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8 Ties along the arterial border in Mexico

Groups, institutions, and information

*Alejandra Díaz de León and
John Doering-White*

In midsummer 2021, half an hour after an empty freight train passed in front of La Casita, a migrant shelter in a small town near the center of Mexico, there was a knock at the door. A group of eight migrants had arrived. They were tired and hungry. We hurried to register them and to give them soap, a toothbrush, toilet paper, and a face mask. We were halfway through explaining how the shelter worked when another group of four arrived. After this occurred again a third time, we waited. Eighty people arrived in total over the course of an hour. They had all been forced to jump off the freight train they had been riding to avoid a checkpoint set up by Mexico's National Migration Institute (Instituto Nacional de Migración or "INM" in Spanish), an hour's walk from the shelter. "The *migra* caught some of them, but most of us *nos tiramos*. We jumped off before the *retén* [the checkpoint]," a first-time Honduran migrant named Freddy told us.

People who have gone through this area told us to jump off before the town to avoid the checkpoint. I also got a text message from someone who is ahead of us; then I told the people around me on the train. The word spread. We help each other, you know.

(Freddy, 2021)

Without this timely and accurate information, most of those 80 migrants would have been caught. This near-miss story illustrates how important it is for migrants to get up-to-date and accurate information while navigating what are unpredictable and ever-changing routes through Mexico. Often, migration is discussed in terms of strong ties, including close personal relationships with family, relatives, and friends. We argue that migrants tend to get the most valuable information through loose ties they develop while en route: people and institutions that are on the ground observing and experiencing the arterial border (Vogt, 2018), including other migrants on the road and humanitarian institutions. We show that although strong ties still have a strong emotional value in transit, they do not necessarily provide the in-the-moment information that migrants need.

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The deterrence policies that Mexico has implemented with the help of the United States have created what the anthropologist Wendy Vogt (2018) refers to as an “arterial border” along transit routes through the country, where physical and natural obstacles, as well as state and non-state actors, make migrants’ journeys dangerous and unpredictable. Migrants are stopped at highway checkpoints manned by the army, state and federal police, the National Guard, or the INM and are detained—often violently—and deported. Thieves and bandits, many of whom collude with state officials, climb on top of the train and charge migrants up to 100 dollars at various points along the route, a system commonly known as *la cuota*. Those who cannot pay are sometimes thrown off the train. Others are kidnapped for ransom or forced labor (Anguiano Téllez and Villafuerte Solís, 2016). Bus drivers, shop owners, employers, and denizens of Mexico take advantage of them and threaten to call the INM or the police when they see them. Migrants endure heat, cold, thirst, hunger, headaches, and blisters. Thousands die or disappear while attempting to cross the country (Vogt, 2013; Doering-White, Frank-Vitale and De León, 2017).

Migrants are attempting to survive in a context of violent policies that the government of Mexico has implemented with the explicit intent to deter migration. As long as the government of Mexico strives to make the journey violent and dangerous, migrants will get injured, die, and disappear. Although they cannot completely escape from the violence, people like Freddy and the others on the train rely on timely tips to minimize risks, avoid deportation, and continue their journeys.

In this chapter, we analyze how migrants in transit through Mexico obtain relevant and current information while they are traveling through the arterial border. We identify three main sources of help and information: 1) family and friends back home or in the US, 2) humanitarian institutions, and 3) ties they make on the road. We discuss how migrants connect with these groups, which types of assistance they receive, and how they put assistance to use. We focus on the ways that smartphone use among migrants affects how they communicate with their families, with other migrants, and with humanitarian institutions while en route. We show how these three sources of information complement each other and how migrants use them to resist the violence of the arterial border.

For scholars who have studied undocumented migration through Mexico in recent decades, the fact that cell phone use has become widespread might seem surprising. It was for us too. During earlier fieldwork (2014–2019), we both found that migrants tended to view open cell phone use as an invitation to be robbed or as a signal that someone was a smuggler or guide (Doering-White, 2018; Díaz de León, 2021). During the more recent fieldwork that this article draws on (2021), however, cell phone use was notably more widespread and conspicuous. This change has important implications for the ways migrants interact with their families, with the institutions that support them, and with other migrants they meet while traveling. As we will show, while help from institutions on the road and new friends that migrants make are essential to migrating through Mexico, the widespread use of phones means that families have regained some of their standing as aides during the journey. Likewise, the use of phones with internet has allowed migrants to

search online more readily for maps and to keep themselves and others updated about the road.

This chapter is based on fieldwork—conducted individually and together as a team—within migrant shelters across Mexico. Alejandra has done multi-situated research along the migrant route in Mexico and the US-Mexico border since 2015. Similarly, John has conducted 20 months of ethnographic fieldwork in and around migrant shelters throughout Mexico. During the summer of 2021, both of us spent a month doing fieldwork together at La Casita, a relatively small migrant shelter east of Mexico City in central Mexico that—during the time of our fieldwork—primarily served Honduran migrants who had already crossed through Oaxaca, Chiapas, and Veracruz, mostly on foot and by train. During our time at La Casita, we participated in the daily life of the shelter, took detailed ethnographic notes, and conducted 34 interviews with migrants who accessed the shelter. Our previous fieldwork experience and our shared knowledge of migrant routes and several other humanitarian aid spaces allowed us to notice changes and continuities since 2014, when the Southern Border Program had just been implemented by the Peña Nieto administration. In this chapter, we use the pooled information from our previous fieldwork along with the recent data we gathered. These six years of data help us observe which strategies have changed and which have remained as the route changes, technology improves, and dissuasion and control policies are altered.

Transit migration, information outlets, and trust

This research spans two presidential administrations and two border control policies. In 2014, the government of Peña Nieto implemented the Southern Border Program (*Plan Integral Frontera Sur*). Although the stated aims of the Plan were to protect the human rights of migrants and to make the route safer for them (Redacción, 2014), the changes it implemented increased the violence and uncertainty experienced by migrants by extending immigration enforcement beyond national border spaces along major transit corridors through interior states. This took the form of roadblocks, inspection stations, kiosks, and migrant detention centers arrayed in concentric circles throughout southern states like Chiapas, Tabasco, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. The government also increased railcar velocities to deter migrants from hopping trains. Instead of riding on top of the freight train, migrants were forced to take more secluded routes and walk for longer parts of the journey. This re-routing made migrants more vulnerable to abuse from authorities and to violence, murder, and kidnapping by criminals (Suárez, Knippen, and Meyer, 2016).

Since 2014, these tactics have expanded well beyond southern Mexico. Upon taking office in 2018, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador helmed a new migration policy known as the *Plan Migrante Frontera Norte y Sur*.¹ As part of this operation, 15,000 troops (including army, navy, INM staff, and the newly established National Guard) were dispatched throughout the country with explicit orders to contain migration to the United States (Storr, 2021). According to human rights organizations that have been monitoring migration flows and human rights,

the government of Mexico has displayed a generalized and massive use of armed forces and a militarized National Guard to apply a strategy of dissuasion and control (Storr, 2021). These institutions have not shown proportional use of force, respect for human rights, transparency, or due process when dealing with migrants.

People who migrate use several techniques of “self-making” (Basok et al., 2015) to overcome the risks they face when traveling through Mexico. To do so, they need to know how to avoid detection, how to protect themselves, and what to do if they are caught. Information helps migrants in transit to select better routes (Yee Quintero and Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016), locate aid spaces such as migrant shelters (Hernández and Hernández, 2015), and choose strategic means of transportation (Torre Cantalapiedra and Mariscal Nava, 2020).

Research with undocumented migrants who have settled in Europe or North America has tended to focus on information exchanges between acquaintances, friends, and family who live nearby or in their country of origin. Studies have identified how migrants access information through local news (Schwenken, 2013) and through social media platforms (Tungohan, 2018) and have shown that useful social ties are not limited to other migrants in similar situations but can extend to locals, advocates, and members of a community such as a church (Tungohan, 2018).

Fewer studies have examined how migrants find useful and trustworthy information while in transit, where they face technological obstacles and often must quickly identify whether relative strangers can be trusted. They need to get a Mexican SIM card, keep the phone safe, and be able to charge and add credit to it. In addition to their phones, migrants rely on face-to-face contact with other migrants and people they meet on the road. Approaching someone relatively unknown is risky, given how commonplace kidnapping, assault, and extortion have become. At the same time, the people they encounter in transit also tend to have more updated information than trusted family and friends living back home or in the United States (Díaz de León, 2021). In a constantly evolving situation like transiting through Mexico, novel information can make all the difference. For example, Kristian Berg Harvikpen (2009) showed that when refugee families fled Afghanistan, those who activated their weak ties (Granovetter, 1983) obtained better insight into where and when to flee. This is also true when transiting Mexico. Migrants who talk to strangers on the road learn about shifting checkpoints and changes in bus routes. In the context of COVID-19, when many shelters limited services or shut down entirely, they learned where to seek refuge.

While trusting a stranger or even a weak tie (or acquaintance) is complicated, migrants do have strategies to assess who can provide trustworthy information, and just how trustworthy that information is. In the following section, we discuss three main ways that migrants access information they feel they can trust: (1) kin, (2) institutions that help them, and (3) ties on the road. We observe how their relevance has changed over time and how migrants currently use them. In these three sections, we discuss the use of smartphones on the migrant trail and talk about how they have affected the way that migrants relate to families back home, to institutions, and to new ties.

How do migrants in transit get information on the migrant route?

Cristopher, a 23-year-old Honduran man, looked like a completely new person when we saw him the day after we checked him into La Casita. He had showered, changed clothes, and combed his hair. He was more upbeat than the day before, when he and a group of six other men arrived dusty, tired, and hungry. Cristopher had struggled to make a living as a farmhand on the outskirts of Tegucigalpa, before deciding to leave his country for the first time in May 2021. When he arrived at La Casita, he had been walking, taking *combis*, and riding the train for almost three months. During the two days he spent at the shelter, he tended to stay close to the office and seemed to enjoy sharing stories about his life in Honduras and his journey. Like a growing number of Hondurans, poverty and climate-related disruptions both shaped his decision to leave (Díaz De León and Doering-White, 2021). Inconsistent rains associated with the climate crisis meant inconsistent farmhand work. He told us that before leaving he had tried to find out more about the route. He did some googling, looked at maps, and talked to neighbors who had crossed Mexico before. He brought a smartphone with him and made sure to buy a Mexican SIM card at a convenience store as soon as he could after entering Mexico. He explained that although he had a phone, he rarely sent messages to his family as he did not know how to explain what he was experiencing and did not want them to worry. He occasionally texted them to ask for *envíos* (money transfers), but they rarely sent anything.

Cristopher left Comayagua with three neighbors, but he arrived at La Casita as part of a group of six traveling companions. The group of three became five when they learned that two men staying at a migrant shelter in Tapachula were from the same town. The sixth member of the group “se les pegó” (stuck to them) a couple of days before they all arrived at La Casita. He seemed quiet, but he was more familiar with the route than the others in the group, having made several attempts at crossing Mexico’s arterial border. His knowledge frequently came in handy, especially when deciding where to go and when to take the train. With stops in migrant shelters—when they found them—plus a little support from their families back in Honduras and help from people they met on the road, Cristopher and most of the group made it to Brownsville a few weeks after our encounter; there they found work in an auto repair shop.

In Cristopher’s journey, we can see how kin, institutional help, and the social ties that migrants form while moving through Mexico are essential for gaining emotional and economic support and for deciding which strategies to take. Although they had not known their other travel companions before meeting them in Mexico, the fact that all of them were from the same town allowed them not only to trust each other more easily but also provided some peace of mind. They knew that if something bad happened to them, their new friends would locate their loved ones in Comayagua and let them know what had happened to them. We can also see the important role that smartphones now have for some along the migrant journey. As we show in this section, the transmission of knowledge is not only a survival strategy but also a way to form bonds, to circulate care, and to show migrants that they are seen and that they matter.

Information from kin

Family members and close ties who have already migrated can be important resources for migrants (Massey and Aysa-Lastra, 2011). Family members help people choose routes, find smugglers, and settle into new surroundings (Flores-Yeffal, 2013). Often, family members—whether in the country of origin or destination—pool resources or get into debt to finance some or all of the journey (Heidbrink, 2014). The importance of family ties for undocumented migrants has been well established; however, for those whose migration process lasts weeks or months and involves crossing several countries, links to far-away kin are not always the most efficient way to access resources or information (Díaz de León, 2019).

This appears to have changed somewhat now that smartphone access has become more normalized along the route. Although many migrants travel without economic support from their families, others rely on kin in the United States or in Central America to regularly send money through *envíos*. Along with increased cell phone use, the receipt of international money transfers appears to have become easier for migrants crossing Mexico. In 2015, international transfers tended to require considerable coordination and generally involved borrowing a cell phone and making a costly international call (Doering-White, 2022). While migrants still need to find a Mexican citizen with a valid ID who is willing to receive the transfer (or a fellow migrant carrying a valid passport) and then share the required information (legal names, location details, and retrieval keys), most migrants now carry relatively affordable smartphones, chargers, and even external batteries to stay in touch with their families through Facebook or WhatsApp, services that are much more affordable than international phone calls.

Having ready access to calls and messaging also helps them stay emotionally connected with their kin. Compared with what we observed during our fieldwork in 2015, easy access to messaging and voice memos through social networking apps like Facebook and WhatsApp appears to have lowered the emotional and financial stakes of staying in contact with family members. For example, in 2021, many more migrants sent regular updates, texts, or even videos to their families back home. Although the migrants we spoke still mentioned not sharing the full extent of the violence they were experiencing, they did check in more regularly.

This circulation of care is very important for migrants, who often feel invisible or dehumanized. Having a loved one comment on a video of the train passing or on their stories makes them feel loved and supported. After interviewing Juan Pedro in the small office of La Casita, for example, Alejandra offered to send a copy of the interview recording to his phone. He said he didn't have one but that he would love it if we could send it to his son, who was still in Honduras. Hidden in his jeans was a crumpled piece of paper with three numbers written on it. He pulled out the paper and dictated the first number to Alejandra. We sent Juan Pedro's son the recording along with a picture of his father and an audio message that we helped Juan Pedro record. In the audio, he told his son that he was doing fine, that he was in the middle of the journey and that he loved everyone back home very much. He explained that we had interviewed him and that he wanted his son to have the

recording as a keepsake. Soon after, the son replied with a long voice note. Juan Pedro listened to it a couple of times with tears in his eyes. He told us that his son said that he loved him, that the whole family was rooting for him, and that they knew that Juan Pedro was migrating to improve life for everyone. They were proud of him. “Just what I needed,” he told Alejandra. “I can feel my family close to me” (Juan Pedro, 2021).

Although the information that kin can provide about the arterial border may not be as up-to-date and relevant as migrants might need, the transnational relationship to friends and family abroad remains important. We have observed this change as technology has allowed migrants to stay in touch more frequently, making the circulation of care between migrants and their families more continual.

Institutions that help migrants

Shelters and humanitarian aid organizations are also important institutions for gathering and transmitting useful information. Inside the relative safety of the shelters, migrants can talk to each other and can communicate with their families more comfortably. At the same time, shelters disseminate information that other humanitarian aid organizations create,² including “know-your-rights” pamphlets or maps of the migrant route. They also host workshops and talks, and they sometimes provide legal and psychological help. They provide services and produce public goods, often while engaging in complex collaboration strategies among themselves and between local bureaucracies (Agudo Sanchíz, 2021).

While migrant houses are known as safe spaces, shelter organizers walk a fine line between protecting migrants and maintaining a working relationship with the government authorities that are tasked with detaining and deporting them (Doering-White, 2018). Mexican authorities have recognized these houses and shelters as legally protected sanctuary spaces where INM agents cannot get closer than 500 meters (Doncel de la Colina and Lara Ramírez, 2021). During our research, we occasionally observed INM agents performing raids around the shelters; nevertheless, most migrants feel protected when they are inside or around those spaces.

The time migrants spend within shelters is important for “remaining in mobility” by sharing and gathering information with other shelter guests (Candiz and Bélanger, 2018). Migrants often discuss checkpoints and share stories of escaping dangerous situations during impromptu conversations. While these conversations are often limited to information sharing and casual conversation, they can also lead to the formation of new groups. This does not mean that migrants trust strangers completely. Although they often share information about their journey and tips about what lies ahead, they also tend to not share intimate details about access to money or connections to people in the United States. In other words, migrants exchange information, albeit cautiously.

During our fieldwork, we noticed that the normalization of cell phones has changed these brief interactions in several ways. A young woman named Linda, for example, who had been at the shelter for weeks with her partner as she recuperated

from a broken arm from falling off the train, revealed what had happened to a young teenager we had gotten to know before he moved on from the shelter:

The *chelito*, the blond kid, he died. You remember him? He was here with his brother, and he had an injury on the head from getting off the train. ... I found out because a Guatemalan was in the shelter at the same time as the *chelito* and his brother was on the train with them. He let me know.

(Linda, 2021)

Linda explained that sometimes she exchanged phone numbers with people she met on the road. She would let them know what to expect if she went ahead and vice versa.

Staff and volunteers in migrant houses also gather, produce, and transmit information about the route. Staff and experienced volunteers often provide information to migrants who ask for insight into how enforcement has evolved in the area. Experts conduct workshops and give advice; everyone distributes a wide range of pamphlets, brochures, and maps that contain useful information. The reception areas of most migrant houses are also brimming with a variety of informational brochures. During our most recent fieldwork, we talked to many migrants who described situations when such brochures came in handy.

One day, we were asked to help clean the lockers where migrants put their belongings while they stayed with us. Among broken backpacks, stale tortillas, half-used tubes of toothpaste, and tattered shoes, we also found various pamphlets, brochures, and maps. Many had evidently been well-studied as they showed signs of having been folded and unfolded several times; some had annotations, more advice, or markings indicating the location of migrant houses. We also saw people planning their routes with the help of a paper map. They would ask for advice while holding a map or a brochure. Knowing which migrant houses come next is especially important in choosing a meeting point in case someone falls behind or the group scatters during a *correteada*, a run-in with the authorities. For example, in 2016, Lucy lost her cousin after the INM stopped the train they were riding. Everyone scattered, but she knew what to do.

We had looked over this map I have here [showing a map with routes and shelters marked] and we had decided that if we separated, we would meet at the San Luis Potosí migrant house, this one [pointing at the map]. And well, we waited for him for days and groups of people came, and no one had seen him, and I was starting to think he was dead because if he had been deported to Olancho, he would have called... Anyway, eventually he arrived! All tattered and with different clothes, but we were reunited in San Luis Potosí. I'm glad they let us stay for a week.

(Lucy, 2021)

Here, we can see how the map and the migrant shelter were essential for planning a strategy that worked. Lucy and her family knew what was coming, they trusted the

information, and they formulated a plan. We can also see how important it was for them to have a safe space where they could rest and wait for her kin.

Interactions and social ties they form with other migrants

Who do you turn to when your family cannot help you? The connections that migrants form with other migrants on the road are perhaps the most important way in which they find help, information, and support. When they are walking for days, riding the train, or running from the *migra*, they are often alone in the *monte*, the middle of nowhere, with just the people around them. These other migrants have the same goals and are experiencing the same aggressions, hunger, cold, and uncertainty. Some of the people we talked to expressed the importance of “getting each other” in the sense of having lived through a shared experience. “No one understands what it is like to be really hungry or scared. Only another migrant” (Rulo 2016), a Guatemalan man named Rulo explained in 2016. These ties, which can be both fleeting and deep, are often what make the journey tolerable, even enjoyable.

This has not changed with the passage of time and the implementation of more restrictive migration policies in Mexico. Scholars have noted that traditional social networks such as kin and kin-like ties seem to lose relevance for Central American migrants in Mexico (González Arias and Aikin Araluce, 2015; Brigden 2018), while new forms of socialities are formed. Some migrants in transit create ad hoc communities that help each other for short periods and then disband as their interests diverge (Wheatley and Gomberg-Muñoz, 2016). Female migrants create “protective pairings” (Vogt, 2018), form groups with other women, or associate with women traveling with their husbands (Schmidt and Buechler, 2017). Although these authors have identified the importance of smaller groups in the migrant journey, few authors have analyzed the wide variety of associations that migrants can form at different points of the journey (see Díaz de León, 2023).

We suggest that migrants use two types of links with people on the road. The first are “road families”—strangers who meet on the road and form ties characterized by quick trust, solidarity, and friendship. These groups aim to stick together through the arterial border and call each other *hermanos*, brothers. The second grouping is the “transient community of migrants” that includes everyone migrating at the same time (or as an interviewee called it, “*la flota*”). This association is characterized by the cautious, generalized exchange of resources and information. Significantly, migrants often perform solidarity while maintaining a lack of trust and without establishing lasting ties.

Road families

“We all go in groups. It makes it easier and we protect each other,” a young Salvadoran migrant named Ismael told us. Ismael was traveling with Hondurans he had met on the southern border of Mexico. We call these “road families” (see Díaz de León, 2023) because migrants who form these groups show substantial

trust toward each other and display self-sacrificing solidarity, such as delaying their journey to wait for someone else. These “road families” often seem to form early in the journey in southern states like Tabasco, Chiapas, and Veracruz where they face the full force of violent immigration policies. They quickly realize they need two equally important things to complete their journeys: emotional support and practical help. On the road, migrants often feel disempowered, dehumanized, and alone; having someone care for them and witness their existence can be invaluable. At the same time, they understand that it is often useful to have people to help them navigate the road and share resources. Maycol, a 20-year-old Honduran taxi driver who Alejandra interviewed at the shelter in Saltillo in 2016, for example, explained why groups are important.

Well, to be honest, the first time I migrated [in 2014], I left by myself. And I crossed the river and started walking. And well, you always follow people when you take *el camino* but I didn’t talk to a lot of people because I was scared and didn’t trust them. But then I was so lonely and so sad. And I started wondering who would let my family know if something happened to me. And I walked slower... I don’t know. Eventually, close to Palenque, there was a roadblock and the *migra nos correteó*, started chasing us, and I just gave up. I stopped running. They picked me up, put me in the *perrera* [literally, dog kennel, the van used to transport migrants] and took me to the detention center. As soon as I was in the *perrera* with all these other people who were so disappointed about getting caught, I regretted not fighting more. But it was too late. [...] So, the next time I tried, a couple of months later [2015], I decided that what I had needed back then were *compañeros de viaje*, *amigos*, road friends. *Así que me le pegué a un grupo que conocí* [so I joined a group that I met] and we travelled together and now we are here [in Saltillo].

(Maycol, 2016)

Most of the road families we have met since 2015 were formed by men because families with women tend to have different migration strategies. Most of the members of these groups are mestizo men from Central America. They do not necessarily gather by nationality, ethnicity, or age, although racialized distinctions do appear to be more commonplace (Garifuna crews). However, since most people who take trains and *combis* are young Hondurans, this demographic dominates. Groups form when migrants are waiting on the train tracks, in shelters, or in bus stations. After a quick conversation and evaluation, they decide if they can trust the people they have just met; if they can, they leave together.

While one might anticipate relative strangers to be reticent about sharing information, the migrants we spoke to also described traveling with strangers as an opportunity to talk about things they might not share with family members or close friends. As Felipe, a Honduran man traveling with his five new hermanos explained,

We tell each other everything: about our lives, families, dreams. We wait for each other and try to stick together. When this guy injured his foot, we found an

abandoned shack and stayed with him for two weeks, *charoleando*, asking for money, stealing food, and caring for him. We could not leave our brother.

(Felipe, 2015)

When they waited for the injured friend, they had known each other for only a week. Migrants we talked to discussed how forming close ties with someone in a similar situation allows their basic humanity to be recognized. When asked why he travels with a group, Felipe responded,

I know that he [pointing towards Lucas, a man in his road family] is my brother, and he sees beyond the dust and the smell. He knows my heart. People in Mexico treat us like dogs. It is good to be with people who understand you are a person.

(Felipe, 2015)

These road relationships are useful for migrants because they can pool resources and information. When one of them gets an *envío*, he shares the money with the rest. Those who know where to go or how to get on the train teach the others. They wait for each other and look for someone if he goes missing after the *migra* chases them. For example, some migrants we spoke with discussed how traveling with their new brothers helps them feel more comfortable doing things they would not want their families back home to know about, such as asking strangers for money, sleeping on the street, and wearing dirty, mismatched clothes. We have found that having a road family provides support and help without the burden of behaving as your closest family and friends expect you to behave.

Transient community of migrants

We have observed that all migrants who are on the road form part of a big, loose “transient community” just by being on the journey and engaging in generalized exchange of information about available resources and changing route conditions (Díaz de León, 2020, 2023). This reciprocity is not necessarily based on having strong ties or prior evidence of trustworthiness but on shared experiences and expectations (see Malkki, 1995). Collective experiences of violence and oppression can lead to the articulation of a group identity that, through solidarity without long-term obligation, can provide its members with: (a) a group identity; (b) resources through cooperation, even in the absence of trust; and (c) migration-specific cultural capital such as “rules of the game” and behaviors. This “transient community” helps to compensate for some of the disadvantages migrants experience by not having access to their kinship ties. It is one of the most stable and ubiquitous components of the transit experience in Mexico.

This community becomes noticeable along the tracks when everyone is waiting for the train to arrive. More experienced migrants, for example, teach novices how to climb on the train, how to run alongside a moving train without being sucked under the wheels, and how to sit securely on top of the train cars. Migrants sitting

in small groups close to the tracks talk to people or groups next to them and sometimes share tortillas and *queso fresco* for a taco. It's not uncommon to see a 2-liter Coca Cola bottle being passed around. Luis, a first-time Honduran migrant, recounted when once, after walking for three days without eating a bite, he ran into a group of migrants having tacos and avocados. He sat close to them to rest.

They handed me a taco. And it tasted like heaven. I was going to faint because I was so relieved to have eaten something. And the guy who gave me the taco told me, "We've also been hungry, eat up. They told us there is a checkpoint ahead; we might have to run."

(Luis, 2015)

This fleeting interaction with other migrants who understood what Luis was going through and shared a little bit of information and a little bit of food proved essential to help him survive and move on, both physically and emotionally. The group helped Luis, but to do that they did not need to trust him or make sacrifices for him. Solidarity did not lead to trust. These exchanges are important but do not form lasting bonds between migrants. However, as many interviewees have told us, they are one of the most beautiful parts of the journey. As Andabas concluded, "That is one of the things I will never forget, how the *compañeros* shared. We are all *migrantes* after all." (Andabas, 2016). As we can see, migrants, by participating in the generalized exchange of information and resources, help enrich and keep the transient community updated.

The transient community of migrants helps transmit information quickly and efficiently through gossip, conversations, calls, or messages. This is how Freddy and the rest of the migrants got the tip to get off the train before the checkpoint, for example. It is also how migrants learn some of the "rules of the game" such as how to behave on shelters, whom to ask for money, and from whom to flee.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the three ways that migrants in transit in Mexico find information and support to overcome the arterial border: (1) information from kin, (2) humanitarian aid organizations, and (3) ties they form on the road. This help is essential to obtain resources and knowledge about what comes next, how to behave, and where to go. Many migrants overcome the obstacles of the road, thanks to aid provided by family, migrant houses, or newly formed ties. As we have shown, when migrants are separated from strong ties to family and friends, the links they establish with organizations along the road and with new ties become indispensable for navigating Mexico.

We showed how the use of cell phones has increased exponentially in recent years and discussed how migrants use phones as a strategy to share information and resource with their families and the new acquaintances they form on the road. While phones facilitate communication, migrants still rely on strangers for the most current information about what they should do.

Sharing is not only a pragmatic strategy for people in mobility. The circulation of information, food, resources, and the act of talking with others and listening to their stories is a way of caring for others, even strangers. As we showed with the stories in this chapter, the sharing of a taco or a tip has as much emotional as practical value. On a journey where migrants are ignored, undervalued, or victimized, these exchanges and interactions become important for sustaining them emotionally.

Not all information and advice, especially from kin and from ties that migrants make on the road, is accurate and useful. We have heard well-intentioned rumors—about asylum, the border, and criminals—that people in mobility transmit and repeat to each other. We have also heard stories about migrants meeting people on the road who deceived and tricked them. In this chapter, we are not suggesting that forming ties and sharing information are always positive. However, we have found that in general, the advice is helpful and the transmission of information as a practice of care helps migrants to endure the journey.

Notes

- 1 Rodríguez (2019); see Torres (2021).
- 2 For example, Doctors Without Borders, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, the Mexican National Human Rights Commission, universities, the Red Cross.

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