy made taking the train more dangerous and taking the combis more difficult and expensive and thus forced many migrants to walk. The government had effectively closed the most frequent migratory routes and had pushed the flows to even more dangerous – and secluded – routes. Now, migrants were forced to take long and dangerous detours in the jungle, becoming vulnerable to the elements and to criminals in more isolated places. They arrived at the migrant houses already tired, hungry, dehydrated, and with big blisters on their feet. Some had already been robbed and beaten by criminals or by authorities. Most migrants that had followed the same route before 2014 agreed that it was more dangerous and that it had taken them more days to arrive just to Palenque. They were surprised and scared about what followed.

Many more migrants have been caught and deported, too. The agents of the National Migration Institute perform illegal raids on the train, on houses and hotels, and around migrant houses. In 2015, Mexico deported more Central American migrants than the United States (Dominguez Villegas and Rietig 2015). When I visited the Palenque detention centre to interview the agents, I heard my name being called: "Alejandra, Alejandra!". When I turned around I could see a group of twenty migrants that I had just met the day before in Tenosique who had been captured while riding the train to

Palenque. Everyone in the train had been caught, everyone looked hurt and beaten. I knew they were going to be sent back and most of them would try again very soon.

Migratory documents available to transit migrants

Transit migrants in Mexico have access to two main migratory documents while they are in Mexico. They can apply for a visa for humanitarian reasons (VRH) or they can apply for asylum. Both of these documents are not available to all, but if they are eligible, having a migratory document could make their transit (or settlement in Mexico, if they choose so) easier. These documents can change their strategies and the way they tackle the road.

Migrants who experience violence during their journeys in Mexico, who are applying for asylum, and who are in a "vulnerable situation" can apply to be recognized as a "visitor for humanitarian reasons" (VRH) according to article 52 of the Migration Law of 2011. This status allows migrants to live in Mexico legally for a year, it can be renovated, and it can lead to permanent residency (Coria and Zamudio, 2018). Yet, in order to get a VRH, victims need to prove that the crime they experienced was "severe" according to Mexico's prosecution office. In 2017, 1,214 people were granted a VRH; of those 88% were Central American migrants (Coria and Zamudio, 2018). Despite the strategic value of the VRH for migrants, civil society organizations state that often, migrants who are victims of a crime are unaware that they can apply for this document. Many times, too, they are scared about showing up at the police station as they do not trust Mexican officers.

However, the VRH also provides transit migrants a strategy to improve their safety while traveling. Those who suffered from a "severe" human right violation and who were informed of the possibility of getting a VRH can strategically choose to apply

for one in order to be able to migrate legally through Mexico. This would allow them to take long-haul buses through Mexico and to face migratory agents and police with confidence. There are tradeoffs, nevertheless. Getting a VRH can take months, migrants often do not trust the police, and I have heard from migrants who tell me that the state agents sometimes do not recognize the document when they stop them. However, some migrants still think that slowing their journey is worth it if they are making it safer.

During my time in Palenque, I interviewed a group of three friends who had been kidnapped during their journey. When they arrived at the migrant house in Pakal-Na, Sor Nely advised them to apply for VRH in order to report the crime and to be able to move in Mexico for a year. They had waited for three months inside the migrant house when I met them. They were bored, tired, and about to give up on getting the documentation. While they were waiting they were in a type of legal limbo where they were very vulnerable. They could not work, and they could be deported if an agent of the INM picked them up. They were stuck in the migrant house and the surrounding streets. Eventually, they got their documentation and were able to make the trip to the north of Mexico with more certainty. One of them made it to Tucson while the other two were deported when they tried to enter the United States. In their case, the strategy paid off. However, most of the migrants I talked who were eligible for the VRH and were aware they could apply, decided not to do it. They did not have enough money and support to wait for months in Mexico and they wanted to arrive at the United States as soon as possible.

As the previous chapter showed, most of the migrants who leave Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, do so because they are escaping the violence and the poverty in their countries. According to Human Rights Watch, at least half of the Central Americans

crossing Mexico are fleeing threats to their life and safety (Human Rights Watch, 2016). Under Mexican law, any government official who receives a request for asylum (written or verbal) must forward it to Mexico's refugee agency, the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados, COMAR). People who are apprehended and then ask for asylum are usually detained while people who go to COMAR are not detained while the process goes on.

According to officials interviewed by Human Rights Watch, although the law in Mexico follows international standards, accessing the procedure is complicated. Officers rarely inform detained migrants about the possibility of applying for asylum, the credible fear interviews are not done properly, and people have to wait in detention for over a year if they want to hear the result of their application (Human Rights Watch, 2016; Ureste, 2014). Another thing migrants have to consider is that less than half of the applications are successful. In 2016, Mexico received 8,732 refugee applications, predominantly from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. Of those only 3,260 applications were accepted (Casillas R., 2018). This means that migrants can spend over a year in detention or inside a migrant house in Mexico waiting for the result of an application that might be fruitless.

In La 72 and in the Saltillo migrant house, migrants were informed that they could apply for asylum if they had enough evidence. Those two institutions had lawyers who were able to advise the migrants and help them with their applications. Nevertheless, few people choose to apply for asylum in Mexico. They are dissuaded by the time they would have to wait and by the documentation they have to provide. Many also prefer to apply for asylum on the United States or even cross clandestinely.

Those who apply for asylum often use it strategically, as a way to get a document that will allow them to arrive at the northern border. Some do not have the intention of staying in Mexico. They see the asylum process as a strategy to decrease their vulnerability. In the following chapters I will talk about Jonathan's family. They applied for asylum and after months of waiting without being able to leave the migrant house in Pakal-Na, finally got it. They quickly went to the United States where they have settled. Many migrants, however, once they get their asylum, settle in Mexico.

Applying for asylum and getting the VRH document are the two main documents that migrants can access while they are in Mexico. Choosing to apply for either one is a strategic choice that might improve the migration journey at the cost of a long delay. When migrants are informed about their choices sometimes they favour waiting in Mexico to improve their chances of getting into the United States. Some of them, eventually stay in Mexico, as some ethnographies have shown (Castillo Rivas, 2014; Fernández Casanueva, 2017).

In my ethnography I observed that it was families with children or teenagers that often chose to ask for asylum in Mexico. At the moment of applying for asylum they were not sure if they preferred to stay in Mexico or in the United States, they just wanted some certainty for their families and they were truly scared of being deported. I did not meet any migrant by herself who applied for asylum in Mexico; however, that was not the main aim of my research and I did not ask about this to everyone I met. For what I could observe, those who chose to apply for a humanitarian visa were usually people who had suffered kidnappings, beatings, and violent robberies and who did not have support or family waiting for them in the United States. According to my conversations with the volunteers, the attrition rate

for this last group was high, as they got restless and often chose to move on before getting their documents.

Access, research strategies, and field site

I stayed in Palenque for six weeks to do the initial leg of my fieldwork and in Tenosique for one week. For this stage, I joined the Undocumented Migration Project (UMP) from the University of Michigan in Palenque. Dr. Jason de León and Dr. María Inclán, the leaders of the project, invited me to participate. The group included four PhD students including me, two researchers, and 15 anthropology undergraduate students who were learning to do ethnography. I was working in my own research project but being with the UMP facilitated getting to many sites that I would not have known were important by myself. They also negotiated the access to the Jtatic Samuel Ruíz García on Pakal-Na and La 72 in Tenosique on behalf of the research group and donated food for the migrants. Thanks to them, I could spend most days in the migrant house. Being with researchers who were familiar with doing ethnography in secluded places with difficult to access population was very valuable. I learned how to approach the migrants, how to talk to them, and to evaluate where it was safe for me and the migrants to spend time together.

I performed participatory observation in the migrant house. I helped cook, clean and provide first aid to the migrants. I sometimes taught English classes or played card games with the migrants. I also worked along with the PhD student in anthropology who taught me to pay attention to the items that migrants used and discarded along the path. That taught us what migrants brought from Central America and showed their degree of preparedness. We also learned what they bought in Mexico and where they gathered.

In Pakal-Na, I spent most mornings in the migrant house. It was run by two nuns with the help of some volunteers. In this place, migrants were let inside at 7:00 am, had breakfast, rested and received medical help, had lunch and then were let out at 14:00. They had to wait until 19:00 to go back inside the house and spend the night. Migrants were not allowed to stay for more than three days so those who were not ready to go to the north just yet usually slept outside the migrant house, where they felt safe. These rules meant that during the afternoon, all the migrants were outside of the house feeling vulnerable. In the exterior of the migrant house, along with those whose time had run out, were petty criminals who extorted and robbed migrants. If they strayed far away from the house, even by two blocks, they could run into the police or border agents and be picked up.[22]

[22] During my stay in Palenque, the National Migration Institute performed a raid in the guest houses and the streets around the migrant house picking up migrants and detaining them. After that, we learned that the tacit truce between the authorities and the migrant house could be broken anytime.

Jasón de León gives a presentation for the migrants inside the migrant house in Pakal-Na. In this open space is where migrants spend most of their time, photo of the author, 2015.

The fact that migrants had to leave the house every day provided me with two spaces to interact with them. During the mornings, I worked in the migrant house and spent time with the migrants. When they were let out, I sometimes asked someone I had met to give me an interview. Even though they were safer in the migrant house, it was also more difficult to talk privately, since there were few secluded spaces to talk. As the next chapters will show, migrants are very private with their personal information and some experiences so they are careful about eavesdroppers. Outside, they could guide me to a spot where they would feel comfortable and they could talk. Our previous interactions and the fact that they met me inside the migrant house, with the trustworthy volunteers, meant that they trusted me.

The way in which migrants told me their experience varied depending on the place where I talked to them. Inside Jtatic Samuel Ruíz García they were respectful and narrated only the sad and dramatic parts of their story as they believed that was what the volunteers wanted to hear. They did not joke a lot with me and I had to ask them many questions to get answers. They were careful and spoke quietly, to make sure no one overheard us. It was outside where I learned the most about them. I usually bought a snack for us and we spent a couple of hours together. In that context, we could joke and talk freely. Sometimes the person I was talking to introduced me to his travel companions and encouraged me to interview them all at the same time. The interview became an intimate and lively conversation between friends. Although a group interview is more difficult to transcribe and analyse, the fact that migrants were able to talk about a journey they shared with their "road brothers" made the interview richer. I observed how they talked with love to each other and how they shared anecdotes and stories. Those group interviews allowed me to see how the members of a *familia del camino* relate to each other.

Towards the end of my stay in Palenque, I went for a week to the migrant house in Tenosique, La 72. This is usually the first space where migrants can rest after arriving at Mexico. The house is next to the train tracks but the train does not stop so the migrants have to run to catch the train. Sometimes they get hurt or lose a limb. Since lately the train has been going faster, many choose to walk to Palenque. In La 72, migrants can stay inside for the whole day and they have more freedom to spend their time however they like. It is also a bigger migrant house, with several buildings, an open-air dining area, and a basketball court. Migrants were less bored and thus less excited about talking to me to kill time. Nevertheless, it was in Tenosique, with its women's quarters, where I was able to interview more women and their families, as

they felt more comfortable talking to me in their own private area. We spent most of the day together talking and watching people play soccer.

View of La 72 in Tenosique, photo of the author, 2015.

Challenges and opportunities

An advantage of going with a big group of is that we could go to places I would have never been able to go alone. I walked on the train tracks deep into the jungle accompanied by a – male– PhD student. As a young female researcher, there were some places where I could not go by myself. The fact that the group was comprised of mostly Americans was also useful sometimes. On one occasion, I joined a group of five other members of the research group to observe how the agents of the National Migratory Institute stopped the train (illegally) in the middle of the jungle. We saw them rob and beat up the migrants before securing them in the van. When they noticed our presence, they surrounded us and pointed their guns at us; they also called more agents who then threatened us. The men were pushed and screamed at, the women were patronised. Most of us were certain we were going to be arrested or taken somewhere. After a

standoff of hours, one of the agents received a call. It seemed that his boss had found out there were American citizens in our group and ordered them to let us go.

The undergraduate anthropology students that came with the group also had the chance to interview the migrants and to take ethnographical notes. I was present in some interviews and I have listened to interviews that they made. It was very compelling to listen how the migrants explained their realities back home and their journeys to young, American, and mostly female, researchers. They tried to be clearer with them than with me (probably because they assumed we shared a culture), they took longer in narrating the details of their story, and they usually sent a message to the American people or directly to Obama of the sort of: "I am a good person and will be a good citizen and please stop deporting us, we just want to work."[23] Listening to them explain their lives in so much detail helped me to understand them too.

The downside of being with such a large group was that our presence altered the day to day life of Pakal-Na and of the shelter. We were too visible; the nuns were annoyed by all of us there; the neighbours started to be rude to us; and the police and the INM officers started noticing us and following us around. After being there for a month we noticed that the environment was tenser and we realised we had to be more cautious about where we went and who we talked to. The authorities in Chiapas were not happy with such a big group talking to irregular migrants for so long.

[23] Interview: Santiago, 3 July 2015, Palenque.

Train leaving Palenque, UMP, 2015.

The north of Mexico

Between the southern and the border of Mexico, migrants have to cross about 3,000 km. They end up walking, taking the train, and taking buses along the way; it can take weeks or even months to arrive to the north. Most migrants experience discrimination, overcharging, abuse, and robberies. Many run out of money soon and have to beg on the streets and rely on the help of migrant houses and generous people. Some survive kidnappings and robberies with violence. They all arrived sunburned, skinny, and tired. They are dirty, dusty, and with well-worn shoes and clothes. They are less noisy and talkative than in the southern border. Many had been deported in southern states and had finally arrived at the north. Some never arrived.

For those who finally manage to get close to the U.S.-Mexico border, the second part of their migration process starts. They need to plan how they are going to cross to the United States. Here, the common wisdom is that it is impossible and even crazy to try

the crossing without the help of a good smuggler. The United States has, since 1994, made crossing from Mexico irregularly increasingly expensive and dangerous by moving the routes to more difficult paths, including the Sonoran Desert .

Saltillo

I waited for a month after finishing my fieldwork in the southern border to go to the northern border. This gave me some time to rest and think about what I had learned and improve my strategies. I also knew that sometimes migrants took a month to arrive from one border to the other and I was looking forward to meeting some of the migrants I had met and interviewed on the south. Many had planned to go through Saltillo, my second field site. To show how unpredictable and hard it is to control the migration process, I was only able to see one migrant that I had met, Toño. The rest I never saw and many never contacted me. Later, I found out that some had looked for me in Saltillo, a couple of them had been deported, and at least two had disappeared in Mexico. This happens all the time, when groups separate, it is very difficult for them to find each other again. There are many routes that migrants can take and many obstacles they have to overcome, so it was even surprising (in hindsight) that I ran into Toño and that he remembered me.

I stayed in Saltillo for seven weeks. This time I went by myself. To gain access to the migrant house there I asked Juan, a colleague of mine for when I worked at migrants' rights NGO in Mexico, to introduce me to the person in charge of volunteers and researchers. Thanks to Juan and to the help of Juanjo, from the Saltillo migrant house, I could go every day for seven weeks. As part of the deal for me staying there, I had to

help the volunteers in the everyday activities of the house. The Saltillo migrant house has a core group of lawyers and social workers who are paid to work with migrants in their cases. They also receive the help of four young men and women that volunteer for a year in the migrant house. These volunteers are the ones who are more in contact with the migrants and who organise the day to day activities. The spiritual leader of the migrant house is Father Pantoja, a charismatic Catholic priest who managed to involve the wider community with the migrant house.

Inside the Casa del Migrante de Saltillo, photo of the author, 2015.

I went by myself and conducted most of my research inside the migrant house, La Casa del Migrante de Saltillo. I did try to go out and find the migrants in open and unregulated spaces; however, the situation in the north of Mexico is different than in the south; the cartels have a stronger control on the population. Few migrants gathered during the day in the train tracks for fear of being detained or kidnapped. It was easier to find people at dusk. However, after going once, I realised I could not do most of my fieldwork there. It was too dangerous. Everyone, including the migrants, warned me about being a woman alone in that secluded space. They were nervous about me being

there and they refused to take the blame if something happened to me. I understood that my presence there increased their visibility and vulnerability. I also trusted them when they told me I could not go there by myself; I had learned that in Palenque.

As a consequence, I had to conduct most of my fieldwork in the migrant house in Saltillo. Fortunately, this shelter's rules were more flexible and allowed the migrants to have more freedom. There were private spaces where I could talk to them. Another advantage of the house is that they had an area with comfortable seats and tables where the migrants and volunteers could play games and chat. In this situation, the environment was much more relaxed and migrants exchanged experiences amongst each other. The volunteers welcomed me quickly and thanks to them the migrants trusted me immediately. They saw me as one of the volunteers and were happy to spend time with me. The fact that I knew about the route and about their culture also helped me to earn their trust.

In La Casa del Migrante de Saltillo they were able to stay for as long as they needed. In contrast to the southern border, where they wanted to move up as fast as possible, here most were waiting for money from their families, for their *coyote* to pick them up, or for the right time to attempt to cross by themselves. That allowed me to interview people who stayed for one day and people who had been there for longer. I formed some friendships that I still maintain and I got to know the migrants on a deeper level. I could also come back with follow up questions.

Another view of the Casa del Migrante with volunteers and migrants making piñatas, photo of the author, 2015.

I arrived in the morning and I had breakfast among the migrants and tried to strike up conversations with them. For them, sitting to eat with them showed them that I was not "stuck-up" and that I was humble, like them. It made me more approachable and it reduced my perceived power there. I then spent time with whoever wanted to play Rummy or checkers with me in the common area. We chatted about our lives and they talked about their hometowns. I became close to some of the migrants and we had fun together. I eventually interviewed some of them. However, our conversations were sometimes so rich and so intimate that I felt I did not need to formally interview them; I wrote what we had talked about in my field notes to help me remember for later.

Like in Palenque and Tenosique, I also learned to sit by myself and wait for someone to approach me. Usually those people were the ones who had been sitting apart from the other migrants and who did not participate a lot. It was clear that they were by themselves and did not trust the other migrants enough to let their guard down and hang out with them. They spent many hours with me and explained to me the migration process, the strategies to survive, and their experiences. They were very patient and nice.

I also continued doing the group interviews, I realised that hearing a group talk about their collective experience was going to be useful in my analysis, especially if I was talking about social networks. By then I suspected that the groups would become an important part of my analysis so I asked more questions about group formation and composition to try to understand them more. Sometimes I interviewed some of the members by themselves and then the group, to compare versions.

Nogales

I did fieldwork in Nogales almost six months after finishing my time in Saltillo. During that pause, I reviewed my interviews and my notes and had time to think about other things I found interesting and wanted to ask. I also contacted people I had met in Palenque and Saltillo to gain access to research spaces in Nogales and Tucson. I did not stay in Nogales because I was told that it was too dangerous for me to stay there. Apparently, the cartels have been fighting for the area and had been killing migrants and threatening the volunteers. Sometimes, when I was in the Comedor in Nogales, I could see a van with cartel lookouts observing the comings and goings of the Comedor.

I stayed in Tucson for six weeks instead. Some days I hiked the Desert or observed Operation Streamline in Tucson and some days I went to Nogales. The Comedor is run by the Kino Border Initiative (KBI), an American religious organization that aims to protect and feed deported Mexican migrants in Nogales and Central Americans in transit. I gained access to them through Bob Kee, an American volunteer that I met in Palenque through Jason de León (who taught me how to do fieldwork in Palenque). Bob volunteers for the Samaritans, an organization in Tucson that looks for migrants in the Sonoran Desert and does advocacy in Tucson. The KBI allowed me to stay in the Comedor and to interview whoever I wanted. They introduced me every morning right after the prayer and the announcements so migrants knew what I was doing and why I was there. The Comedor was only open for breakfast and then the migrants left; this was not a migrant house. That meant that it was difficult for me to have casual conversations and then turn them into an interview. Instead, I helped with distributing food and I manned the phones. After breakfast, migrants who wanted to call their families could use the mobiles that No Mas Muertes, another organization in Tucson, provided. I was supposed to dial the numbers for them and maintain a record of how many people called. Sometimes I helped Bob cure the injured feet of the migrants too.

The Comedor is located right next to the crossing point in Nogales. Most of the people they help are Mexican deportees who had just been dropped by the Border Patrol on that side of the border. Many are dirty and hurt, since they got caught in the desert; some were caught after living for years in the United States. Sometimes they are not given their belongings back so they do not have any money or IDs. The volunteers and workers of the Comedor give them food, legal advice if they can, pick up the wire transfers their families send them, and give them clothes and toiletries. People from the Mexican government also go to give money and bus tickets for Mexican deportees to

go back to their states in other parts of Mexico. Some choose to go back; many decide to stay and try to cross again. Like in some migrant houses, migrants can only use the Comedor for three days. Those who have used up their days but cannot leave gather in the close-by graveyard or go to downtown Nogales to look for a place to stay.

Deported Mexican migrants and Central American migrants in transit eat lunch at the Kino Border Initiative Comedor. Photo of Hermana Engracia, 2017.

Although I was only able to interview five migrants in the Comedor, I learned a lot about the border dynamics and the stories of Mexican migrants. When they were there, in the border town, separated from their families, they were as vulnerable as Central American migrants and they knew it. They could relate their struggle to that of the transit migrants and they felt a sense of camaraderie with them. I heard them comparing stories and apologizing on behalf of the Mexicans who had taken advantage of the Central Americans while they transited. I was able to observe how a community of migrants existed among people with the same goals and experiences.

Twice a week, Bob also took me to the migrant house in Nogales, Juan Bosco. This migrant house was set up by Don Francisco and his wife. They are Catholic but he was a politician and businessman who, as he told me, observed the suffering of the migrants and decided to do something about it. He set up the migrant house twenty years ago and he pays for most of the day-to-day operation. That migrant house is just for the night. It receives mostly deported Mexican migrants but they also take Central Americans in transit. They only let them stay three days, like in the Comedor. When he can, Bob takes the No Mas Muertes phones to help migrants take calls and he brings toiletries.

In this house, migrants have to wait for a couple of hours for dinner in a chapel. There, they sit and rest or talk to each other. Many had just been deported and are still hurt, tired, and surprised while some had had a couple of days to understand their situation. The Central Americans had been in transit and were waiting for the opportunity to cross. Here, they could listen to the experiences of people who had just been in the desert. They paid close attention, since their turn was next.

In the chapel, I could sit next to the migrants and talk to them. Since there were few Central Americans, I also spent time with Mexican deportees. I listened to the reasons they had for leaving their hometowns, to their migration stories, and to stories about their deportation. I noticed that the way they told their story was very similar to how Central Americans told me theirs; many were also leaving as a consequence of the violence in Mexico. Looking at them like that and talking to them, I realized they considered themselves to be all just *migrantes* regardless of their nationalities. Once they were in the border, they were all being turned down by the United States who targeted all similarly.

Considerations about fieldwork in the north of Mexico

The fieldwork in the north was more restrictive. Gatekeepers and migrants alike strongly recommended me not to walk by myself at night and not to go to train tracks and places where I knew migrants gathered (like the graveyard or underpasses). The constant threat of the cartel violence surrounded me. I understood that the advocates and the researchers could only do their job if they limited themselves to the spaces that the government and the cartels allowed them and I learned how to stay in my place quickly. The lookouts outside the Comedor in Nogales and the shootings in Saltillo reminded me that I was not completely safe. Being forced to stay inside limited my understanding of all the spaces that the migrant used and did not allow me to see how they behaved when they were not surrounded by authority figures, like in the south.

However, by the time I did my fieldwork in the northern border, I was more comfortable about approaching migrants and gatekeepers and I already shared their language and the way they expressed themselves. I had learned about Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala and could picture the towns that migrants came from. I had learned how to play *conquian*, a card game they like, and to dance *punta*. All the cultural cues that I learned from the migrants in the south made my conversations more familiar with the migrants in the north.

An issue I had to deal with while doing fieldwork in Saltillo was my slow desensitization. I hadn't noticed but after listening to so many similar stories of violence in Central America and abuse in Mexico, my tolerance to violence increased. I did not realise it but sometimes, when listening to a migrant's journey, I thought it

had been pretty uneventful, even when he was telling me about the fear of running from the gangs or the agents of the government. Luckily, Lucas, a Honduran migrant who had migrated with his brother, pulled me out of that state of mind. After talking to him while having breakfast and learning that they had only been robbed once and with very little violence, I told him; "So, it was a pretty easy journey, right?" He looked at me with surprise and responded angrily; "No, it was a pretty fucking awful journey ma'am. We were scared all the time, my brother got injured, we lost all our money, and we were hungry for three weeks. It was not easy!"[24] I felt terrible; Lucas had really put me in my place and I deserved it. For a while, I had been evaluating the experiences of migrants based on how much pain – according to me – they had experienced. It reminded me of when the nuns in a migrant house on the south asked the migrants to come forward and tell their most horrendous stories to journalists or donors to show how they suffered while in Mexico. A couple of months ago I had felt disgusted by that but now I was replicating it. Now I am very aware of my tendency to get habituated to a narrative and I work to give each story the value that their owners give it.

Doing fieldwork in both borders allowed me to see how the migrants changed physically and emotionally. It also let me observe how their strategies and their social arrangements had changed throughout the journey. It also let me witness how the activism dynamics are different in both borders. In the south, most activism is geared towards Central American migrants whereas in the north Mexican and Central American migrants get very similar treatment. In the south, the population around the migrant houses seems to be more hostile towards the presence of the migrants while in

[24] Informal conversation, August 2015, Saltillo.

Saltillo the population around the house cooperates with the migrant house and often organises events inside of it.

US-Mexico Border

After arriving to the northern states of Mexico, Mexican and Central American migrants have to cross to the United States. Since 1994, the U.S. government has made it increasingly difficult for migrants to cross and has forced the flows to move to more secluded and dangerous routes. Crossing this last stage of the journey is completely different from crossing Mexico. The terrain is different, the actors are others, and the strategies have changed. Most of the crossing points to the United States now cover the desert or a river. Most migrants admit that attempting to cross without a guide is practically suicidal and very few attempt it. I went to Tucson, Arizona and to the Sonoran Desert to understand the last stage of the migration process to the United States for Central American migrants. I wanted to see what they had to go through and understand the dissuasion system that the United States had built. I also wanted to see with my own eyes the desert that scared and fascinated many of the experienced migrants I had interviewed. I also went to Tucson with the hope of interviewing Central American migrants who had crossed successfully.

<u>Dissuasion policies in the United States</u>

Crossing the US-Mexico border has become more dangerous since the "prevention through deterrence" strategy was implemented in 1994 to control illegal immigration

(Dunn, 2010). Before this strategy entered into force, the U.S. controlled unauthorized migration by detaining migrants in towns located in the proximity of the actual border, and thus after they had accessed the national territory. However, in 1993, the Chief Patrol Agent of El Paso Border Patrol Sector, Silvestre Reyes, created "Operation Hold the Line" (Bean et al., 1994) to move the activities of Border Patrol officers to the international boundary separating El Paso from Ciudad Juárez. With visible agents, helicopters, and a repaired fence, this operation effectively built a virtual line to deter migrants from crossing: seeing the agents from the Mexican side, unauthorized migrants would have not attempted to cross there (Bean et al., 1994). Considered a success, the operation reduced the number of apprehensions on the El Paso Border Sector, so that similar policies were soon implemented in other sectors of the border – e.g. "Operation Gatekeeper" in San Diego (Nevins, 2010) and "Operation Safeguard" in Arizona in 1994.

After 9/11, the United States created the Department of Homeland Security and passed the PATRIOT Act. One of the consequences of the Act was the construction of large databases for the collection and analysis of information (Mittelstadt et al. 2011). The Department of Homeland Security also created the Secure Border Initiative (SBI) in 2005. The SBI intended to secure the border with new fencing, ground surveillance radar, infrared cameras, and laser range finders (Shaw-Taylor 2011). The law also unified the systems that were needed to control the border. This included integrating the work of customs, patrol, agriculture and immigration officers.

Following this restrictive trend, on December 16, 2005 the House of Representatives of the 109th Congress passed the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (HR 4437) (Immigration Policy Project 2015). This bill sought to make it a felony to be undocumented and expand border security measures.

It increased cooperation between federal and local police agencies on immigration and law-enforcement. It broadened the definition of aggravated felony to include some misdemeanour charges and expanded the classification of human trafficking to include anyone who transports an undocumented person in an automobile.

The Congress also passed the Real ID Act and the Secure Fence Act. The Real ID Act introduced national regulations for state-issued identification that prevented undocumented people from getting driver's licences, and waived potential barriers to building a border wall (Sensenbrenner 2005). The Secure Fence Act sought to build seven hundred miles of fencing and to increase the number of agents dedicated to border enforcement. The bill also mentions using technology such as satellites to control the border. These bills effectively "pushed the borders out" towards Mexico (King 2006).

Border wall in Nogales, picture of the author, 2016.

In the border, the U.S. Border Patrol implements a three tiered strategy composed of line watch in the international border, roving patrols deployed behind this line to arrest those who cross the first layer of agents, and checkpoints to catch those who manage to get further into the territory of the United States (Stana, 2010). The southwest border of the United States with Mexico is 3,201 km long as it includes California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. Besides some border cities, the U.S. and Mexico are separated by the Rio Grande River, and the Sonoran Desert. Before 1994, most illegal border crossings happened near the border towns, where migrants only had to walk for a couple of hours before finding the next urban settlement. Now, most crossings happen away from the cities, as migrants end up crossing the Rio Grande and the Sonoran Desert.

The latter covers most of the border between Mexico and Arizona, as it is a vast territory with hills, ravines, and abundant cacti. During the day, temperatures can rise to 50 degrees Celsius, making it a difficult terrain to patrol. The primary technology the Customs and Border Protection (CBP) uses is the Remote Video Surveillance System: about 250 towers with day and night cameras deployed along the 3,201 km of the border. Yet, the Border Patrol agency also relies on Mobile Surveillance Systems (MSSs) such as truck-mounted infrared cameras, radars, planes, helicopters, unmanned aerial vehicles and various database systems to survey and control the border (Haddal, 2010; Homeland Security, 2016). Besides, the Border Patrol is authorized to establish checkpoints up to 100 miles away from the border already inside the territory of the

U.S.[25] All these technologies, strategies and personnel, started operating between the U.S. and Mexico in the late 1990s to enhance surveillance capabilities and the ability of law enforcement agencies to detect unauthorized crossings (Dunn, 1996).

Fieldwork in the Sonoran Desert

During April of 2016 I spent six weeks in Tucson, hiking in the Sonoran Desert and visiting Nogales. Bob Kee took me hiking; he knows everything there is to know about that border and about the Sonoran Desert. At least twice a week he visits Nogales and he hikes frequently in the desert; he is always happy to take whoever is interested in learning about how the United States deals with its migrants to the desert. He was Jason's guide when he first started researching and he has guided school groups, reporters, PhD students, and curious Tucsonans. For him it is important to make as many people as possible aware of what is happening in the border. Some days I hiked (for over 10 miles!) in the desert with Bob or stayed in Tucson and some days he drove us to Nogales, Mexico, to help in the Comedor or in the migrant house.

I wanted to understand the experience of crossing the border and to see what the migrants I had met would have to face. For those weeks, I worked alongside the Tucson Samaritans. This is an organization that provides help to the migrants lost and stranded in the Sonoran Desert. The volunteers drive and hike in the desert carrying as many water bottles, socks, and food as they can and they search for migrants, alive or dead.

[25] If the checkpoints are brief and the passengers are asked brief questions to determine their residence status according to United States v. Martinez-Fuerte, 428 U.S. 543 (1976).

They also do “water drops”, where they leave big jugs of water with encouraging words written on them on the main crossing points of the migrants.

Migrants walk in the desert for many days to arrive to the United States. Most of them hire a guide. The guides walk at a fast pace and do not leave them enough time to rest. If someone gets injured or cannot follow anymore, they are often left in the desert with the promise to get help. Many die waiting for someone to find them. Throughout the year, but especially during the summer, the temperatures during the day can reach over 45 degrees Celsius. There is no shade, just one hill after another and one cactus after another. Migrants have to carry their own food and their own water; they rarely bring enough to survive the journey. Many run out of supplies on the first days of hiking. The terrain is hilly and with many little loose rocks; it is very difficult to walk, especially if you must keep up with your guide. They are usually wearing sneakers, which do not provide any support. Many get huge blisters. Some are forced to stop walking from the pain; many die waiting for help. Often, the guide abandons the group either because he always meant to do that or because the *Migra* appears and the group disperses.

Water jugs that the volunteers leave for the migrants. This is the fence that marks the border between Mexico and the United States in Walker Canyon, part of the Sonoran Desert. Notice the contrast with the border wall, picture of the author 2016.

Throughout my month there, Bob picked me up at my hostel and then we went to the Samaritan's headquarters in the church to get the official truck, as much water as possible, some socks, the maps, and the GPS tracker. Then we drove to the Desert. Bob chooses different areas every time he goes to replace the water jugs and to see which routes are "hot" and "cold". We can learn which routes the migrants are using by the

debris they leave behind.[26] We also check if they have been drinking the water that the Samaritans left for them. I learned to recognize Bob's jugs because he always writes "Paz" on them.

As we were walking, Bob showed me the towers that the Border Patrol uses to look for migrants; he told me that they are the same towers that Israel uses in Gaza. They can record sounds and image and have thermal sensors. They towered over us as we walked. Once, the Border Patrol ran up to us – apparently we had triggered some motion sensors they have hidden in the desert. The agent asked us: "have you found any quitters yet?"[27] It angered me how casually the agent talked about people that might be dying right there in the desert. It angered me further when we saw that some of the water jugs had been sliced. Bob told me that ranchers, hunters or border agents sometimes do it. The rejection of immigrants comes from the highest level, the towers, to some of the individual officers, to some people in the border, who make sure migrants cannot get water, the most precious resource, when they are dying in the desert.[28]

In the hikes, I observed how the newer routes were in more secluded and dangerous spots. Bob showed me where he had found the remains of migrants along the paths. We saw shrines to the Guadalupe Virgin, we found backpacks that had been dumped because they broke, a Bible with 5 dollars inside, a tree with a prayer carved in it. He

[26] In fact, one of the anti-immigrant arguments that some people in the community give is the fact that migrants pollute the desert, which has some areas that are a natural sanctuary. Of course, they always forget to argue that the border wall is a natural catastrophe that prevents many animals to move through the desert. According to activists, the litter that the migrants leave is negligible, and there are groups that frequently go and pick it up.
[27] Conversation with border agent, April 2016, Walker Canyon, Tucson.
[28] In February of 2018, No Mas Muertes, another organization that puts jugs of water in the Desert, showed several videos of Border Patrol Agents slashing and kicking the water jugs the volunteers of No Mas Muertes had left for the migrants in the Sonoran Desert.

showed me where Jason and his fieldwork students had found a dead migrant woman, the same one he talks about in his book.[29]

A cross in the desert marks the spots where Bob found the remains of a migrant; a volunteer builds the crosses and hikes to put them there and remember the dead -and often unidentified- migrants, photo by the author, 2016.

During those six weeks, we saw a group of Central American migrants and they did not need help; we gave them water bottles. We also ran into a young boy who had been lost for three days in the desert. He was scared, dehydrated, and regretful. He had been abandoned by his smuggler after the *Migra* ran after them and had been wandering the desert for days. He wanted to go home so we called the Border Patrol and they took

[29] De León (2015), *The Land of the Open Graves*, Oakland, California: University of California Press.

him back to Mexico. Since he is a minor, he did not go through Operation Streamline, where they prosecute migrants for entering illegally and send them to private prisons for at least three months.

In addition to observing how the dissuasion apparatus works in the desert, I also attended the hearings of Operation Streamline. I sat in a richly decorated courthouse in downtown Tucson while the police let seventy migrants in and sat them in rows of ten. The migrants were shackled on the feet and on the hands and were wearing the clothes they were caught with. Some were limping and clearly in pain. Most were confused and scared. None spoke English. There were only five lawyers for all the migrants. The proceedings went by quickly; the judge asked each one if they pleaded guilty to the crime of entering illegally. After someone had pleaded guilty, she would assign detention time of three, six, nine months. Some people got more than a year. As each row was done, they were escorted back to detention. They all looked defeated. Here, too, a member of the Samaritans was present to make sure to document how many people were processed and to see if there were any gross violations. She told me that before, they could sit directly in front of the migrants and could smile at them but that the court had forbidden that so now they had to sit at the back. She was frustrated about a system that killed and incarcerated migrants and was fighting to protect as many as she could with the Samaritans.

I did not know this before going, but there is not a strong Central American community in Tucson. Most of those who manage to cross go quickly to other states of the United States. Even the Mexican community was difficult to find: the clampdown on immigration had intensified and Arizona is not the most welcoming state for migrants. I managed to have some conversations with Mexican migrants waiting to get picked

up for a job in front of the church but I did not get to really interact with irregular migrants in Tucson.

Reflections on the fieldwork in Tucson and the Sonoran Desert

Even if I did not manage to talk to any Central American migrants in Tucson, the experience was very valuable because I was able to learn about both migration control systems in Mexico and in the United States. I learned that they seem to have similar objectives – to make migrating more difficult – but different implementations. I saw the way in which both countries use the natural elements as "aids" in stopping irregular migration to their countries. Mexico uses the jungle and the United States uses the desert. They both use human rights discourses to justify increasing the control on the migrants and the activists.

Going all the way to Tucson allowed me to understand the whole migration process for the migrants. It let me see how each stage, Mexico and the border, has different challenges and how the role of social ties is different depending on the stage of the journey. Whereas family and new groups are very important when crossing Mexico, finding a smuggler is much more valuable when crossing the desert. The emotional support and the resources that a group of migrants can provide you is useless without the knowhow of the smugglers. Migrants must learn two sets of 'rules of the game' and must be able to adapt quickly.

Having hiked the desert allowed me to understand what probably happened to Filadelfo, a Honduran man I became friends with in Saltillo, when the Aguilas del Desierto found his bones in the Sonoran Desert. I feel that those hikes allowed me to

follow him until the end of his journey into a dry ravine in the middle of nowhere. It made me understand the fear, the anger, the frustration of being so close and so far away from the United States when you are in the middle of the desert.

Concluding Reflections on Multi-sited Fieldwork

A multi-sited fieldwork was ideal for me because the population I was trying to find was mobile and difficult to find. This strategy allowed me to "follow the people" and to understand the processes of transit migration. Spending more than one month in each place let me understand the flows of people and the cycles of the migrant houses and the towns. This strategy also allowed me to learn about the whole migration trajectory and to contrast each stage of the journey and the effect the trajectory has on migrants. I learned how they change their strategies, their outlooks, and how they form and maintain ties while they are on the road. It let me contrast the regions and the migrant houses to understand how the context where migrants circulate changes as they move north.

Moving sites without following the same group of migrants allowed me to see the changes without putting myself and the people I was observing at risk. It also allowed me to reflect and improve my research strategies and include new field sites as I met new people who could open more doors to me. My mobility let me learn cultural cues that facilitated forming links to the migrants.

Migrants in Palenque studying the route. Photo UMP, 2015.

Chapter 5: *Familias del camino*

During the fourth day of my fieldwork in Palenque, I interviewed a group of five men. Before the interview, we had been talking, joking around and getting to know each other. I had assumed they were family or acquaintances from Honduras because they were very attentive towards each other, they seemed very comfortable, and they talked openly about their families and the amount of money they carried with them, for example.

> Alejandra: And where did you meet?
>
> Santiago: Well, we just met on the way. In the capital of Honduras, Tegucigalpa. Yes… and well we are on our way to see if we can arrive at the United States where you can really have a better life, to arrive even here is very hard but we'll keep pushing forward. And here we come making family.
>
> Alejandra: Making family? Are you a family?
>
> Santiago: Yes, because since we left we come together.
>
> Juan: Brothered
>
> Alejandra: How long have you known each other?
>
> Santiago: Five days.[30]

They had only known each other five days and they already considered themselves brothers! From then on, I asked everyone about the friends they had made while in Mexico. The answers I got were surprising. Most migrants had tried – and many had

[30] Interview: Santiago, 3 July 2015, Palenque

succeeded – in making friends during the road and travelling together. These were both true in the southern and the northern border. Many of them described the groups they had formed as close friendships or families.

Migrants in Mexico do not have social networks and social capital they can use while in transit. Instead, what they rely on to survive is trust in a small group of strangers throughout the journey. They did not share social networks or social capital with these strangers. In this case, trust and cooperation exist even when the migrants who conform to a group did not know each other and did not have any common acquaintance. The groups they form go beyond these concepts. The previous research on social capital and social networks is insufficient to understand bonding, cooperation, and trust among individuals in volatile and dangerous circumstances.

In this chapter, I will discuss the experiences of migrants who formed groups during the journey. With this analysis, I will show that migrants can be cooperative and trusting even when self-preservation and competition might seem like the smartest alternative.

Why not go alone?

Pedro and Reyna, an uncle and a niece from Honduras, understand the value of forming a group and have observed it themselves while migrating:

> One can leave his house by himself but in certain parts of the way one can start meeting people and once one arrives in Mexico they [the migrants] already come in groups of 4, 5… People that left alone and people that left with acquaintances usually join more migrants before arriving in Mexico

> or very soon after they cross the Guatemala-Mexico border. We the Central American migrants always try to go together in a group. Even if we are Hondurans, even if we are Guatemalans we are always in a group. Even if we are only four or five we are in a group. It is unusual to see someone going with only two or with one.[31]

Some people, like Roberto, a 21-year-old father of two from Honduras[32], decided to leave their houses without the company of their families or friends. Roberto did not want to ask for any favours and did not have any friends who were leaving at the same time so he decided to go alone. He took the bus from Honduras to Guatemala alone and by himself crossed from El Ceibo to Tabasco. Later he would meet his travel companions in Tenosique.

Pedro (24 years old), in contrast, left with four of his friends. They decided they were going to leave Olancho in Honduras and go to the United States after a soccer match when Jaime, a friend, told them he wanted to try his luck crossing again. Knowing that they did not want to grow up picking coffee for someone else, Pedro and his friends decided to follow Jaime to the United States. They too, despite travelling with friends, met two other migrants who joined their group early in the journey.[33]

When discussing social capital and social networks, most scholars pay little attention to group formation. Most descriptions of groups only start when the group is already performing. Putnam (1995, 2007), Coleman (Coleman, 1988) and Bourdieu (Bourdieu, 1986) all begin their analyses of social networks when the social ties have already been built. This is mainly because these authors are more interested in the social capital that

[31] Interview: Pedro and Reyna, 16 July 2015, Palenque.
[32] Interview: Roberto, 27 April 2016, Nogales.
[33] Interview: Pedro, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.

the groups create, not in the origin of the groups. Also, most classical researchers focus on social capital creation in stable environments where families, neighbourhoods, and communities form the fabric of social life. People usually arrive naturally to their social groups, either by birth, family, social status, or occupation. They form ties with the people they are often around. For Coleman (1988) and Bourdieu (1986), the family is the origin of social groups and the origin of social capital.

These perspectives also assume that social ties are the product of a long-lasting process of exchange among the members of a social network. The social capital that is created is a product of the effort of its members to keep the relationships alive to eventually reap rewards. "This is done through the alchemy of consecration, the symbolic constitution produced by social institution and endlessly reproduced in and through the exchange which it encourages and which presupposes and produces mutual knowledge and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986: 87). These ideas assume that individuals have the time and space to build relationships and build on the bonds they create. They do not consider the role of social ties and social capital outside the peaceful settings of modern western societies.

This research will shed light on the creation of ties and social capital in contexts of violence. Understanding how groups are formed, their composition, and their performance will add to the knowledge of social networks and social capital. Learning about bonding during threatening situations will also allow other researchers and activists to enquire about cooperation and the creation of social ties in other stressful situations, when group cooperation is more important for survival.

So far, there is scarce literature on social networks in contexts of violence. In general, research on natural disasters and catastrophes has shown that when there is a crisis,

people tend to retreat among their closest kin and evade helping the wider community (Chong et al., 2011; Erikson, 1995, 1979; Webb, 1996). This has very negative effects for survival and recovery since "weak ties", or ties with acquaintances, are the most useful during times of crisis (Berg Harpviken, 2009).

The literature would assume, then, that when migrants go by themselves to a dangerous place like Mexico, they would become isolated and concerned by their own safety first. However, I observed exactly the opposite happening. Migrants form groups hurriedly as soon as they realise their vulnerability. When they cross Guatemala or enter Mexico, they will most likely face extortion or robbery. This is when they understand that they have been stripped of their rights, their value as humans, and their dignity. Gordo (23 years old), a first-time Honduran migrant in Saltillo, told me:

> As soon as you cross to Guatemala they make you less of a human and by the time you arrive at Tenosique you do not recognise yourself, the mistreatments, the humiliation, the…. the way they treat us is if like we were not humans…. If you could see me the way I am back home, a person.[34]

As the literature had described, the migrants understand that they are separated from their usual support networks and are vulnerable. However, in contrast to what other authors have observed, this did not make them less sociable, but more willing – at least initially – to talk to strangers.

One of the explanations that migrants gave me for this pro social behaviour is that they see other people die or get deported and they notice that no one seems to care. They understand instinctively that while they are in Mexico they are, as Judith Butler (2009)

[34] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.

described, lives that do not matter, that are not grievable. Finding *amigos del camino*, friends of the road, as Jason de León (2015) has called them, helps them feel important, valued, and makes them "people" again. In interviews, I have seen that they call each other *hermanos*, brothers; they form a *familia del camino*, a road family.

Gordo, who was talking earlier, when reflecting about the *familia del camino* he had formed, told me:

> I've learned to value people for who they are. I've learned that you should never ever be jealous of someone. When I see one of my comrades falling, I give him my hand and lift him up and give him hope…. On this road, you learn to appreciate the people you love and the people that love you.[35]

Juan (19), from San Pedro Sula in Honduras, feels that the experiences and the care they have for each other makes them family. He feels that the ties have existed forever, like in a family.

> So yeah, when you are in the road and share experiences…. you feel trust, you feel as if you were related. You look around and you see your new friends but you feel you have known them forever. I think it is because we have a common goal and we wish each other the best, we want all of us to arrive together.[36]

Personal interest and strategy also play an important role in the formation of groups. Migrants become aware of their lack of knowledge, money, or information very early in the journey and they must make up for it. A survey, the EMIF SUR[37] has shown that migrants are ill prepared when they cross Mexico. I also observed that some first-time

[35] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.
[36] Interview: Juan, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.
[37] A survey done by the Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Mexico where researchers asked Central American migrants who had been deported from Mexico and the United States about their migration experience and their demographic characteristics.

migrants do not have any networks to let them know how to behave when they arrive in Mexico. Other migrants researched and listened to stories about the transit but were not aware of the "rules of the game." This is an example of a social network not providing value to a member (see Cranford 2005 and Rosales 2014). Often, migrants who had done the trip had not shared their scariest memories (and the most valuable information) with their family members out of shame or to keep them at ease. These omissions misled their families in Central America and made the transit seem easier than it was. Often, then, migrants must rely on the scarce resources they brought with them. This research shows, though, that migrants are very effective in overcoming the uselessness of their social networks and in building migration specific social capital.

One of the first things they learn is that it is difficult to survive by themselves. Most make this discovery after the first days of travelling by themselves. Sor Nely, who runs the Palenque shelter, related a clear example of this happening in Palenque, the second stop in Mexico. She said that when migrants go from Tenosique to Palenque either by train or by foot, they realise that the journey is emotionally and physically challenging and that they might not be able to do it by themselves. Therefore, according to her, the enganchadores (people who convince the migrants to go with them and then kidnap them) and the coyotes (smugglers) wait there, to prey on the scared migrants.

Migrants start grouping after being in Mexico for two or three days, when they feel vulnerable and exposed. Juan, a second-time Honduran migrant, says that the one recommendation he would give to a potential migrant is to find a *familia del camino*.

The first time he migrated he attempted to do it by himself and after a week he got himself deported because he could not stand the loneliness.[38]

The need to be recognised as someone who is valued and to form part of a community of peers, coupled with the strategic advantage that groups seem to provide, encourages many migrants to form groups early in the journey. After all, many tried to do the first legs of *el camino* by themselves and failed. Toña (31 years old from Honduras), for example, chose to migrate from Honduras to the United States alone. She decided that she would rather be by herself than with a stranger (in her mind, male) who would take advantage of her. While she walked towards Tenosique, after crossing the border in Guatemala, she heard a gunshot and she ran under a bridge. The fear paralysed her so she stayed in hiding for two or three days until hunger trumped her anxiety and she forced herself to start walking. She kept wondering who would have told her mother had she died under a bridge in Mexico. She also believed that if she had been accompanied she would have probably been braver and would not have stayed for so many days in hiding. When I talked to her in Tenosique she had decided she was not going to leave until she found a *familia del camino* to walk with.[39]

No con cualquiera:[40] Group formation

Groups can form in bus stations towards the Guatemala-Mexico border, in the migrant houses in the southern border or in any place where migrants have to wait for a while, often next to the train tracks or in churches. The *hermanos* from the first example met

[38] Interview: Juan, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.
[39] Interview: Toña, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.
[40] I don't just go with anyone.

in the bus station in Tegucigalpa. They started talking and they realised that they were all going to the United States and that they were all nervous. In the hour they had to kill before boarding the bus, they decided they could trust each other and agreed to travel together. The group's cohesion was further strengthened after the Mexican migrant agents, La Migra, chased them shortly after crossing the border. When that happened, they all scattered but as soon as they felt safe again they looked for each other and did not leave until everyone had re-joined the group. During my fieldwork, I have observed migrants getting to know each other before lunch and leaving together when the train arrives an hour later.

The minimum requirement for group formation is physical proximity (Tyler and Melander, 2011). For Bourdieu, social and economic proximity and "material and symbolic exchanges" are also indispensable in people bonding (Bourdieu 1986: 86). In transit, migrants cannot find secure spaces where they have time to talk and assess each other carefully. At most, they have a day or two to get to know each other and decide if they seem trustworthy. Often, they cannot halt for long in the same place. In the migrant houses and shelters, they can only stay for a limited time. Many want to continue the journey as soon as possible and become restless if they have to stay for long periods of time even if they are allowed. When migrants concentrate outside of "safe" spaces, they cannot stay for long or they risk being deported or mistreated. They simply do not have time to find out if they have social and economic proximity with someone and they are completely unable to perform valuable exchanges.

They must find an impossible balance between talking – but not too much and about nothing too important – and listening, but not too intently, not sneakily and not for a long time. It is common knowledge that talking too much is bad because you could

provide someone with information about yourself. Jesús (25 years old), a second-time migrant from Honduras I met in Tenosique, expressed the general feeling among the migrants: "you cannot just go around talking about yourself and your family and your life to others, if someone who wants to hurt you hears you, he will kidnap you or do something to hurt you."[41] Listening too much is dangerous also: people can think you are an enganchador (people who trick migrants into going with them and then rob or kidnap them) trying to find new prey. I have observed how suddenly in the middle of a conversation migrants grow quiet, look suspiciously at someone and then change seating places with their eyes fixed on the floor. I have been told "not to trust that guy" or "don't interview this guy" because they are clearly bad people, they listen too much and ask too many questions.

Of course, Bourdieu was talking about social network formation in quiet settings, not in stressful and public situations. There are few studies of group formation between people in vulnerable and exposed situations. However, there is a growing literature that researches how homeless youth form social ties. It has shown that physical proximity is usually all that is needed (Tyler and Melander, 2011). In their ethnography, Kimberly A. Tyler and Lisa A. Melander describe how homeless youth make friends in the street. However, the social formation process and the creation of trust were outside of the scope of their investigation. Unfortunately, they did not describe how groups were formed and at what pace. This research on migrants in transit adds to their findings by specifically looking at group formation through interviews and ethnography.

Contrary to previously described social network formation, the creation of a *familia del camino* is fast and based on very little shared information. Migrants cannot seem too

[41] Interview: Jesús, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.

eager to get to know someone and they cannot ask anyone to vouch for them. Most of them are strangers to each other, they do not have any contacts in common and no way of knowing if what they have been told is the truth. When I asked them, "why did you go with him/her and not with another person?" their answers were vague. Luis, a first time migrant from Guatemala, looks for people with "kind eyes that do not look threatening."[42] Dionisio (29), a first-time migrant from Honduras, looks for people that seem to be working class, like himself. He also described his companions as humble.[43] Toña wanted to join someone who seemed hardworking and who had a "legitimate reason for going to the United States," not just to have fun and drink.[44] Roque chose Raul because Raul was carrying a pocket Bible and reading from it.[45] When I probed more and tried to get more reflexive answers, they couldn't provide them. For them it was a gut feeling, an "identificatory interpellation" (Santer, 2001): they had "found" the person.

The demand for "love," for recognition, awakens the migrants to an "identificatory interpellation" in which they become "undead" (Santer, 2001) or grievable again. It is an "acknowledgement rather than a claim of pursuit of knowledge" (Santer 2001: 66). The gut feeling that led them to identify with someone is impossible to explain and it frustrates them when you press for more details. Somehow, on the train tracks, in the church, while riding the bus, some migrants sense that they found each other. They feel identified as members of a part again, they are no longer stripped of all the things that make them grievable, they have some support again. A good metaphor for how they

[42] Interview: Luis, 18 September 2015, Saltillo.
[43] Interview: Roberto, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.
[44] Interview: Toña, 17 June 2015, Tenosique.
[45] Informal conversation with Raul and Roque, 20 June 2015, Palenque.

express it is something like love at first sight or faith in a higher entity. You cannot explain it but you can feel it.

This is how the five "brothers" expressed how they met and decided to get together:

> Santiago: So yeah….
>
> Juan: So, when you meet the person….
>
> Lucio: You know about the person.
>
> Santiago: You more or less can see how the person is and then….
>
> Lucio: And then you just get together, we just got together.
>
> Santiago: We have been traveling together for a long time [5 days]. We met in Guatemala.
>
> Juan: And he [Santiago], he gave us food…he gave us a taco and we shared all amongst ourselves, he gave us a glass of water and we all drank from the same glass, and yeah… we keep going…[46]

For Christopher (39 from El Salvador), the gut feeling comes from the heart:

> Alejandra: And when you met him, did you know you could trust him?
>
> Christopher: Mmmmm, I didn't know I could, I didn't know I could trust him but in my heart… he looked like a humble man, we had been suffering, so we both supported each other, we had a small pichinga of water, I had water and he had bread and… and both things matched…. […] and we matched as if we were brothers and we decided, he left his group and he came… I was still alone.[47]

[46] Interview: Santiago, 3 July 2015, Palenque.
[47] Interview: Christopher, 4 September 2015, Saltillo.

Gordo, who thought he could not trust anyone, calls the mutual identification he experienced divine intervention. He and his group went all the way to Saltillo. His narrative also shows how he was looking for a group because of practical and emotional reasons.

> I don't know since I saw them through… I was alone, right? I had to join a gr… or someone who was alone because I couldn't come alone, alone, alone, by myself, to start with I didn't know Mexico and didn't know anything and, how can I tell you, I didn't know anything, right? I couldn't tell if I had to go this way or the other way, no? But I don't know how... God probably put them on my way, they were…. they, at least one of them knew more or less, or all knew more or less, they had crossed already, and then I 'stuck' with them and we came together, suffering, enduring the cold, the hunger, and everything. Until we arrived here.[48]

In short, migrants try to use the information they have to make a decision about who to go with. Most of the weight of the decision comes from a type of love-at-first-sight feeling that they cannot describe. This identificatory interpellation probably comes from observations and instincts that they cannot express when asked. In the next section, I will discuss how they identify "bad migrants" to show that they indeed perform some sort of analysis. Whatever it is, many groups formed by strangers have arrived safely to the north. They have performed efficiently, they have cooperated and trusted each other, and they have overcome hard situations in Mexico without breaking down. Clearly, time to socialize, economic and social proximity, and shared social capital are not fundamental for trust to flourish and for positive results to happen.

[48] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.

In social capital literature, different social networks interact. People are part of many social groups with which they have strong ties and are acquainted with other people with whom they have weak ties (Putnam, 2000). These interactions between groups and people increase the social capital in the community. In contrast, migrant groups tend to try to stay isolated from other groups and rarely use opportunities to socialise. Since the people outside the group are complete strangers, the groups rarely overlap and almost never interact significantly with one another. I will discuss the way in which they show solidarity and cooperate with the *migrante* community in following chapters.

Reading signs and finding the "good migrants"

Migrants do not experience this identificatory interpellation with everyone. They bring from their countries pre-existing notions about what constitutes a trustworthy person. For them, the risk of making a mistake could be fatal. Like the cab drivers in Gambetta and Hamil's (2005) ethnography, they feel forced to trust strangers if they want to survive (or earn a living) and they have to make a fast decision to engage with someone. Migrants in transit have the same dilemma; however, their situation is even more precarious, as they have nothing to protect them from the consequences of their decisions. For them, there are no safe spaces to hide, no screen in the taxi, no police help, no safer streets.

Migrants must be very careful when they talk to each other, even in "safe" spaces such as migrant houses or churches. They are always aware that among the migrants there are "good migrants" – those who just want to go to the United States and work – and "bad migrants" that want to take advantage of the "good ones." It is common

knowledge that there are "moles" who pretend to be migrants in every place where migrants gather. "Bad migrants" have incentives to mimic "good migrants" and to adopt their demeanour and attitudes to trick others. Thus, migrants should be able to go beyond the superficial characteristics of a person to decide if he is to be trusted; they need to be able to read subtle cues that cannot be disguised.

There are some types of people with whom migrants refuse to interact. Most do not trust people who are heavily tattooed. "I do not trust those who are all "painted," those with many tattoos are from the gangs, the Mara or they come from prison in the United States. Either way, I do not want anything to do with them."[49] So I was told by David, a 41-year-old migrant from El Salvador, as he scowled at a group of young, heavily tattooed men who were sitting apart from most migrants. Tattoos are something that cannot be hidden easily in the road, so they are considered a good marker of a "bad migrant." Of course, "good migrants" with tattoos are negatively affected by this prejudice and will have to work harder to find friends on the road. This statistical discrimination (Gambetta and Hamil, 2005) helps the migrants make fast decisions but hurts good people who happen to have those characteristics.

There are also other types of "bad" behaviours. Rober (22), who I met in Tenosique in his fourth migration from Honduras, summarises what most people told me about "bad migrants."

> ... They arrive and they lie, he can ask you, "hey, hey, where are you going? where are you going? who are you going with?," "I can give you this, have some money for a soda, you can have this, you can have that." I will not fall for that and I was close…. And once they get you they don't tell you, "I'm a coyote," one is already tangled with them when one notices. If you

[49] Interview: David, 2 September 2015, Saltillo.

> are not part of the group you cannot be too attentive, too generous, or too eager.[50]

Gambetta and Hamil (2005) warn that sometimes "bad patrons" can mimic signs that "good patrons" make to appear "good." In this case, Ronal understands that "bad migrants" can mimic "good migrants" by being nice and friendly. Therefore, for many, being too nice and too helpful immediately makes you a suspect. Other behaviours that migrants mistrust are having a mobile (because smugglers use them to call other smugglers); being too confident; being too loud, and smoking marihuana.

A "good migrant" is usually described as someone who is humble, hardworking, who wants to cross for legitimate reasons (take care of his family or to flee the violence). They are generous on the train but quiet on the road and they respect the personal space of migrants they do not know. They are not in Mexico to rob or to take advantage of Mexicans but only to arrive to the United States. Being Catholic or protestant also improves one's credibility as a moral person. Sometimes "bad migrants" are sophisticated enough to be quiet and respectful to gain someone else's trust; nevertheless, most of my interviewees had had positive experiences with quiet migrants. However, a cross is an easy disguise and so is carrying a Bible. A trustworthy sign of virtue is knowing the scriptures by heart or having a tattoo with a verse (the only time having a tattoo is accepted).

It is impossible for me to know if migrants were good at picking out "good" and "bad" migrants. However, I believe that this statistical discrimination (tattooed people, people who drink or do drugs, talkative people) is, in most cases, a rational shortcut for the migrants. Although by this point they have not met their *familias del camino*, they have

[50] Interview: Rober, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.

already had time to observe how other migrants act and to listen to more experienced people talking. By the time they start to look for "brothers" they have already acquired some migration-specific social capital that includes cues for statistical discrimination towards certain groups. Gambetta and Hamil were able confirm that some of the signs that cab drivers used were rational and they corresponded to the statistical likelihood of a certain passenger becoming an attacker. Unfortunately, there are not good enough statistics of violence against migrants to find out if migrants' biases are indeed true. A good database of migrant aggressions would allow researchers to understand if the information migrants learn and discover is accurate and thus useful.

Who joins a *familia del camino*?

Groups are usually made of four to five people, most of them men. Women represent a smaller percentage of migrants (EMIF 2013); however, some also join these types of *familia del camino*. Of the women I observed and interviewed, some came with a partner, a family member or a friend and then sometimes joined a group (more on that on the next chapters) and some came by themselves or with their children. Pedro and Reyna, the uncle and niece, realised they needed to join a group and did so in Guatemala.

Women have a hard time joining a group because they are perceived as "weak" and as a hindrance to men. Oscar and Franco (19 and 19) for example, refused to travel with women.

Alejandra: Is it harder for women?

> Oscar: Well…. It is harder as I told you…. You know… a woman is not going to walk three days.
>
> Alejandra: Women can't walk for three days?
>
> Oscar: They can't.
>
> Luis: And yes, they migrate a lot but… women, it is difficult for them to cross this road because they are more… they are weaker, they are more sensitive, and with all these gangs, women are raped, I don't think they will risk crossing anymore. They stay there and they go back to their countries, and with all the pain in their souls about what happened to them.[51]

Women, however, do not agree with this perception and their stories confirm that many are self-sufficient and resourceful. Martha, a 32-year-old mother of two from Honduras, only needed to be taught how to ride the train once (as all the new migrants do) and then she did the crossing 5 times without injuring herself or falling behind. Laura (27 from El Salvador) has taken the train and migrated two times, the first time alone. She completed the second migration after she lost her foot in an accident. Rosa and her sister in law migrated with their five children from Honduras and walked one week from Guatemala to Tenosique where they met their husbands (who were twins). Rosa had just given birth to her third son three days earlier.

Women, because they are perceived as non-threatening by Mexicans, are very helpful for the group, as Martha (32 years old from Honduras) shows:

> So, I was the one who usually asked for help or money to people along the way because I am a woman and they tended to be more generous towards me. I was also less shy about approaching people.[52]

[51] Interview: Oscar and Franco, 8 September 2015, Saltillo.
[52] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.

Nevertheless, most groups have only men. The age range of the members goes from teenagers (16-17) to older people (53 was the oldest migrant I talked to). The groups have members of varying ages although older people tended to be alone more often. Since many of the migrants are between 16 and 25 years old (EMIF 2013), most groups tended to have young people in them. Age is not a factor when choosing travel companions because many of them are in the same stage of their lives; they are family men who want to work in the United States. Nationality does not seem to be a factor; Hondurans joined Salvadorans and Guatemalans if they found them trustworthy. Since geographical proximity is one of the primary reasons for group formation (Tyler and Melander, 2011), the groups tend to heterogeneous, albeit male.

Some groups only have strangers, like Santiago's group, the five friends from the beginning:

> Me: And do you come together or did you meet here?
>
> Santiago: We met here, while we were migrating, in Tegucigalpa in Honduras.[53]

In some cases, two or three friends that left together find other people they want or need to join. Robin, in Saltillo, explained about his group:

> With the black one yes [he knew him before] because we are like brothers, we are friends from the same neighbourhood, but with the other boy no, we didn't meet him until Coatzacoalcos [Veracruz].[54]

Finally, sometimes people run into someone from their village or their neighbourhood and decide to go together. In this case, they do have a family member or a friend in

[53] Interview: Santiago, 3 July 2015, Palenque.
[54] Interview: Robin, 10 September 2015, Palenque.

common. Having this weak social tie to someone makes it easier to choose them to go north with. In this case, social networks and social capital aid the migrant in deciding how to group.

Oscar and Franco, who had left Honduras together for the first time, ran into Oscar's cousin who was smuggling three more Hondurans. "And well yeah, my cousin told us to come with him because he was taking those people anyway and we didn't know what we were doing. And he took care of us. I'm glad because we honestly didn't know what we were doing or where to go!"[55]

Rino (21 years old) is an experienced migrant who has help from his social networks in the United States; however, in seven attempts has never managed to arrive at the United States because he has "bad luck." He told me how in one of his trips he met people he had known in Honduras. He did not want them to join him but the fact that they knew each other forced him to help them. He knew that if he did not someone would have found out in the village and scolded him. Here, the influence of the social capital they shared in Honduras is clear. Rino had obligations derived from the fact that their families had ties.

> Rino: And yeah, I ran into two boys who were from back there, from my neighbourhood. From my place. I was going through the house in Tabasco, the migrant house in Tabasco, I arrived at shower, because, because I was on my way and didn't want to stay there, so I was, I was only going to shower, and a boy came and talked to me and it was him.
>
> Alejandra: Ah! You already knew him from back home!

[55] Interview: Oscar and Franco, 8 September 2015, Palenque.

> Rino: Yeah, I already knew him, they were from my neighbourhood, and then they asked me if was coming here [Saltillo], and I said yes, because…. I don't like to be selfish, because I could come alone, much better, because you are alone in the world, and it is easier, with oneself it is easier than with more.
>
> Alejandra: Yeah?
>
> Rino: Yeah, but then I told them they could come and we arrived all the way here.[56]

Regardless of the composition of the group, once the *familias* are formed, they all start performing similarly. They all display comparable levels of trust and cooperation, and they all provide similar advantages to its members. These findings contribute to the literature on social networks and social capital by showing that new groups of people that have no ties in common and that have had no time to get to know each other can generate trust, social capital and can cooperate efficiently. When the common goal is survival, the social processes accelerate.

Group dynamics

Since the members of these groups come from different backgrounds and have different migratory experiences and even personalities, they eventually acquire different roles within the *familia*. The ones with more social capital, information, or money tended to be more visible and usually made most of the relevant decisions. The older person -who was usually the more experienced- became the *de facto* leader of the group. The younger and least experienced member of the group usually looked up to him and imitated his behaviour. This is how they learned to jump on the train,

[56] Interview: Rino, 3 September 2015, Saltillo.

how to interact with others, and what to do when they were waiting. As I observed it, the leadership was implicit, and the members of the group were free to make their own decisions or sit apart if they wanted. They did not seem coerced to do something or scared of their "leader". Sometimes, when I asked them for an interview, they invited the more experienced member or even the whole group to give me a better interview, but I never felt they asked for permission to talk to me.

Besides the knowhow, another factor that affected the influence or "power" of an individual in the *familia* was the amount of help they had from their families. When migrants are in transit their ties to their transnational networks do not disappear, and some of them are able to use them during the transit. Rino, for example, received constant money wires throughout the route from his family in Honduras. With this money he was able to support his road family for a period of time. This slightly altered the power dynamics by making him an indispensable member of the group. He felt he was expected to make more decisions. Having the upper hand work for Rino because he knew which route he wanted to take and which migrant houses he wanted to visit. He shaped the others' route.

Finally, the charisma of a person can affect how much they are looked after by the group. I met a couple of group that had inexperienced migrants with nothing material to contribute to the group but who kept the spirits up, told jokes, and -crucially- were excellent at approaching people and asking for food, money or favours. This skill, very valuable during the transit migration, gave them influence over the group.

Those who were young, inexperienced, and lacked social support, while perhaps having less influence over where to go and where to rest, seemed comfortable members of the group. They were happy to have found friends and helped as much as

they could. Some were good cooks and prepared the food. Some had brought cards that they used to play *conquián.* Most just followed along and provided what families provide, a sense of validation and love to the rest of the members. As with most groups, as time passed, each member started to settle into a particular role. In Marlo's group, for example, there was the leader with experience; the one who brought pans and salt was the cook; Marlo was the young inexperienced one with the charisma; and Roque was the smart one who carried a Bible and read to them. He was also the spokesperson of the group. Similar divisions of labour were present in most groups.

When they had to make difficult decisions, such as leaving someone who got hurt or got lost behind; the group seemed to look at the de facto leader for the final opinion. I talked to a man called Manuel in Saltillo. He told me how he was migrating with a group that had become close. However, in Aguas Blancas they lost two members of their group. They waited for them for four days and then they looked for them in the next migrant house. They never appeared. The group feared they had died because they had not contacted them or had used their Facebook accounts. Finally, Manuel, as the experienced one, had to decide to leave them behind for the good of the group. Everyone obeyed, and no one resented Manuel. However, they still wondered what had happened to their brothers and they kept asking about them. In contrast, when they leave someone behind because they did not want to be with them (as I will discuss in the next sections), the group unity became grater and the story of how they "lost" the intruder became part of the group's narrative.

During my interviews I did not ask about conflicts in the group and I was told of few instances where they had a strong disagreement. While I was there, most migrants seemed very comfortable with each other and happy to be together. I am sure that, as with any new group, they had issues; unfortunately, I was not made aware of them.

Longevity of the group

The members of the *familias* that were together when I talked to them believed that they had shared an experience that no one else was going to be able to understand. They felt that the bond they had created was going to last forever. They called themselves *hermanos* because they have indeed become brothers. I interviewed them when they were still in the middle of experiencing the violence, when they still needed each other emotionally and practically. All *familias del camino* wanted to arrive together to the U.S.-Mexico border; unfortunately, many groups are separated by the road.

Since Mexico has toughened its border control policies, sometimes groups get separated even if their members do not want to.

> There are moments when you run into La Migra and some are caught, some hand themselves to La Migra because they don't want to walk anymore. We were eight in the group but only two of us arrived. The rest were caught, decided to go back, and one separated from the group. We don't know anything about them.[57]

Franklin (19 years old from Honduras), told me this while getting ready to cross the Sonoran Desert by himself. This was his third attempt and he was still sad about losing all those friends while migrating.

On other occasions, some members of the group are victims of crime and cannot go on. Cristopher, an older experienced migrant from El Salvador, had to move on when some gang members threw his travel companion off the train and he lost a hand. His friend had to stay and recover in a migrant house in Arriaga (Oaxaca) and then intended to go

[57] Interview: Franklin, 21 April, 2016, Nogales.

back to Honduras. Martha's family got separated when Mexican officials from a southern state kidnapped her brother. She hid in the migrant house with her son for several months until she got a humanitarian visa that allowed her to transit through Mexico to the northern border. Marlo, a 17-year-old Honduran who wanted to apply for asylum in the U.S., was the only one left when the Mexican border agents caught all the members of his group in Veracruz. He took the train by himself all the way to Saltillo.

The strong bonds that these groups form sometimes persist after the members are separated. A year after my first stage of fieldwork, I contacted the migrants that had added me on Facebook and were willing to talk about their experiences when migrating. Many of them had been deported back to Honduras while crossing Mexico or the Sonoran Desert in the United States. Some of them had died or disappeared (as I learned from their Facebook walls where friends and family wrote grieving messages); few had arrived at the United States. To the ones I could talk or chat with, I asked if they were still in contact with the *hermanos* they had made in the road. It is important to remember that migrants were not from the same region originally and do not have the same destinations in the United States in mind so they are rarely in the same place after they get deported or arrive at the United States.

Caballero, who is living in Saltillo while he decides if he will cross the desert alone, replied, I don't talk to them because they left the migrant house and we didn't exchange contact details.[58] He was concerned about them but he had not made any efforts to find what happened to them. Gilberto, who lives in Austin, Texas, kept in touch through Facebook with his friends who were deported. He intends on helping them settle if they

[58] Facebook conversation: Caballero, 17 August 2017.

ever get to the United States. Saul, who was deported along with his entire group when *La Migra* found them around Veracruz, keeps in touch: "we talk all the time."[59] The last time I spoke to him he was planning on crossing again with some of them. These groups can last longer than the time they are useful but migrants do not always have a contact address and the time and will to keep them alive.

A *familia* is not always good

So far, I have discussed the positive aspects of joining a group, forming strong bonds and trusting your new *hermanos*. Nevertheless, one of the objectives of this research is to understand all the consequences of social network formation. For years, scholars have assumed that social ties automatically produce valuable social capital for all the members of the group. However, lately, research on transnational migrant communities in the United States has shown that having close ties does not always yield positive results for everyone (see Hondagneu-Sotelo 1994; Rosales 2014; Cranford 2005). Members with less information and women are usually the ones who end up in exploitative and dangerous situations.

My ethnography adds to these studies by showing that group formation in transit is not always positive, especially for the most inexperienced and the youngest migrants (I will talk about gender in the following chapters). When migrants work together and when everyone is trustworthy, they tend to have an easier journey even among the violence of Mexico. Yet, there are many *malandros*, criminals and bad people, who are

[59] Facebook conversation: Saúl, 5 April 2017.

willing to take advantage of the migrants. Sometimes, a person's instincts fail and he bonds with the wrong person, shares his secrets, and gets into trouble as a consequence.

> And that day we arrived at the bus station in Reynosa, Tamaulipas. And we were sleeping there, at night, with some friends who were from Honduras [he is from Guatemala] and [when they had met in the Southern border] one of my friends told me he had already been in the United States three times or four and he had actually come in through this entrance so I decided to cross with him. So, we were in the bus station of Reynosa and the people in the bus station told us that it was too hot [dangerous] that we could stay in the bus station to sleep while it was dark. So we did that and very early in the morning my pal woke me up and told me, "It's now or never". He stood up, stopped a taxi and told the taxi driver to take us to the migrant house that was close to the Rio Bravo, in Reynosa. And then the taxi drove us to a house and my friend handed me to the Cartel del Golfo.[60]

Manuel, 28 years old from Honduras, had spent three weeks with this man and had shared the fact that he had family members in the United States. Almost at the end of his journey, his *hermano* sold him to the Cartel del Golfo. Manuel was captive for 20 days, being fed only *Sabritas* and Coca Cola. He refused to admit he had a family because he knew they could not pay the ransom and did not want to worry them. Then, luckily, he and other 80 migrants were rescued by the Mexican police and deported immediately.[61]

[60] Interview: Manuel, 21 April 2016, Nogales.

[61] Manuel should not have been deported. He should have been allowed to report the kidnapping and he should have been given a humanitarian visa while the criminal case proceeded.

Mayra (24 from Honduras) lost her group in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. After being kidnapped and escaping she felt she needed to find a group but it seemed too late; no one wanted to take her. She met Ramón in Apizaco and he told her she could tag along.

> "I am a guide," he told me, "come with me, no problem. You don't have to pay; I feel sorry for you: You will have to help me with the cooking and maybe washing clothes. You will not pay for anything, you will have food and you will be able to call your children." And to be honest, I did tag along with him and thank God I was able to talk to my girls…. And we left Apizaco and we took the train towards here [the north] … One we arrived at Laredo our roles changed because I asked him to help me get a job. I wanted to get a room and a job. And he said… "No! You do what I tell you to do and you will stay here and you will die here!" I told him, "You promised and we were friends" and he replied, "You shouldn't believe everything that people say, people lie."[62]

After that, Mayra was forced to "work for him" for two years. She rode the train down to the Southern Border with him and then he "hooked" more people to take up. She cleaned, cooked, and washed everyone's clothes. He hit her with a board when she was bad. He forced her to dispose of the dead bodies of those he killed when they could not pay his fee once they arrived at Laredo. She finally escaped and is in hiding.

In the following testimony, José Lucas (37 from Honduras), the one who is talking below, attempted to sleep with one of the female members of the *familia*. He felt that since he was helping her she could have been more grateful to him and shown it by sleeping with him. After they had travelled half of Mexico he got sick of the women because one had rejected him constantly and they just left them.

[62] Interview: Mayra, 17 September 2015, undisclosed location to protect her.

> So, I was coming with another guy and two women and another young man. One was pregnant and we were helping them. We met them in Arriaga… They were alone… We started helping them because we helped them escape from La Migra and they decided to stick with us. So, we went with them. And one night we were sleeping on the side of the road and I wanted to hook up with the one that was not pregnant and she didn't want but I insisted. And she told me she was tired. And we kept on going and she was always tired. I was tired but I could have slept with her but she didn't want to. And I never gave up but she never got loose. So, I got sick of walking with them and we left them…[63]

All these examples show that forming ties and trusting is risky, because the truster puts himself in a vulnerable position, as he cannot predict with certainty that the trustee will be reciprocal. One of the most important decisions a migrant will take in the road is who to trust and how much. For some migrants, forming a group and trusting the new *hermanos* can lead to exploitation and abuse.

Trust and *familias del camino*

Despite the potentially catastrophic consequences of trusting someone, many of the groups that I observed in *el camino,* especially those that managed to stay together for long stretches of the journey, displayed a great degree of trust. Trust is an expectation of reciprocity from others in uncertain or risky situations. It is when someone has the potential to gain at someone else's expense that trust becomes indispensable if people are going to work together (Foddy and Yamagishi, 2009). Migrants are in an extremely precarious situation because they need help to survive and to feel that they belong but

[63] Interview: José Lucas, 4 September 2015, Saltillo.

they have very little information about the people surrounding them. For them, trusting means managing the risks around them and showing vulnerability with strangers. Initiating and showing trust can have enormous advantages if the person they confide in reciprocates but it can be catastrophic is the faith is misplaced (Foddy and Yamagishi, 2009). To minimise the risk, people use their own cues to form an opinion about a stranger (Gambetta and Hamil, 2005). They can also choose to depend on someone who is in a better position, in the hopes that better-off people will have less incentives to take advantage of them (Binder and Jackson, 2011). When earlier I discussed group formation, I showed how, similarly to what Gambetta and Hamil (2005) observed in taxi drivers, migrants use cues, prejudices, and strategic discrimination to decide which person is less likely to be "bad."

Even if there are no formal institutions that encourage trust, there are usually informal institutions that regulate behaviour and punish those who cheat. One of the most efficient mechanisms is reputation. Unfortunately, when groups are open, people might decide that the incentives to cheat are higher than the likelihood of getting a bad reputation and choose to be deceitful anyway (Gosh and Ray, 1996; Kranton, 1996). One of the problems with this mechanism in an open structure is that good reputations are difficult to maintain and easy to lose (Coleman, 2001). Another problem with these types of groups, where people come and go and the membership is unstable, is that people who defect from the association cannot be effectively punished, they can only be punished – if at all – by the person to whom the obligation is owed; the whole group cannot do anything about it. Observing this, Coleman affirmed that that for trust to flourish it is important that the social structures are closed (2001).

Migrants in transit interact in a special type of open structure. It not only has many actors coming in and out every few days but it also has a mostly unidirectional flow, from south to north. As migrants move to the north they gain experience specific to that route in that certain month. As they move north, they bring that information with them and share it, as anecdotes, with other migrants. However, since all of them have already overcome that stage in the south, the information is not relevant for them. Maybe if they get deported, they will remember some of the things they learned and adjust their behaviour; nonetheless, perhaps the route will have changed. So, the way the transit process works creates a problem of transmission of information because the people who need to know about the reputations and the strategies are always a step behind the people who can share the information. This open and unidirectional social structure limits the production of data and the creation of reputations.

Migrants can quickly form a reputation for untrustworthiness; yet, this reputation is circumstantial and short-lived. When I was in Saltillo talking to people who had come through Tenosique and Palenque, they told me about a group of Honduras, including Javier and Carrizo, that hung out outside of the shelter and extorted and robbed migrants quite clumsily. With only a couple of details, many more migrants came and started talking about how they too had noted them and gave a complete picture of these people. I had met and interviewed Javier and Carrizo too, so I could confirm that what people were saying was mostly true. Many migrants also remembered a certain smuggler who used a holed piece of board to spank those who couldn't walk anymore or those who were not obedient. Many people had met him and remembered them.

Bad reputations of this sort seem to last for some time, or at least they lasted while I was doing fieldwork. The stories were common and people seemed to recognise the

criminals. However, the new migrants just arriving in Palenque were not going to find out about Carrizo and Javier until they had met them. The unique structure of the migration community facilitates the movement of information northwards, with the migrants. All the valuable information about people like Carrizo and Javier will probably never reach the people who are about to face them. Thus, bad reputations remain but they does not matter because the people who know about them are gone and unable to transmit this information to those who might need it. By now, Javier and Carrizo are probably forgotten and their reputations "restored."

For most people on transit in Mexico, getting an untrustworthy reputation is not something they have to worry about. The open and unidirectional social structure and the lack of norms and networks mean that there are no consequences for betraying your group. The formal institutions – such as the legal protection migrants have in Mexico – that could punish migrants that rob, kidnap, and take advantage of others do not work and thus are not efficient in preventing someone from being untrustworthy.

The only consequence that affects those who betray their group does not come from reputation or from punishment but from signaling (Gambetta and Hamil, 2005). When a migrant is by himself at the middle of *el camino* (around Veracruz) and is looking for a group, other migrants automatically assume that he is a 'bad migrant' who has done something horrible to his previous group. This is not really a bad reputation and it is not a punishment because no group or individual are ostracizing him. It is just that being alone at that stage becomes as bad as having tattoos or doing drugs. It is a sign that cannot be cloaked or hidden. Being alone guarantees you'll remain alone.

Most groups get formed in the southern border or in Central America. As Pedro and Reyna stated earlier: "one can start meeting people and once one arrives in Mexico they

already come in groups of 4, 5[…]"[64] By the time they arrive in Coatzacoalcos very few people are able or willing to find new travel companions. It appears that once the group is formed and is performing correctly, people are not keen on letting a new member join them. As soon as groups are formed they become closed units that refuse to allow new members to join.

[In Palenque when the group had been together for less than a week]

> Alejandra: Would you let anyone new join the group?
>
> Santiago: Nooooo!
>
> Luis: I don't think so…
>
> Alejandra: Why?
>
> Luis: Because the road is dangerous, you can find anything, there are criminals, everything.
>
> Santiago: And then sometimes you don't want to have too many people, a big group like some people say because the bigger the group….[65]

Meanwhile, Juan (19 years old from Honduras), even after recognising he needed a group to survive, refused to countenance the idea of adding new members to his group once he had one:

> No, and if anyone tries to get close to us, if a group arrived and if someone wanted to get together with us, we moved away because it is better to come, eh, to come with few people and not a lot.[66]

[64] Interview: Pedro and Reyna, 16 July 2015, Palenque.
[65] Interview: Santiago, 3 July 2015, Palenque.
[66] Interview: Juan, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.

Some don't let them join because they had already taken the risk once. Risking the safety of the group again does not make sense if the group is already fulfilling all their needs. By that time, they have also learned that a small group attracts less attention. When talking to them, it was clear that they had created a group identity that puts the needs of the group before the needs of other migrants outside of the group. As soon as the migrants identify themselves as a *familia del camino*, the internal trust in the group increases and they expect better treatment from the members of the group. Finally, an "us vs. them" mentality has appeared in the *familia del camino* by then and they start prioritizing their needs above the needs of someone outside of their group.

Sometimes, migrants who are alone try very hard to tag along to a group (literally translated as "stick" from the *pegarse* in Spanish). Even when they are persistent and harmless, they are kicked out, as Martha's group shows.

> Mmmmmm no, we didn't like it [people joining their group] very much but at the same time, because there are people that stick to you and run behind you and it is better for this road, they say, it is much better, much better to go alone [with your group] but there are people that stick to you and stick and stick and it is not good. And we tried to stay behind and they stayed behind, and there are people that are persistent. Look. Two young men stayed with us for two days, and so we didn't take the train, we walked and then they got tired of that and then they took the train, and yeah….[67]

Oscar and Franco's group also had to "get rid" of someone they felt did not belong to the *familia*. Laughing, they told me how a 16-year-old boy insisted on "sticking" with them even when they had rejected him. They were okay with the people that they had and they did not trust the boy. Like Martha, they tried to walk slower so that he would

[67] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.

get tired of their pace but he did not. Finally, they decided to spend the night at a cheap hotel, spending the last pesos they had. They did not offer to pay for the boy's lodging and they knew he did not have any money. The boy had to sleep rough and they snuck out the next day. They clearly did not feel any sense of solidarity towards him, even after –reluctantly – hanging out with him for a couple of days.[68]

The consequence of not finding a group, of leaving, or of being forced out of your group is that the migrant will most likely not be able to find a new *familia del camino* for most of the journey. If they are really intending to arrive to the United States, going alone makes them feel vulnerable and lonely. Putting up with their group is their best chance for survival.

This section has shown that there are two characteristics of the transit that could make it hard to create trust: the migrant group is open, and the flow of information is unidirectional. Forming a reputation and punishing a cheater is impossible. Nevertheless, this ethnography on transit migration shows that, against all odds, trust can be maintained in structures of this type. Group closure and access to information about behaviour are important but not fundamental for guaranteeing good behaviour in certain associations. This research has shown that even when the group is unable to prevent and punish defection, individuals can acquire the knowhow to guard against deception. And when many individuals start using similar cues, this trait will become a signal of untrustworthiness. Migrants who are alone end up being collectively punished by individuals who did not coordinate their actions. This emphasizes the

[68] Interview: Oscar and Franco, 8 September 2015, Saltillo.

value of migration-specific social capital to survival and the way in which "rules" are created in an open and unilateral association.

Showing trust

Migrants use a combination of bias, gut feeling, and strategic behaviour to decide to trust some people and make them their *familia del camino*. Members of the *familia* really have faith in each other and they show it by sharing the most valuable things they have: their personal information and their money and resources. This exchange produces "mutual knowledge and recognition" (Bourdieu 1986: 87) and strengthens the group as it produces social capital.

Telling people about your family and yourself makes you more vulnerable to kidnappings and abuses, as many migrants know. If someone shows that she has a family member abroad who could send money if she were captured, she can become a target. Therefore, if someone asks you about your family you always say you are traveling alone and have no one. When you are willing to share your family information with someone in *el camino*, it shows that you trust them with your life (or at least with your freedom). When migrants are with their *familia*, the barriers come down as I learned by talking to the *hermanos* from the beginning.

Alejandra: How do you keep yourselves entertained? What do you do?

Luis: We talk.

Alejandra: What do you talk about?

Luis: We joke, we tell jokes.

> Felipe: We keep each other in a good mood to forget what we are suffering, all the sleep that we miss, to keep each other awake.
>
> Alejandra: You must know each other's lives by heart now, I'm guessing.
>
> Luis: We tell each other our lives little by little because the journey is long and then not a word will remain.
>
> Alejandra: You haven't finished.
>
> Felipe: We never finish talking.[69]

They do not only talk about their families but they also talk about the fact that they have their family's phone numbers and that they could contact them. This is something that no migrant would ever do in front of someone they did not trust. During our interview, several of them showed me how they had sewn the phone numbers to the inside of their pants or how they had written them in code inside a Bible. I also let them use my phone to call and text their family members in front of the rest of the group.

They also share the fact that they have money.

> Juan: And when we came here on the border of Guatemala, almost in the last checkpoint, I almost didn't have any money and they took all I had left.
>
> Santiago: And from then on, we have been helping him.[70]

They leave their things (with valuables) with one person when they shower (in the migrant house or the river), when they go to beg for money or food, or when they make a call. It would be very easy for the person who is left with the things to just abscond and disappear in five minutes if they wanted. It has happened; Cristopher's bag was

[69] Interview: Felipe, 3 July 2015, Palenque.
[70] Interview: Felipe, 3 July 2015, Palenque.

stolen by someone while he went to buy tacos in Palenque. Similarly, any member of the *familia* could steal the things and no one would find him again.

What does the *familia del camino* provide?

Once trust is established, the members can start working together to achieve an objective. Trust is essential for ensuring cooperation between strangers or for people who meet infrequently because – as shown earlier – there are few opportunities to punish the defectors (La Porta et al. 2000: 311). Trust is also important for group performance; "A group within which there is extensive trustworthiness and extensive trust is able to accomplish much more than a comparable group without that trustworthiness and trust" (Coleman 2000: 19). Kristian Berg Harpviken (2009) showed in his study of social networks in wartime Afghanistan that social ties are able to provide the members of their group with information, security, and money in dangerous times. With these three basic resources, refugees were able to flee quickly and safely. Similarly, the *familias del camino* can yield resources that will increase the likelihood of arriving to the United States.

Company

Walking for hours in the jungle, waiting in migrant houses on the train tracks, and riding the train for long stretches is sometimes stressful but most of the time terribly boring. Migrants have a lot of down time where waiting is the main activity. Before I went to Palenque, I expected migrants to be on edge all the time. However, after

spending most of my time around them I realised there are countless dull moments. Juan, who was in his second migration, told me that the first time he migrated he almost went crazy because he had no one to talk to. He even handed himself over to La Migra out of desperation.[71] Gordo, the one who felt a religious connection with his group, does not understand how people can take the road without feeling the need to talk about something that is not *el camino* and how scared they are about the gang members in the road and the cartels in the north.[72] Groups provide a safe space to chat. Being too talkative, too quiet, or too attentive with your brothers is not a suspicious behaviour anymore.

When I asked Santiago's group, the *hermanos*, what they did to keep each other busy they told me they joke and they talk to each other.[73] Pedro and his friends, who decided to leave after a soccer game, carried a soccer ball with them and tried to play with the ball while they were walking and when they stopped in towns.[74] When they eventually lost the ball they threw rocks or water bottles around. Gordo and his group composed rap songs and sang them to each other.[75] Rosita, a woman fleeing an abusive husband in Honduras, told me how for stretches of the road she and her friends prayed together and kept each other's spirits high while praising God.[76]

[71] Interview: Juan, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.
[72] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.
[73] Interview: Santiago, 3 July 2015, Palenque.
[74] Interview: Pedro, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.
[75] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.
[76] Interview: Rosita, 9 September 2015, Saltillo.

Solidarity

Laura and Karina met in Laura's second migration. Laura had already lost a foot in an accident with the train two years earlier and this was her second attempt. She met Karina in Huehuetoca.

> We became friends because we talked and we liked each other and we were two women migrating alone and we decided to go together. And we got together in the train and it derailed! And we were there for hours, and then the Red Cross came and she was lucky because when I lost my foot I had to hop and then crawl for hours to the nearest town but she had time so they saved her.[77]

In that accident, Karina lost her left leg below the knee. The train was on her leg for hours until they saved her. Laura did not move from her side even if it meant she might be deported when they found them. And they called the consulate and he came for us and he brought us to the migrant house in Saltillo. "And now well… now we are waiting for Laura to get better and then we'll go up north, obviously."[78] After I clumsily asked how they were going to cross the desert with Karina in a wheelchair, Laura told me, "I don't have a foot and I can dance, I rode the train and I came all the way up to Saltillo. Karina will cross the desert with me by her own foot or I'll push her all the way to Tucson but we are crossing and we are crossing together."[79]

Members of the *familia del camino* are very supportive of each other. They indeed make each other feel like they matter. Through their actions, they show that if something happened to a member of the group they would take care of them.

[77] Interview: Laura, 9 September 2015, Saltillo.
[78] Interview: Laura, 9 September 2015, Saltillo.
[79] Interview: Laura, 9 September 2015, Saltillo.

After an illegal raid by the Mexican authorities when she was riding the train, Martha understood how valuable her *familia* was to her.

> So, we were riding the train at night and suddenly it stops and *La Migra* appears. We all scattered. They got some but they didn't get me. I hid in the bushes for a long time. When dawn broke many of us got out and started looking for our friends. We couldn't find my brother in law but we found the rest of the group. We went up the hill to wait for him to find him but he never came. We decided to take a train back and see if he returned to the last place we were. We had actually decided that we were going to meet in San Luis [ahead] if one of us got lost and we were going to wait for that person but we were scared he was in trouble, maybe he had been kidnapped so we decided to go back and find him and rescue him if necessary. But we couldn't find him. So, we rode the train to San Luis and on the train, we saw him!!! He had been waiting for us and looking for us and he was scared we had been kidnapped so that is why he stayed where we had gotten off. And then I knew someone had my back and he knew we had his back.[80]

In the *Comedor* of Nogales, a volunteer told me about five Garífuna migrants from Honduras who had had a particularly difficult time arriving at the north. Garífunas are descendants of Africans, so they are black and they are very visible in Mexico, a country with few black inhabitants. Most Garífunas do not make it to the north. This group had advanced a lot in Mexico when one of them died. The four other members of the group, instead of leaving the dead body there, where his family would have a hard time finding him, handed themselves over to the National Migration Institute and made sure that the family of the dead man was informed and that the body was repatriated.

[80] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.

Even after a beating, or after having been run off by the *Migra*, groups tend to stick together. The *familias del camino* can survive very traumatic and stressful situations.

Gilberto, Jaime, and Lucho, from Honduras, were kidnapped by a man before they arrived at Tapachula. A man offered to take them to Tapachula and let them stay at his house. They had previously accepted help and lodging in two other occasions and nothing had happened to them; they were first time migrants with little experience. They accepted the lift. When they got to the house he tied them down and locked the house. He did not come back for three days, he fed them and left. After two weeks of being held, they managed to escape. The experience drew them closer and they intended to migrate together and share a flat in the United States when they arrived.[81] Gilberto is the only one who made it but he keeps in touch with them and is waiting for them in the United States.

Security

> We walk always in groups, we have to walk in groups because if they see that you are alone, they come and grab you! And then that's it… Like this man, he was with his group and then someone came and gave him a 500-pesos bill and asked him to buy a jug of water in the grocery store, close to where we were [the church], and then three Mareros, gang members, I think, or well, three *malandros* appeared behind him and pointed a gun at him and took him. He was taken because he was alone. That's why the man came and gave him 500 pesos. NO ONE gives you 500 pesos to buy a 50-pesos jug of water. They wanted him alone… and they took him.

[81] Interview: Gilberto, 26 June 2015, Palenque.

Migrants find strength in numbers. They believe it is less likely to get kidnapped or robbed if you are with your friends. They walk around together. They sleep together; sometimes one stays awake and takes care of the others while they sleep. They even ask for money together. They feel that they will be able to protect each other if the situation arose. I have not been able to observe if indeed migrants who are in groups are less vulnerable than migrants who are alone. Their hunch is probably true with petty criminals but not true with the Mareros who jump in the train pointing their guns to everyone. Likewise, cartel members have been known to kidnap seventy people at gunpoint.

Information

Information is very valuable *en el camino*. Unfortunately, the road changes a lot, the checkpoints move and the criminals adapt. What was useful last year might not work this year. People are continuously surprised by the new challenges they face. They are simply not prepared. Felipe, a 35 year-old migrant from Honduras who felt "stuck" in Palenque told me about the road:

> [Before] I jumped in the train and I arrived but now…. Now it is very difficult. You have to pay a quota, they kidnap you… they kill you… if you don't pay a quota they throw you off the train and you fall… Now migrating… now the guards say they can hand in the migrants, so they give you to the mafia… The Beta group deceives…[82]

It is hard to find out if the checkpoint is indeed where you were told, if there is really a migrant house in that town or if walking is really better than taking the train. Anyone

[82] Interview: Felipe, 29 June 2015, Palenque.

who has a scrap of information or contact with someone who knows what they are doing becomes very important.

Oscar and Franco ran into a cousin early in the journey so they got together with him and followed him unconditionally; after all, he knew what he was doing.[83] Robin explains that at the beginning he just followed the guy he just met because he had no idea what he was doing.

> Alejandra: Did you know about Mexico before you crossed? How dangerous it was?
>
> Robin. No!
>
> Alejandra: Really? Nothing?
>
> Robin: Tsss, I didn't even know, I hadn't even seen a train, just to tell you that when I did see the train…. Well… I got goose bumps, I won't deny it.[84]

Food and money

The migrants that leave their houses with cash usually spend it and lose it to criminals during the early stages of the journey. Agents of the National Migration Institute (their functions are described in an earlier chapter) extort migrants or plainly rob them when they do not detain them. A number of criminal groups charge passage fees to take the train or cross particular places. Jesús (25 years-old from Honduras) told me about one time when he was riding the train:

[83] Interview: Oscar and Franco, 8 September 2015, Saltillo.
[84] Interview: Robin, 10 September 2015, Saltillo.

> And yeah three crooks climbed into the train and asked me, "where are you going?" and I tell them, "dude, I'm going to the other side" and he says, "did you pay the train?" and I tell him, "well, who the fuck is supposed to pay for the train if the train is owned by the fucking government? How am I going to pay?," "fuck off, we are the bosses and we rule and we own the train," "don't cross me" I said and they gave me a beating.[85]

Almost everyone, very early in the journey needs to find ways to find food or money to buy food and get lodging. With your *familia*, you have more people working towards getting food or willing to share their money.

Marlo, the older of a group of 4 teenagers migrating for the first time from Honduras, explains how they all work together to share the food they get.

> We walked from Honduras, since Guatemala, we shone shoes and decorated roofs, we earn some cash and we could eat. And that is how I was able to provide for them and for that one and with only my money and that is how I helped some of them. And well, we shared food and ate…[86]

Pedro and his friends begged for money or food or sometimes "took food that no one was watching over just when we walked next to a house."[87] I already talked about how the group of Santiago was supporting someone who ran out of money in just after crossing Guatemala. Martha too went to beg for money to support the shyer or "prouder" member of her group who refused to do it. She then bought food for everyone.

[85] Interview: Jesús, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.
[86] Interview: Marlo, 30 June 2015, Palenque.
[87] Interview: Pedro, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.

Laura's story shows how she helped the group she had joined without ever expecting them to be able to repay them. She even got slightly offended when I suggested that they were not really bringing anything to the group.

> Alejandra: And you, when you travel with people, do you share food and stuff or to each his own?
>
> Laura: We share, of course. We share food.
>
> Alejandra: And with your money you bought for them….
>
> Laura: Yes!
>
> Alejandra: Did they have anything to contribute?
>
> Laura: It's not like that! I wanted to give it to them. If they said, "look, we don't have any money and we cannot buy" I would tell them, "we are going there to buy" and they said, "but we don't have any money." "No!" I told them, "don't worry, I will buy a kilo of tortillas, avocado and beans" and there we ate. And we shared all the time.[88]

Access to extended social networks

Even though most migrants are unable to access their social networks and benefit from their help, some (few) lucky migrants can count on the help of their family networks in the United States. When this happens, migrants receive quality information and money. Usually, the family members send them money through wire transfer in different points of the journey. They do this because they know the migrant will need a constant influx of money to have a better chance to arrive in the United States. You cannot carry all

[88] Interview: Laura, 9 September 2015, Saltillo.

your cash with you because you will eventually get robbed. Despite having the money, though, they decide to form groups and share what they have with some.

Rino gets generous and regular wire transfers from his family. Regardless of this, he always joins a group when he crosses. He likes the company, he wants to help new migrants and he understands that he is safer with them…. Once he joins a group he shares his money with them. His money becomes the group's money.

> Rino: I begged for money for them because they didn't have money
>
> Alejandra: Ah! So, you didn't share your money with them?
>
> Rino: No, how can I explain this? Since we took the bus I spent all my money, right? So, we needed to beg to eat.[89]

Roberto (21 years old from Honduras), who also gets money regularly met his travel companions in Tenosique. The story about how he knew they were brothers shows how close they grew when they migrated:

> If I have money is as if the others had money. In fact, here another *compañero* of mine went ahead. He took the train he came ahead and I took the bus and was stranded and alone in Irapuato and didn't have any money. I didn't have any money and went to the internet and communicated with my uncle but I didn't even have money to pay for the internet. An hour for ten pesos and I didn't have any money and this boy who is with me…. I was left without money there but since he [the friend he met on the way] had [money] he told, he told me "if I have money it is as if you had money and I'm here for everything you need."[90]

[89] Interview: Rino, 3 September 2015, Saltillo.
[90] Interview, Roberto, 27 April 2016, Nogales.

Roberto benefited from the money his friend gave him. However, Roberto stayed with him and helped him, even when in Irapuato he got his own money and his new friend didn't have any. I met them in Nogales when they were getting ready to cross north. Now, Roberto had all the money and could have left Juan by himself. They had arrived at the north so there were no consequences for Roberto if he just disappeared one day. However, he stuck with Juan because they were family now.

> And to tell you the truth he doesn't have anyone to send him money and they send me money and it weighs on me because I cannot eat without feeding him too. I think of myself as a good person and it is not like I want to eat when he is not looking. When I go to eat, I tell him "let's go" and if I don't have for both of us…. We don't eat.[91]

Rino and Roberto's networks supported not only their journey but their group's transit too. Migrants who have access to some money but not enough to pay for a *pollero*, a smuggler, sometimes choose to go hungry or not stay in hotels in to help the people they meet along the way. They put their safety and their health at risk but they find a new *familia del camino* and company and emotional support. Some also feel they are fulfilling their duty as good people or good Christians.

Singer and Massey (1998) had shown that Mexican migrants with experienced social networks had safer and easier crossings in the U.S.-Mexico border. The knowledgeable family member would teach the new migrant what to do and how to behave thus decreasing the risk for him. The research added to the idea that social networks were always positive for migration as it decreased the costs for new migrants.

[91] Interview, Roberto, 27 April 2016, Nogales.

My research adds two caveats to what they proposed. The first is that social networks are useful when and if they are willing to help their family members. We should not assume that the existence of a transnational network will mean that it will help the new migrants. The fact that members of the network kept in touch and sometimes exchanged money and gifts does not mean that they will continue to do so. The second one is that when social ties come through, they have much more potential than previously thought. In the case of the migrants in Mexico who received help, the aid of the social ties helped not one but approximately four migrants. Most of the time, the families in the United States do not know they are helping five people survive. It is interesting to realise that the strong social network that the migrant formed in Mexico gets help from people who do not know them and do intend to help them. A future line of research can ask if this is the case with transnational networks in destination and origin countries. Is the money the migrant sending just helping their family directly or is the family distributing it to its own networks who are worse off?

"Karmic investment" in the journey

When asked why they help people when they could go alone, many migrants express a sense of duty, what Converse et al (2012) have called karmic investment. They have shown that when "uncertainty is high and personal control is lacking, people may be more likely to help others as if they can encourage fate's favour by doing good deeds proactively" (Converse et al 2012: 1). According to them, people connect bad outcomes to moral failings and good outcomes to good behaviour. Therefore, when they are expecting something to happen beyond their control they "invest" in good behaviour in order to tip the balance to positive outcomes.

In some of the migrants' narratives, they express the need to be good and to show solidarity in order to "deserve" arriving at the north. This was true for experienced and inexperienced migrants although migrants who felt have more to offer seemed to feel they needed to be more generous. The first time that I observed the train leave was in Pakal-Na. In that place, the train stops and then starts again so migrants get the chance to practice getting on top and they get to find a good place to sit or lie down. It took the train an hour to leave and in that time you could observe the seasoned migrants showing very anxious newbies how to grab the side of the train and then jump up making sure you do not step on the fast moving wheel. Then they showed them the best places to place themselves.

Some, like Rober and Jesús, showed me maps that experienced migrants drew for them to help them arrive north. Likewise, migrants who have more money feel they have an obligation to share it with the members of their group to earn the favour of luck or, if they are religious, of God. Rino, who had attempted to cross seven times already, was certain that if he didn't help people along the way he was never going to deserve to live in the United States. He begrudgingly accepted travel companions and helped them along the way because he feared the consequences if he did not. "So, they asked me if I was coming here [the north of Mexico] and I said yes because I don't like to be selfish…. I want to be able to arrive and I cannot be selfish if I want God to allow me to arrive…"[92]

[92] Interview: Rino, 3 September 2015, Saltillo.

Conclusion

This chapter describes the *familias del camino*; a group of four or five strangers who find each other and decide to stick together through the transit in Mexico. This *familia* is formed in the first stages of the migration process, after migrants witness or experience the first violent acts. The familia usually stays together at least until the northern border of Mexico. They help each other, they pool their resources, and they provide emotional support through the journey.

The chapter advances the literature on social capital and social networks by carefully describing the formation of these *familias* between strangers who have no ties in common, no knowledge of each other, and who are in an unpredictable situation. It shows how a perception of helplessness and the desire to be recognized as a member of an association encourages migrants to seek travel companions even if that means becoming more vulnerable. It expands the findings by Gambetta and Hamil (2005) by analysing how migrants decide who is trustworthy in a situation when the stakes are high and the decision should be made quickly. It outlines which signs and attitudes are thought to point to a "bad migrant," including tattoos, doing drugs, and being too nice and too eager. Later in the journey, being alone becomes a sign of untrustworthiness that cannot be hidden.

It problematizes the literature that studies social ties in reactions to catastrophes by showing that vulnerability and scarcity of resources do not always break social ties. In the case of migration in transit, the precarious position and the isolation from the social ties encourages group formation and eventually, trust.

Groups that just formed and have no ties and few control mechanisms can function well under dangerous circumstances. This adds to the literature on social capital and social networks by showing that ties in common and strong control mechanisms are not essential for group performance. However, it also agrees with social capital authors in arguing that the more time the *hermanos* stay together and the more information they trust, the group becomes stronger. Increased trust produces more cooperation.

The chapter also provides a critical look at social network formation by showing instances in which social ties do not produce positive social capital for the migrants. It adds to the growing body of literature that encourages researchers to be critical about social networks and to think about who does not benefit from the exchanges.

Finally, it adds two caveats to the research done by Audrey Singer and Douglas Massey (1998) in showing that social ties are only useful if the members who are asked to help are willing to do so. This again highlights that having strong social networks does not immediately lead to having social capital that people can access when they need it. The second proviso goes in the opposite direction; sometimes family members who are willing to help end up helping more people than they thought because they are helping the *familia del camino*. This emphasises that social networks, when they work, are extremely beneficial yet, they are not always ready to be used.

Chapter 6: Alone but not lonely; migrants and the "transient community of *migrantes*"

The easiest people to talk to were the men who sat by themselves. It took me a while to discover this, though; at the beginning I avoided them. If they were by themselves, I thought, it is because they were not very nice or not very sociable; some of them even seemed scary to me. I did not want to disturb them and I did not want them to tell me to go away if I tried to talk to them. Eventually, I realised that if I only spoke to the migrants that made me feel comfortable, my research was going to be very biased—I would have to make an effort. I decided to talk to a man who looked rough and who was sitting by himself. So, one morning in Tenosique, after some hesitation, I sat next to Marvin on the floor of the common area. He had clear blue eyes, many tattoos, and was wearing head to toe camouflage. He was wearing strong boots and had the confident and tired air of someone who had migrated before, perhaps many times. After I sat, I did not have time to get nervous or to engage in awkward chit chat, he just started talking. He introduced himself and told me it was his third time migrating. He asked me if I wanted to hear cool stories about his travels and he told me about the time when he had to jump into a river to escape from a drug dealer who was shooting at him and the time he was kidnapped in the north of Mexico for three weeks. I learned his life story before I even had the chance to introduce myself.

After my long conversation with Marvin, I developed a new strategy for talking to migrants: sitting next to someone who was alone or sitting by myself. If I sat next to someone, they almost immediately started talking; if I sat by myself, a lone migrant always came by to talk with me. By doing this I met Ronaldo, a 47-year-old Guatemalan migrant who had attempted to arrive at the United States for ten years

without success. He did not want to go back to Guatemala because every time he arrived dirty and tired his brothers made fun of him. He migrated alone because he did not want to give anyone his bad luck, nor share his embarrassment. I also came across Andabas, another Guatemalan migrant who could do a very convincing Mexican accent and who had escaped two kidnapping attempts in Mexico in one year. He too went by himself. He did not want to have to negotiate everything he did with someone else; besides, he said, escaping the cartels as a group is much more difficult. The talks I had with them have been some of the most intimate, rich, and informative conversations that I had have. These lonely migrants have had time to reflect on their process and observe others take the journey. This meant they had many insights to share with me.

With women, it was slightly different. I had to sit close to them and engage them in conversation if I wanted to interact with them. They tended to avoid the bustling migrant house, and usually sat with other women or by themselves. It was difficult to approach them because they never seemed eager to talk. Some were always busy with their children or friends. They were more cautious about talking to me and, when we did chat, it was usually regarding subjects that did not deal with their journey—such as the lunch, gossip about the volunteers, their children, or their lives in Central America.

It was very difficult to engage with Reina. I wanted to talk to her because she had blonde hair, a bold statement for someone coming from Honduras, where only the girlfriends of the Maras (gang members) can wear that hair colour. She was also a very good dancer and seemed very lively when surrounded by other women. I sat next to her and waited for her to talk. After 20 minutes, she finally asked me if I wanted my nails painted. While she was doing my nails, I tried to talk about her life and her migration experiences, but she kept diverting to “girl talk.” It was not until we were friends and we did an official interview that she told me about her life and her

experiences in Mexico. In my case, lone women were more difficult to talk to because I always felt they were on guard.

I learned that male migrants who are by themselves usually are experienced migrants who chose to migrate without company after a difficult migration experience. They do not trust any migrants but, surprisingly, they willingly accept the help of Mexicans on the road and even stay in their houses. Their mistrust of other migrants does not mean that they are unwilling to sometimes share information or resources with other migrants. They are very deft at taking and giving as much as is safe from the migrants who surround them without exposing themselves too much.

Women who migrate by themselves have different reasons for tackling *el camino* by themselves. On the one hand, they do not like how male migrants behave during the journey and therefore prefer to be alone (especially if they have children). On the other hand, male migrants believe that female migrants "do not belong on the road" and often refuse to migrate with them. They believe the presence of a woman in the group endangers everyone and they believe women should not take that risk.

This chapter will discuss migrants who travel by themselves, focusing on their attitudes towards trust and bonding. These issues will be illuminated through the perspective of gender. It will introduce the concept of transient communities and explain why these associations are one of the most ubiquitous and important aspects of migration to the United States. The concept of transient communities is also an important term analytically because it can help us to understand the types of loose communities that displacement and transit create.

The concept of transient communities will show that migrants are able to find a middle point between, on the one hand, not trusting anyone and refusing to get together with

others, and on the other, getting help and information while on the road. It will also show that even when the violence of the situation has broken the weak and strong ties among individuals, the transient community persists and helps the victims survive. As far as I could observe and understand from talks and interviews, the community avoids dissolution by being an imagined community[93]: it remains even when the people are dispersed or far away from each other. For example, when the National Migration Institute stops a train that migrants are riding on, they all scramble to escape and hide. At that point, it is every man for himself. However, as soon as the immediate threat disappears, everyone gets up and helps each other find their belongings before starting to walk again. Even in the context of an imminent threat, I did not hear stories of people tripping other migrants or shoving them into the arms of *La Migra*. They try to protect themselves without hurting others.

Trust and bonding for lone migrants

Although it is more common for migrants to form a *familia del camino* with others they meet on the way, some migrants end up crossing Mexico by themselves. Some do so because they found themselves alone after losing their group. Marlo, a 17-year-old Honduran, was travelling with four companions when two of them were captured and deported. The fourth member of the group decided to go back to Honduras, rejoin the deported, and go north again through the same route. He did not want Marlo to suffer again so he gave him around 50 dollars and asked him to rent a room and wait for him

[93] Reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's imagined communities.

for a couple of days in Veracruz. After only a day of waiting, Marlo got restless and decided to go by himself. He tried to join a couple of groups but he was never allowed.

> Eventually I just decided to come by myself because I didn't want to wait and I didn't find someone to help me. I rode the train for three days straight. I didn't have a lot money and I didn't know what to do so I just didn't eat for three days until I arrived here [the Saltillo migrant house][94].

Marlo admits he was impulsive; when he had access to internet, he realised his travel companions had arrived at Veracruz and had looked for him. When they did not find him, they moved on hoping to run into him. They were already in the United States by the time he was able to contact them.

Marlo had a *familia del camino* that he trusted: he felt connected with his "brothers." He had met them in Honduras and they had been traveling together. However, when he lost them, he was left alone surrounded by people he did not know. He tried to find a new group, but – like others who lose their group – no one accepted him; the *familias del camino* had already been formed in the southern border. They did not know Marlo, but the fact that he was by himself indicated that he was probably untrustworthy. He had missed the window when migrants are willing to be vulnerable with each other and he had to journey by himself.

Even though some migrants lose their group while crossing Mexico, most of those who decide to go alone do so by choice. Some scholars argue that individuals decide who to trust based on personality and situational characteristics. The propensity of the "trustor" to trust someone is especially important (Das and Teng, 2004). What affects

[94] Interview: Marlo, 8 September 2015, Saltillo.

the propensity to trust in the case of Central American migrants is their past experiences and the context in which they are migrating.

Migrants who choose not to associate with others are usually those who have survived an extremely dangerous situation such as kidnapping or life-threatening violence.

For example, Mayra, a 24-year-old Honduran migrant, was kidnapped by an *enganchador* that worked for a Cartel in the north of Mexico. She was forced to go with him to the southern border where he would "hook" unsuspecting migrants by promising to take them north. Along the way her job was to cook and wash the migrants' clothes. If her behaviour displeased the *enganchador*, she was beaten. She was sexually abused several times. She had to endure five trips up and down Mexico and she had to witness the murder of the migrants who could not pay the exorbitant fees they were charged; she was the one who cleaned up after the executions. When she finally managed to escape by using ingenious diversion strategies, she hid in the migrant house where I met her. This experience changed her outlook on migration. She decided that it was better to go by herself and realised that people are not always what you think they are.[95]

Another migrant, Andabas (38 years old), who left Guatemala after being extorted by the gangs, was kidnapped while he was walking with a group of people he had met the night before. This experience, like Mayra's, altered the way he tackled *el camino.*

> So, in 2015 I was crossing and another criminal group was fighting for territory… they took us, the six people that were walking. And from those six, they took two of us. They tied the other four Hondurans with rope and they asked me where I was from and I told them…. I lied to them… I told

[95] Interview: Mayra, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.

> them, I'm from Chiapas, and of course I know Chiapas pretty well because we [Guatemalans] are allowed to cross…. So, they asked me where in Chiapas and I said, "Concordia," and he asked me, "Where in Concordia?" And they kept asking me questions… and at the end they sent me to a corner but I was not tied. The other guy, a Salvadoran, said he was from Veracruz and they sent him with me to the corner. They kicked us quite a lot but left us there. On the other hand, the Hondurans were tied down with rope and barbed wire. And our corner had a tiny, 50-cm window, which they left open—and they left. I told the Salvadoran, "they are letting us go, we should jump out the window and walk back." So, we jumped out the window and I swear I saw them looking at us; but I think they wanted us to escape. And we ran and ran and we took the train.[96]

What is interesting about most descriptions of the events is that people who experienced this type of violence rarely blamed other migrants for what happened to them. If a foreigner had been involved in the events, they were always careful to clarify that, although he was not from Mexico, he was not a migrant, but rather a criminal. In Mayra's story, she specifies that she was tricked by an *enganchador*, a character who was no longer a migrant, but a criminal with his own agenda. Andabas was kidnapped by Mexicans and he never believed that another migrant was at fault for what happened to them.

When I asked about the lessons they got from the traumatic event, none of them told me that they had learned to be more mistrustful of migrants. Instead, they said they had understood that going alone was the best strategy. Andabas learned that "it is easier to go alone because you can change routes and strategies quickly."[97] Rober (a 22-year-old experienced migrant from Honduras), who witnessed his friends getting kidnapped

[96] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Palenque.
[97] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Palenque.

in a previous migration said, "If you are by yourself, you do not have to wait for your friends and look for them when the Migra chases you."[98] Ronaldo (47 years old from Guatemala, with seven previous migrations) and Jesús (second time migrant from Honduras) both agree that if you travel with a group you are more visible and more likely to be kidnapped or robbed. Jesús told me, "I just follow a group and find out what they are doing; I don't need to talk to them."[99]

Even if they did not explicitly express their increased mistrust of other migrants, throughout the rest of the interview they made it very clear that they did not trust them. Andabas told me many times "you can't trust anyone, not even your shadow,"[100] while Jesús reiterated that he never believes the apparent good intentions of people. Tellingly, many of those who were alone when I interviewed them had attempted to migrate with friends or "road brothers" before the event that affected them. After that, they became loners.

To trust someone is to take a risk with the trustee: it is to believe that you will not be harmed or taken advantage of if you engage with a person (Sabel, 1993). Taking that kind of risk is dangerous, especially in a situation where the stakes are so high. Some migrants find ways to build new ties and new trust. Migrants who formed *familias del camino* chose to be vulnerable with a small group of people and to cooperate with them. Some migrants decide to travel with only their family and avoid the risks associated with migrating with strangers, thereby isolating themselves from the broader *migrante* community (as the next chapter will show). Lone migrants refuse to gamble with groups and end up migrating by themselves. However, in contrast to the families, they

[98] Interview: Rober, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.
[99] Interview: Jesús, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.
[100] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.

do not isolate themselves from the rest of the migrants, even if they do not trust them: they participate in the transient community of migrants that exists in Mexico.

Women migrating by themselves

Many women I met on the road were migrating by themselves or with their little children.[101] Almost none of the groups that I interviewed included women, and I heard of few instances of females joining a group of strangers. Men did not want to accept women into their group because they felt a woman would slow down their journey and make it more dangerous. Women are often construed as weak and in need of protection and this affects the way they are treated. Additionally, men perceive women as people who should not be migrating at all and who are *invading* their territory; this leads them to reject them. Women, based on their own beliefs about men, rarely attempted to join groups anyway. They chose to travel by themselves in order to avoid the rowdy, loud, and potentially aggressive migrants they expected to find. Plus, they feared that, if they joined a group, their new travel mates would sexually abuse them.

Male migrants see women as a liability. "They cannot get on the train, they cannot follow our pace, and they complain more,"[102] explained one migrant. Another listed more reasons for refusing women: "They get raped and one has to protect them; it is not worth it. If my sister wanted to migrate, I would tell her not to—it is just too dangerous for her."[103] Following this logic, women get raped because they *choose* to

[101] In this chapter I place women with children as lone women too; for the purposes of considering the relative dangers of the road, women with children are very similar to women who are completely unaccompanied.
[102] Interview: Robin, 10 September 2015, Saltillo.
[103] Interview: Juan, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.

take the road, even though they are women and therefore not suited to the road. They are leaving the secure private sphere where they belong and attempt to claim a traditional male space: *el camino*, the migrant route. According to many of the men I interviewed, this female transgression increases the vulnerability of everyone around them because the mere presence of a woman – a sexualized body – generates the threat of sexual violence on the road. For men, migrating is hard enough; a woman just adds another layer of danger to their experience.

Also, most male migrants assured me that female migrants suffer (physically and emotionally) more than male migrants when they cross Mexico. Men perceive their own misery when migrating as necessary, or at least inevitable. I heard numerous variations of "if it were easy, everyone would do it". Yet, they view the distress of women as gratuitous and worse than what they experience.

> For men, crossing is difficult because you can get killed or you can injure yourself and one suffers a lot—I cannot lie, one suffers a lot…. for women it is worse: they can get abused and raped and you never know what the gangs will do with them. I've seen women on the side of the road getting killed and raped and I think, 'why did they leave their houses?' One has to do it, but they do not have to…[104]

For Robin, women get killed and raped because they left their houses; whereas the pain he experiences shows that he is strong enough to succeed in the United States. He can do it because others cannot. For women, though, suffering is unnecessary.

Robin and most male migrants' position comes from a perspective that makes a clear distinction between the "public," political sphere and the "private," domestic sphere. According to this perspective, men are the ones who can participate in the public life

[104] Interview: Robin, 10 September 2015, Saltillo.

of the city, while women are confined to the household (MacIntyre, 1998). Men have the right to navigate both spheres; yet, if a woman transgress the public and attempt to use it like a man would, she is deemed a "bad citizen" and punished (Bethke Elshtain, 1974). Many male migrants displayed this attitude in interviews: women have it coming if they leave their houses (their private space) and decide to *expose* themselves in the male migrants' arena. They *should know* that sexual abuse is rampant and they should not leave their houses to face unnecessary danger. The violence suffered by the female body during migration is seen as almost deserved because they chose to become public, dangerous women. While female suffering is not useful and "contaminates" everyone, a man's misery earns him the right to access the United States.

This is an interesting position because, while the male migrants were arguing that women do not belong on the migrant route, they failed to notice that they too were transgressing on a space that was not meant for them. Mexico is *their* public space. They complained about not being welcome, about being taken advantage of, and about the pain of crossing. Yet, in the same breath, they said women had it coming for doing the same thing.

The consensus of most of my interviewees is that women should never attempt to migrate without a very trustworthy *coyote* that picks her up in Central America and delivers her to her family in the United States. If women do not have the approximately 7,000 dollars to do that, they should simply not cross Mexico. If they must cross, they should get picked up by a man (who can navigate the public sphere and take care of her) and be delivered to a man in the United States (who paid for her to go). Even my presence there was perceived as brave and daring; after all, I was a single woman by herself in a *malandro*, criminal dominated context.

According to most migrants, if a woman *insists* on migrating and cannot pay a smuggler or a guide she *must* go with a man who will take care of her. If she doesn't have a man, she should probably find one very early in the journey. Carmen told one of my colleagues in Palenque[105], "[…] other migrants tell women, you have your passport, there, between your legs: use it and find someone who will take care of you." Sex can be a passport if women give it "voluntarily." Women explained to me that there are two options for women who come alone: (1) they can accept being raped by one man all the way to the north if they stick with him for protection on the journey; or 2) they can be raped by many men if they choose to go alone. Carmen follows: "so you see women looking for men to take care of them in the migrant house; they have been told it's the only way to survive, so they do it. They are scared!"[106] One of my male interviewees in Saltillo told me how frustrated he was about having put up with a woman and her "fat friend" for a week without any of them "opening their legs" and "thanking him." He believed they had made an implicit agreement when he decided to take them on and the women were not fulfilling it. He eventually abandoned them on the road: "If you are not getting something from them, there is no point in dragging them… I left when they were sleeping."[107] Although some activists have told me that women often find partners for the road, I did not observe this behavior myself, nor did any of the women I talked to tell me about it.

Although most men assume that unaccompanied women are constantly looking for a male companion to protect them, this has not been confirmed by women themselves or by my observations. Many go alone since it is their first migration and, unlike men,

[105] Conversation with Carmen on Palenque, June 2015.
[106] Conversation with Carmen on Palenque, June 2015.
[107] Interview: Mario, 2 September 2015, Saltillo.

lone women usually do not have a previous traumatic migration experience that predisposes them to solitude. They say they do not like migrating with men because they believe men are rowdier, less methodical when migrating, and yes, they might rape them on the way. Indeed, I was told by women who had chosen to go alone that they never tried to get together with a man or a group. Juanita, who migrated with her 16-year-old daughter decided not to join anyone because she was sure men were going to be "having fun" on the road instead of attempting to get to the U.S.-Mexico border. She only joined a group of men once "because they were praying and singing hymns to the Lord. I knew they would behave well."[108] She stuck with the for a couple of days and then moved on. Just as men believe women are weaker and need a man to help them, women believe men are more likely to be explosive and impulsive. For Toña (31 years old from Honduras), who was migrating without any adult travel companions for the second time with her son, men are the liability because they are more reckless.

> Alejandra: And were you scared? Do you think it is easier to travel with men or by yourself?
>
> Toña: By myself, by myself.
>
> Alejandra: Why?
>
> Toña: If I go alone, God goes with me; whereas men smoke, drink, and sometimes they even try to grope women. If you go by yourself, God goes with you.[109]

As Toña's answer shows, she believes she can migrate successfully with her child without other adults (and with the protection of God) and considers men a nuisance. It

[108] Interview: Juanita, 9 September 2015, Saltillo.
[109] Interview: Toña, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.

is interesting to see how, even if she is aware of the potential of sexual violence, she does not narrate her whole experience through that lens.

I only knew of one instance of a lone woman, Laura, meeting another lone woman, and deciding to go together. They met in Veracruz and they bonded over the creepiness of the men who were hanging around the shelter. They liked each other, and they stayed together, even though Luisa was in an accident and lost her leg. When I met them, they were waiting for Luisa to get a new prosthetic leg before carrying on their journey together. They were strong together and they never felt they needed a man. Yet most of the women that I observed did not make female friends in order to travel north as a group. I did not ask them why in my interviews, so I can only speculate that perhaps there are not enough women migrating at the same time. This might mean that the chances of finding another female travel companion while migrating are very low.

In Toña's interview (quoted above), and the interviews with other lone women, I noticed that they have a perception of the road similar to male migrants. They fear *La Migra*, being hungry, the criminals, and the road. They talk about sexual violence but significantly less often than women who migrate with their families. Lone migrant women have already left their homes, the traditional "safe space" for females and they have migrated by themselves. What is more, they have faced the public sphere with relative success. For them, sexual violence is an extremely violent experience than can nevertheless remain private from their wider social network and family. They do not need to be concerned about the reaction to an assault or how it will affect their identities as mothers, wives, or people. Additionally, by leaving their private sphere, they have crossed paths and engaged with migrant men on the road, even on a casual basis. They have spoken to some and shared a drink or a bite to eat on the train. They learn that not every migrant around them wants to sexually abuse them. Of course, they are always

aware of the threat of sexual violence; nonetheless, it does not show up in their narrative as often as with accompanied women.

Lone women expressed mistrust towards all other migrants, like most of my interviewees. However, in contrast to women in families, they sometimes interact with others around them, especially while they are on the train or waiting on the side of the road or on train tracks. They accept small gestures of kindness, like when someone offers to help them or their children on the train, or when people share their food with them. Laura, who migrated by herself for half of the journey, told me that she knew how to get on the train without help. Nevertheless, she understood that men thought she was weak and she accepted the extra help they offered. Like families, women get special treatment in the migrant houses. They get to spend more days there and they are more likely to receive gifts and help from the volunteers. Laura, from El Salvador, told me "we can stay more time and they give us our rooms and they have more clothes. They take better care of us [women] here [in the migrant house]. In another migrant house, they even gave me a towel! I still carry it with me, it is so soft!"[110] Like lone male migrants, they also rely heavily on participating in the transient community of migrants that is formed in Mexico.

Mothers in transit

I met several women who had decided to leave with their babies or toddlers. The next section explains why women and families sometimes choose to migrate with their families, especially with their little children. In La 72 in Tenosique, there were around

[110] Interview: Laura, 7 September 2015, Saltillo.

20 children when I was there. One of the kids that everyone knew was Grecia. She was three years old, but very small and had not learned to talk yet. She could walk, though, and she followed other migrants and the volunteers around. Everyone knew and liked her because she and her mother Reina (35 years old), had been in la 72 for eight months already. In La 72, contrary to other migrant houses, migrants can go out during the day and many women went to the town centre to beg for money with their children. Reina never left. She was aware of the three men standing outside the migrant house day and night and she believed they were gang members from Honduras. She felt surrounded by criminals.

The first time that Reina left Honduras, she was five months pregnant with Grecia. In Tegucigalpa, Honduras, The MS18, one of the gangs that terrorizes Honduras, has threatened to kill her because she was spending too much time in a neighbourhood controlled by the Mara Salvatrucha, the rivals of the MS18. Reina's mother lived there so she had to go into the rival's territory to see her mother, even if she was not affiliated with any gang. "They thought I was a spy or something so I had to leave. I was pregnant and I walked a lot and I didn't eat a lot. I was deported. A year later, they [the gangs] threatened me again and I left again. I brought Grecia [her two-year old] with me."[111] She carried Grecia for weeks while they walked through the jungle. When I met them, they were stuck in the migrant house as Reina suspected that if she left she might be killed. She was also uneasy about migrating with Grecia. I asked her if she had considered joining a group but she just asked, "won't they do anything [they like] to

[111] Interview: Reina, 16 July 2015, Tenosique.

me?" [112] Reina had left three older children with her mom but had brought Grecia. She believed Grecia was the weakest and the one that would need her most.

Toña brought Jonathan, her 5-year-old son, because she thought he would help her get asylum if they arrived in the United States. Juanita brought her 16-year-old daughter from Honduras to protect her from her abusive father. The concept of motherhood and traditional maternity roles have for a very long time affected the decisions of migrant women. The model of intense motherhood (Asakura, 2014) holds that a good mother will devote extensive quality time to be with her children and assumes that biological mothers are the ones who can care best for the offspring. This has become an ideal in the mind of many men and women. In addition, the current conceptions of motherhood assume that mothering is to be done in close physical proximity to one's children, even if some tasks can be performed by other women like grandmothers, sisters, or aunts (Asakura, 2014).

This leaves women with two alternatives: either leave their children behind, thereby separating them from their mother (the only one who can really take care of them), or take their children with them in order to keep them close. The women who bring their children feel that only they can take good care of them. As Rosa (who migrated from Honduras with her husband and two infant children) told me:

> When my mother migrated, I was left alone with my grandmother and she never took good care of me. I knew my mother was sending money but I never got anything new. I brought the child because I know that, whatever happens to me, she will be better with her mother, me; children need to be with their mothers.[113]

[112] Interview: Reina, 16 July 2015, Tenosique.
[113] Interview: Rosa, 18 July 2015, Tenosique.

Reina carried Grecia through the jungle because she could not allow herself to leave all her children behind: "at least I brought Grecia. I do not remember the phone number of my mother and I do not know where she took my children. I do not know if I can find them. And that makes me sad…. but at least I have Grecia; she needs her mother; she will grow up with her mother."[114] For them, being able to still be mothers is extremely important. They understand the risks to the children, but they also believe that their kids will be better with their mothers than back home.

A town that walks together: transient community of *migrantes*

In the Saltillo Migrant House, Irving[115] gathers the migrants in the patio before every meal. The migrants line the edge of the patio while Irving stands in the centre, talking to them. First, he welcomes the new guys to the house and reminds them of the rules with the help of veteran migrants. Then, he tells them that one of the most important policies of the house is to eat everything on the plate and not to waste food; if they do not like something, they should ask not to be served that food; once it is in their plate, they should eat it. "Why do we do this?" asks Irving. Five or six migrants raise their hands and then Gordo (23 year old, from Honduras) answers: "Because each little grain of rice that we waste could have gotten together with other grains of rice and could have eventually become a taco, and that taco would help feed someone who comes later, another migrante."[116] Then Mabel (31 years old, migrated from El Salvador with her 4 year-old) follows, "and since we are all migrants and we know how hard walking

[114] Interview: Reina, 16 July 2015, Tenosique.
[115] Irving agreed that I could use his real name.
[116] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.

here is and how hungry we get, we understand we need to eat but also consider those who come later."[117] Irving agrees and adds, "remember that there is always someone else coming after you; and this house is for you, but also for the ones who will come after you."[118] Then, Irving lets them slowly go into the dining room.

Only those who have taken *el camino* can understand what is like to be hungry, scared, or threatened and discriminated while attempting to access a new country. They can understand the experience because they have already lived it. Josué (20 years old), a third-time migrant, told me that he feels he cannot talk about what is happening to him with his family back in El Salvador because he knows they will not be able to imagine what he has seen and what he has felt.[119] He has had scary times, like when he saw a woman fall from the train; but he has also met very generous people who open their homes to him and offer their help. Esteban, a 22-year-old migrant from Honduras, who I met in Saltillo told me that migrating is very hard but also very beautiful: he remembered how the landscape changed when he was on the train, from jungle to desert, and how the most beautiful stars he had seen were while traveling on top on the train.[120] All those who take *el camino* share similar memories and similar fears; migrating changed them and they know it.

Liisa Malkki observed something similar in a refugee camp where she did fieldwork. She noticed that the people living in the camp had shared understandings of their situation and formed an "accidental community of memory" that was not anchored in a local or national community. Instead, they were drawn together by a "less explicit

[117] I observed this going on in the meeting.
[118] Irving before most lunches and breakfasts, August and September 2015, Saltillo.
[119] Informal conversation, August 2015, Saltillo.
[120] Interview: Esteban, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.

and often more biographical, microhistorical, unevenly emerging sense of accidental sharings of memories and transitory experience" (Malkki, 1995). For her, "accidental communities of memory" can be formed by people who have shared experiences—for instance, of war, of living in a refugee camp, or of fleeing a revolution. In all these cases, the event brings people together who might not otherwise have met in the regular course of their lives. They all understand that they lived through a unique experience that only those who were there will be able to understand—an experience that is now their shared and transient history.

This concept is a useful starting point for describing the type of community that migrants engage with while they are in Mexico. They understand what it means to be a migrant in Mexico because they have survived similar incidents. However, this community goes beyond understanding and sharing a common experience. Malkki's description of an "accidental community of memory" (1995) focuses on the shared understandings and narratives that a group of people experience; not on the ways in which those shared experiences lead to action.

Migrants in transit in Mexico not only share an understanding about the experience of transiting, but also build a sense of migrant identity and solidarity through that insight. When talking about the people on the road, Andabas notes that "they all share. When you are on the train sometimes you bring something, and the other guy doesn't, and you share."[121] They become a "transient community" that is not tied to a territory or a culture, but that has defined members who know instinctively that they belong. Andabas elaborates: "we are going towards the same goal, the same dream; we have

[121] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.

the same objective, but we share our things; there is no competition."[122] This transient community of migrants is one of the most stable and ubiquitous components of the transit experience in Mexico.

In general, communities have strong and stable ties that go back in time. They provide a context for intimacy, they represent morality and serve as the repository for old traditions (Erikson, 1979). The transient community that exists in Mexico is not like that as there is little mutual intimacy between the members, there are no traditions and there is no culture to transmit. Yet, they form an imagined community of *migrantes* who share a common narrative about their experiences in Mexico and through that insight build a sense of migrant identity and solidarity. It is still a community and it shares the following characteristics: (a) the membership is clearly defined either by the members or by an external force (members and non-members can identify who belongs based on the external characteristics and attitudes of those who belong); (b) There are unspoken rules that are transmitted informally; (c) there is solidarity, but no trust among the members; and (d) the transitory community remains even if the members change constantly.

Membership is clearly defined

Drury *et al* (2009) researched the London bombings of 2005 to observe if there was cooperation and solidarity between the survivors immediately after the bombs went off. Based on their data, they suggest that sometimes strangers who survived the same violent situation can feel like members of a distinct group. They argue that feeling and

[122] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.

acting with others as part of a group operates through self-categorizations, which may range from personal self-categorizations to shared collective self-categorizations. Cognitively categorizing oneself with others, based on some context-relevant dimension (survivors of the bombing, in this case), tends to heighten perceptions of similarity and unity with these others. In their account, one of the bases for seeing oneself as a member of group with others is the perception of a common fate (Drury et al., 2009).

Migrants in transit self-categorize as *migrantes* not only because they come from similar places and have the same goal. Robin, who migrated from Guatemala with his brothers, told me that "we are all immigrants, we all want to arrive to the north. We are not criminals, we are just trying to survive."[123] In this classification, *migrantes* does not include all foreigners in Mexico, but those who are trying to arrive to the United States through the country. These *migrantes* share the same perception of danger: they know that they can be caught and deported any time and that they will most likely have to face criminals and gangs along the way. According to Drury et al. (2009), the perception of an external threat that can affect anyone in the group can transform individuals into a psychologically unified group. Migrants crossing from Central America face a unique threat level in contrast with other foreigners in Mexico. In addition to what Drury et al. (2009) observed, migrants in transient communities are also categorized externally as a group by institutions—in this case, the Mexican government and the advocacy groups. They have their own definitions of a migrant and their own biases about how they behave and how they look.

[123] Interview: Robin, 10 September 2015, Saltillo.

The Mexican government attempts to apprehend and deport anyone who is not in Mexico with permission from the government. However, the government focuses most of its energy in capturing and returning Central American migrants. The agents of the National Migration Institute usually look for people who seem to come from these countries. They use a mix of bias and experience to detect them. This is how Jorge, an officer from the National Institute on Migration describes them: "they are dusty, sometimes dirty, they do not look you in the eye, the shoes are worn, they use old backpacks; also, you can smell the fear."[124] Jorge is famous among the officers in the southern border for being able to detect a migrant from far away or among all the passengers of a bus. He is very proud of how efficient he is. According to him, they don't even need to speak, "you can smell who belongs and who doesn't."[125] While he was saying this, a couple of his colleagues nodded knowingly. They agree that you can "sense" it. The south of Mexico, where most migrants are apprehended, is a very poor area with a high proportion of indigenous Mexican people. The agents frequently mistake Mexicans who are members of indigenous groups for undocumented migrants. Sometimes they deport them without listening to their claims of nationality. Although their instinct is sometimes wrong, migrants agree that agents are usually very good at detecting them. Interestingly, both migrants and Mexican officers described the *migrantes* in a similar way. This is how Juan, a 19-year-old migrant describes himself and the others: "we are all dirty, well, dusty; we have unkept hair; we also have suffering on our shoulders—it is easy to see… also, look at the shoes and the backpacks."[126]

[124] Interview: Jorge, 16 July 2015, Palenque.
[125] Interview: Jorge, 16 July 2015, Palenque.
[126] Interview: Juan, 17 September 2015, Saltillo.

In addition to self-categorization and the imposition of the "illegal migrant" label by the Mexican government, migrants choose to identify as transit migrants to get help from advocacy institutions, especially migrant houses. The role of the migrant houses in creating and reproducing a *migrante* identity is very important too. Most of the migrant houses have a song, a prayer, or a speech that is sang or read before every meal. In Pakal-Na, they reinforce that all migrants are a *pueblo* that walks together and that should help each other (they even have a song that I will share in the conclusion). In Saltillo, the taco story really resonated with migrants and made them think about how their actions affected other *migrantes*.

The volunteers have also learned to detect who is a migrant by using similar preconceptions as the other actors. A nun who volunteered in the Saltillo Migrant House told me that she knew who was a migrant and who was not by the way they stood, by how dirty they looked, and by looking at their burned faces from walking for weeks under the sun. As we can see, all the descriptions include people who are still in transit, still attempting to arrive to the United States.

In the London bombings of 2005, the victims experienced a single act of violence that did not last for long, even if the physical and emotional repercussions did. The transit in Mexico involves a continuous threat to the lives and the integrity of the migrants that sometimes culminates in actual violence. My observations have shown that the shift from "me" to "we" that the migrants experience lasts for as long as they are attempting to arrive in the United States. I have also seen that the "we" can expand to encompass other people who become *migrantes.*

In Don Bosco, the Nogales migrant shelter, Mexican migrants who have been deported and Central American migrants on their way to the United States sit together for about

an hour at night in a chapel. They wait there for dinner to be ready before going to bed. The first time I came in with Bob, I could not tell who was Mexican and who was not. They were all tired, scared, hungry, and dusty. Most were looking vacantly in front of them. However, as they got bored they started to chat. I heard how a young Honduran man asked a Mexican with a big moustache if he had attempted to cross the desert: "Yeah, this is the third time they catch me," he replied; "see, all these scars are from running from the Migra among the cacti. The terrain is very uneven and there are only cacti; you fall, you stand up, you grab a cactus. And then they caught me anyway…."[127] As he spoke, the Honduran became more interested—he was going to do that perhaps tomorrow. I could see him imagining the heat, the desert, and the running. He asked more questions and the Mexican man replied as best as he could. Then he asked, "So, are you from Central America? We are really bad to you, right?"[128] The Central American told him that yes, he had had a horrible journey: the train had been hard and Mexicans were not nice, "but it isn't your fault, you are a migrant like me, we want the same thing."[129] The *migrante* community had swelled up to include the Mexicans hoping to go to the United States. In the northern border, being from Mexico did not provide any advantage to men and women who had no ties, no help, no money, and the goal to cross the U.S.-Mexico border. The volunteers and researchers already called them *migrantes* and the *coyotes* and *cartels* did not differentiate between them either. They were all *migrantes.*

In my next field research in California and Arizona, I will look into the longevity of this *migrante* identity to see if it remains and how it changes. As successful migrants

[127] Conversation I overheard in the migrant house in April 2016, Nogales.
[128] Conversation 2 overheard in the migrant house in April 2016, Nogales.
[129] Conversation 3 overheard in the migrant house in April 2016, Nogales.

integrate into their diasporas and unsuccessful migrants settle into their home country's routines, do they still remember they were part of that community? Does it matter?

Informal rules

According to Bourdieu, younger members are socialized to the norms and ideologies of the group by their social relations. This ensures the continuity of the group's traditions (Bourdieu, 1986). Audrey Singer and Douglass Massey (1998) showed that when crossing to the United States, migrants who had family to show them the "rules of the game" were more successful and experienced less violence. Social networks -strong and weak- are fundamental to build knowhow, in this case about how to migrate and how to behave (Massey et al., 1990; Tilly, 2007). They are also important to expand information and ties. This is still true in transit. Migrants who are taught about how to behave in Mexico by their travel companions report that they made less mistakes and learned faster. Eduardo (34 years old), who brought his inexperienced brother from Honduras, showed him how to talk to other migrants, when to ask for food, how to ride the train, and when to walk on the highway and when to run to the jungle. Sometimes, social networks also help to expand ties and information for the members. In transit, the strong social networks migrants created (see previous chapter) allowed them to have more information and, sometimes, to access a wider social network. This improved their experience and decreased their vulnerability. Migrants who go by themselves must learn through trial and error and are more likely to be exposed. However, while Central Americans cross Mexico, they can participate in the transient community and can observe its rules and behaviours and replicate them. Jesús (25 years old) explains how he learned on his first migration: "When I first crossed I just

observed how others acted; I followed a *coyote*[130] and his *pollos*[131] and paid attention."[132] The rules of the community inform the behaviour of the migrants towards the strategies that are currently useful. Since the "rules of the game" change so frequently, even the advice and help of their families is not enough for migrants who want to cross Mexico. Most of them see the need to join the transient community of migrants and to follow its informal rules. The weak ties that this transient community creates help migrants create and obtain more information, new ties, and better knowledge about how to act.

Solidarity without trust

As the previous chapters have shown, migrants usually state that there is no trust on the road and that they do not rely on anyone. Nevertheless, most described the benefit they also gained from numerous occurrences of help and camaraderie while in Mexico. Gordo describes the solidarity he experienced: "when you are on the train for ten hours and you are thirsty and someone gives you a sip of Coca Cola or a bite of a taco even if they do not know you… and I did the same thing sometimes. At the end of the day, we are all migrantes."[133]

Like Gordo, many migrants explained to me how, while they were gathered waiting for the train or lingering before coming into the migrant house, people (both those in groups and those by themselves) engaged in generalized exchange of food and

[130] Smuggler.
[131] Smuglees.
[132] Interview: Jesús, 17 July 2015, Tenosique.
[133] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.

information. For social capital theorists, the most important benefit of this type of exchange is the enhancement of solidarity, *including* the creation of trust and affective regard between individuals (Lévi-Strauss, 1969; Sahlins, 1965). For these scholars, solidarity and trust usually go hand in hand: when there is more exchange, people will trust each other more.

According to Linda D. Molm et al. (2007), indirect reciprocity (like that experienced by migrants in transit) generates feelings of solidarity and unity among a group of strangers. They also found that, most of the time, the increased solidarity came with increased trust and feelings of affection, even in the absence of common values or prior history (Molm et al., 2007b). Yet, their research did not focus on trust among strangers where there was scarcity and violence surrounding them. In these conditions, is there a link between solidarity and trust?

The participants in the transitory *migrante* community engage in generalized exchange and express feelings of belonging to the *migrante* community. They self-categorize as migrants and this has emotional consequences: the shift from "me" to "we" means a greater commitment and loyalty to the group. This, in turn, means acting in the new group's interests in various ways, even when individual members do not know each other personally (Drury et al., 2009). "What I learned on the road is the solidarity, the companionship among the migrants; I understood we are all migrants and we are going to the same place and we are not competing; we all want everyone to arrive..."[134] Andabas identified as a *migrante,* understood the shared threat, and became part of the "we." Consequently, he understood what his peers went through, and helped them sometimes. The exchange and the self-categorization led to feelings of solidarity.

[134] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.

Even after experiencing the advantages of exchange, migrants will not extend their trust outside of their immediate circle (e.g. their family or familia del camino, if they have one). This comradeship in transit is relatively easy for them because it does not involve any risk. They do not need to trust someone to share some food with them. They share a sip of water or a bite of *torta* because they can spare them. But they never take out their money or buy extra food for everyone. They give information about the road because it is easy and, frankly, rude not to reply if someone asks—but they never volunteer personal data or strategies. The transitory community does not produce trust, but the modicum of solidarity it creates provides the migrants with a sense of identity, of belonging and also helps them survive and adapt.

Stable community with ever changing members

Anyone migrating to the United States is, in principle, part of the transitory community. Families are considered *migrantes* by others even if they choose not to participate in it. The migrants naturally become part of the community when they access Mexico and stop being part of it when they arrive to their destination, give up on their intention to migrate, or die. While new migrants join the community frequently in the south, and old members leave it permanently or temporally throughout Mexico, the mass of the transitory community remains and it spans across the migrant routes. The old members socialize the new members into the rules. The systems and behaviours are updated as the road changes. Ronaldo (47 years old from Guatemala), a seven-time migrant, told me: “I show the new migrants how to behave and how to get on the train and how to treat the people from the migrant house. They are so young, they do not know. I can

tell them."[135] A couple of migrants have also told me how experienced migrants have drawn a map for them and told them about the migrant houses while they waited for the train or a bus.

The transitory *migrante* community in Mexico

This is an imagined community of *migrantes.* Even if they did not all go through exactly the same experiences, their narratives are similar and most people I interviewed *felt* they went through the same. Who is a *migrante* is also part of the imaginary of the community. There is a "migrant look and attitude" that they all envision they share. The transitory *migrante* community exists because all the members believe they are part of the same journey, with the same memories and the same goals. The community does not exist to be useful, to transmit information, or to help the migrants stay alive (although it may help with these things as well); it is created by migrants transiting through Mexico who feel they are part of something—that they belong somehow. It has an independent existence from each individual migrant and it remains when they leave.

However, the community is still a repository of valuable information and gossip. Migrants who choose to engage with its members can learn about new changes in the layout of the route and new obstacles. When in 2014 the Mexican government increased the number or checkpoints and made the train run faster to deter irregular migration, the community adapted fast. Migrants learned, if they paid attention, that as soon as they arrived in Tenosique they would need to walk for three days to Palenque

[135] Interview: Ronaldo, 9 September 2015, Saltillo.

to avoid the roadblocks and to catch the train when it stopped. When I was doing fieldwork, two women were murdered by gangs close to Palenque. Everyone, even those in a church far away from the place where it happened, knew what was going on. Many decided to avoid the spot for a couple of days. It does not matter if migrants choose to go by themselves or in a group, using the help that the migrant community can provide a greater chance of success. That is why families that isolate themselves are more vulnerable—they refuse to participate in the community.

In general, social capital theories have only focused on the value of strong/bonding ties (to get by) and on weak/bridging ties (to get ahead) (Granovetter, 1983; Putnam, 2000). For them, these ties are the ones that promote trust and cooperation and the ones that help individuals succeed. Social networks also help individuals gather information they would otherwise not have gotten, facilitate the creation of new ties, and help them develop strategies to survive. However, my research shows that while migrating through Mexico, weak ties are irrelevant and strong ties are hard to find. Thus, the essential associations for most migrants are the loose links between strangers that a transient community creates. These links substitute family ties in providing information and help along the difficult and stressful journey. In contrast to what most literature on migration has observed and theorized, kin and kin-like ties are not fundamental in helping migrants during transit. The transitory community, then, can be an important substitute for social networks in times of violence and social breakdown. Most of the people I interviewed on the northern border had participated in the community and had expressed that the help they got from the migrants surrounding them was very important. With this finding I do not mean to say that social networks and weak and strong ties are irrelevant in the migration process. Some migrants still have access to their transnational networks and to the help they give them. With this ethnography I

want to highlight the importance of a loose community of individuals who are living through the same thing in order to survive.

Trusting Mexicans

Migrants who choose to go by themselves also receive help from an unlikely ally: Mexicans. This tendency to trust people from Mexico is very surprising as most other migrants agree that accepting help from Mexicans is a very bad idea. Even more, these lonely migrants have already been victims of serious crimes and as a result had decided to avoid forming close ties with others. Nevertheless, against all odds, they choose to trust Mexicans and to accept their help. This, I believe, is real trust because migrants are being vulnerable with Mexicans in a better position than them and who have everything to gain from abusing them. For these lone migrants, getting into a van with a stranger might mean being murdered or kidnapped—yet they do it.

Cristopher, a Salvadoran migrant who was held captive for three weeks by a cartel during his last migration, told his story to anyone who wanted to hear it. It was about the very kind lady that hosted him for around a month in Mexico City. During his interview, and after hearing the story of his kidnapping and rescue, I asked him why he went with the lady. He stopped talking, looked at me in disbelief, paused for a couple of minutes and told me, "You know what….? I had never thought about that… why did I go with them? I just went. It was raining, it was cold, I hadn't eaten anything in two days and I was hiding in a chapel… I saw a girl walking by, she was eating a torta,

and I asked her for a bite, I was so hungry. She called her mom and they stood there and prayed with me and they took me to their house… it was a beautiful experience."[136]

Don Goyo, one of the oldest migrants I met, goes to the north alone because his strategy only permits one. He cycles from Honduras to the United States. He says that people in the checkpoints never think that a migrant will ride a bicycle, so they let him go through. He does not get blisters and he goes faster than walking. He can also sell the bicycle in the north of Mexico and get some cash to survive while he crosses. He, like many lone migrants, accepts the help from other Mexicans and even accepts invitations to their homes. This behaviour is considered risky and even reckless by all the other migrants.

> Alejandra: And where do you sleep?
>
> Don Goyo: Well… many times people have offered me their houses and a space to relax; I've been migrating for three weeks and only once I've slept in the open.[137]

Lone women also trusted other Mexicans. They were very willing to get on a stranger's lorry or sleep in their houses if they offered. They also seemed surprised when I asked why they had trusted them. For Laura, if they offer with a smile, they are probably good people. She rode for four days with a lorry driver that bought her food, let her sleep, and never touched her. Juanita and her daughter accepted a place to sleep and food in the southern border without thinking about the potential for kidnapping. Many believed that the help they got was because they brought their children with them.

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[136] Interview: Christopher, 4 September 2015, Saltillo.
[137] Interview: Don Goyo, 2 July 2015, Palenque.

In their narratives, it also appears that Mexicans are nicer to, and more generous with, them than with people who go in groups, regardless of their gender. Many of these migrants have spent weeks in Mexican people's houses. In contrast, migrants who go in groups almost never get very generous invitations and they never accept help. The wisdom among people in *familias del camino* is to ask for help because if the help is offered, then there is a catch. The fact that migrants are going by themselves probably makes them less threatening and easier to help. It is especially surprising that migrants who have survived more violence seem more willing to trust strangers—albeit Mexican strangers.

A possible explanation for this apparently incongruous behaviour, at least with male migrants, is that lonely migrants already know how kidnappers and *enganchadores* behave and that they learned to identify them. In other words, they already know the market. They have learned the signals of "good" and "bad" migrants and they became deft at interpreting them after their first mistake (when they were kidnapped). While they were kidnapped or suffering they probably learned their telling signs and signals, too. In contrast with migrants who have not been kidnapped, they already know how "bad" migrants behave and thus feel that they can detect them in the future. When they decide someone is not threatening, the risk is assumed to be minimal. By contrast, migrants who have not lived through kidnappings or extremely violent situations have not had the opportunity to test their judgment (i.e. to see if the signs they have learned to identify as symbols of "bad" migrants are accurate). Thus, they mistrust almost everyone because they do not have the experience to distinguish dangerous from unthreatening, well-meaning people. This initial insight opens up a very promising line of research that could follow Gambetta and Hamil's (2005) research on how taxi drivers decide which patron will be "good" or "bad" in just a few seconds. What do

migrants learn from the transit that helps them to improve their ability to detect trustworthiness quickly and efficiently?

Conclusion

This chapter introduces the notion of transient community of *migrantes*, taking Malkki's concept of an "accidental community of memories" as a starting point. This transient community, however, takes the feeling of shared history and reacts to it. The transient community of *migrantes* that exists in Mexico is one of the most permanent fixtures of the transit migration through Mexico. It is a loose association of migrants who have the same goals and experience similar events (most of which are threatening or even violent). Not all foreigners in Mexico form part of this community: the transient community of *migrantes* is formed by those who are trying to cross from Central America to the United States. They are targeted by the Mexican government and by the cartels and gangs. They also self-categorize as *migrantes* and know how to recognise one another. They have a sense of shared history, identity, and characteristics.

The community has rules and behaviours that are reproduced by all the members. The new *migrantes* are socialized into these rules and behaviours through example. This helps them survive while they cross Mexico. The *migrantes* are tied together by a common fate and shared threats. Since they understand what others are going through, members of the community are willing to share some information and some resources. However, there is rarely – if ever – trust between the members. Even with the lack of trust, the transient community of *migrantes* is fundamental for most migrants as it provides new and relevant information and some help when they need it most.

The fact that this transient community exists means lone migrants can keep apart from others while at the same time getting help and information from them. Lone migrants usually mistrust other migrants and refuse to join groups of migrants, or *familias del camino.* Male migrants usually become loners after experiencing a previous traumatic experience when migrating. This experience, however, seems to have taught them the "signals" that criminals tend to use to disguise themselves as legitimate migrants in order to take advantage of unsuspecting victims. As a consequence, although they remain distant from other migrants, they are very good at discerning whose help to accept. This, along with their participation in the community of *migrantes*, facilitates their journeys even if they are not able to use strong or weak ties while migrating.

Migrants are separated from all their networks and not all of them are able to form new strong ties on the road. They are crossing a dangerous country where most institutional and non-institutional actors are a threat and they mistrust everyone around them. In this type of context, a transient community is the only social arrangement that allows migrants to access some resources while at the same time maintaining their generalized mistrust towards others on the road.

The chapter also focuses on the experiences of female migrants who are migrating by themselves or with their little children. It frames the experience of unaccompanied female migration through the contrast between the "public" and "private" spheres and the expectation that women remain "protected" inside the domestic sphere. It shows how women who migrate by themselves are considered not only weak and a liability to other migrants but are also constructed as transgressors of a territory that is not theirs: the migrant trail. Men who hold either of these contrasting perceptions avoid travelling with women, preventing them from participating in a *familia del camino*. Yet, most

women, based on their own perceptions of male migrants as rowdy and careless, also choose to migrate alone or with their children.

Chapter 7: Families that migrate together

The first person who greeted me and the other researchers in the migrant house in Pakal-Na was Jonathan. He had not been allowed to leave the migrant house for five months and he was going crazy. He was bored out of his mind and was very excited to meet and play with so many new people. Jonathan – who was six years old – and his parents had fled El Salvador after a local gang threatened his father. They left their house in the middle of the night and Jonathan was forced to leave most of his toys behind. His sister was only two years old and could not play with him—so, from Jonathan's perspective, she was boring. The family was waiting for a transit visa through Mexico and couldn't leave the migrant house in the meantime since they would be deported if they did. Fortunately for Jonathan, there was a constant influx of children who had left Central America with their parents. They would arrive tired and dirty from the road but would soon be recovered enough to play soccer or tag with him. Unfortunately for him, most families left after a couple of days because their parents wanted to go to the United States as fast as possible.

As a consequence of the political and economic situation in Central America, an increasing number of families are choosing to migrate together. During my fieldwork, I observed a variety of family compositions on the road. I interviewed or had long talks with thirteen families: four heterosexual families with one child, three couples with a man and a woman, one uncle with his niece, two lesbian couples with a child, and three sets of brothers. As this description shows, most of the families had at least one woman. All the families left their countries with the intention of arriving together to the United States. When I talk about families in this chapter, I do not only mean nuclear family with a heterosexual couple and a son or daughter. By families I mean people who are

related to each other, who considered themselves family before they migrated, and who left their countries together. Families can be two brothers, homosexual and heterosexual couples, an aunt and a niece, or a nuclear family, for example. Although mothers with their babies or toddlers are undoubtedly a family; I do not talk about them here because their trajectory is more like the one of a lone migrant, since the child does not help in the decision making. The previous chapter has already discussed women who left by themselves and women who took their young children with them.

This chapter analyses why all these diverse families have different attitudes towards trust, solidarity, and bonding, as compared to other migrants. It investigates why people in families, regardless of their constitution tend to perceive the road as more dangerous and be more mistrustful of individuals outside of their group. Finally, it discusses the consequences for the families of being more isolated from the *migrante* community (the community of migrants migrating at the same time) and more reliant on the help of advocacy institutions.

Why do families migrate together?

> I don't understand why those women bring their children and their babies. It is just plain stupid. Why would you bring a child that will die on the road? You have to make him walk; if he gets sick you don't have medicine; if he gets injured you don't have a doctor. It is selfish; it is stupid to bring your child on the road.[138]

It is not uncommon to see mothers and families with small children in the migrant houses, on the road, or on the train tracks. Yadira, who was migrating with her uncle,

[138] Interview: Yadira, 12 July 2017, Palenque.

expresses the shock and the feelings that many volunteers, researchers, and migrants have when they meet the women or families who chose to migrate with the "burden" of a child. For them, the families are irresponsible and the mothers are selfish. Additionally, they consider the decision unpractical. What are these families thinking? How do they decide who stays and who leaves?

Families and individuals are strategic actors who use the information they possess to react to their economic, political, and social context. Migration is informed by risk: it is one of the strategies that people can use to escape or manage threats. The way in which people understand and evaluate danger influences the decision of who stays and who leaves (Williams and Baláž, 2012). In Central America, the risks can be economic (loss of crops, loss of income) or related to personal integrity (extortion and threats of violence, death threats, gendered violence). Most of the decisions families make are taken after careful consideration of how their actions will affect the family and the family's assets.

Poverty: New Economics of Migration

There are several approaches to studying how migrants face risk and react to it. Proponents of the "new economics of migration" argue that

> migration decisions are not made by isolated individual actors but by larger units of related people—typically families or households but sometimes communities in which people act collectively not only to maximize expected income, but also to minimize risks and to loosen constraints associated with a variety of market failures, apart from those in the labor market.

(Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino, Taylor, 1993).

To act strategically, families sometimes choose to send some of their members to work abroad. The person who migrated will then be able to send remittances to support the family. If something happens at home, at least one of their members is still generating income. This theory only focuses on economic risks and overlooks migrants' reaction to physical threats.

There are many migrants who leave Central America for economic reasons. Central America is one of the poorest regions of the continent, with rampant unemployment and underemployment. The neoliberal reforms of the nineties caused thousands of peasants to lose their land to big conglomerates and pushed them from the countryside to the city to look for a job.

The families I interviewed that said they only left for economic reasons did not migrate with children because they thought their children would be safe and cared for in Central America. Most were couples that had decided that the best way to improve their situation was by staying together and both earning money. Martha (32 years old from Honduras), who I met in Saltillo when she arrived with her husband and her brother in law, told me that they had left their three teenage sons with her mother. "They will be fine there," she told me, "they will get the money we will send and they will have a good life. We will see them in a couple of years and we will all be better. I know that my mother will take good care of them and will prevent them from doing drugs. Plus, they are older now; they can take care of themselves."[139] This was Martha's first time in Mexico, but her husband's third. They, like most couples I interviewed, wanted to be together in the United States ("so that he doesn't find a new one [woman]," Martha

[139] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.

said) and decided that earning two salaries in dollars was faster if they wanted to go back and start a business in Central America. Martha also clearly wanted to keep a closer eye on her husband, to make sure he did not cheat.

> Alejandra: Why did you leave your country?
>
> Martha: Because of the poverty. I had a job and one day they asked me to train someone new and then they fired me and they only gave me half of my paycheck. I couldn't protect my rights as a worker because my boss was very powerful. And my husband is a construction worker and he got hired to build a house and then he wasn't paid what he was owed. So, in the end we did not have any money and we had to pay rent and the food for our children so we took out loans and now we owe a lot of money. We are going to the United States because we have debts and we know we will not be able to pay them in Honduras.[140]

They are relocating to run away from their debts and to make some money so that they can come back. In Central America and Mexico it is very common to migrate and leave your children behind with their grandparents in exchange for a contribution to the household you leave behind. Martha's narrative is one of the few where violence is never discussed. For Martha, her children will be safe back home; she does not feel scared by the gangs in Honduras. To talk about violence, I had to ask about the gangs in her region (Olancho). She said that *Mareros* (gang members) were not an issue where she lived. It was evident that she did not consider the violence of Honduras when she made the decision to migrate. In this sense, leaving her children behind makes sense. Their children can take care of their house and remain safe.

[140] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.

Physical threats

Central America is a very dangerous place. In 2013, the murder rate in Honduras was the highest in the world, with 79 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2015). Many organizations have reported links between the police or the military and organized crime and gangs (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos, 2015). The gangs increased rapidly in El Salvador and now control large areas of the country (Savenije, 2007). The biggest gangs in Central America are the *Mara Salvatrucha* (also known as *MS13*) and the *Pandilla 18*. Poor people are particularly vulnerable to gang violence and police abuse since they cannot pay for security or relocate to safer areas.

In a context of generalized violence, like the situation in Central America, the way in which people evaluate risk changes completely. When there are immediate physical threats, economic calculations take a secondary place and survival becomes the number one priority.

Many of the families I interviewed had been very poor before they migrated: they had just enough money to get by or they had debt, and most people had been sub-employed or unemployed. However, they had remained in Central America and had even endured a certain level of violence for many years before deciding to relocate. For most, the decision to leave was sudden, but it was not triggered by an exceptional act of violence. They told me how they tolerated the everyday aggressions of being robbed on the streets, seeing their neighbors get killed or join the gangs, or being charged *derecho de piso* (war tax). Then, one of the hostilities became too much to endure and convinced them that staying in Central America was no longer an option. The way they evaluated risk changed. It had suddenly become more dangerous to stay than to migrate.

As they tell it, the decision to migrate was triggered by the violence. Nevertheless, when they reflected on the reasons why they left, they almost always included economic reasons too. Reno and Darwin, two brothers from Honduras (18 and 22 years old), explain why they migrated:

> [We left] because of the poverty and the mafias that want to force you to work for them …. We had a problem six years ago with our father: he was murdered. From then on, we have experienced threats and attempts to kill us. That is what made us leave our country and leave our family.[141]

Reno and Darwin had been threatened a couple of times already and their father had been murdered because he refused to pay the war tax on his business. However, this did not make them leave. Then, one day, Reno was stopped by a gang member while he was going back home and threatened to be killed if he did not join them in 24 hours. After this, they decided to leave. They left without their families as they believed their families would be safe as long as they were gone. In their case, they seemed to be right: they contacted their wives and the gang members laid off. However, there are other circumstances when migrating with the whole family is the only way to save all the members—as the following story will show.

Some families leave because they cannot afford to pay the war tax on their businesses. Rosa and Pedro had a small business in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, where they sold roasted nuts to stores and to children outside schools. They had two kids and were just about scraping by: they could afford to rent a small house and buy food every day.

> We were OK but one day we had to leave. The Mareros came and asked for the rent; they just threw a random number at us. I am sure they did not know how much money we made. We really couldn't pay it; we would

[141] Interview: Darwin, 30 June 2015, Palenque.

> have gone broke, and then what? They would kill us! Pedro couldn't go the United States to get more money because if we stopped paying they were going to kill me and the children. We sold everything we could and we came [with the two kids]—what would you have done?[142]

Rosa and Pedro's family was threatened by the gangs. They were going to get killed if they did not pay the war tax. The threat was persuasive enough to convince Pedro's twin brother and his family to escape too, just in case they also became targets. In a comparison of Darwin and Rosa's interviews we can see that the threat is the same: they both got told they were going to be killed, and the menace was credible enough that they fled. Both Darwin and Rosa have little children. However, Darwin did not assume that the threat was directed towards his *whole* family, while Rosa did. Darwin had experienced more direct violence in his life in Honduras (his father was killed, he had been robbed at gun point four times, and he had witnessed a murder) than Rosa (she had only experienced the fear in her neighborhood, but never direct violence). Perhaps their background, and the violence they had endured before, affected the way they reacted. Rosa and her husband clearly are more conservative when evaluating risks, so they decided that it was safer for the whole family to migrate to the United States. They feared their children would be killed if they left them. Reno and Darwin, with very similar information, decided to leave their families behind as they calculated risk differently. Both families were first-time migrants.

It is hard to say which strategy is the better one. Sometimes, families that are left behind are not bothered by the gangs again. Nothing had happened to Reno and Darwin's families when I interviewed them, five days after they left. Unfortunately, sometimes family members who stay behind do get killed. Ramona and her partner fled Honduras

[142] Interview: Rosa, 18 July 2015, Tenosique.

to save their niece's life after she was the victim, and only surviving witness, of a mass murder in Honduras. Ramona did not want to migrate but she believed that her niece was going to be targeted by the gang of the perpetrator and that taking her to the United States was the only way to save her life. Most of the family stayed behind. A day before I interviewed Ramona in the *Comedor* of Nogales, she found out that twenty members of her family had been murdered for helping her niece escape. Ramona, her husband, and her niece are the only ones left. Cases like this show that bringing the complete family can be a well-thought-out strategy when people are making decisions among uncertainty.[143]

Gendered violence

> To be honest, she is my partner and we live in a village where men don't accept that two women are partners and they tried to rape us. And once, someone tried to dance with her [my partner] and she said no and ran home. But later the man was waiting for us in front of our house with a machete and there was a mess and we had to leave to protect our lives and our child's life.[144]

It was only after knowing me for two days and participating in an hour-long interview that Yuri "confessed" that she was homosexual. This was impossible to guess from the way she acted around Selma, her partner, as they had learned to act as friends and to avoid showing any intimacy while growing up in Honduras. In Central America, a very catholic region, homosexuality is still considered deviant and people who are members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTQI) community must be

[143] Interview: Ramona, 21 April 2016, Nogales.
[144] Interview: Yuri, June 2015, Palenque.

very discreet if they want to remain safe. On the road, I met four women – two couples – who had to escape after being outed as homosexual.

According to the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women in Honduras, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex community is facing escalating violence. She found that 107 members of this community had been murdered between 1994 and 2012. Her reports also notes other forms of discrimination and harassment that motivates migration.

> Lesbians and other women who live outside of heterosexual norms are often subjected to violence, rape and other forms of discrimination. In the workplace they are often bullied, harassed or overlooked for promotions, and may even be denied employment due to their style of dress. The Special Rapporteur was informed of an increasing trend of migration, especially among transgender sex workers seeking to flee from discrimination and abuse.
>
> (Manjoo, 2015)

Women also leave Central America to escape domestic or intimate partner violence. Ramona's niece had witnessed her cousins being murdered by one of their ex-boyfriends; "she was stabbed and all her cousins were murdered in front of her."[145] Since the killer was a member of a gang, the child's family had to help her escape to save her life. Many women leave with their children to escape their violent partners: like Rosita, who left with her daughter, or Toña, who migrated with her son. In the previous chapter, I already talked about Rosita and Toña, who migrated only with their children.

[145] Interview: Ramona, 21 April 2016, Nogales.

Men are also affected by gendered violence in Central America. The gang members frequently force kids as young as 11 to join their ranks. If they refuse, they are threatened and later murdered. Mario went to Honduras from the United States to retrieve his son, Lucas, because he had been recruited by the MS13. The reach of the gangs is so vast that the only way to effectively run from them is by going to the United States.

Mistrust of family in Central America

Finally, sometimes a mother or the whole family migrate together because there is no one to leave the children with. Regardless of the reason for leaving, if the parents believe their children will be worse off staying with a relative or friend, they sometimes decide to bring their children with them.

Many of the women I interviewed did not want to leave their children behind because they do not trust their families to take good care of them.

> To be honest, my mother migrated and left me with my grandmother. And she sent money, and I knew… but I never got any money for clothes and I didn't get a lot of food and my grandmother wasn't good to me because my mother was not there protecting me. I think that there is no substitute for the care and love of a mother and I would rather suffer with my child than have her suffer with her family that won't love her as I do.[146]

Here, Lety (21 years-old from Honduras), whose mother left when she was seven, shows that she believes people outside the nuclear family cannot always be trusted,

[146] Interview: Lety, 29 July 2015, Palenque.

even if they are related. She believes, like many of the mothers I interviewed, that only mothers can take care of their children and that the best place for a child to be is next to her mother. Many of the mothers that took their children also came with their partners. Those mothers that were accompanied by their children alone have already appeared in the previous chapter.

As this section showed, the decision to migrate as a family, and especially with children, is not taken lightly and is not considered irresponsible by those making the decision. Families try to be strategic actors and use the information they have about the economy, the political situation, the dangers of migrating, and the payouts in the United States, to make the best decision they can. This informs who stays, who leaves, and how they act during transit.

"The danger is in the others"

Mexico is a perilous place for migrants, families, and people who left by themselves alike. An estimate of 70,000 migrants disappeared in Mexico as of 2012 (Frank-Vitale, 2013) and the National Commission on Human Rights believes that at least 11,000 migrants have been kidnapped in a six month period in 2009 (CNDH, 2009). Authorities of all levels extort and rob them, and organized crime groups profit from their transit by charging quotas.

As soon as migrants arrive in Mexico, they must face the very real possibility of becoming victims. Like migrants who left by themselves, families often find themselves surprised and unprepared by what they are experiencing. Similarly, they realize that they cannot get any help from acquaintances while they are in Mexico. The

sheer length of the road and the possibility of being kidnapped sever – sometimes permanently – the social networks that migrants had. Sometimes they fall out of touch with their families because they forget their contact details or they simply run out of money needed to make calls. Even those who can stay in contact with their family in Central America often cannot receive help: their families are usually too poor to sustain them. Finally, most Central Americans do not have social networks in the United States that are willing to support them.

In contexts of stress and violence, research has shown that social ties tend to break and that trust tends to be limited to the family and not extended to the rest of the community (Erikson, 1995). This happens to most transit-migrant families in Mexico: their trust becomes intimate and they do not trust outsiders.

> We know that either we all arrive together, or no one arrives. It is very important for us to stick together, even if we have to go slower. After we got deported the first time, the only one who wanted to go back was Lydia; she was just a friend, not a family member. She realized she had more money than us and would have to share it with us and decided to go back and use the money in Honduras rather than helping us. She was not family. She just left.[147]

Lydia was a close friend of Martha's who had attempted to migrate with them the first time and Martha (32 years old from Honduras) trusted her completely. They were deported from Palenque after being migrating for only one week. The migration, detention, and deportation were traumatic for the four members of the group, yet they still decided to try crossing again. Lydia, having learned how difficult it was and having realized she had more money than the rest, decided to leave them. Her well-being came

[147] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.

before the others and she abandoned the group, leaving just the family members.

Martha thus understood what researchers like Kai Erikson (1995) have observed: in dangerous times, social ties tend to break down, leaving only family ties intact. People often become more selfish and self-preservation wins (as in Lydia's case). Families instinctively start looking inwards to preserve their safety. This seems to make sense, since families are believed to be the "most effective forms of social capital" (Field 2008: 104). Strong social capital leads to increased trust and more efficient cooperation while migrating. Thus, families would appear to be the strongest and safest social arrangements in a difficult situation. Nevertheless, authors that assume families always produce social capital fail to take into account that sometimes social ties produce negative capital—as Rocio Rosales (2014) has shown. This research, too, challenges the assumption that families are the best groups to face a crisis with. It will show that what seems to be the strongest qualities of a family – close bonds and internal trust – do not help them face the challenges of a volatile situation where information is scarce. It will argue that families, by attempting to protect exclusively their members, damage their ability to survive while they are in transit.

Families are not only tied by love and trust but also by shared transnational connections to other members of their wider kinship network in Central America or in the United States. These transnational ties can exert some control on the members of the family and dissuade them from defecting from the group. If Martha had decided to leave, she would have had to explain why she left the others behind to the rest of the family in Honduras. She might have been scolded, punished, or even ostracized. This situation is similar with Oscar and Franco (both 19 years old). These two first time migrants left with their cousin, Luis. Luis knew he had to protect them because if something happened to his cousins, he wouldn't be able to go back to Honduras and face the rest

of the family. These transnational control mechanisms cannot operate while migrants are in Mexico since communicating with the family back home is difficult. Yet they are activated as soon as the family members can be reached.

Because they focus all their trust inward, and mistrust almost everyone else. Families tried to stay apart from Mexicans, even from those who seemed nice: "if people are too nice they might kidnap you,"[148] warns Brian. When they had to ask for money, they would do it in front of churches; they felt that it was less likely that catholic people would take advantage of them. In general, they were more mistrustful of Mexicans than other types of migrants and were less willing to accept food, money, or help.

Migrating families are even suspicious of other migrants, some even fearing them: "most of the time, some migrants take advantage of other migrants. There are very selfish migrants who hurt you; not all, but some of them."[149] Reno and Darwin, who fled the violence in Honduras, summarize the position of most families:

> It's like that… like when you feed the birds and they come: you come and you never know how you ended up being tricked. So, you cannot let your guard down. I came here with my brother because he won't let me die and I won't let him die. So, I don't trust anyone and I don't go with anyone because I do not know the type of people that they are.[150]

By contrast, many migrants who had formed *familias del camino* (road families) were less fearful of other migrants—even when they acknowledged there were some "bad seeds." Roberto, who formed a road family on the southern border and stuck with it for the whole journey, recognises that there are some trustworthy migrants outside of his

[148] Interview: Brian, 7 July 2015, Palenque.
[149] Interview: Rosa, 18 July 2015, Tenosique.
[150] Interview: Darwin, 30 June 2015, Palenque.

group.

> So, when the train stops you sometimes talk to other migrants but you already come with your people… There are some folks who look evil but I trust people who are humble, simple, with a goal, with a will…. some people are good; of course, some people are bad too.[151]

As Roberto's description shows, his position towards trusting other migrants is nuanced and flexible. In contrast, Reno and Darwin's position is black and white; it is them versus everyone because anyone can be a criminal. Darwin also has a more dramatic way to express their mistrust, in terms of life and death, whereas Roberto seems willing to believe there is good to be found even on *el camino*.

Families formed of only men were cautious in their approach to other migrants: they tried to seat apart from them, and in general were more selective of who they talked to. Most of them chose to stay as a closed unit and not to accept anyone who tried to *pegárseles* (stick to them). Probably because they never saw the usefulness in joining forces with other migrants and because they never felt the loneliness and fear of being by themselves, they did not force themselves to be social and find new travel associates.

However, the mistrust and withdrawal of families with female members is significantly higher than that of families who only had men. Their strategies for protecting the women rely strongly on a gendered division of labour and a strong division between the private and the public sphere, where women stay in the private sphere. The following section analyses these strategies and discusses the role of women inside migrating families.

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[151] Interview: Roberto, 27 April 2016, Nogales.

Families in transit and gender

Families and the threat of sexual violence

All migrants are aware of the violence that surrounds them, as my story in the introduction and the previous chapters have shown. Yet, families with women are also worried about the constant threat of sexual violence that surrounds women who migrate. This fear permeated the whole conversation with them. For example: "the train is very dangerous because there are men and also because you can fall,"[152] or "there is no one in the train tracks and someone can touch you."[153] In the first statement, we can see Rosa equates violence that men can inflict with that of losing a limb or getting killed by a train. Later in the interview it is clear that she fears men because of the threat of sexual violence. In Estrella's interview, the inappropriate touching is more explicit but the perpetrator is again ambiguous, not limited to criminals and, if analyzed with the whole interview, clearly male. Interestingly, interviews with women who migrate by themselves do not show this pattern.

Male migrants and many researchers and members of advocacy groups agree that women are particularly exposed to violence while they are crossing Mexico. Women are indeed exposed to sexual violence in addition to the violence of migration. In a report from 2010, Amnesty International estimated that six out of ten women were raped during their journey—some more than once (Amnesty International, 2010). Rapes are so frequent that some smugglers give women contraceptive pills to make sure they do not get pregnant while on the road. Some of the women I interviewed had already experienced sexual abuse and rape while migrating—often more than once.

[152] Interview: Rosa, 18 July 2015, Tenosique.
[153] Interview: Estrella, 1 July 2015, Palenque.

The threat of rape is so present in the collective imagination that many male migrants do not cross Mexico with women because they believe that makes *them* more vulnerable. When I asked about migrating with women, male migrants often replied along the lines of "yeah, and we saw how they took those women from the train and were going to rape them, but what can you do? If you defend them they kill you too, it is just too dangerous for women to come… it is really not worth it to bring a woman."[154] In addition, female migrants are more likely to experience other types of gendered crimes, such as sexual violence, trafficking, and kidnapping (Center for Gender & Refugee Studies, 2017).

This awareness of sexual violence is a crucial difference between families – most of whom have women – and the rest of the migrants (including women who migrate by themselves). In families, the fear of others comes mainly from the threat of violence against women, who are considered to be the weakest members of the group. They dread anyone who is not part of the family. It makes families react differently from other migrants to the state and criminal violence they witness when they are in Mexico. What the aggressions teach them is that "the threat is the *others*"[155] and that they are only safe within their family. By contrast, as I showed in chapter five, members of the *familias del camino* learn that they need to let their guard down – if only for a second – in order to meet other migrants who can help them survive Mexico.

This "additional vulnerability" and the perceived softness of women affects the way in which families behave during their journey. They fixate on sexual violence as the main threat for the whole group during the migration process. Whatever happens to the men,

[154] Interview: David, 2 September 2015, Saltillo.
[155] Interview: Fernando Alfaro, 4 September 2015, Saltillo.

they can endure it, but *letting* the woman get raped by the gang members or the cartels is unthinkable.

According to Gibbons and Luna (2015), in Central America there is still a very strong patriarchal tradition, where men are primarily valued as strong breadwinners who take care of the family, and women are primarily valued as discreet and virtuous persons. In this tradition, women are "bad" insofar as they are sexual, adventurous, or contaminated by their activities in the public sphere (Castillo et al., 1999). The image of the pure, untouched mother as the angel, the spiritual force of the family, is still very persistent (Gibbons and Luna, 2015). When a woman is sexually abused while migrating with her family, she not only faces the trauma of the violation of her body, but also the fear and shame of her family witnessing it. She is an angel no more; her presence in the public sphere has contaminated the whole family (Castillo et al., 1999). This abuse not only affects her personally but also has the potential to alter the family dynamics and the way the members relate to each other. If a woman gets raped, that will show that her partner is not the strong leader the family needs, and therefore will make the family weaker. The man's masculine identity as the head of the household will be shattered and his sense of self might be altered. For families, sexual abuse of women does not fall into the same category as the rest of the violent acts they could experience while attempting to arrive to the United States. Sexual abuse is worse because it will haunt the whole family forever.

(Re)creating the private sphere

If women are constructed as "pure, private and apolitical", while men are constructed

as "immoral, public and political" (Bethke Elshtain, 1974), then women have to be protected and kept safe to remain moral. To preserve the woman's virtue and her familial functional, the man becomes *serio* (serious) and protective. It makes sense for them to take care of the family by separating the vulnerable ones – women and children – from the "others." This is difficult to do on the road, however. In transit, migrants are exposed all the time: they are permanently surrounded by other migrants and strangers, whether they are outside, in the streets, in the highways, or on the trains. Even when they are technically inside, they are observable: the way the migrant houses and canteens are designed does not allow for privacy. In these spaces, they are forced to mix with other migrants and to be seen by everyone, including the volunteers. Effectively, migrants are in public all the time because they are constantly surrounded by the prying eyes of others.

At lease since Aristotle's discussion of the *polis*, authors have differentiated between the public sphere, where politics happen, and the private sphere, which is the properly domestic area. While men can move freely between both spheres, women are confined to the private sphere where they *must* remain apolitical. A man, then, has two statuses: he is a public and a private person; while women are totally immersed in the household and do not participate in the "public" (Bethke Elshtain, 1974). However, the public sphere in Mexico is not a *polis* for Central American Migrants: they are not *citizens* of that country and they are not *entitled* to use public areas as they would otherwise. For them, this public sphere in Mexico is hostile; they must walk with their heads down and make themselves invisible from the citizens that own it. They are, perhaps for the first time, transgressors of a public space that does not belong to them.

Being undocumented in a strange land makes male migrants realize they do not own the public space of Mexico. It challenges their masculinity because it robs them of the

entitlement to occupy the public sphere. Families react to this by trying earnestly to (re)create their own private spheres. This is what Mabel and Juan were doing in the Saltillo migrant house: they were attempting to create a domestic, intimate sphere, where both would feel safe and comfortable. Rosa, her sister Tatiana, and their husbands also struggled to emulate a domesticity that the openness of their situation (staying in La 72 in Tenosique) had stripped from them. Rosa, Tatiana, and their babies stayed apart from the rest of the migrants all morning. During this time, they chatted, washed their families' clothes, cooked if they had food, and waited. When the husbands came back from looking for occasional work or from working, they would relax next to Rosa and Tatiana and they would talk or play with the babies. They rarely spent time with the other male migrants and maintained an effort to remain apart from them. Most families "carry" their domestic sphere with them.

This strategy allows the men in the family to reclaim their traditional masculine role by becoming the *serio*, strong protector of the private sphere. While in Mexico they have no public sphere to lay claim to, but they retain their power in private. This "invisible private sphere" that the family creates allows women to retain their private morality by staying inside the domestic sphere and not transgressing it. By fashioning a new private sphere in public, women and men make the men feel more in control of their lives and their destiny.

This invisible private sphere allows families to isolate themselves as much as possible and to retain the traditional role for women. The division of labour inside the families remains mostly gendered. Ramona's husband goes out, talks to people, and researches the route while she stays with the child. Similarly, Rosa and Tatiana's husbands work and find information about the road while they take care of the children and wash all the clothes. Women are still considered the spiritual force of the family, encouraging

their husbands to keep going and lifting the morale after difficult experiences. After they were robbed for the second time, Martha's husband wanted to quit.

> […]yeah, we were very very scared, very scared and we didn't want to keep going on and my husband told me, "let's go back!" And I told him, "not a step back!" Scared but moving forward, not a step back! And so it went; and now we are here.[156]

Mario, Martha's husband, told me that she was brave when he could not take it anymore and that was what kept him moving. We can see that Martha does not perceive her role as less important just because she does not "go out;" she is the *madre* (mother) that pushes them forward while ruling the domestic sphere.

In transit, women try to remain in the imaginary private space their families created. However, when they need to, they "go out" to help the family. As Melissa W. Wright has observed, even inside a patriarchal narrative, women can sometimes be compelled to enter the public space for private reasons (such as helping the family when there is no other alternative) (Wright, 2011). Most women take a leading role when there is no money, no food, and the partner is unable to find a job. In this case, women find sustenance for the family. For example, Alicia, a 34-year old woman from Honduras, explains the situation:

> My husband and my friends were too embarrassed to ask for help so I went and knocked on a door and asked the lady who opened for some tortillas and salt. And she gave us some beans too. If you really need help, you have to overcome your fears and ask for help.[157]

Many of the women in La 72 went to Tenosique's town center to beg for money in the

[156] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.
[157] Interview: Alicia, 5 May 2016, Nogales.

town square or in front of the church. Their contribution is important in order to succeed on *el camino*. Women take advantage of their perceived vulnerability and their non-threatening appearance to approach people on the streets and ask for help. They usually get more help, faster. Rosa told me that if she sent her husband to beg for money, he would come back empty-handed. Women are better at begging because people are not scared to approach them.

Women also contribute when they get information about the road by talking to other female migrants in the migrant houses. If there is a space exclusively for women, they can let their guard down and spend time with others in a safe space. In La 72 in Tenosique and in the Saltillo migrant house, for example, women spent most of the day together separated from the rest of the men (especially if their partners were working or finding information). Females show a lot of trust and solidarity among themselves when they are alone. These fleeting but deep bonds provide them with emotional relief; Alicia told me how happy she was every time she could share her experiences with other women who have lived through the same. Women also give each other information about migrant houses and the services they provide for themselves and their children (they frequently ranked them in front of me).

Although women participate in gathering information, most of the families delegate the final decision making to the head of the family. He also acts as the public face of the family and the gatekeeper to the private sphere. He is the one who mediates the interactions with the rest of the migrant community and decides who (if anyone) can join the group. The families travel alone and rarely let anyone join them; the mistrust of others and the fear of sexual violence keep them from talking to other migrants and letting them inside their social group.

The discussion in this section advances the literature on gender and migration by providing insights into how men and women in families react to the disempowerment and fear they experience while they are crossing Mexico clandestinely. I argue that, perhaps for the first time in their lives, men understand what it feels to transgress a public sphere (Mexico) that they do not own. Both men and women are also affected by the constant threat of sexual violence directed towards females. They are afraid of the consequences of rape, not only due to its effect on the body of the woman, but also due to its effect on the identity of everyone in the family. I suggest that the way families react is by (re)creating a private sphere in public where men can act as serious protectors of the family and women can be kept away from "external" violence. By performing this fiction, they attempt to regain some power and control over their lives in order to overcome a transit that is difficult on the body and on the mind.

The consequences of isolation for families

In general, all types of families isolate themselves from the wider migrant community – and the potential allies they could find in Mexico – to their peril. Although it sounds counterintuitive, when the stakes are high, at least while crossing Mexico, engaging with strangers can be the most efficient strategy for survival. Although there is always the risk that an outsider will be a criminal, people external to one's social group are more likely to have new and different information that might prove useful in dangerous situations.

The context of Mexico changes frequently. The gangs and cartels do not always charge the quota in the same places and the roadblocks of the National Migration Institute

change daily, for example. The migrant houses are a relatively stable part of the route, but other well-intentioned actors such as researchers, volunteers, and priests can appear – and disappear – suddenly. These all make the road unpredictable and ever changing. Migrants who passed through Mexico two months before, were deported, and tried again, still find differences to their chagrin.

"We go alone together"

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the *migrantes* on the road are an ever flowing "transient accidental community." All migrants who are taking *el camino* understand what everyone else is going through. Even if they do not trust each other completely, they can still sympathize with other migrants and show solidarity. Andabas, a Guatemalan migrant, was pleasantly surprised by this: "What I learned on the road is the solidarity, the companionship among the migrants; I understood we are all migrants and we are going to the same place and we are not competing—we all want everyone to arrive..."[158] Gordo also understands how important it is to participate: "when you are on the train for ten hours and you are thirsty and someone gives you a sip of Coca Cola or a bite of a taco even if they do not know you… and I did the same thing sometimes. At the end of the day, we are all migrants."[159]

Families do not usually participate in these acts of solidarity. In the train tracks, in churches, and in the migrant houses, I could observe that families tried to sit separately from the others. Cheryl and Juan are a good example. The Saltillo migrant house

[158] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.
[159] Interview: Gordo, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.

consists of an open space where migrants and volunteers spent most of their time. From the Rummy table, I was able to follow the daily flows of migrants. I saw how they arrived tired, dusty, and hungry and how they looked better after a shower and food. I noticed how they sat next to other migrants and had cautious but lively conversations, or how they played checkers or foosball. By contrast, families like Cheryl and Juan spent most of their time apart from the rest of the migrants, attempting to create their own private space; Cheryl was friendly with other women but never spent time around other men. I saw this situation happen everywhere I went; families do not participate in the small ceremonies of the rest of the *migrante* community: "We are very serious, we stay apart…. if they talk to me…. I might give them a smile, that's it."[160] Serious men are men who only care about their family, who do not drink and waste time with other men. Being a serious man in Central America is a thing to be proud of: on the road, serious men are respected and left alone, even if people consider them standoffish.

While in transit in Mexico, the transient community of *migrantes* is one of the most memorable features of the journey for the migrants. This community gives them a sense of camaraderie, common destiny, and identity. It also acts as a valuable repository for the information that migrants learn while crossing Mexico. The rumors and the information that experienced migrants and recently deported migrants can provide is invaluable for adapting strategies and survival. Brian (29 years old from Honduras), a migrant who formed a *familia del camino* and who takes part in the *pueblo migrante*, is always talking to people to find out about the route:

> I talk to those that I see in the road …. Because they have experience and I ask them about the journey; I don't want to fail, I don't want to have an accident… I've heard that you have to pay 100 dollars, they say, to get on

[160] Interview: Ramona, 21 April 2016, Nogales.

> the train, maybe [to] the Mareros, maybe [to] the Zetas. I know that one way is Migración, one way is the Maras, and one way is the Zetas. That worries me but at least I know.[161]

By contrast, Ramona, who came with her husband, summarizes the position of most families: "We do not talk to anyone else; no one that is not ourselves. We don't trust anyone. We are serious and we are apart. That's what keeps us safe."[162]

Individuals and groups that exist in a context of uncertainty need to have regular access to new and varied information to survive. Kristian Berg Harpviken (2009) showed the importance of diverse information for families fleeing the war in Enjil, Afghanistan. In that case, In that case, "weak ties" – to use Mark Granovetter's influential term – were the ones that provided the money and strategies needed for a safe departure from the region. Weak ties also had the most up to date information about the situation of the war and the roads. Without those links, many families would have been stuck in Enjil or would have had a more dangerous escape. Families in Mexico do not have the opportunity to communicate with their weak ties. However, they are surrounded by the *migrante* community that could provide them with some guidance. When the families refuse to engage with the transient community of *migrantes*, they limit their access to knowledge and their ability to make informed decisions about which strategies to take.

I interviewed Reno and Darwin (18 and 22 years old from Honduras) in the migrant house in Pakal-Na, in Tapachula. It was their first migration, but so far everything had gone fine. They had decided not to trust anyone and to only get their information through observing other migrants and through talking to volunteers in the migrant house. They had a plan: from Palenque they were going to follow the train tracks to the

[161] Interview: Brian, 7 July 2015, Palenque.
[162] Interview: Ramona, 21 April 2016, Nogales.

next stop and then take the train from there. They knew there were criminals in the jungle, which intimidated them; they bought two huge machetes from a local peasant.[163] They showed them to me and left. After they went inside the jungle, another migrant approached me and said "those two that just left are idiots, *everyone* knows you are not supposed to take a weapon—the Mareros will kill them."[164] I was surprised, worried, and angry at the migrant for not telling them. When I asked him why he did not say anything before, he responded: "I don't know them, they didn't ask, and they wouldn't have trusted me if I had told them."[165] Two days later I found out that Darwin and Reno had indeed been murdered by the gang who dominated that part of town (most likely the MS13). Most people agreed that it was because they had machetes. The fact that they were not constant participants in the gossip and chat of the *migrante* community prevented them from finding out about commonly accepted "rules" for behaviour of migrants in the region.

Acting strategically to compensate for isolation

Families in Mexico are thus in a very vulnerable position because they refuse to interact with other migrants and to take advantage of the rich source of information that it provides. Still, families are strategic actors and they use a variety of tactics to compensate for their lack of contact, thereby improving their chances of survival.

Ramona's husband, for example, eavesdrops on the conversations of other migrants. "My husband is very serious, so he just sits next to them and listens. And since he is

[163] Interview: Reno and Darwin, 30 June 2015, Palenque.
[164] Conversation with migrant in front of the train tracks in Pakal-Na, Palenque, June 2015.
[165] Conversation with migrant in front of the train tracks in Pakal-Na, Palenque, June 2015.

very serious, no one talks to him directly. I stay behind with the child."[166] Martha and her family follow other groups from a distance: "so you arrive in the road and if there is someone walking around you, you are not going to tell him "go away", but you do try to get away. We didn't like to be in the front because we like to be behind and see what happens. And that is why nothing happened to us; because when we saw that everybody ran, we ran; and if you are in the back you have more opportunities of getting away."[167] They used the *migrante* community without participating in it.

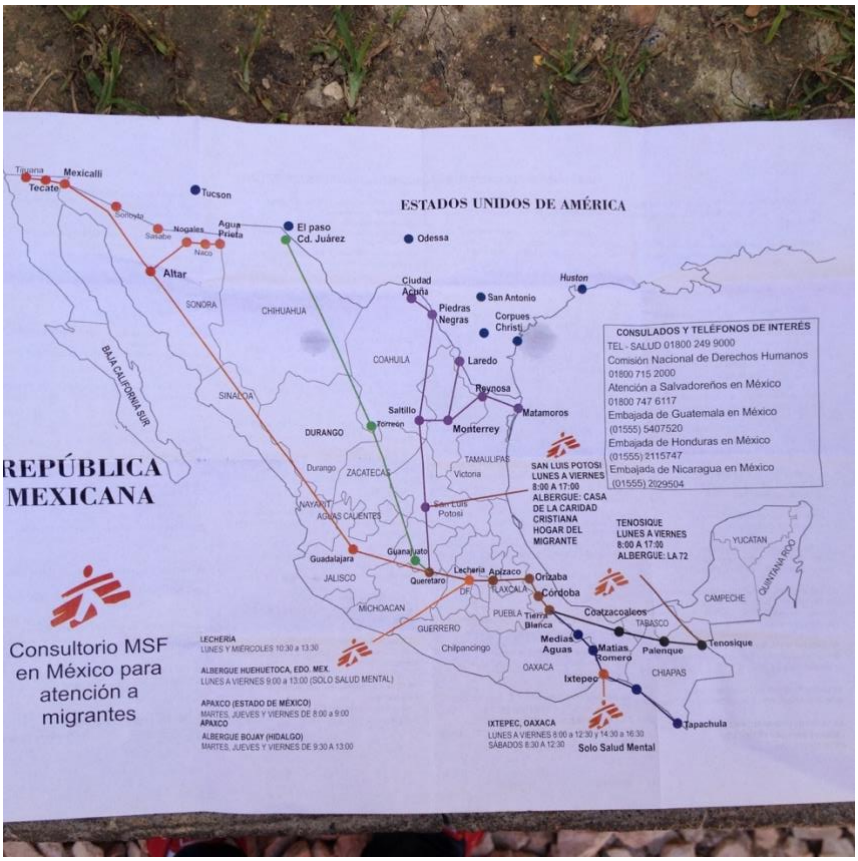
Some families (especially those with only men) remain detached, but ask questions cautiously: "Yeah, with reservations, it is easy to say "hello", but you do not talk. You do not give information and they do not want to give you information. Sometimes they offer you a taco – and you take it because you are hungry – and when you get close to them, they pull you and kidnap you."[168] Some, like David (41 years old from El Salvador), identify the *coyote* of a group and watch him closely to learn about him. They also walk ten steps behind the group with the *coyote* to copy his strategies.[169] This information is sometimes not enough—as Reno and Darwin's case shows. However, there is another institution that helps families overcome their lack of contact with other migrants.

Fortunately for families, there are advocacy institutions along the migrant route in Mexico that help them compensate for their lack of weak ties and information. The migrant houses and canteens provide food and shelter along the migratory route. Some of these institutions have formal methods of gathering information about the conditions

[166] Interview: Ramona, 21 April 2016, Nogales.
[167] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.
[168] Interview: Esteban, 28 August 2015, Saltillo.
[169] Interview: David, 2 September 2015, Saltillo.

of the road and the distribution of actors: the people who work there distribute brief surveys to the migrants who arrive or ask them to talk to a counsellor. Many have databases and files with the information of the migrants and of their experiences. In places where the data is not systematically saved, newcomers chat to the volunteers running the institution.

This information is then given back to the migrants through formal and informal channels. For example, in a migrant house in the north, a volunteer nicknamed "Jean Claude Van Dame" shows up every Friday to tell migrants about the new intel regarding the U.S.-Mexico border. He shows them maps and points out the main roads, roadblocks, crossing points, where the cartels are believed to kidnap migrants, and the distances to border towns in the United States. He uses the information he gathers each week from migrants who had tried to cross and were deported. Sometimes, he does his own scouting of the border. The migrant house La 72, in Tenosique, has a huge mural showing the main routes and main migrant houses along the way. Migrants are continuously studying and trying to memorize it. Fray Tomás, who runs the house, gives a speech every night warning migrants against the coyotes and telling them about the new strategies criminals and police officers use to take advantage of the migrants. Organizations like Doctors Without Borders provide pocket maps with information about the route.



Map given to migrants by Doctors Without borders, photo by the author 2015.

These spaces also provide a great opportunity to eavesdrop on other migrants, ask the volunteers questions, and sometimes use the internet (for free in Tenosique; in other places they must find an internet café or use a volunteer's cellphone) to look at maps or research routes.

Families with women and children also take advantage of the fact that they are travelling with people perceived as vulnerable. In most advocacy institutions, preference is given to women and children. Ramona (27 years old from Honduras) knows that it is easier for families to stay in migrant houses for longer periods of time: "we can stay longer in the house because we brought the child; we are prioritized because we are a family… we also stayed with Padre Flor in Tapachula—he hired my

husband to build a fence. He knew the family needed the money."[170] Similarly, Martha attributes most of the help they have gotten inside and outside the migrant house to being in a family: "they give us extra help because they see we are family and that we are struggling."[171] Rosa took her children to ask for money and food in Tenosique because she got more money: "I take the children and I can take care of them; but also people, especially older women, give me more money and more things because they feel bad for my children. I feel bad too, but on the other hand if I take them we all get more help."[172] These advocacy institutions provide a very valuable tool for all migrants, but they are lifesavers for families who would be completely isolated and thus more vulnerable without them.

Conclusion

Families, like the rest of the migrants in transit, are separated from their kinship networks when they are in Mexico. They are exposed to criminals, cartels, and gangs, as well as corrupt authorities. They have to take isolated routes and walk for days or ride on top of the dangerous freight train to cross the country.

This chapter adds to the literature on gender and migration by showing the effects of the brutal journey on men and women in families. It shows that male migrants with families react to the disempowerment they feel in Mexico by reasserting their masculinity in the only place they can: their domestic sphere. To protect the "weak" ones of the family, especially the women who can be raped, the families create an

[170] Interview: Ramona, 21 April 2016, Nogales.
[171] Interview: Martha, 14 September 2015, Saltillo.
[172] Interview: Rosa, 18 July 2015, Tenosique.

imaginary private sphere. The women remain relatively isolated with the children while the men engage with people outside their "domestic bubble." They mistrust all the migrants surrounding them and refuse to establish ties with anyone who is not in the family.

Although occupations inside the "domestic sphere" are generally gendered (i.e. reserved for women), most women "go out" and help the family when needed—by asking for money in the streets, for example. Women are also characterized as the spirit of the family and the emotional strength behind the man. This analysis has shown that, at least in transit, gendered roles and patriarchal ideas of the family are reinforced.

This isolation that families choose prevents the migrants from participating in the *migrante* community. The families miss opportunities to experience small acts of solidarity on the train or on the highway. More importantly, not forming weak ties limits their access to information about the ever-changing migration routes. This increases the families' vulnerability because they become less able to change their strategies and adapt. These findings add to the feminist literature that argues social networks do not always produce social capital and that not all members of a group are benefited similarly. It also suggests that families are not always the best group to have in situations of stress and violence, especially when uncertainty is rampant and new and varied information is fundamental to make life or death decisions. It shows that, in some cases, looser social arrangements might be better suited to help people survive.

Chapter eight: Conclusion

Thus far, I have detailed my observations regarding Central American transit migrants' use of social networks as they cross Mexico and described how the Mexican government has implemented migration policies that make migrants more vulnerable by impeding their passage.

In this concluding chapter, I revisit my initial research questions and summarize my findings in view of their contribution to the literature on migration, bonding, and trust. Next, I consider the broader implications of my work for the way migration research is understood and conducted. Finally, I reflect on the questions I have left unanswered, suggesting new lines of enquiry.

Are social networks important in transit?

My initial research question was whether the existing social networks of Central American transit migrants in Mexico would help them complete their journey to the United States.

I expected that Central American migrants would behave similarly to Mexican migrants, an assumption based on three main factors: my perception of a shared Central American and Mexican cultural background; my knowledge of Mexican migration to the United States; and my familiarity with the literature on social networks and migration, focusing mostly on Mexican migrants. For example, I assumed that

migrants' families would be willing to send them money or information but might not do so for practical reasons, such as distance or difficulty maintaining communication.

I also sought to determine whether Central American migrants in transit who could not use their existing social networks would form new ones, and if so, how. There is scant literature on the ways in which migrant networks deal with crises[173], especially concerning migrants in transit, so I drew upon ethnographies describing how homeless youth (Smith, 2008) and the urban poor in Milwaukee (Desmond, 2012) formed ties with strangers in challenging circumstances as well as how communities react in the face of catastrophes (Chong et al., 2011; Drury et al., 2009; Erikson, 1979). While Smith's and Desmond's work suggests that people can form ties with strangers in order to survive, the other ethnographies I reviewed showed that, in general, life-threatening events affecting most of a community caused people to focus on their own survival; when they cared for others, it was typically only for members of their immediate family.

Though none of these ethnographies studied mobile populations from different communities, such as transit migrants in Mexico, they led me to what I thought was a reasonable hypothesis: that the circumstances migrants endure in Mexico would make them more individualistic and selfish during their journey. In essence, migrants in transit are an itinerant group of strangers competing for resources as they fend off external threats, including kidnapping and murder; when would they have the time (and inclination) to form friendships?

[173] Kristian Berg Harpvinger's (2009) work is the sole major exploration of the subject.

Thus, I arrived at Palenque, my first field site, expecting to find a group of gloomy Central American migrants refusing to talk to strangers in order to improve their chances of surviving. In contrast, from the migrant house to the train tracks, the church, and nearby streets, I saw small groups of friends resting, talking, sharing food, and even playing cards. Invariably, each group informed me that 1) though they seemed to know each other intimately, they had only met days or even just hours before, and 2) most of them did not have help from their family members in the United States or in Central America.[174]

Through this ethnography, I discovered to my surprise that the unique characteristics of the road created an environment in which vulnerable people who did not know each other chose over and over again to be generous, trust, and cooperate. Instead of tackling the road with their heads down, hoping to avoid government agents, disease, criminals, and death, they looked up and around to find people they could empathise with, frequently sharing their money, information, and food. As Andabas said, "the nicest part of the journey is the solidarity that you find. I did not know people were so good until I found myself surrounded by so much suffering."[175]

Ultimately, the migrants' time in Mexico changed their understanding of solidarity and bonding, while their instinctive but strategic actions might even have made the migration process slightly less dangerous for all transit migrants, demonstrating that "the most important thing is helping each other, we are the same, you know?"[176]

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[174] I found further confirmation of this lack of assistance in Basok et al's (2015) interviews with Central American migrants.
[175] Interview: Andabas, 1 September 2015, Saltillo.
[176] Interview: Duck, 5 May 2016, Nogales.

Academic contributions of this research

Research on social capital and social networks has rarely paid attention to how groups form, instead theorizing groups or observing associations that exist naturally in peaceful settings (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 1995). This leaves much to study regarding how social capital and social networks act under contexts of stress and strain, and suggests that the field of enquiry must be extended to other environments, much like the ethnographies by Smith (2008) and Tyler and Melander (2011) that describe the formation of groups among homeless youth. My own research joins these and the few other ethnographies dealing with associations created in situations of precarity by considering reactions under stress and isolation from extant social ties to explore how vulnerable strangers form a strong group that helps them survive; it is also the first ethnography that details how migrants associate during transit.

Many Central American migrants do not have family in the United States to help them, but even for those who do, any aid they receive rarely comes while crossing Mexico; instead, their families usually promise them money or the help of a smuggler to cross the US–Mexico border. However, they are still part of a transnational network with their families of origin. These families play an important role in the decision making when leaving the country and in the strategies that the migrant uses when crossing Mexico. Their influence is often very important, even when they cannot communicate while the migrant is on the road. Although the scope of my research did not allow me to interview the family members who chose not to help their migrant kin, I believe Central American migrants can still be differentiated from their Mexican peers by their lack of family support while they are in transit (Massey et al., 1990). Thus, as most

Central American transit migrants are left to their own devices in Mexico, it becomes apparent that kin and kin-like social networks are not essential to facilitating migration, at least during transit – contrary to what most of the literature on social networks and migration has established (Massey et al., 1991; Melero Malpica, 2008; Singer and Massey, 1998). This discovery suggests that we as migration scholars should not always assume that migrants will have access to the help of their existing networks - even when the transnational networks exist- and we should be more critical when analysing who really benefits from a social tie. Furthermore, we must begin to ask a new set of empirical questions about migration processes: What other migrant groups lack the help of their social ties? What tools do they use instead? What factors define which diasporas help their families and which do not?

In transit, migrants who departed by themselves and are not receiving help or emotional support from their kin and kin-like networks usually choose to join four or five other migrants in what I call *familias del camino*: road families. These road families are bound by strong, meaningful ties and complete trust, evidenced by the fact that they share money and resources and usually stick together until the US–Mexico border, even when it might not appear to be in their best interests. For example, Roberto stayed with his friends throughout Mexico even though he was the only one contributing money: his new "family" needed him and he stuck by them. Juan also believes the best advice for a new migrant is to find a road family: "I would recommend that new migrants find friends on the road… the first time I came without friends and I got so sad I wanted to hand myself to *La Migra*."[177]

[177] Interview: Juan, 17 September 2015, Saltillo

For migrants who feel dehumanized and vulnerable on the road, forming a road family is not just an emotional impulse to find companionship and feel valued, but a strategic choice stemming from the realization that they lack tools to survive in transit, especially considering the myriad dangers the road presents. Therefore, migrants must make quick and accurate decisions regarding the trustworthiness of potential members of their road family, lest they fall victim to smugglers, kidnappers, or even just free-riders. Though migrants describe their decision as simply a "gut feeling", through interviews and informal chats I discovered the signs and cues that inform their instincts, similar to Gambetta and Hamil (2005) in their ethnography; I also identified the impact of context on whether a sign is interpreted positively or negatively. Some of the signs are concrete: possession of a phone is thought to indicate a smuggler, while – as Cristopher Alfaro discovered – smoking marijuana is associated by many migrants with criminality. Other signs are more subjective, such as whether a person has "kind" eyes, "legitimate" goals, or, conversely, whether the person demonstrates excessive (and therefore, potentially false) kindness. For Roberto, religion is an important sign, which is why he would approach a potential travel mate by quoting the Bible; when Paco replied with another Bible quote, they knew they could trust each other. By learning more about the emotional and strategic motivations for transit migrants to form groups, as well as how they decide whom to trust, we can gain insight into how vulnerable and mobile people interpret their environment and attempt to make accurate decisions with scarce information, especially in high-stakes scenarios where swift decisions are necessary. The fact that these road families are formed, does not mean that migrants lose their transnational networks; however, while on the road, the road families seem to be more useful for them. The exception, of course, is when transnational families are able to send money constantly and to talk to their family members while they are on the road.

Through these actions, they have influence over the outcomes of the migration process and the strategies the migrant follows.

Though some migrants choose to complete their journey alone (even without a road family), the overwhelming majority of these migrants do not feel lonely. In fact, my research reveals that, together, migrants on the road form what I call a "transient community of *migrantes*", reminiscent of Malkki's (1995) "accidental communities of memory", but ultimately unlike other groups described in the literature on social networks and social capital. The "transient community of *migrantes*" is an accidental community consisting of all the migrants crossing Mexico at a given time. Though membership is constantly in flux, the community remains, giving migrants the opportunity to share a common narrative and identity. Consequently, even when they do not trust each other, they understand each other's pain, leading to displays of solidarity and camaraderie.

This ethnography makes clear that even when traditional kin or kin-like social networks are not useful in transit, social ties (specifically with strangers) are one of a migrant's most important resources – however fleeting they may be. The openness to interaction with strangers and displays of camaraderie found in transit migrants not travelling with kin adds important nuance to the literature on communities, social capital, and trust. The fact that these migrants choose to be cautiously generous with the wider community in the wake of a crisis, even if they have already joined a smaller group like a road family, is an encouraging finding for transit migration and for future research on communities and their reaction to violence. Furthermore, my description of the transient community of *migrantes* makes clear that communities need not be geographically bounded (with relatively stable members) in order to be significant and

useful, demonstrating that types of ties beyond strong and weak are just as valuable to mobile and vulnerable groups – perhaps more so. As a consequence, future research on migration should look for social networks beyond traditional kin-like ties to see whether there are rich spaces of aid and solidarity in other transit migration routes or stages of the migration process.

Social capital is fundamental for people in challenging situations because it allows them to create new ties, to gather useful information and to develop knowledge. Both strong and weak ties generate social capital that helps its members. My research has shown that even in the case of the "transient community of migrants", an association with very weak ties, social capital is created and used by its members to survive. By describing a variety of social arrangements with different levels of strength (road families, transient community, families), I illustrate how different groups behave and evolve and how they generate different types of information and capital. The contrast between the transient community of migrants and the *familias del camino* or the families also shows that migrants can be part of more than one social network and reap the benefits from that. While forming all these ties in transit, most migrants still have a transnational network aiming to help them and waiting to be contacted.

At the same time, my findings are not limited to lone migrants in transit. I observed that migrant families (especially those with children) were reluctant to participate in the transient community of *migrantes*, becoming more self-centred and less willing to cooperate when faced with challenging circumstances. This is to be expected, given previous ethnographies (Fogleman and Parenton, 1959) demonstrating that people accompanied by their families become more mistrustful and self-centred when a crisis arises. Through this ethnography, however, I illuminate another facet of the dynamics

behind family isolation in the wake of catastrophes (Erikson, 1995), namely, the gendered implications of migration on men, women, and families. As transit is an understudied stage of the migration process, this is an important contribution to our understanding of families and migration (Asakura, 2014).

The threat of violence and the dehumanization of migrants lead to feelings of vulnerability and disempowerment, which affect the gendered identity of men and women differently, despite a shared fear of the repercussions of sexual assault on women specifically and on the dynamics of the family in general. Men react to the loss of their ownership of the public space in Mexico by trying to reaffirm their masculinity the only way they know how: as "protector of the clan", relegating the women and children to an invisible private sphere the family creates on the road. Thus, traditional patriarchal institutions prevail, along with their corresponding gender roles, thereby preventing women who migrate with men from becoming empowered (in decision making, for example) and creating new social networks.

The way migrant families behave also has implications for the way they strategise and tackle *el camino*. In general, they do not talk to other migrants, leaving them with less up-to-date information about the route, which makes them more vulnerable to violence. This bolsters Kristian Berg Harpviken's (2009) suggestion that when deciding to flee a dangerous situation it is better to enlist the help of weak ties, or acquaintances, since they belong to other social groups and are therefore more likely to have new information than family members who share the same experiences. Taken into consideration with my other findings presented thus far, this conclusion provides yet another reason to re-evaluate the argument – prevalent in the literature on migration

and social networks – that a kin-type social network is always the best kind of arrangement while migrating.

Finally, this ethnography joins a growing body of studies focusing on the agency of migrant women outside their relationship to men (Choy, 2000; Gamburd, 2000; Mahler and Pessar, 2006), specifically by describing female transit migration and its strategies as well as the reactions of external actors and other migrants. Since the migrant trail is still considered a masculine sphere, women who migrate without a man are criticized by male travellers for daring to leave the "safe" private sphere in Central America for the male-dominated migration through Mexico. Yet though they endure rejection and sexual abuse from fellow travellers, these women react to the structural and criminal violence on the road and throughout Mexico by choosing to migrate on their own, without joining a road family. To accomplish this, they rely on migrant houses and the generosity of strangers (often from Mexico) who give them money, shelter, and advice.

A missing piece of the migration puzzle

Migration studies have focused on why people leave their home countries and how they arrive and settle in a new one, neglecting the intermediate stage: transit. Given the unique and sometimes counter-intuitive characteristics of this stage, studying it is essential to a complete understanding of the migration process.

Scholars are still disputing when transit ends and settlement begins, especially for migrants whose journeys force them to spend months or even years in a country where they only intended to stay for a short period of time (Cherti and Grant, 2013; Düvell, 2012). I argue that interactions and connections with the local population should carry

greater weight in our analysis of who is in transit than the amount of time migrants spend in a region or their stated destination. While Central American migrants interact with people from Mexico, such as volunteers in migrant houses, they only form ties with people on the move, like them. Thus, in my view they are a good example of transit migrants.

The context surrounding migrants in transit is unlike that of their home countries or their destinations; while they are in transit, they are "in between", separated from their networks, unwanted, and subject to emotional and physical threats. As they told me over and over again, "there is no moment of peace when you are on the road."[178]

This state of affairs will only grow more dangerous. Destination states and regions such as the United States, Australia, and Europe are extending their border control capabilities outside their geographical borders, using pressure and negotiation to create "vertical borders" (Basok et al. 2015) in third countries that prevent migrants from arriving in these territories (Basok et al. 2015; *Reuters* 2013) – yet another obstacle for migrants in transit countries such as Mexico, Morocco, and Libya. Moreover, while they cross these countries, migrants experience serious human rights violations at the hands of state agents, gangs, and criminals, with many migrants being deported, disappearing, or dying (Animal Político, 2016; Boggs, 2015; CNDH, 2009; Doctors Without Borders, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2014).

My description of the migrant trail in Mexico provides a detailed account of the consequences of the Southern Border Plan, complementing the statistics and surveys that academics, activists, and the Mexican government have gathered about transit

[178] Interview: Jan, 27 April 2016, Nogales.

migration in Mexico. It shows, with ethnographic detail, how migrants are suffering the consequences of a dissuasion policy aimed at deterring and detaining them. Beyond its academic contributions, I hope this research shows how violent policies to control migration only increase the institutional and criminal violence that migrants suffer, regardless of the policies' stated aims, thereby providing even more impetus for migration scholars to understand how migrants react to this situation, develop survival strategies, use and create new ties, and change their expectations of the road.

Much like other migration researchers, I have found multi-sited ethnography the best way to study mobile people (FitzGerald 2006; Marcus 1995; De León 2015). Moving my field sites to follow the migrant route allowed me to study the process of migration and observe changes in people and places, giving me a glimpse into the ebb and flow of the transient community of *migrantes* and adding crucial context to their stories. Consequently, I would encourage other migration researchers to "follow the people" (Marcus, 1995).

Without multi-sited ethnography I might not have discovered important differences with the extant literature; indeed, every day transit migrants in Mexico challenge conceptions of trust, bonds, kin, and solidarity. They have entered a completely new scenario in which they have to re-evaluate their expectations and bias about the road and the people around them, learning how to make impromptu decisions about whom to trust and whom to reject based on their instincts and the little information they have. Yet in the face of isolation and constant threats, they avoid the selfish behaviour expected by the literature, instead forming meaningful connections with others – behaviour fuelled in part by an instinctual desire to join a clan where they are recognized and understood. At its broadest, this "clan" is what I have termed a transient

community of *migrantes*, through which migrants experience solidarity and camaraderie even with those whom they might not trust.

Through my ethnography I also confirmed that the absence of social networks increased migrants' vulnerability at the beginning of the road because they lacked access to information and material help, another factor motivating them to form ties and join the transient community of *migrantes*. With this in mind, NGOs, volunteers, and migrant houses should strive to ensure that migrants have access to truthful and relevant information relating to the road in order to improve their chances of completing the journey safely.

Future research questions

My research raises important questions about solidarity, trust, and bonding in stressful circumstances. Even though I have shown that camaraderie can thrive and people can form strong bonds in the violent context of Mexico, this finding cannot be generalized without further fieldwork in other situations in which people are under threat. Mathew Desmond (2012), for example, found that the urban poor form disposable ties with strangers when they face eviction, which seem strong until the ties disintegrate as people start quarrelling with each other. Which characteristics of the route, its context, and the migrants themselves favour the creation of solidarity and cooperation?

I focused on migrants crossing Mexico on foot or using the train or buses, i.e. visible migrants who are constantly exposed to authorities, criminals, and researchers. They are usually the poorest migrants, unable to afford a "good" smuggler who can provide transportation and lodging at security houses and hotels (and even fake documents). At

best, some migrants I interviewed had an inexpensive guide who made them walk and sleep in the open. The dynamics I observed, then, cannot be generalized to all migrants crossing Mexico, especially not to those who remain under the radar thanks to their smugglers. I did not have access to the world of smuggling, security houses, and private buses for my research, as it is a mostly male environment where women are unwelcome and fieldwork is extremely dangerous. However, as the policies of Mexico and the United States become harsher, it will become even more important to develop good ethnographic studies on smuggling to complete the picture of migrants in transit.

For this ethnography I was only able to analyse the migratory route from Central America to the United States; however, there are other important routes, such as those from the south of Africa or Syria to Europe, or those travelled by Afghans, Somalis and Iraqis on their way to Australia. Future ethnographies on these routes can explore whether vulnerable transit migrants in similar circumstances are also separated from their social ties and whether they attempt to survive by joining road families. In a similar vein, further research can try to identify other types of transient communities.

My research design only allowed me to follow the Central American migrants through Mexico up to the northern border, and thus I was unable to see how they fared while attempting to cross it, leaving me without answers as to the longevity of the groups or how lessons learned and bonds formed in transit affected migrants' expectations and future behaviour. Both of these are promising areas for future research.

I suspect that crossing the US–Mexico border has completely different dynamics from transit through Mexico, as most migrants attempt to cross with a smuggler who probably serves as an authority figure, changing the way migrants relate to each other. In the future, I will research migrants who have successfully crossed Mexico and the

US–Mexico border to compare both migration processes and assess how different routes and dynamics affect migrants' survival strategies and their views on bonding.

Through my interviews I learned that few transit migrants have the help of their social networks in the United States. Migrants had two explanations for the reluctance of their kin to provide them with assistance. First, that given the expense of crossing Mexico family members could only afford to help with one crossing, preferring to save their money for the US–Mexico border under the assumption that it is the most difficult. Second, and more cynically, that their kin remember how dangerous it was for them to cross Mexico and thus do not want to "waste" their money on someone who might disappear or die. I was unable to ask migrants' families in the United States for their side of the story, a limitation I will seek to address in future interviews.

Unfortunately for many migrants, arriving in their destination country is not always a guarantee of success. One migrant, for example, told me that after he arrived in Tucson he spent three days hungry and lost until he was picked up by Border Patrol. Despite having overcome both borders, his lack of help still affected him. How can migrants who have no help or social networks in the United States keep safe and find work and a home? This is one of the central questions I hope to answer in future research.

The song

The title of this research comes from a song that the nuns in the Pakal-Na migrant house taught the migrants. They sang it before each meal and when an important guest came. It resonates with the spirit of my findings.

Somos un pueblo que camina

y juntos caminando
podemos alcanzar
una ciudad que no se acaba
sin penas ni tristezas
ciudad de la amistad

We are a pueblo that walks
And walking together
We can arrive
At a city that is infinite
Without sorrows and pain
A city of friendship

Appendix One: Interviewees

Interview ID	Gender	Age	Occupation	Rural/Urban	Country	PInterview
7-17-2015-A	Male	25	land owner	Rural	Honduras	Tenosique
9-03-2015-A	Male	26	construction	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
7-01-2015-A	Female	43	office job	Urban	Honduras	Palenque
7-13-2015-A	Male	18	fare collecto	Urban	El Salvador	Palenque
7-17-2015-A	Male	22	peasant	Urban	Honduras	Tenosique
9-08-2015-A	Male	19	land owner	Rural	Honduras	Saltillo
9-08-2015-A	Male	19	peasant	Rural	Honduras	Saltillo
9-17-2015 AI	Male	19	moto taxi	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
7-03-2015-A	Male	22	sub-employe	Rural	Honduras	Palenque
9-07-2015-A	Female	27	restaurant	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
9-04-2015-A	Male	39	drug dealer	Urban	El Salvador	Saltillo
6-29-2015-A	Male	35	unemployed	Urban	Honduras	Palenque
7-16-2015-A	Male	45	NA	NA	Honduras	Tenosique
9-08-2015-A	Male	17	peasant	Rural	Honduras	Saltillo
7-13-2015-A	Male	18	fare collecto	Urban	Honduras	Palenque
9-09-2015-A	Male	47	mechanic	Rural	Honduras	Saltillo
9-09-2015-A	Female	39	housewife	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
9-14-2015-A	Male	29	welder	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
9-01-2015-A	Male	38	welder	Urban	Guatemala	Saltillo
8-28-2015-A	Male	23	peasant	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
9-02-2015-A	Male	41	internet café	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
6-30-2015-A	Male	22	fare collecto	Urban	Honduras	Palenque
6-30-2015-A	Male	18	washing cars	Urban	Honduras	Palenque
6-30-2015-A	Male	20	peasant	Urban	Honduras	Palenque
7-17-2015-A	Female	33	unemployed	Urban	Honduras	Tenosique
7-17-2015-A	Female	34	unemployed	Urban	Honduras	Tenosique
6-26-2015-A	Male	42	unemployed	Urban	Honduras	Palenque
4-21-2016-A	Male	30	builder	Rural	Guatemala	Nogales
4-23-2016-A	Male	22	peasant	Rural	Honduras	Nogales
4-25-2016-A	Male	38	peasant	Rural	Honduras	Nogales
4-27-2016-A	Male	24	peasant	Rural	Guatemale	Nogales
4-21-26-ADL	Female	26	factory	Rural	Guatemala	Nogales
5-05-2016-A	Male	33	tailor	Urban	Honduras	Nogales
5-05-2016-A	Female	29	market sales	Urban	Honduras	Nogales
5-05-2016-A	Male	27	peasant	Rural	Honduras	Nogales
07-15-2015-A	Female	19	waitress	NA	Honduras	Palenque
07-15-2015-I	Male	25	NA	NA	NA	Palenque
07-16-2015-J	Male	20	homeless	Rural	Honduras	Palenque
07-16-2015-I	Male	23	NA	NA	Honduras	Palenque
07-17-2015-A	Female	NA	housewife	Rural	Honduras	Tenosique
7-02-2015-J	Male	21	unemployed	Rural	Guatemala	Palenque
7-02-2015-J	Male	55	NA	NA	NA	NA
7-06-2015-J	Male	29	janitor	Rural	Honduras	Palenque
8-17-2015-J	Female	NA	restaurant	Urban	Honduras	Tenosique

7-17-2015	Female	33	unemployed	Urban	Honduras	Tenosique
8-28-2015-	Male	23	NA	Urban	Honduras	Saltillo
9-04-2015-	Male	37	peasant	Rural	Honduras	Saltillo

Appendix Two: Participant Information Sheet

UNIVERSITY OF ESSEX

Project Information Sheet

Title of Project/investigation:

Central American migrants in Mexico: the role of social networks and experience in transit

About the Main Researcher:

My name is Alejandra Diaz de Leon and I am a PhD student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Essex. I am from Mexico and I am presently living in the UK. Before starting the PhD I worked at Insyde A.C. where I was a researcher in transit migration and human rights of migrants in Mexico.

Purpose of the Research:

The purpose of this research is to understand the role of social resources, personal networks, and migratory experience in the process of transit migration in Mexico. I aim to find out if the advice or material help that family, friends or acquaintances can provide to migrants while they cross through Mexico makes a difference in their experience and in their vulnerability. I also want to determine if migrants who have done the route before have better strategies and insight about crossing the country and are thus less vulnerable to crime and violence.

Individual interviews:

The participants will be non-Mexican migrants over 18 years old that are crossing or have crossed Mexico to arrive to the United States.

I will also interview representatives of key organizations relating to migration to talk about their expert opinions and their own experiences.

Informed consent:

All information will be treated confidentially and participants' ensured anonymity by the use of pseudonyms. Whoever agrees to take part in the research will be asked to

provide consent. If the consent is written, the participants will be provided of a copy of the consent, for their records.

The participation is entirely voluntary and the participants are free to withdraw from the interview at any time without prejudice and without providing a reason.

Benefits and Risks:

At the end of the project, I will conduct a workshop on the project outcomes (if requested). I will also provide an executive summary of the final thesis.

Prior to the interview I will discuss any queries or concerns relating to risks in terms of work and case studies. The research will be conducted fully within the boundaries of the Data Protection Act (1998), University of Essex's Ethical Approval of Research guidelines and British Sociological Association (BSA) guidelines.

Data Access, Storage and Security:

If you agree, all personal data collected for the research will be digitally recorded. Recordings will be stored on password-protected University-provided PCs. This will be accessible only to my supervisor and me. The transcribed data will be held securely on a password protected university computer server which is regularly backed up.

This PhD research will be published in hard copy and will be housed at University of Essex, UK. The findings of the research will be shared at appropriate academic and professional conferences.

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