Introduction

On a quiet cobblestoned street near the bus station in Oaxaca, Mexico, the logics of the global economy play out on a daily basis. On one side of the street sits the loading dock behind one of Mexico’s largest superstore chains, where each day trucks, machinery, and men unload boxes of vegetables, clothing, and electronics grown, sewn, and assembled in factories and farms all over the world. These disappear behind thick plastic curtains before being unveiled on the store’s floor. Inside, the aisles are lined with pasta from Italy, wine from Chile, and strollers from China. Tortillas made with corn grown in Indiana are stamped out onto conveyer belts, barely resembling the thick, hand-pressed patties of fresh masa being cooked on hot ceramic griddles by indigenous women on the sidewalk out front.

Directly across from the loading dock, there is a heavy black metal gate set in a graffit-marked wall bearing the painted words, “Here, no one is a foreigner.” This is the front entrance to Casa Guadalupe (not its real name), a small compound, where another type of global flow also arrives in daily waves. Unlike the swift, ordered movements of global cargo, however, these movements are circuitous, unpredictable, and illicit. This is a way station, a sanctuary, for clandestine flows of unauthorized migrants. People from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and beyond arrive in
search of a hot meal, medical attention, or simply a safe place to rest their heads for the night. These immediate needs are welcome distractions from what they’ve left behind, and what they continue to sacrifice to reach their destinations.

Behind the gate, they find a temporary reprieve from their exhausting, perilous journeys. If you look quickly you might catch a glimpse of a child riding a rusty tricycle, or a small group of men and women sitting down to a bowl of warm beans, salsa, and tortillas, undoubtedly purchased in bulk from the superstore across the road.

On an almost daily basis, I observed this absurd contrast: the sanctioned free movement of goods and commodities between and across international borders and the dangerous, unauthorized movements of people who traveled on the very same roads and freight trains. It served as a reminder of the dizzyingly unequal structural conditions that brought people to the doorstep of this modest migrant shelter and helped me begin to make sense of the unimaginable stories I collected inside.

I spent a year between 2008 and 2009 working as a volunteer at Casa Guadalupe. Within its walls, I observed people break bread, share stories, tips, and even their few precious possessions. I listened as people made heartbreaking phone calls home to the children they had recently left behind. I watched strangers come together to forge social bonds. I also watched groups of traveling migrants fracture and disintegrate. Rumors, skepticism, and distrust flourished alongside compassion and solidarity. Casa Guadalupe was a rich site from which to observe the encounters, strategies, and social relations of Central Americans in transit through Mexico.

A CEMETERY WITHOUT CROSSES

In the United States, political and public discourses on migration from Latin America typically begin and end at the U.S.–Mexico border, but for many people crossing that border is but one phase of a much longer journey. Each year tens of thousands of people from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and beyond leave their homes in search of a more secure future. Before reaching the scorching, deadly deserts of Arizona or the sweeping currents of the Rio Grande/Río Bravo, migrants must first cross Mexico,
a paradoxical, resource-rich, naturally and ethnically diverse land of striking economic inequality, and the center of a hemispheric war on drugs. Between Mexico’s southern and northern borders, migrants spend indefinite periods of time navigating the complex physical and human terrain of the journey. Increased militarization and state enforcement by roadside checkpoints, raids, and detention centers have created borderlike conditions throughout Mexico’s interior. Migrants are funneled into more clandestine and dangerous routes, where they may engage human smugglers, buy passage from the organized criminals who control transit routes, and sometimes ride on top of freight trains. They routinely encounter abuse, injury, extortion, sexual assault, and kidnapping as they become caught up in local economies that profit from their plight. In response to this violence, a diverse network of migrant shelters has been established along transit routes, offering aid and advocacy to migrants in need.

In 2006, when I first began research on Central American migration across Mexico, there was very little media or scholarly attention to the topic. It was the underbelly of one of Mexico’s darkest hypocrisies: the inhumane treatment of transit migrants at the southern border and simultaneous critique of U.S. immigration policy at the northern border. Yet in recent years, particularly in the wake of several highly publicized tragedies, international news outlets have become fascinated—if only temporarily—with the spectacle of Central American migration.

In 2010, the discovery of seventy-two, mostly Central American migrants found brutally murdered on a ranch in the northern state of Tamaulipas gave the world a brief glimpse into the violent realities that Central Americans face while crossing Mexico. But it was not until the summer of 2014 and the arrival of more than sixty thousand young Central Americans on the southern border of the United States that the spectacle was broadcast nightly on television screens in living rooms across the United States. While much media coverage was fueled by moral panics over a “surge” of child migrants, there were also more sympathetic accounts of a humanitarian crisis that had silently raged for years. News articles, reports, photo essays, blogs, and documentaries covering the perilous journey inundated viewers with dramatic images of desperate migrants clinging to the tops of freight trains and packed into detention centers under subhuman conditions. Rape. Kidnapping. Extortion. Dismemberment.
Murder. Massacre. Repeat. These were the headlines. And they were real and often accurate. In the words of one priest I interviewed, “Mexico is a cemetery for Central Americans; a cemetery without crosses.”

The documentation of violence through public and social media is a crucial strategy in Mexico's migrants' rights movement, particularly because violence against migrants has long been invisible. Yet these stories risk becoming dangerously ordinary and one-dimensional. Through the barrage of news stories and reports of the spectacular violence of kidnappings, murders, and heroic police rescues, migrants' bodies are dematerialized and transformed into what Eric Klinenberg calls “journalistic commodities,” abstracted from the social causes of their demise. As discussed in more depth below, proliferating stories of migrant women being raped also perpetuate gendered narratives that flatten the agency of female migrants and ignore the diversity of victims of sexual assault.

Media and politicians often attribute the violence experienced by migrants to a typical cast of “bad guys”—brutal drug cartels, human smugglers, a few “bad apple” corrupt authorities, and sometimes migrants themselves. Indeed, unauthorized migrants are treated as both criminals and victims, depending on political strategy and context. In all these cases, blame is placed on opaque extralegal entities that render states and citizens devoid of responsibility.

Inspired by a rich body of literature in the anthropology of violence, this book offers a different perspective so that the story of Central American migration does not become yet another predictable tragedy and fade into the background static of contemporary drug and border wars. It seeks to complicate the narrative of Central American migration by focusing on the deeper conditions that systematically produce and sustain violence along transit routes and in people's lives. In reality, the “bad guys” blamed for violence are actors maneuvering within the constraints of the structures of global capitalism and state enforcement where there is profit to be made from the mobility of unauthorized people.

Scholars have examined the complex and often nuanced ways in which violence operates and manifests itself in the spectacular and the ordinary in times of both conflict and peace. Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Philippe Bourgois propose a “continuum of violence” to understand the ways in which visible and invisible forms of violence—structural, symbolic, gendered, polit-
ical, and direct—are mutually constitutive and reinforcing.\textsuperscript{5} The everyday acts of direct and physical violence that migrants experience en route cannot be understood outside their deeper structural and historical contexts. A political economic framework of structural violence thus allows us to trace how misery “and inequality [are] structured and legitimated over time.”\textsuperscript{6} For example, a structural lens allows us to trace the ways in which global economies and state security projects propel migration, create the conditions for violent and clandestine crossings and manifest themselves in structural vulnerabilities once migrants arrive at their destinations.\textsuperscript{7}

Pushing this analysis further, the question becomes not only how violence is produced, but who benefits from it? A central argument I make throughout this book is that violence and impunity are key processes in a multilayered migration industry from which diverse actors profit. In such a framework, migrant bodies, labor, and lives become valuable commodities in both global and local economies. To understand such processes, I examine the ripple effects of violence as it travels through power relations and inequalities at the local level and in social relations, what Linda Green has called the “microeconomics of difference.”\textsuperscript{8} Along these lines, the more recent concept of “poststructural violence” allows us to deepen understandings of how migrants respond to structural conditions of violence, in some cases themselves becoming perpetrators of it as a means of survival.\textsuperscript{9}

Such an analytic of violence is also informed by the feminist concept of intersectionality to link together structural forces and inequalities based on race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexuality, class, legal status, and disability with people’s everyday lived experiences of violence.\textsuperscript{10} Kimberlé Crenshaw’s seminal work on the ways in which violence experienced by women of color is the result of interlocking systems of oppression—namely, racism and sexism—helps us to think through the social dimensions at play along migrant routes in Mexico. The prevalence of racial profiling, sexual assault, forced labor, and kidnapping of Central Americans cannot be understood outside migrant subject positions as unauthorized, racialized, and gendered others struggling to survive in the contexts of state-sanctioned violence, transnational security politics, and an unequal global capitalist system. Taken together, such a layered approach to violence illuminates the historical and transnational threads and state policies that create the conditions for migration and violence and their ripple
effects on communities, individuals, and bodies. Through these conceptual avenues, the book shifts the focus from the spectacle of violence to the less visible infrastructures and economies of mobility, violence, and intimacy that undergird spaces of transit.

**TOWARD AN ANTHROPOLOGY OF TRANSIT**

If a deeper understanding of the production and reproduction of violence is one goal of this book, a second goal is to develop a more nuanced, human-centered understanding of the social processes involved in clandestine transit migration. In anthropology, the topic of migration has been approached through both micro and macro levels of analysis, ranging from neoclassical economic rational actor models to dependency and world-systems theories.\(^1\) Anthropologists have sought to bridge these approaches by looking at both people and processes, recognizing the structural and historical contexts in which individuals make choices and act.\(^2\) The ethnographic focus has primarily centered on the dynamics of migrant sending and receiving communities. Scholars have considered the forces and impacts of out-migration in communities of origin, and how immigrant communities negotiate their lives at their destinations. In the 1990s, as scholars began investigating the fluid links, flows, and circuits between these socio-spatial zones, the field of transnationalism emerged.\(^3\) This scholarship grew out of an attempt to reject narratives of immigrant assimilation and instead focus on the material, discursive, and ideological circulations between migrant sending and receiving communities. Such analyses challenged bounded conceptualizations of identity and locality and instead explored how flows of people, information, capital, and identities were increasingly deterritorialized.\(^4\)

Despite the turn to studying transnational processes at multiple locations, in practice, this literature remains wedded to a conceptual framework centered on locally fixed origins and destinations and the connections between them. Moreover, migration is often treated in binary terms: people migrate or they stay home; they are mobile subjects or immobile subjects. Yet most of the world’s migrants—and asylum seekers—do not simply board a jetliner or a cruise ship and arrive at their destinations a
few hours or days later. On the contrary, they may live in a liminal state of transit for weeks, months, or even years as they attempt to cross land and sea borders, earn enough to live on, evade immigration controls, hire smugglers, secure shelter, feed themselves, and find protection. By not considering transient populations, the embodied realities experienced by people traversing different socio-spatial zones are overlooked. Mobility is not an abstract process; it is a material and embodied one.

It is also not a linear process. En route, the lived realities of transit are fraught with uncertainty, and movements are incremental, circuitous, and often stalled. Migrants are caught up in what scholars have called “regimes of mobility” and “precarious transit zones” produced at the nexus of exclusionary state policies and increased circulation around the globe. They are legally excluded, making them both visible and invisible in the eyes of the state. Such legal liminality and disconnection from core familial, spatial, and social networks opens the door to new types of exploitation, and migrants become potential sites of profit in both licit and illicit markets. At the same time, migrants develop strategies and social relationships with one another and with local residents in the communities they pass through to cope with the precarity of their situations.

The concept of transit migration has primarily been applied to Europe’s borders, but it is also a useful lens through which to study clandestine migrant routes worldwide. With good reason, most scholarship on Latin American migration to the United States has historically concentrated on the U.S.–Mexico border, where one of the world’s most visible displays of state power, manifest in a sophisticated enforcement infrastructure, has significant political, economic, and social consequences for both migrants and local communities. There is no doubt that national borders are crucial to ongoing projects of state-making and national sovereignty in our globalized world. However, scholars have moved beyond understandings of borders as fixed “lines in the sand” to reconceptualize the political geographies where borders are “enacted, materialized and performed.” As William Walters has argued, decentering political borders enables us to focus on other types of spatialities, particularly the geographical and infrastructural transit routes where the politics of migration are “visualized, problematized, policed and contested,” and new forms of violence, intimacy, and solidarity emerge.
This book looks beyond the U.S.–Mexico border region to understand the material, political, and social infrastructures that shape clandestine migration along what I call Mexico’s arterial border. Central American migrants have moved through Mexico in significant numbers since the 1980s, first as refugees fleeing civil war, then as “economic migrants,” and now, arguably, as refugees once again, though they are not legally recognized as such. Mexico, generally conceptualized as a country of origin, is also a major country of transit, geographically and geopolitically caught between Central and South America and the United States. Over the past half-century, the Mexican state has implemented various crackdowns on Central American migration—largely in response to U.S. political pressure and with U.S. funding—during periods of increased concern over immigration and hemispheric security. Roadside checkpoints, technological surveillance, vehicle patrols, police raids, and detention facilities enforce “diffused” control of clandestine Central American migrants’ routes through Mexico. This has most recently been embodied in Mexico’s Programa Frontera Sur (Southern Border Program), a highly aggressive securitization strategy, resulting from U.S. pressure during the 2014 unaccompanied minor crisis. However, Mexico is not simply a pawn in the U.S. geopolitical agenda. The Mexican state and state actors profit considerably from border enforcement and militarization, which have increasingly come under the larger umbrella of “security” in Mexico’s southern border region, and in the context of Mexico’s drug war, a notable instance of the internalization of border controls.

Critics of the proliferation of immigration enforcement in Mexico’s interior call it a “vertical border,” but the dynamics of Central American migration are not that simple. Just like a horizontal one, a vertical border still consolidates state power in a linear, ahistorical, top-down manner. In contrast, the concept of the arterial border presents state power in terms of the more fluid, multidirectional, and contested regimes of mobility that manifest in everyday encounters, discourses, and material infrastructures. The arterial border is in constant flux, expanding and contracting as migrants, organized criminals, and local activists engage, evade, and contest the state along highways, train routes, and the network of shelters that traverse the country like arteries (see map 1). As migrants negotiate the arterial border, obstacles emerge and people’s journeys slow down. Migration flows thicken
and become more viscous, sticky even. In some cases, migrants become stuck in place, unable or unwilling to move on for a variety of reasons, whether abuse, injury, robbery, or opportunity. For these migrants, the initial goal of reaching the United States may be deferred. The physical immobility that people experience may be mirrored by an existential immobility, what Ghassan Hage has called “stuckedness,” in which migrants must cope with the anxieties and uncertainties of waiting. The transit of migrants can thus be both temporary and characterized by an extended, and in some cases semi-permanent, state of liminality.

Whether they are in transit for a few weeks or a few years, people must develop strategies, not only to move, but also to live and meet their most basic needs of sustenance and survival. In doing so, migrants alter the local communities they pass through, just as local communities impact people’s migration experiences. Certain corridors become hot spots of migration-related activity, and complex social dynamics emerge around places like shelters and train yards. As people negotiate their lives in transit, they become embedded in particular localities. They look for work. They buy things. They seek medical attention. They develop relationships. An ethnography of transit cannot thus focus solely on the experiences of migrants themselves, but must also look at the complex social worlds that emerge in transit zones.

As my research developed, it became clear that this is a story, not only about violence, but also about resistance and solidarity, as individuals, families, and communities began to say, “¡Ya basta!”—“Enough already!” The migrant journey, and migrant shelters in particular, have emerged as key sites in a robust social movement around migrant rights, humanity, and justice. There are over fifty migrant shelters and comedores (dining halls) in Mexico. Most of them are connected through the transnational Pastoral de Movilidad Humana (Human Movement Pastorate) of the Catholic bishops of North America, Central America, and the Caribbean region. In addition to Movilidad Humana, the Congregation of the Missionaries of Saint Charles, or Scalabrinians, provide sanctuary for migrants in Mexico.

Much of on-the-ground organizing and aid to clandestine migrants has been led by a radical subset of Catholic priests, several of whom draw inspiration from the rich tradition of religious leaders advocating on the behalf of marginalized peoples across the Americas. One such leader was
Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero who was assassinated in 1980 shortly after asking the United States to stop supplying military aid to El Salvador. Along with Romero’s teachings, the Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s in the southern United States and the wider influence of liberation theology, with its emphasis on justice and giving preference in ecclesiastical social work to the poor and powerless, have been important antecedents of Mexico’s migrants’ rights movement.32

While migrant shelters are spaces of solidarity and hope, they are also fraught points of contestation as they are impacted by local economies of violence, and shelter workers, residents, and migrants must grapple with everyday insecurity. On one hand, through everyday encounters of care, shelters and local residents have challenged the othering and exclusion of migrants. On the other hand, the increased presence of outsiders perceived to be dangerous, coupled with few protections from the state, has exacerbated local tensions around the politics of safety and security. I explore these tensions, but also look beyond the public arena to some of the less visible battles that are waged as the ripple effect of violence impacts humanitarian aid shelters, neighborhoods, and family homes.

CASA GUADALUPE

It is my first day of work at Casa Guadalupe. I ring the doorbell, precariously connected to a bundle of wires on the outside gate of the walled complex. From the other side a man’s voice asks, “Who is it?” Talking to the wall, I introduce myself as the new volunteer. The metal door cracks open, a pair of eyes behind tinted glasses peer out at me, and the door widens just enough to let me through. Mauricio, a man in his early thirties with spiky black hair wearing a punk band T-shirt and stonewashed jeans, is on the other side. He smiles and holds out his hand to greet me with a typical handshake, kiss on the cheek, and “Mucho gusto.” Hiding behind his legs is a young girl with thick black curly hair and wide-set big brown eyes. Mauricio introduces me to Carmina, his four-year old daughter, who along with him and his wife, Flor, have lived at Casa Guadalupe since Carmina was an infant, when they came here from a rural village about three hours’ drive from Oaxaca City. Now they are in charge of the shelter’s daily opera-
tions. All their belongings are packed into a small room they share across from the shelter’s basic kitchen. Mauricio tells me that Araceli, who is officially Casa Guadalupe’s secretary, but whose role extends far beyond administrative tasks, is on her way to meet me. She would become my closest interlocutor, travel companion, and friend during my fieldwork here.

Mauricio guides me to the main living room, presided over by a large painting of Mexico’s beloved Virgin of Guadalupe captioned “Maria Guadalupe, Take care of our migrants.” Juxtaposed with her benevolent presence is a corkboard full of newspaper clippings and advisories. The headlines chronicle a recent wave of assaults and kidnappings of migrants in the region: “Terror in Chahuites: Federal Police abuse migrants”; “Raid on train with over 100 migrants confirmed.”

A woman seated on an old brown plaid couch greets me with a warm smile and invites me to join her. She introduces herself as Sandra. Mauricio playfully jokes that Sandra doesn’t need them anymore at the shelter, that she is just gracing them with her presence with a rare visit. She smiles and blushes.

Sandra is one of the regulars at the shelter. She is from Honduras, where she has four children between the ages of five and thirteen, whom she left with her ex-husband. She tells me she left home six months and five days ago, and I am impressed by her precision, but realize that this is because her departure was likely very difficult. I begin to ask for more details about her children, but I can sense that it is too much to talk about. Instead, she tells me about her journey. As I would find throughout my fieldwork, people were often quite forthcoming with the details of their journeys in Mexico and the injustices they experienced. After being robbed twice in the state of Chiapas, she decided to stay in Oaxaca to look for work. She tells me about being assaulted, but makes sure to clarify that, by the grace of God, she was not raped. Many women are raped, but not her. Still, she tells me, she had to walk for seven days between Huixtla and Arriaga in Chiapas, an area known as La Arrocera, where *rateros Mexicanos* (Mexican thieves) lie in wait for migrants seeking to bypass military and police checkpoints.

“It is a difficult life,” she says, shaking her head.

In exchange for cooking and cleaning, Sandra lives with a local woman who sells *atole*, a traditional corn-based beverage, from a street stall. She has found intermittent work over the past few months, but says there are
not many opportunities, especially for outsiders like her. She almost managed to get a job in a food stall at Oaxaca City’s sprawling outdoor market, the Central de Abastos, but the offer was withdrawn when they found out that she was indocumentada (undocumented). People assume she is a prostitute, like the other Central American women who work in the strip clubs that line the road to the airport. “But even if you are from here, it is difficult to find work. Look at all the Oaxacans who are leaving,” she observes. Dismissing the discrimination against her, Sandra explains that she needs to earn more anyway. Her plan is to go to Mexico City where she says they pay more. In fact, she has come to Casa Guadalupe today to borrow money for a phone card to call her uncle in the United States and ask him to wire her some money. Her uncle crossed Mexico four years ago and now lives in Virginia. To get there from Honduras, he had to pay a smuggler U.S.$6,000. Sandra tells me that she doesn’t have a smuggler for the whole journey but did meet a coyote on the train in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, near Albergue Nazaret. She plans to meet him in Nuevo Laredo and pay him U.S.$1,500 to get her across the U.S.–Mexico border. For now, she just needs 360 pesos to pay for her bus ticket to Mexico City.

As we are talking, a group of four people—three men and one woman—enter the room and sit down at the dining table. Flor, whom I briefly meet, comes out of the kitchen with some reheated beans and tortillas. Sandra is busy working on logistics with Mauricio, so I sit down with the group. One of the men, who appears to be in his mid-forties, tells me that he has lived in the United States for nineteen years but was recently deported back to Guatemala. He is extremely talkative and speaks with me in Spanish and English. He is traveling with his younger cousin and his cousin’s wife, who look to be in their late teens or early twenties. The young woman is visibly nervous. The older man explains that they have just had a traumatic experience. In the same region where Sandra was robbed, they were held up by four armed men. These men made the young woman take all her clothing off but only asked the men to remove their belts and shoes. As they checked the young woman’s clothing for valuables, one of the men held a machete up to the girl’s neck. He says they didn’t do anything else to the girl, but that she hadn’t been the same since. He tells me about the last town they visited before getting to Oaxaca City. A local man had offered them breakfast there, but the young couple refused to enter
his house. He says they don’t trust anyone, so I am somewhat surprised that he is so forthcoming with me about the intimate details of the robbery. Perhaps he feels safe sharing these details because we are inside the shelter. Yet I note that neither of his companions speak or even make eye contact with me at all. I later wonder if the man is in fact their cousin, or perhaps their smuggler.

The fourth man, Efrain, tells us he is not from Central America; he is Mexican. He just arrived that morning and hasn’t eaten a full meal for several days. He also appears to be distraught, but he speaks quickly, so fast that it is difficult to make out what he is saying. From what I gather, he was recently deported from the United States and is trying to make his way back home to his community in Mexico’s most southern state, Chiapas. On his journey south, he had sought help from a local church, where they had recommended he come to Casa Guadalupe. Efrain has no money and claims that the police are still after him. When I ask what his plan is, Efrain turns his head toward the ground and simply says, “I don’t know.”

I spend the afternoon assembling toiletry kits with Flor. When I arranged my volunteer/research position with a Maryknoll missionary who helped found the shelter, I asked if there was anything I could bring from the United States. “Travel-size toiletries,” she told me, because migrants always need them when they arrive. Flor was excited when I showed her the two large bags of travel-size shampoos, mini soaps, and razors I had brought with me.

As we pack the plastic baggies, the doorbell rings. Just as he did when I arrived, Mauricio approaches the front door and cracks it open. From the couch I can see him through the window talking to a man and woman on the other side, asking them questions and searching their backpacks. I later learn that Mauricio checks the belongings of all migrants who pass through to check for weapons. He opens the door and the couple, Elena and Miguel, come inside and greet us. Mauricio invites me along when he goes to show them the separate men and women’s dormitories. The women’s dormitory is located inside the main building, adjacent to the kitchen and Mauricio’s family’s bedroom, providing a bit more security. The sparse room is dark and dank; there is not much air circulation, but the bunk beds are tidy. Mauricio tells Elena she can choose whichever open bed she wants. There is just one other woman
currently staying at the shelter. We walk outside where Mauricio leads us to another small building, where the bathrooms and men’s dormitory are located. Several of these beds are occupied, and Mauricio suggests a lower bunk for Miguel. He tells them both to get some rest before their obligatory intake interviews.

Later that afternoon, as we prepare canned sardines and beans for the evening meal, I have a chance to speak in more depth with Elena, who has volunteered to help. I am surprised when she tells me they are from Nicaragua, since most migrants who pass through are from Honduras, Guatemala, or El Salvador. They have been on the road for just over two weeks, and Elena tells me a bit about who she calls the “devils” and “angels” they have encountered so far: the bandits who robbed them at gunpoint; a man who bought them bottles of cold soda; the local woman who took pity on them and allowed them to sleep on the floor of her home. “I was so grateful to sleep at that woman’s house,” she says. “I was so tired!”

But this was just the beginning. Elena tells me about their narrow escape from organized criminals who had nearly kidnapped them. She explains that along the route, there are many people who pretend to be your friends, but in reality, they are trying to pry information out of you to see if you are a good candidate for kidnapping. They look for people with family members in the United States from whom they can extort large ransoms.

During their stay at Albergue Nazaret (another shelter in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, which would also become a secondary field site for my research), Elena and Miguel were befriended by a young migrant looking for some traveling companions, whom they guessed was around sixteen years old. But when he persuaded them to leave the shelter extra early to catch the next train, Elena sensed that something was wrong. They met up with three other men, and Elena overheard their companion describing the clothing and features of two women also staying at the shelter. They were being set up. “These were not migrants, they were Los Zetas,” Elena said. This was the first I had heard about the Zetas, the notoriously brutal organized criminal group that has come to control the migrant routes. One of the men suggested that Elena and her husband split up before they jumped the train. She knew then that they needed to get out of there. Not knowing what else to do, Elena decided to feign sudden stomach pains. She started
wailing, drawing attention to herself. She told Miguel to hail a taxi, claiming that she needed to go to the hospital immediately. Luckily, there was a taxi nearby, and they were able to quickly jump in. They told the driver to take them directly back to the shelter; they had to warn the women. Padre José, the priest in charge of Albergue Nazaret, advised them not to continue on the train. The train route through Veracruz was quickly becoming the epicenter of mass kidnappings and violence. As he would do time and time again for migrants over the next year, Padre José helped pay for their bus tickets to Casa Guadalupe. First, he sent Elena and Miguel there. The next day, he would send the two women. We were all relieved the following day when the doorbell rang and the two young women appeared outside. The journey was brutal, but local people were responding, and this organic network of assistance continued to take shape.

In less than twenty-four hours, I had already met people from four different countries who had been in transit for different periods of time and were moving in different directions. I heard tales of danger, deception, and violence. Of journeys begun, journeys stalled, and journeys coming to an end. Through their words and gestures, people hinted at solidarity and sacrifice, suspicion and tension. Each person was motivated by her or his own histories and dreams. Yet what I was most struck by—and it would take months for me fully to grasp this—was that the shelter itself was a space of intimacy. Within its walls, people shared stories about the most intimate aspects of their lives—their children, their aspirations for the future—and their harrowing experiences en route. Shelter workers, many of them women, shared in testimonies, prayer, and everyday forms of carework. In a context of social exclusion, a warm embrace, even a handshake, could be a profound act of human connection, one of myriad intimate encounters, social relationships, and embodied realities.

THE INTIMATE ECONOMIES OF MOBILITY

Inspired by a rich body of feminist scholarship on the linkages between global, state, and structural processes, on the one hand, and the intimacies of people’s everyday lives, on the other, this book focuses on the intimate, intersectional and embodied dimensions of life in transit. Rather than
seeing them as separate realms, feminist scholars have examined the ways in which the global and the intimate constitute each other and are important sites for understanding the reproduction of power and social inequalities, as well as forms of resistance. For example, migration scholars have focused on how state immigration policies impact relations of gender, kinship, care, and identity within transnational and mixed-status families. Through border enforcement, forced removals, and the more general condition of deportability, (im)migrant families grapple with the hardships of family separation, loss, and life in the shadows. At the same time, despite new forms of inequality, (im)migrant families are able to create meaningful relationships across borders and generations. Scholars have sought to construct a framework of intimacies that goes beyond state-recognized family relations in order to understand the other types of meaningful affective ties, social relations, arrangements, and household strategies that may emerge in (im)migrant worlds.

For example, the concept of “intimate labors” interrogates the ways intimate relations are linked to transnational processes of exchange, labor, and cash economies through practices like transnational adoption, sex tourism, and even the intimate labor of nail salons. Critical feminist geographers have examined the intimate economies that pervade migrants’ detention and deportation. Inspired by this collective work, I examine how migrants’ journeys have emerged as important spaces to study intimate relations and the intersections between intimate and economic life in the contemporary world, often viewed as separate realms. I investigate how intimacy is created, managed, and negotiated in relation to immigration enforcement, the smuggling and kidnapping industries, and networks of care. The complexities of these emerging relations, encounters, and configurations are what I call the intimate economies of mobility. Such a framework rejects top-down notions of global forces “penetrating” intimate life and instead focuses on the dialectics between global intimate relations and individual strategies at the local level.

I use “intimacy” here less as a term for private, personal, or sexual relations than as a flexible analytical concept, emphasizing what Ara Wilson calls “relational life,” and what Lieba Faier describes as the “intimate encounters” arising from everyday interactions between and among migrant and resident populations. Within a context of transience, the
intimacies of transit are often temporary, serendipitous and constituted between strangers. Despite the traditional placement of intimacy within the private realms of homes and bedrooms, the intimate economies of mobility are often forged between social actors in the public, exposed and everyday zones of transit, such as migrant shelters, free clinics, or even the tops of moving freight trains. These public spaces have also become crucial to the feminist-inspired politics of much of the migrants’ rights movement in Mexico.

Looking at intimacy focuses attention on the contours of reciprocity that can develop between mobile—and sometimes temporarily immobile—subjects. By highlighting agency and their strategies for survival, this approach challenges gendered constructions as either victims or criminals, not only of migrants, but also of smugglers, shelter workers, and local people. At the same time, relationships of mobility and care may both depend on and reproduce social inequalities. Care, trust, and profit can thus not easily be separated along the migration route. Intimate labors involve relations where inequities based on race, class, ethnicity, and gender are both maintained and resisted.

A NOTE ON GENDERED VIOLENCE

After I returned from the field, I was interviewed for a national radio program doing a feature story on female migrants. The host asked me to relay some of the most harrowing stories of sexual assault and violence experienced by women. She also wanted to know exactly how many Central American migrant women are raped during their journeys. Statistics floating around claim that between 60 and 80 percent of migrant women are sexually assaulted during their journeys. However, I found her request to boil these experiences down to soundbites and numbers problematic. On one hand, making violence against women legible is a key task of the migrants’ rights movement. We cannot address a problem until we recognize that it exists. Yet it seemed to me that there was so much sensationalized discourse around violence against women that it had become almost normalized. Women being raped was the status quo. When shelter workers wanted to stress how dire the situation of gendered violence had
become, they would talk—in hushed voices—about sexual violence against migrating men. Like assaults on LGBTQ migrants, this is also a reality of Central Americans’ clandestine migration through Mexico, and one that does not get much attention, but it almost seemed as if the rape of a man was being constructed as somehow worse than the rape of a woman. The transgression of heteronormative boundaries seemed to exacerbate the vileness of the crime exponentially.

I was also hesitant because I found that while some people were willing to talk openly about their own experiences of sexual assault, many preferred to talk through euphemisms, or focus on other people’s stories. This is something that feminist scholars who study sexual violence have noted in other contexts as well. For example, in her work on state-sponsored rape in Guatemala, Julie Hastings found that public and legal testimonies of sexual violence are not always in the best interests of women seeking political asylum. She argues that the lack of survivors’ accounts of rape was less likely due to shame or stigma, and more due to the fact that the construction of people as “gendered victims” in testimonies potentially compromised the more important claim of being a political victim, which was crucial to being determined to be a legitimate refugee. Kimberly Theidon speaks of moving from frameworks of “break the silence” to respecting certain silences. Can silence be a form of agency?

I suspect that many migrants did not talk to me openly about rape because the threat of it was very much still present throughout their journey. An assault could take place anywhere, at any moment, during encounters with state agents, criminals, smugglers, other migrants, or even shelter workers. Silence was a survival strategy for these women and men. The narratives they constructed for me were not of victimization, but of resilience, of strength, and of faith that they would arrive. Students, researchers, and activists working on these issues should perhaps take their cue from these women and men and resist the temptation simply to reproduce statistics and spectacles of violence, and instead focus on deeper, more critical analyses of the underlying conditions that produce gendered violence. Might we not, for example, see sexual violence as a product of militarization or racial and patriarchal power?

This is not to say that the book does not include stories of gendered and sexual violence. On the contrary, almost every chapter of this book includes
stories of gendered violence, because nearly every dimension of migrants’ journeys—from the decisions people make to leave home to their encounters with state agents, the suffering they experience, the social relations they forge, the care they give, and the transnational solidarities that evolve—are imbued with gendered dynamics and intimate relations. Individual stories are important to put a human face on suffering, but as a political project, it is crucial that we contextualize the lived and embodied forms of gendered and sexual violence experienced by migrants in transit. Gendered violence, like much of the violence experienced along the journey, is not just the work of bad individuals, but rather produced at the nexus of state and structural forms of violence that permeate the lives of migrants at home, during their journeys, and once they reach their destinations.

ETHNOGRAPHY AT THE DEPOT

Inside the coin purse of my wallet I carry a single folded bill worth two lempiras, the national currency of Honduras, which was given to me by Jimmy and Melsy, a Honduran couple and parents of two young children. I met Jimmy and Melsy early on in my fieldwork and learned quite a bit about their lives in a short period of time. Since they both suffered from various health problems, I spent several days accompanying them to the local clinic. I was particularly interested in their decision to migrate together, as opposed to one of them staying behind in Honduras with their children. The rationale was that if they both worked in the United States, they would be able to return to Honduras and be reunited in half the time it would take if only one of them migrated. For the past twenty-five days, Melsy and Jimmy had traveled from their home in Honduras to Oaxaca, where they were robbed of everything they had except a cheap cell phone and the two lempiras.

“This is all they left us with,” Melsy said as she held out the bill for me to see. When I tried to hand it back to her she said, “No, you keep it. We have no use for it now. And besides, now you will have something to remember us by.” They left in the late afternoon, planning to take an overnight bus north to Mexico City. Several days later I received a hurried phone call from them stating they had arrived safely in San Luis Potosí, in central
Mexico, and would call again later. This was the last I would hear from them. Back from the field in the United States, I am transported back to the shelter and to my memory of Melsy and Jimmy whenever I open my wallet to pay for a latte or a parking place and see the two-lempira bill. What happened to them after that last phone call? Did they make it to the U.S.–Mexico border? If so, were they able to cross over? Where are they now? Did they ever make good on their promise to return home to their children?

Ethnography with people in transit often yields more questions than answers. It also challenges traditional concepts of fieldwork. Anthropologists have advocated for multi-sited ethnography as a way to study the links, networks, and processes of a globalized, transnational world. Others have deconstructed travel and the dichotomy between “home” and “field” in ethnographic fieldwork. “Anthropology potentially includes a cast of diverse dwellers and travelers whose displacement or travel in ‘fieldwork’ differs from the traditional spatial practice of the field,” James Clifford writes. Yet the emphasis on “diasporic scholars” is still focused primarily on the movement of the researcher and not the research subjects. How, as anthropologists, do we resolve the tensions around the transience of our interlocutors and the ethnographic authority attached to “being there” in the field? Where, exactly, is “there” when we are talking about such fluid, transient populations?

As mentioned above, there is a rich body of literature on transnational migrants and communities that employ ethnographic methods primarily in sending and receiving communities. Beyond this, some scholars have collected powerful narratives of the strategies and lived experiences of journeys and border crossings, including compelling accounts by Central American migrants who had arrived at their destinations. Several recent ethnographies exemplify innovative approaches to the possibilities of multi-sited fieldwork with migrants in transit. For instance, Seth Holmes took a multi-sited approach in his commitment to “follow the people” in ethnographic research with Triqui migrant farmworkers between rural Oaxaca and the berry fields of Washington State, including crossing the border with them. Ruben Andersson traveled to key sites in the Euro-African borderlands and documents the experiences of clandestine migrants within what he calls the “illegality industry.” Jason De León
introduction

brings together ethnographic and archaeological analyses in multiple locales to examine the violent consequences of U.S. state policies on the border-crossing experience and the ripple effects on migrant families. Initially, I had envisaged fieldwork “on the move,” accompanying migrants from Guatemala to the U.S.–Mexico border. I was first drawn to the topic of Central American migration in 2005 during a conversation with Macario, a Mixtec street vendor living on the U.S.–Mexico border. I was doing research for my Master’s thesis on indigenous transnational migrants, and Macario and I were talking about discrimination against migrants in Mexico. “If you want to know who is really screwed in Mexico, you have to go to the southern border and see what is happening to Central Americans,” he told me. The next year I made my first trip to the Mexico-Guatemala border region, where I visited shelters on both sides. The following summer I made my way north, visiting shelters and transit sites in the Mexican states of Oaxaca and Veracruz. These early ethnographic encounters, several of which are discussed in this book, were crucial in exposing me to the diversity and complexity of the migrant journey across different spaces. And while primarily focused on the experiences of migrants themselves, I also became fascinated by the work being done in migrant shelters. I realized that studying migration did not require me to be constantly on the move. On the contrary, vital insights could be gained by establishing myself in one or more of these fixed locations in order to more deeply observe the logics and logistics of transit flows for both migrants and the communities they move through. Migrant shelters were ideal locations to safely access this largely invisible population. Close daily interactions would enable me to witness the quotidian aspects of transit and humanitarian aid and do my small part for migrants’ rights on a daily basis.

I was particularly intrigued by the work being done in Oaxaca, where the two shelters I visited had recently been established in response to increased flows of migrants. Albergue Nazaret, which had been established just a few months earlier by Padre José, consisted of little more than an open-air chapel and kitchen on a dirt lot along the railroad tracks, with a few folding plastic tables and chairs. Migrants frequently entered and exited the shelter as they waited for the next train to depart (fig. 1).

In contrast, Casa Guadalupe, founded by Padre Luis, with the assistance of two lay missionaries from the United States, was located in urban
Oaxaca City, on a parcel of land donated by the previous governor. While Padre Luis cynically called the donation not much more than a photo-op, I found it remarkable that the shelter was sanctioned by the state, while also in many ways working against state practices. Casa Guadalupe was not located directly on the train route, which at that time was the means of transport favored by migrants heading north, but on an increasingly popular alternate route. Migrants who sought to bypass one of the most feared sections of the train route, between Oaxaca and Veracruz states, traveled instead by bus to Casa Guadalupe on their way to Mexico City. Shelter workers at Albergue Nazaret sent the most vulnerable migrants to Casa Guadalupe—women, children, and recent victims of crimes like kidnapping. The diverse cross section of people who passed through the two shelters made them particularly rich locations in which to explore issues of (im)mobility, violence, and intimacy in the lives of clandestine migrants.

My fieldwork was thus both multi-sited and grounded in what I came to conceptualize as a depot where a highly fluid population of people constantly arrived and departed. Between 2008 and 2009, I spent a year working as a full-time volunteer at Casa Guadalupe, with regular trips to

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image1.png}
\caption{Migrants take a break from washing clothes at Albergue Nazaret to watch the train go by. Photo by author.}
\end{figure}
Albergue Nazaret and visits to other shelters throughout southern Mexico. I also spent the summers of 2010 and 2013 conducting follow-up research. By establishing myself as a volunteer at Casa Guadalupe, I was able to observe the daily experiences, movements, and obstacles that migrants face and capture the raw emotions, thoughts, concerns, and strategies of people in the midst of an uncertain and dangerous process. This shelter served as a nexus from which to explore transit spaces so as to understand the diversity of contexts and landscapes of migrants’ journeys. I also attended local, regional, and national training sessions and conferences for the network of shelters across Mexico. My daily tasks included intake interviews for newly arrived migrants, accompanying people to the local health clinic, helping with shopping and cooking, and leading orientations on the risks of the journey. During downtime at the shelter, I both informally interviewed hundreds of migrants and taped formal, semi-structured interviews with sixty people, primarily migrants and shelter workers I had come to know well.

This research strategy was not without challenges, the most obvious being that in some cases, I had only a few days or even hours to spend with some of my interlocutors. The example of Melsy and Jimmy that opens this section was typical. I was able to spend several intense days with people, only to watch them depart as quickly as they had arrived, and would generally never hear from them again. As a female student from the United States and a resident of Tucson, Arizona, then the most popular U.S.-Mexico border-crossing location, I found myself able to build rapport with migrants over a fairly short period of time. When people learned that I was from Tucson, they would ask me everything from joking requests to help arrange a smuggler to questions about the likelihood of encountering a snake or what types of shoes to wear crossing the Sonoran desert. Even so, these encounters were fleeting, and I was often left with partial, unresolved stories. I worried that this might detract from my ability to uncover the deeper levels of social processes and relations, but I believe that the element of fluidity and the rawness of the migrants’ perspectives I recorded sets this study apart from other work on migration. Moreover, as circumstances dictated, I was able to establish longer-term relationships and rapport with migrants who temporarily settled in Oaxaca, like Sandra, and with my co-workers at the shelter.
Personal safety was another concern that shaped my decision to conduct research from within the structure of migrant shelters. Early encounters with individuals participating in illicit activities along the tracks, and the concern of my PhD committee and family members, influenced this decision. After several trips alone, I decided it was more prudent to travel with a companion, which usually meant my co-worker and closest confidant at Casa Guadalupe, Araceli, or when possible, my husband, Nick, who joined me intermittently during my fieldwork.

With the clarity of hindsight, I now see that the shelter offered a lens through which to study one slice of a longer journey, and with it, the depth of understanding that can only come from situated, long-term fieldwork observing everyday realities. Shelters are not spaces where migrants simply languish, but places where people form connections, make art, eat, play games, pray, and laugh together. Within shelters people often let their guard down a little to reflect on their experiences, bounce ideas off one another, and plan their next steps. Conversations in shelter dormitories, hospital waiting rooms, and at kitchen tables thus reveal the layers of meaning and emotion that imbue clandestine crossings. From the vantage point of humanitarian aid shelters, I was also able to capture the complex and contradictory interworkings of solidarity, charity, and ethical demands in a context of cascading forms of violence. The intimate spaces constituted by shelters, and the social dimensions in which they are embedded, serve as points of departure for understanding the political, moral, and affective economics of transit life. Through the “infinite repetition of the present,” ethnographic research is able to gain access to the everyday, while also maintaining the distance necessary to put the taken-for-granted in a larger context.59

Ultimately, the transient presence of migrants parallels the transience of ethnography itself as a subjective and unfinished practice.50 As ethnographers, we do our best to capture and connect lived experience to larger historical trajectories. Yet the realities of our contexts remain in flux. Policies change, social relations diminish, infrastructures crumble, and the occupants of seats of power are replaced. Our interlocutors, friends, and colleagues get on with their lives after our fieldwork has ended. Since returning from the field, I have grappled with the unease of not “being there,” as if one more stint of fieldwork or series of interviews would bring closure. But ethnography inevitably remains unfinished, a process more
than project. As such, this book captures a moment in history made up of people, places, and processes that are infinitely layered, interconnected, and changing. I hope that by documenting my experiences and analyses, this work contributes to deepening our understanding of the veiled complexities of life in transit.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Each chapter of this book illuminates different dimensions of violence and intimacy along Central American migration routes in Mexico. Chapter 1 situates lived experiences of violence in the deeper temporal and spatial context of violence across the Americas. Structural forms of violence, including the legacies of civil war, neoliberal securitization, and everyday insecurity, propel migration from Central America. I suggest a historical continuum where the violence people experience along the journey is not conceptualized as new or unique, but rather a continuation of processes they have known all their lives.

In Chapter 2, I turn to the ways in which the discourse and practices of state securitization projects cross borders along with migrants. I trace the development and implementation of Mexico’s arterial border from the 1980s to the present through stories of abuse and extortion, with an emphasis on sexual violence, as migrants encounter state agents along the journey. This chapter also introduces the shifting dynamics and novel strategies migrants develop as they are funneled into more clandestine transit routes. In doing so, the chapter highlights the disjuncture between discourses of security and the lived realities of human (in)security.

Chapter 3 delves into the ways the journey across Mexico has become a site of intense violence and exploitation in what may be conceptualized as an industry. Through migrant testimonies, it traces how Central American migrants’ bodies, labor, and lives are transformed into commodities in economies of smuggling, extortion, and kidnapping. I examine how such processes depend on dehumanizing state, legal, and social practices that construct migrants as unwanted criminals and racialized and gendered others. The commodification of migrants also coincides with the transformation of local spaces into new sites of insecurity.
Chapter 4 shifts the focus to the visible and less visible embodied realities of transit migration. Through analysis of injury, illness, and sexual violence, the chapter explores meanings of deservingness as related to migrants’ health and well-being.

Chapter 5 examines the diverse social relations and economies of intimacy in which migrants engage en route. It aims to complicate normative understandings of human mobility and human smuggling by focusing on the intimate social relationships and forms of care that develop along migrant journeys, as well as the contradictions they produce.

Beyond the effects of migration on migrants themselves, an ethnography of transit must also examine the ways such movement impacts the communities they pass through. Chapter 6 examines some of the complexities around economies of compassion and the politics of security in local spaces. On one hand, the emergence of migrant shelters shows how local actors challenge the state and advocate for migrants’ rights through the creation of spaces of refuge. On the other hand, however, migrants are often feared by local people, causing them to contest humanitarian aid shelters. The dynamics between priests, shelter workers, and local residents throw into relief the ways in which the moral imaginaries of charity, inclusion, and justice are shaped by everyday economic and social realities of safety and security.

Chapter 7 examines the gendered dimensions of solidarity, care, and activism in multiple contexts along the migrant journey. It links together the highly visible labors of a caravan of mothers of disappeared migrants with the less visible, yet no less important, labor of the local women who sustain migrant shelters on a daily basis. In doing so, I seek to shed light on the transnational feminist politics and forms of solidarity that undergird these local and transnational economies of compassion and social justice.

A mural at Casa Guadalupe depicts scenes from the journey between Central America and the United States: a mother and child looking northward, people clinging to the tops of freight trains, and masked gunmen robbing them as they pass through military checkpoints before arriving at
a wall of graves along the U.S.–Mexico border. But there are also scenes of hope: churches, migrant aid shelters, women throwing food to migrants, and protestors demanding “Justice for Migrants” in the United States. The legend beneath a series of interconnected faces in different shades of brown reads: “El migrante no es una estadística, tiene rostro y dignidad” (The migrant is not a statistic, [he] has a face and dignity" (fig. 2).

This book aspires to make these faces and this humanity visible. As the mural so beautifully depicts, Central American migration north is a complex journey involving a myriad of social actors, connected between and across borders. Their stories are often told through the brutality of violence, but this violence does not come without struggle. This is a book about that struggle and about the people whose everyday labors of hope, solidarity, and care animate it.