

MOVING, WAITING, SEARCHING ACROSS BORDERS:
GENDERED GEOGRAPHIES OF VIOLENCE, DISAPPEARANCE
AND CONTESTATION IN SOUTHERN MEXICO

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Abstract

Women displaced by violence from Central America are the protagonists of this dissertation. Their intimate stories and acts of survival and care are foregrounded as they move, wait and search in social spaces in southern Mexico. They are mobilized to reconceptualize mainstream academic, political and humanitarian thinking about bordering practices as integral parts of states' tactics to control people's movement only. The dissertation delves into migrant and body-territory epistemologies of everyday politics, arts-based contestations and performative acts, revealing and making present the bodies, spatialities, and knowledges that populate a geopolitically manufactured border and migration "crisis" in southern Mexico. The research explores bordering practices at the scale of their everyday implementation on the ground, theorizing how borders and bordering as a violent state-driven apparatus operate, how it is experienced differently, whom it impacts, and how it is negotiated across space and time.

The research is situated at the intersection of political geography, critical border studies, refugee studies and transnational feminist approaches. The study and grounded analysis originate from feminist ethnographic and participatory action research with migrant women, feminist and women's groups, collectives searching for the disappeared and others accompanying border-crossers in 2022-23. The methods applied include life history narratives, in-depth semi-structured interviews, workshops, and the accompaniment of people moving, waiting and searching along migratory routes.

This dissertation contributes to debates on bordering practices, gender violence, migrant disappearances, and care, making four unique contributions to the literature. First, the methodological approach fosters novel narratives about borders and the acts of people crossing them despite fears. Second, the research reveals a gendered and intimate geopolitical analysis that highlights women's experiences and survival strategies and considers their exclusion to move quickly across borders that shape and are shaped by state practices. Third, the research re-conceptualizes the outcomes of bordering practices, exposing the protagonism and spaces of care while underlining the experience of waiting in borderlands, all of which are frequently overlooked and undocumented. Finally, the

research reads disappearances as violence towards (feminized) migrant bodies and territories and probes subsequent performative searches by friends and family that defy the salient maternalist and state-centric discourses.

Dedication

To my grandmothers, Sigrid Göta Maria Sahlin Biörklund and Britta Maria Elisabet Hammar Jonsson, and to my mother, Svea Gunilla Biörklund Jonsson, for being the most admirable women and *brujas*, who, in their presence and absence, offer an endless force of inspiration, challenge, love, and support.

To all the women protagonists and *brujas* crossing borders (in the broadest sense) to search for safety for themselves, their families, and their disappeared loved ones, with my utmost admiration.

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Note on languages and in-text translations

This research was mainly conducted in Spanish and translated into English. Still, I have chosen to keep certain words and phrases in Spanish, for which I provide an in-text translation in parenthesis following their first use in a chapter or as a footnote if the excerpt is particularly lengthy. Following APA style, I italicize all Spanish terms that do not appear in an English dictionary. Except where otherwise indicated, all textual translations are my own and have often been proofread by collaborating scholars fluent in Spanish and English.

Chapter I. Introduction: *Presentes* (Present)

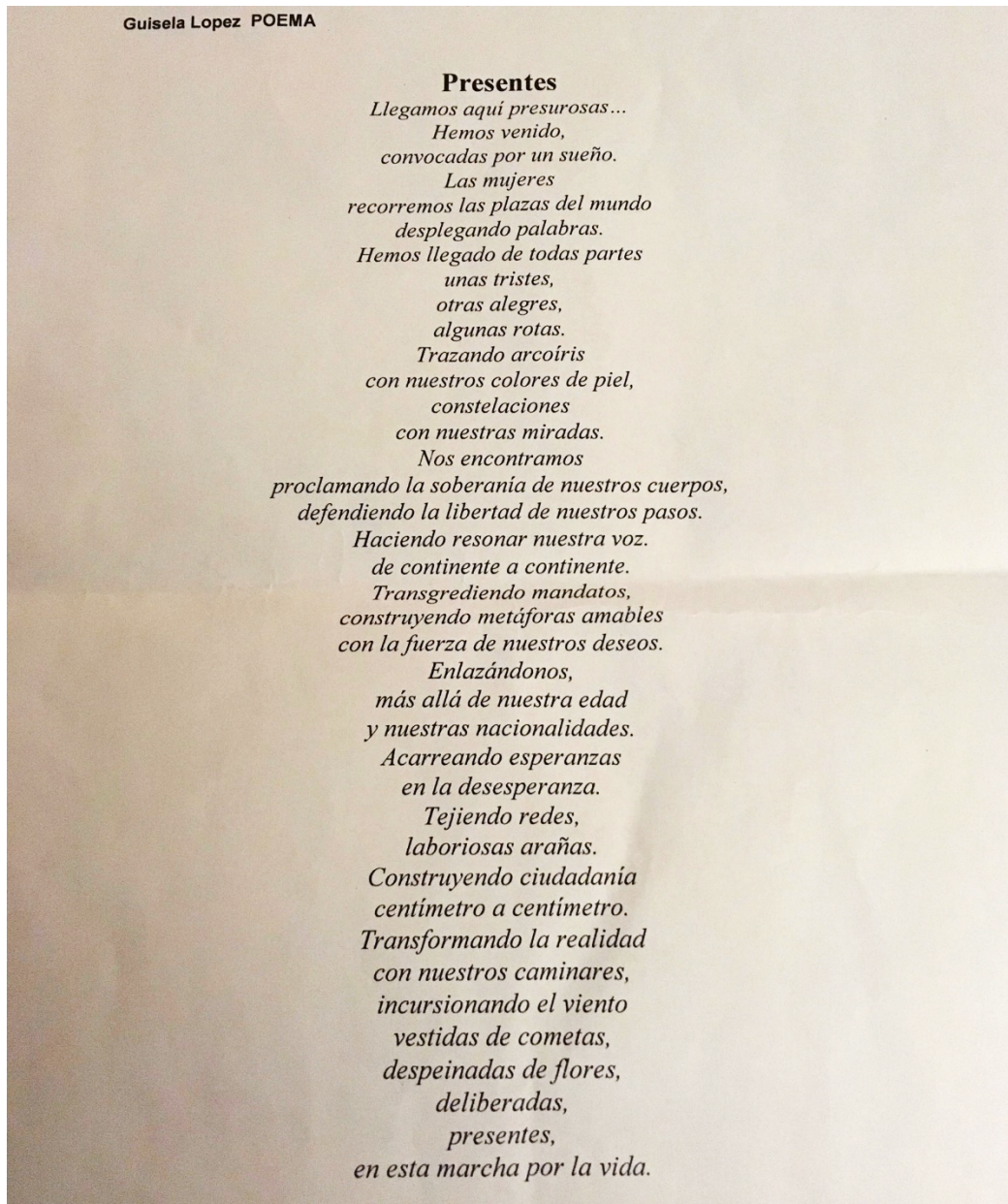


Figure 1. A printed copy of *Presentes* (2013), by Guatemalan feminist activist scholar Guisela Lopez, brought by a protagonist to one of the *talleres de saberes* (knowledges workshops) in southern Mexico in 2022. Photo by author.

Presentes (Present)

*We came here in a hurry...
We have come,
summoned by a dream.
The women
we tour the squares of the world
unfolding words.
We have come from everywhere
some sad,
others happy,
some broken.
Tracing rainbows
with our skin colours,
constellations
with our looks.
We meet
proclaiming the sovereignty of our bodies,
defending the freedom of our steps.
Making our voice resonate,
from continent to continent.
Transgressing commands,
building friendly metaphors
with the strength of our desires.
Connecting,
beyond our age
and our nationalities.
Carrying hopes
in despair.
Weaving networks,
laborious spiders.
Building citizenship
centimeter by centimeter.
Transforming reality
with our walks,
venturing into the wind
dressed as kites,
tousled by flowers,
deliberate,
present,
in this march through life.¹*

¹ *Presentes*, was translated by the author and proofread by another Spanish-speaking scholar.

Presentes (Present), a poem by Guatemalan feminist scholar and activist Guisela López, was introduced to me during a *taller de saberes* (knowledges workshop) co-organized in March 2022 with a *casa migrante* (migrant shelter) in the southern Mexican state of Tabasco. Rosa,² one of the main protagonists of this research project, made the poem her contribution to the *taller de saberes*. She read it aloud and reflected on how these words helped her move forward.

Presentes and Rosa's engagement with it generated an intimate space where an exchange of knowledges, care and imagination materialized among women (women-identified and feminized peoples) residing in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands.

Presentes are the women protagonists who have left their homes in Central America, often in the context of gendered violence and crossed militarized borders to arrive and wait in southern Mexico, often moving slowly along migratory routes. *Presentes* are their stories, dreams, (dis)abilities, and actions despite the violent geographies.

Presentes are the women from Central America who have been made to disappear (materially and statistically) while crossing borders in search of safety. *Presentes* are their absences, their footprints, their reasons for leaving, and the memories their loved ones hold of them.

Presentes are the activists, humanitarians, (re) searchers,' and *brujas* (witches) efforts and collective performances to generate spaces of protection and hope for border-crossers in

² Pseudonyms are used for all the accounts of people moving along the routes and for Mexican activists and humanitarian workers to protect their identities. The research participants chose pseudonyms following their approval to include the narratives and quotes about their experiences and work presented in this dissertation. The only research participant whose actual name is referenced is Juanita (see Chapter VI). This is because Juanita's disappearance and the community's struggle for justice are publicly featured. They intentionally use(d) her name in slogans claiming justice for all disappeared women.

Mexico beyond the edges of colonial and discriminatory borders. *Presentes* are their contestations and calls for justice.

Presentes are the differential experiences along migratory routes, the undocumented bordering practices, and the participatory and transformative geopolitics of survival, protection, and love across borders.

Presentes are the significances of embracing alternative epistemic potentialities to trace, map and construct narratives on gendered outcomes of living, waiting, and searching in legally and socially liminal spaces. *Presente* is the importance of introducing more gendered, intimate and affective conceptualizations of violence, disappearance, and contestation to critical border studies, (feminist) political geography and refugee studies scholarship.

* * *

The *protagonists*³ of this dissertation are women – border-crossers, searchers, *bruja*s,⁴ artists, and activists from Central America - navigating life and social spaces in southeastern Mexico and along migratory routes in 2022 and 2023. I give particular attention to women's acts

³ I refer to the women from Central America who participated in this research as *protagonists*. I do so because of their continuous requests to emphasize their dialogical self-authorship, moving away from victimizing connotations of women who cross borders in search of safety. The term protagonist is still largely missing from the vocabulary of feminist political geography, refugee studies and transnational feminism literature, predominantly in English, with Alison Crosby and Brinton Lykes' (2019) work on Mayan women's protagonism in rights discourses in Guatemala as one of few exceptions. Crosby and Lykes (2019, p. 6) emphasize how "they [women] are not objects who have been acted on [...]; instead, they continuously resist and subvert the expectations laid on them to inhabit the category of victim in rigid and homogenizing ways". In considering the relationship of protagonism and agency, they use Carey's (2013, p. 8) framing as "the ways an individual's subjectivity both bounded and sustained their agency." My position on protagonism also emanates from communitarian and decolonial Latin American feminist scholarship and activism, where women protagonists and feminized protagonism are central concepts (Cabnal, 2015b; Dieguez Caballero, 2021; Millan et al., 2014; Riviera Cusicanqui, 2018; Segato, 2016; Varela Huerta, 2018). For further discussion on protagonist and protagonism, see Chapters III & V.

⁴ My reference to *bruja(s)* (witch(es)) in this dissertation is inspired by my work with feminist collectives in Mexico - including *Geobrujas* and *las Brujas del Mar* - and casts them as women protagonists, knowledge-producers and caregivers who, through their presence, absence, acts, and imaginations, produce spatialities that visibilize and challenge violent systems. Accenting this meaning of *bruja*s derives from my aim to extend discourses on gendered violence, borders and disappearances. See Chapters VI & VII for more on *bruja*s and bewitched geographies.

of contestation, bodily autonomy (and lack thereof), and knowledges in liminal spaces amid the grounded de facto ways that borders are gendered and policed.

This research and dissertation aim to analyze the outcomes of a geopolitically manufactured gendered border and migration “crisis” in southern Mexico and how these tactics reinforce historical exclusions and harms. It explores how these tactics produce critical, gendered spatialities of accompaniment, care, memories, and justice across borders.

Drawing on scholarships from (feminist) political geography, critical border studies, refugee studies and transnational feminist approaches, I question reductionist state-centric understandings of borders and people who maneuver cross-border lives. Women’s experiences and survival strategies across borders are, I argue, distinct from those of men, who are more likely to move towards their intended destinations without the same encumbrances of state deterrence measures and threats of sexual and gendered violence that follow them. Seeking safety (physical, emotional, mental and spiritual) for women involves more waiting, living day to day in shelters and precarious spaces, and maneuvering invisibilized geographies.

Focusing on the plight of women from Central America, in particular, their stories, ordinary acts and assemblies in social spaces in southern Mexico, this dissertation expands scholarly debates on bordering practices, gendered violence, and migrant disappearances. It presents (and makes present) the bodies, places and knowledges that populate these geographies by exploring state practices at the scale of their everyday implementation. Further, it theorizes how bordering, as a violent state-driven apparatus, operates, how it is experienced differently, whom it impacts, and how it is negotiated across space and time. More specifically, centring an intimate transnational geographic lens and applying a feminist ethnographic and participatory

action-inspired methodology with migrant⁵ women, feminist groups, search collectives and others accompanying border-crossers in southern Mexico, this dissertation asks:

How is violence gendered? How do women from Central America navigate and contest this violence across borders?

What are bordering practices along the southern Mexico border with Guatemala? Which ones are enacted by state authorities, which by migrants, and are there other players or non-human bordering practices to consider?

How can engaging with migrant and *body-territory*⁶ epistemologies, particularly those emerging from the lived experiences of Central American women facing acute violence, and focusing on often-overlooked geopolitical conditions and gendered political forces within these conditions foster a re-imagination of socio-spatial relations, protections, and waiting in borderlands?

⁵ I intentionally use the terms *migrants*, *border-crossers*, *refugees*, *asylum seekers*, *displaced people*, and *people on the move* interchangeably throughout the dissertation. These categories are political inventions and a form of epistemic violence (Spivak, 1988) that normalize states' hierarchical processes of categorizing people who move across borders. As critical and feminist scholars, we should avoid reproducing "tried-and-true" categories of inquiry that matter to states and policymakers (Bakewell, 2008; Biorklund & Hyndman, 2022; Crawley & Skleparis, 2018).

⁶ A *cuero-territorio* (body-territory) epistemology asserts the inseparable ontological relationship between body and territory meaning that when the places where we live are violated, our bodies are affected, and vice versa. As a method, it prioritizes *the body* and *communal subjectivity* as scales of analysis beyond individualized subjectivities (Cabnal, 2010, 2015a; Paredes, 2008, 2017).

What is the function of performative searches, including across borders for disappeared persons? And how do searchers' collective actions and calls for justice create a presence of (feminized) bodies in the absence of the disappeared?

To answer these questions and produce narratives centring on intimate and gendered spaces, acts and relations across borders, this dissertation carefully combines ethnographic and feminist participatory action research methods that were carried out in the states of Tabasco, Veracruz, and Chiapas, as well as in digital forums from January 2022 to October 2023.

In this period, fifteen life history narratives were constructed with women protagonists from Honduras, Guatemala, and Nicaragua who lived and experienced waiting in southern Mexico for extended periods. Twenty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with representatives of initiatives supporting border-crossers in southern Mexico, including migrant shelters, humanitarian organizations, human rights, and women's groups. Four *talleres de saberes* centring dialogues on violence and care across difference and art making were organized in Tabasco with women protagonists from Central America, La 72 Migrant Shelter (La 72),⁷ Mujeres Organization y Tierra (MOOTS) (local women's organization) and other academics. An essential part of this research was also the active accompaniment of search collectives from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador in their efforts to search for and make present the disappearance of their loved ones in Mexico. Participant observation was conducted in parallel with the other methods throughout the active research phase. This implied observing different groups' performative acts of contestation in public and private spaces and conversing

⁷ "La 72" Hogar-Refugio para Personas Migrantes in Spanish

with migrants residing in the borderlands, state agents, humanitarians, searchers, artists, and activists. The material collected was translated from Spanish to English and then analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014) (see Chapter II for more on methodology, methods and analysis). The three central sites of this research were: 1) La 72 Migrant Shelter (La 72) in Tenosique, Tabasco; 2) the women's collective Las Patronas in northern Veracruz; and 3) the *XVI Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas* (XVI Caravan of Central American Mothers) searching for disappeared migrants across Mexico. Other relevant research sites included other migrant shelters, surrounding transit areas, border crossings and points of entry from Guatemala, bus and train stations, restaurants, bars, farms, and markets (see Chapter III for more on the research sites, protagonists and other participants).

* * *

The remainder of this Introductory chapter is divided into three parts. In the next section, I situate the overall research theme, centring on the geopolitics of violence, migration governance and gendered, racialized, and classed outcomes experienced by migrants in southern Mexico. Then, I identify regions and epistemologies missing from the feminist political geography, critical border, and refugee studies literature, followed by a presentation and justification of the research topic, scales of analysis, theoretical influences, related methodological approaches, and contributions. Lastly, I present an outline of the dissertation, comprised of an abstract of each chapter.

Gendered geopolitics of violence, borders, and displacement

According to the UN refugee agency (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR), at the end of 2023, there were 117 million forcibly displaced people worldwide.

Around 50 percent of forcibly displaced people are women and girls, many of whom are at increased risk of violence, discrimination or abuse because of their gender (UNHCR, 2023; Migration Data Portal, n.d.). Yet, despite these risks and trauma, women are continually able to find the courage to seek safety, re-establish themselves, and begin anew.



Figure 2. Poster developed by La 72 Migrant Shelter in Tabasco, Mexico, to describe the contextual situation experienced by people from Central America to migrants, residents, donors, and other humanitarian actors.

In Central America, the number of people forced to leave their homes and cross borders has increased considerably in recent years (UNHCR, n.d.). The figure is reaching nearly 600,000

refugees and asylum seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua (UNHCR, n.d.). Many more are living as undocumented and/or moving along unsafe migratory routes.⁸ People leave their homes due to various factors that prevent access to livelihoods, including *pandillas* (street gangs) and drug cartels (Cobos, 2018), state violence, poverty, environmental degradation, and climate emergencies (Leutert & Spalding, 2019; Massey, 2020; Rojas Weisner & Ángeles Cruz, 2020; Ruiz Soto, 2022a, 2022b). Arriving in southern Mexico, they often tell stories of violence and how their decision to leave was a decision of *vida o muerte* (life or death) (see Figure 2). Accounts of gendered violence experienced in the places they have left behind and during their journeys are alarming (Instituto Para las Mujeres en La Migracion A.C, 2022). The women protagonists participating in this research commonly refer to the gendered violence that follows them across borders and still manifests in their lives in Mexico today (see Chapters III IV, & V).

The deliberate killing of women and girls is related to gendered and intimate violence in Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico, where feminicide⁹ statistics have long been exceptionally high (Impunidad Cero, 2022; Sánchez & Pesce, 2022; Segato, 2016; Vogt, 2018) and impunity rates are also high (Animal Politico, 2020; Melgar, 2020; Segato, 2016). According to the movement *No Es Una Somos Todas* (n.d), eleven women are killed, and seven are made to

⁸ These categorizations are, as pointed out on page 6, inherently problematic, i.e. who is considered to be a ‘refugee,’ asylum seeker, or an undocumented migrant is fluid and ought to be critically analyzed. See Chapters II & V for more discussion and reflection on the “refugee figure.”

⁹ There is an ongoing debate over the meaning of *femicidio* versus *feminicidio* and its English version of *femicide* and *feminicide* in Mexico and beyond. In this dissertation, I use the term *feminicidio*, in English, *feminicide* as that is the term more commonly used by activists and scholars in Mexico. It is part of the Mexican legal code, and it implicates the state’s complicity in this violence (Damián Bernal & Ibarra Garcia, 2020; Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Millan, 2020; Segato, 2016).

disappear every day in Mexico (INEGI, 2023). This number is comparable to feminicide rates in both Honduras and Guatemala (Observatorio de Violencia Contra las Mujeres, 2023).¹⁰

Amplifying other feminist scholarship, this research shows how gender and other locations intersect with how people move and the violence they experience when seeking safety and protection (Balaguera, 2018; Coleman & Stuesse, 2016; Ehrkamp, 2019; Hiemstra, 2018).

As Wendy Vogt (2018, 19) articulates:

[...] 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.

Outcomes of migration governance practices

Arriving in southern Mexico, border-crossers, and particularly women, are confronted with further safety risks. Over the past decades, the Mexican state has implemented ample violent and discriminatory tactics on northbound migrants, mainly in response to external political pressures and conditional aid and development packages (Biorklund & Ferguson, 2021; Conlon & Hiemstra, 2019). Historically, most scholarship on borders and transit migration from Central America through Mexico to the United States has concentrated on the U.S-Mexico border, where one of the world's most visible state powers and restrictive immigration enforcement structures, including a physical wall, is in place. A growing body of research also examines regional migration governance and bordering practices, which are integral parts of states' spatial and biopolitical tactics to control people's movement, including restrictive policies

¹⁰ The intersection of gendered violence, feminicides, impunity rates, and the obstruction of feminist organizing in Mexico and Central America (Castillo, 2021; Damián Bernal & Ibarra Garcia, 2020; Millan, 2020; Melgar, 2020) is in no way limited to these geographies but must be situated in the context of patriarchal and racial power relations globally (see, for instance, Merry, 2008; Theidon, 2016; Vogt, 2018).

and outsourced migration management to third countries (Coleman & Stuesse 2016; Hafeda, 2016; Jones, 2016; Vaughan-Williams, 2021; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). Such state practices reorganize how we understand borders, territories, sites, scales and actors involved in their production.

Some scholars argue that Mexico has become the world's most extensive *vertical border* (González Velázquez, 2011; Hernández, 2015; Yee Quintero and Torre Cantalapiedra, 2016) and a *país tapón* (stopper country) (Varela Huerta, 2019), denoting Mexico's geographical and geopolitical position in a continental border project established to prevent people from moving north from Central America, Mexico and elsewhere (Campos Delgado, 2021; Jones, 2016; Varela Huerta, 2020). Since the North American Free Trade Agreement in 1994 and specifically since the 2014 Southern Border Plan, Mexico has, at the US and Canada's insistence, functioned as a deliberate bottleneck for 'unwanted' migration across borders (Biorklund & Ferguson, 2021; Hiemstra, 2018; Ruiz Soto, 2022b). In 2011, Mexico enacted a law, in compliance with international law, that protects prospective asylum seekers from forced return (UNHCR, 2011). In theory, this law makes Mexico a "safe" country for people arriving at its southern border, eliminating the need for an onward journey north. In practice, Mexico's southern border region is today one of the most violent places for migrants in the Americas (Estevez-Soto, 2021; Fuentes & Hernández, 2021).

The 2011 national asylum law is part of a transnational policy-law-exclusion nexus, which legitimizes the establishment of *Safe Third Country Agreements*¹¹ that outsource US and

¹¹ The term "safe third country" applies to countries determined as non-refugee-producing or as places where refugees can receive asylum without any danger or threat. Following this concept, asylum-seekers/refugees may be denied entry or forcibly returned to countries where they have, or supposedly could have, sought asylum and where their safety would not be jeopardized (Women's Refugee Commission, 2018).

Canadian migration management to Mexico (Massey, 2020; Walia, 2021). These agreements allow Canada to send asylum seekers back to the US without hearing their refugee claims. Likewise, they enable the US to return people to Mexico, denying them the right to claim protection. Under the present Safe Third Country policy agreements – one between Canada and the US in 2004, reinforced with the closure of the Roxham Road in Quebec in 2023 (Ataç et al., 2018; Biorklund, 2023a; Immigration Refugees And Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2023) and another between the US and Mexico, epitomized in the *Remain in Mexico Policy* introduced in 2018 and updated in 2022 (Meili 2019; Stillman, 2021; Roy, 2022) – asylum seekers entering Mexico at its southern border must either return home or “stay in place.” With few exceptions, they are denied northward mobility (Campos-Delgado, 2021; Guevara González, 2022).

Consequently, the southern parts of Mexico, particularly the south-eastern borderlands, have become a scholarly overlooked proxy border where people seeking safety are regularly perceived as “a risk,” “at risk,” or as resource-filled subjects for extraction (Freier et al., 2021; Walker, 2018). This region, which is highly insecure for migrants, has large-scale industrial extraction and export-production processes that rely on their reproductive labour (Arroyo & Zalik, 2016; Medina & Peña, 2020). A \$20-billion mega train project, el Tren Maya, financed by the state and transnational corporations to expand the development in the region, was recently finalized, generating further insecurities, including for women migrating from Central America and elsewhere (Gasparello & Nunez Rodriguez, 2021; Ceccam, 2021).

People moving along covert migratory routes and waiting in precarious spaces in this region are regularly exposed to deportation, detention, kidnapping, extortion, labour exploitation and sexual assaults (La Jornada, 2022b; Las Patronas, 2022; Rosas & Raymond, 2020). An analysis presented by la Fundación Para La Justicia (2023) indicates that the violences

experienced most by migrants in Mexico between 2009 and 2022 were forced disappearances, trafficking, and arbitrary detention. It should be noted that gendered and sexual violence, including the disappearance of feminized migrant bodies, is seldom reported and is thus likely absent in official statistics (Hernández Castillo, 2019; Sagato, 2016). Further, data on violence experienced by migrants do not include the outcomes of less visible tactics and *slow harms* of migration governance (Hodžić, 2016). Slow harm accentuates the violence obscured in the everyday of people experiencing displacement, including protracted processes of waiting (Hodžić, 2016; Hyndman & Giles, 2016; Jacobsen et al., 2020; Khosravi, 2021). Waiting is a “crucial feature of migrant (im)mobility”; it is “socially produced, imbued with geopolitics, and also actively encountered, incorporated and resisted amidst everyday spaces that migrants experience” (Conlon, 2011, 353, 355).

Critical geographers and border scholars have attempted to describe transnational processes of states bordering practices, migration governance and geopolitical outcomes through various concepts: the migration industry (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Nyberg Sørensen, 2013), illegality industry (Andersson, 2014), intimate and carceral economies of migration control (Conlon & Hiemstra, 2019; Martin, 2020), and extractive humanitarianism (Martin & Tazzioli, 2023; Tazzioli, 2022), among others. Practices of migration governance, which are replicated in many parts of the world, are indissociable from histories of colonialism, capitalism and racism (Picozza, 2021; Samaddar, 2020). Migrant ‘carceral regimes,’ including externalization practices (Gazzoti et al., 2022; Hyndman & Mountz, 2008), are often located in specific territories and premised upon and reproduced by power-laden structures that require land and bodies as sacrifice zones (Agard-Jones, 2013; Besteman, 2022). Imaginaries of humanitarian and border security crises also combine to produce “humanitarian borderscapes” (Pallister-Wilkins, 2018a,

2018b). Along with the manufacturing of racialized and gendered ‘refugee crisis’ spectacles, these humanitarian borderscapes compound violent experiences (Cabot, 2016; Espiritu, 2014). Bordering thus increasingly unfolds in a dialectical rapport between security and humanitarian logics¹² (Williams 2015; 2014) where, in the words of Didier Fassin (2012, 426), “compassion and repression are quasi ineluctably linked.”

In attempts to counter state-bordering practices of enforcement and criminalized rhetoric directed at people moving across borders, critical scholars, activists, and humanitarian actors often present narratives that spectacularize suffering and victimhood. In the process, they tend to represent ‘the refugee,’ ‘the border,’ and the notion of ‘individualized trauma’ as ahistorical facts rather than as political inventions (Crawley & Skleparis, 2018; Fassin, 2012; Hesford, 2011; Malkki, 1996). Such narratives of border-crossers and their experiences risk further homogenizing, victimizing, and excluding people from protection except for ‘lifesaving’ care provided by a few humanitarians at a distant proxy border (discussed in Chapters II & V).

Moreover, scholars tend to overlook reasons other than the search for safety, which propel women and others to cross borders in the region. The Mexico-Guatemala borderlands and northbound migratory routes are also populated with people who accompany migrants in different ways and forms,¹³ and – as discussed in Chapter VI - with groups performing searches for people who have disappeared while migrating through Mexico. The presence of people searching for their disappeared loved ones, their actions, and the memories they bring add

¹² While lifesaving, humanitarianism is a moral and political governing logic that assumes an ontological inequality between human beings, wielding care-control as a form of intervention that “differentiates in a hierarchical manner the values of human lives” (Fassin, 2007, 519).

¹³ To accompany is to lend one’s body to the other’s pain (Das, 1996, 2006). See Appendix A, situating Das’s writings on accompanying others. Chapters III, V and VI further discuss the meaning and significance of accompaniment in different contexts.

important dimensions to spaces in borderlands and migratory routes (McLean, 2020; De Vecchi Gerli, 2018). The presence of mothers, fathers, children, siblings, friends, and whole communities elucidates how migration is felt across borders, territories, and generations (Chapters V & VI).

Making present spaces of moving, waiting and searching

Feminist geopolitics perspectives on violence and displacement in the US-Mexico borderlands are significant. This includes the intimate geopolitics of forced return and arbitrary detention in Northern Mexico (Campos Delgado, 2021; Campos Delgado & Côté-Boucher, 2022; Crawley & Hagen-Zanker, 2019; Mountz et al., 2013), gendered violence as bordering, feminicides and the maquiladora industry (Borzacchiello et al., 2022; Sundberg, 2017; Wright, 2019; 2006). A considerable amount of feminist research has also been done on legal geographies of US border externalization (Conlon & Hiemstra, 2019; Hiemstra, 2018; Meili, 2019; Menjivar, 2014), as well as on migrants embodied experiences of violence as they move through Mexico (Balaguera, 2018; Brigden, 2018; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016; Vogt, 2018).

A review of the literature reveals, however, gaps in knowledge regarding the gendered outcomes of violence and the protagonism (dialogical self-authorship) of women from Central America who reside in, wait in, search in, and move slowly through the southeastern parts of Mexico, particularly the states of Tabasco and Veracruz, including along *la ruta del Golfo* (the Gulf route).

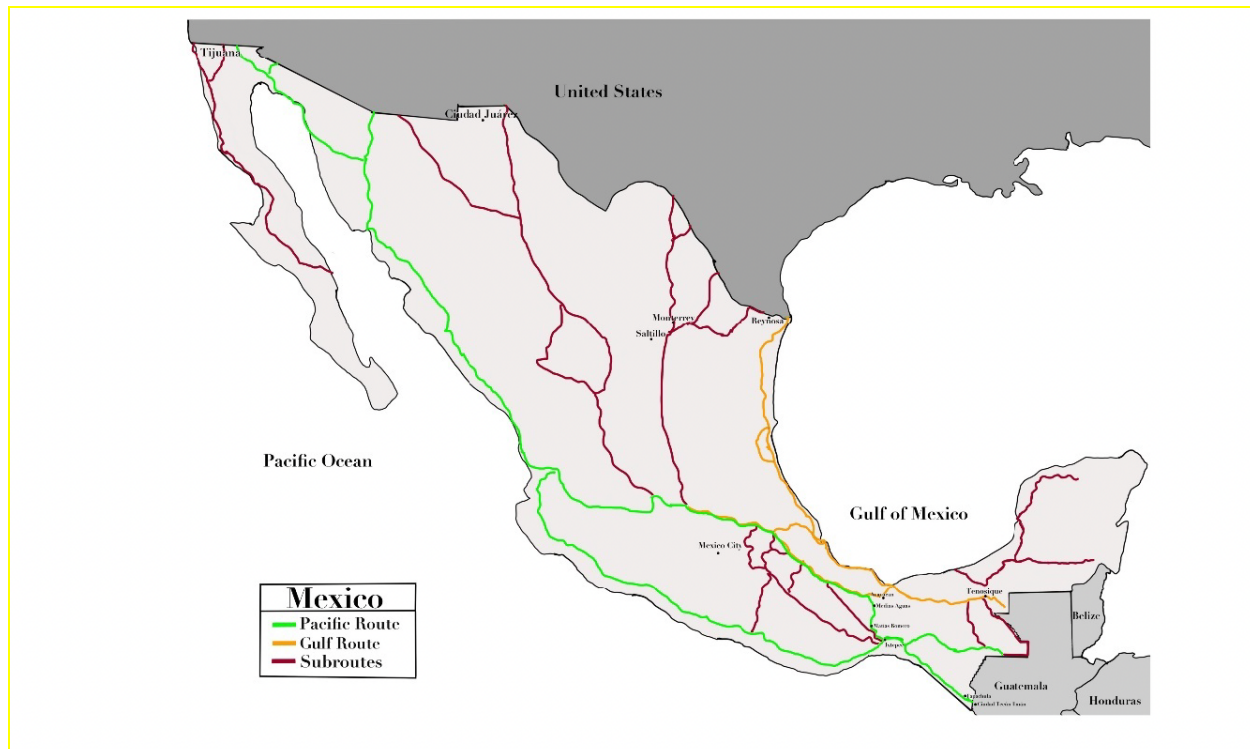


Figure 3. Main transit migratory routes in Mexico.
Source: ©Josue Estrada 2022, based on: Gerónimo Mendoza and Casillas, 2002.

While there are many crossing points and sub-routes along the Mexico-Guatemala border, there are two main routes that border-crossers, including searchers for disappeared migrants, use. The “Pacific route” and the “Gulf route,” the first one being the most studied (Arriola Vega, 2017; Basok et al., 2015; Varela Huerta, 2016; Vogt, 2013). The “Gulf route,” which starts in southern Tabasco and goes through Chiapas and Veracruz, is considered the most dangerous route today (La Jornada, 2022; Secretaria de Gobernación, 2022). There are widespread accounts, including in this research, of violence, forced waiting and disappearances along this route that are overlooked or have been “invisibilized” (Guevara González, 2022).

There are also inspiring accounts, political and social spaces, and people along this route who contest violent practices and make a difference for people on the move and the communities they transit through. With few exceptions (Guevara González, 2022; Rojas

Weisner, 2017; Rojas Weisner & Winton, 2018; Vogt, 2018), scholarly works on precarious, liminal, and intimate spaces in these sites undertaken *with* women who navigate them, however, are largely absent. Further, while a growing body of feminist literature centres on the gendered violence of disappearances in the context of feminicides and related search efforts for disappeared Mexican residents (Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Hernández Castillo, 2023), accounts of migrant disappearances in Mexico, especially of women, as well as transnational political acts, to search for them and to make visible their absence are still limited.

Aspirations and contributions

My research project, conveyed through the materials and grounded analysis presented in this dissertation, fills some of the abovementioned gaps and points to relevant areas for future research. I challenge reductionist representations of women who maneuver cross-border lives by illustrating that “*Migran las mujeres, migra la vida*” (When women migrate, life migrates). This quote was painted on the wall at one of the migrant shelters (La 72) where I conducted this research. It inspired me to make more *presentes* (present) the lives, aspirations, knowledges and intimate spaces of love, care, and contestation that women bring with them and collectively produce across violent borders and geographies. The emphasis on their stories, ordinary acts and how they maneuver social spaces under circumstances not of their own making (Das, 2006; Espiritu, 2014; Hyndman, 2019), rather than merely on their pain and suffering, generates counter-discourses to dominant perspectives of violence, borders, disappearances, and refuge. The following words from Cecilia, one of this research’s protagonists, summarize this locus:

Leaving my home and becoming displaced implies much more than I had ever imagined. In addition to our fears and worries, people trying to help us often see us as victims of everything. **They do not seem to understand that we still control our bodies and how**

we decide to live. Of course, **we are victims** of violence, borders, and xenophobia..., **but whether we live in victimhood is up to us.** I do not see myself as a victim or a failure ... We are women who have crossed borders and activists pushing against this culture of violence and who know too well what living in it feels like. The more those supporting us understand this, the more we can achieve... (Interview Cecilia, 27 January 2022; emphasis added).

Positioning ordinary and everyday strategies, acts of making, and politics of contestation engaged by migrant women, searchers for disappeared and others accompanying them at the centre of analysis intentionally destabilizes certain exercises of state power and bordering practices. By invoking gendered and intimate geopolitics of the everyday and transnational feminist understandings of space, protagonism and performance, I have sought to generate dialogical and transformative spaces from the outset of this research project. I define these as spaces where the conditions that differentially expose particular groups of people to precarity and violence can be critically reflected on parallel with a focus on the agency and practices of contestation and imagination of those most affected by these power relations.

Accordingly, this dissertation contributes to novel gendered narratives and theoretical dialogues of violence, bordering, displacement and disappearances that flow between bodies and territories across scales and times. The three substantive chapters (IV, V & VI) contribute empirically and conceptually to several scholarly disciplines, including feminist geopolitics, political geography, critical border and refugee studies. Chapter IV analyzes differential gendered, intimate and embodied migration experiences in southern Mexico as sites of geopolitical action on and through which geopolitics is performed. I argue that women's incapacity to move fast and safely *Pa'l Norte* (towards the north) results from restrictive migration governance and bordering infrastructures, such as el Tren Maya mega train project.

Further, I focus on how this exclusion coerces women to pay with their time, bodies, and lives. Chapter V centers on the feminization of waiting in southern Mexico as a form of everyday violence and a precondition for migrant women's protagonism and affective spaces of life- and art making. I introduce the concept of *undocumented bordering practices* to illustrate how bordering and political acts of making are performed by women protagonists in precarious spaces of waiting. This analysis challenges conceptualizations of waiting as passive and the waiting woman as a victim of violence only. In Chapter VI, I extend theoretical debates on disappearances, introducing a *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) epistemology to map the geopolitics of disappearances and performative searches for (feminized) disappeared bodies across borders. I argue that migrant disappearances, particularly those of migrant women, are another facet of violent and gendered state (bordering) practices that span geographies and generations. Centring searchers' embodied acts and assemblies to search for and make visible the absence of disappeared, my analysis moves away from notions of individualized trauma, contributing a grounded reading of collective care and contestation amid these harms.

My methodological approach – presented in Chapter II - bridging ethnographic, participatory action and art-based research methods in part inspired by decolonial and communitarian scholars in Latin America, contributes to feminist theories and praxis of conducting research with people experiencing violence, displacement, and uncertainties. I contend that embracing alternative epistemic potentialities, questions, and methodologies coproduced with research participants is essential to creating novel narratives. I hope this approach inspires others to carefully reflect on what stories are told, why, how, and by whom.

Theoretical inspirations

I broadly draw on and, as discussed, contribute to political geography, critical border and refugee studies and transnational feminist theory and practice. In large parts of my work, I use an intimate, gendered geopolitics lens of violence and borders (Loyd et al., 2018; Pain & Staeheli, 2014; Smith, 2012; Sundberg, 2017). It derives from feminist geopolitics and political geography scholarship that seek to dismantle and reconfigure artificial state-centric scaling (Hyndman, 2004; Pain, 2009; Pratt & Rosner, 2006, 2012; Sundberg, 2008) by attending to lived experiences and everyday spaces of geopolitics (Barabantseva, et al., 2021; Hyndman, 2001b, Secor 2001; Smith, 2012, 2017). Intimate geopolitics centres on how “geopolitical struggle is entangled in and comprised through our day-to-day intimate interactions with one another” (Smith, 2020, 282). It intentionally rescales analysis to emphasize the ongoing neglect of particular bodies, voices and processes (Mott & Cockayne, 2017).

Further, I draw on geography literature focused on bodily autonomy, trauma and displacement (Gibson, 2006; Tanyag, 2018; Hall & Wilton, 2016; Loyd et al., 2023) to support my analysis of differential experiences along migratory routes and in borderlands (Chapter IV). To conceptualize women’s protagonism and bordering practices as they wait in southern Mexico (Chapter V), I also engage with scholarship on feminist geographies of making (Gibson & Carr, 2017; Price & Hawkins, 2018), centring the relationship, flow and openness between bodies and materialities across scales (Pile, 2009; McCormack, 2003).

Feminist refugee studies scholarship, building on works by Hannah Arendt (2017/1958), Gloria Anzaldua (1999/1987) and Liisa Malkki (1995), among others, have also inspired this research by moving away from the notion of the ‘refugee crisis’ in which geopolitical borders are seen as natural boundaries and the protection seeking figure is perceived as a voiceless problem

(see Chapter II). In my theorization of *undocumented bordering practices* by women protagonists (in Chapter V), I draw on works that reconceptualize ‘the refugee’ not as an object of rescue but as an agent of social and political critique who produces knowledges (Espiritu, 2014; Espiritu & Duong, 2018; Hyndman, 2000). This includes Yen Le Espiritu and Lan Duong’s (2018) call for “a feminist refugee epistemology” that challenges state centrism and the notion of “spectacles of crises” (Hesford, 2011) in displacement contexts by focusing on the affected and affective spaces that “exist behind, between, and beyond public(zied) spaces [...]” (Espiritu & Duong, 2018, p. 588). Refugee studies work on memory politics situating the refugee figure and her everyday actions as sites of contestation to violent practices, including hegemonic memories (Nguyen, 2012; Lacroix & Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2013) are also central to my analysis of how not only people but also memories cross and are (re)made across borders. This idea emanates from Veena Das’s (2006) and Avery Gordon’s (2008) works on memories and the violence of life obscured at the everyday scale. The focus is not on bearing witness to the moments of horror but on what happens to the subject and the world when the memory of such violent events is integrated into ongoing relationships (Das, 2006) (see Chapters II, V, VI and Appendix A).

These scholarly acts of drawing awareness to ordinary, fluid and intimate spaces and intricate synergies within also relate to transnational feminist understandings of space that focus on everyday situations across geographies (Alexander & Mohanty, 2010; Grewal & Kaplan, 1993; Swarr & Nagar, 2010). Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2010) argue that when used with its critical edge in feminist research, the transnational opens spaces for understanding intersectional perspectives of women’s lives in different contextual and geopolitical locations, considering similarities and differences. I draw on transnational feminist

concepts and practices to analyze women's protagonism (Crosby & Lykes, 2019), disappearances, performative searches and assemblies of care (Álvarez et al., 2014; Butler, 2015; de Alwis in Ruwanpura et al., 2022; de Alwis, 2009; Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Taylor, 2003). Analyzing disappearances and transnational acts to make present the absence of feminized migrant bodies and to seek justice, I put the transnational in dialogue with selected communitarian feminist perspectives (Cabnal, 2015a, 2010; Paredes, 2008; Paredes & Guzman, 2014) and Latin American feminist political geography conceptualizations (Cruz Hernández, 2020; Zaragocin, 2020; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021) of violence and contestation. Here, I emphasize the inseparable relationship between bodies and territories (body-territory) across generations beyond individualized conceptualizations of trauma. The communitarian feminist conceptualization and praxis *acuerpamiento*, which implies the material gathering of bodies outraged by the injustices experienced by other bodies, and their territories, to generate affective and spiritual energies, care and political pressure collectively (Cabnal 2015a, 2010), is also fundamental to my analysis of performativity and assembly.

The theoretical influences and related methodological praxis are discussed further in the following chapter and weaved into the empirical analysis throughout this dissertation.

Organization of the dissertation

The dissertation is structured in seven chapters. The main goal of the *second chapter* is to introduce the reader to my research philosophy and epistemic positioning, to situate my work theoretically and methodologically and to elaborate on the methods chosen and employed. Following a theoretical discussion on alternative geopolitical imaginaries and methodological approaches, I elucidate the reasons for the decisions made throughout the research and in writing

this dissertation. I describe how I entered the field of study, co-produced and collected the empirical material with ethnographic and participatory action research methods, and systematized and analyzed the data using a grounded theory approach. I also discuss the main challenges of conducting this study, mainly reflecting on managing the aftermath of ethnographic and participatory action research.

Chapter three contextualizes this research, introducing the sites where it was carried out, the protagonists and other participating characters. It starts with a detailed account of the material and social spaces in the southeastern Mexican borderlands and along the “Gulf route” central to this research. This includes *casas migrantes* (migrant shelters), particularly a shelter called La 72 Migrant Shelter in southern Tabasco; a women’s collective, Las Patronas in Veracruz; and a transnational caravan from Central America searching for disappeared migrants in Mexico. Then, I present the protagonists – women from Central America displaced by violence who move, wait and search across borders in southern Mexico - other research participants, collaborators, and my relationships with them.

Chapter four is the first of three substantive chapters. This chapter expands the argument and content of my accepted article in *Political Geography*, “We pay with our life and our body:” Gendered and intimate geopolitics of *vias Pa’l Norte*” (Biorklund, forthcoming).¹⁴ Centring life history narratives constructed with women protagonists from an intimate geopolitics lens, the chapter presents differential gendered and corporal experiences embedded in the *vias Pa’l Norte*. The expression *Pa’l Norte*, which people moving along migratory routes in Mexico often use, is

¹⁴ Following the York University Geography Department guidelines, this dissertation has been structured so that the three substantive chapters (Chapters IV, V, VI) and parts of the methodology chapter (Chapter II) may also be presented as independent papers and directly extracted for submission as article publications or book chapters.

not limited to ‘towards the north’ in a literal or geographical sense. I show that it is an actual and imagined destination that holds a variety of relational intimacies, including safety, hope, love, fear and trauma. Assuming a geopolitically produced gender exclusion to cross borders, the chapter illustrates how the construction of el Tren Maya - a mega infrastructure train project that began in 2020 – along with new migration policies have shifted how people move in southern Mexico, reinforcing historical exclusions, including the lack of women’s bodily autonomy. The chapter unpacks how women’s experiences of moving slowly and paying with their bodies, and at times their lives, in southern Mexico today relate to other women’s experiences in other spaces and times.

Chapter five builds on and deepens further the analysis in my published article, “Undocumented Bordering Practices: Protagonism and Spaces of Making” (Biorklund, 2023). This chapter argues that borders are at the centre of our everyday lives and that the outcomes, which are gendered and often violent, exacerbate harm across space and time. It examines how the feminization of waiting is embedded in the political powers of borders. Yet, it can also be a necessary pre-condition for generating affective geographies of making and transformative spaces of solidarity and contestation across borders. This chapter draws on insights obtained during *talleres de saberes* organized with a migrant shelter and feminist collectives in southern Mexico, and on life history narratives documenting bordering practices ‘from below,’ *undocumented bordering practices* performed by women from Central America experiencing waiting in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands. Engaging scholarship on borders, waiting and geographies of making, it expands the definitions and meanings of bordering and protection. The focus is on women’s protagonism and collective acts of making (art, food, and relations) as they wait and the related geopolitical spaces of care, knowledges and activism that emerge. Three

processes of making while waiting are illustrated: a ‘mural-on-the-move;’ a newsletter titled *Breaking barriers: When women migrate, life migrates*; and intimate geopolitics of making and sharing food in borderlands.

Chapter six centres on the story of Juanita, a woman from Guatemala who disappeared in Mexico in 2014 and was arbitrarily imprisoned by the Mexico-US border for almost eight years. The analysis presented stems from participatory action research, including with Juanita’s community and the 2022 Caravan of Mothers from Central America, searching for their loved ones who disappeared while migrating through Mexico. I ask, what is the embodiment of disappearance? And how do *buscadorxs* (searchers) create a presence of bodies in the absence of the disappeared? What is the role of performative searches across borders? To contribute to epistemological gaps in the literature on the geopolitics of disappearances, particularly across borders, this chapter amplifies theoretical frames by introducing the communitarian feminist conceptualization of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory). A body-territory lens asserts the inseparable ontological relationship between body and territory, prioritizing *the body* and *communal subject agency* as scales of analysis beyond individualized subjectivities (Paredes, 2008; Cabnal, 2015a, 2010). The chapter discusses epistemologies of disappearances, maps intimate features of Juanita’s and other migrants’ disappearances in Mexico and documents performative searches to find and make present the absence of the disappeared. The focus is largely on the transnational spaces of contestation and care that emerge with the search and how these transform searchers’ lives.

Finally, *chapter seven*, Conclusion: *Sin miedo* (Without fear), synthesizes and brings the main findings of this research together, reflecting further on the contributions and areas for future research. I speak to how this research is at once an investigation and an act of solidarity;

through it, I have sought to accompany and to make present the narratives, intimacies and contestations of its protagonists and the places they maneuver across borders. I identify some of the limitations of this research and present three themes for future research that build on and further develop this dissertation's contributions. These concerns: 1) A focus on gendered political economies of undocumented bordering practices in southern Mexico, including labour and social reproduction processes; 2) research on what I refer to as *bewitched geographies of violence* to explore further alternative conceptualizations of violence and harm, and 3) questions concerning the collective livingness of disappearances across borders.

Ultimately, this dissertation concerns lives lived in spaces of violence and state rejection. It is about women who, through their moving, waiting and searching across borders, contest the forces that seek to marginalize, violate or victimize them. It is about their will and their creative powers; *when women migrate, life migrates*.

Chapter II. Feminist epistemologies and research methodologies across borders

Introduction

How do we put as much focus on manifesting a world we believe in as we do tearing the other one down? [...] These are responses and acts of imagination. A furthering of imagination... (Polley, 2022)

The above quote comes from *Women Talking*, a film by Sarah Polley (2022) based on the book by Miriam Toews (2019), with the core message that the power of collectively understanding your oppression and potential liberation is essential to change. *Women Talking* is based on a true story about how a group of women from an isolated community grapple with gendered violence, including continuous rape, trauma, and their strategies of survival: do nothing (forgive, forget and hope for the best); stay and fight; or leave. The film's trailer features women's voices reflecting on their experiences with violence and how it is intertwined with love, power and faith. One woman says, "We know we have not imagined these attacks. We know that we are bruised, infected, and pregnant, and some of us are dead." The main protagonist asks, "Why does love, the absence of love, the end of love, and the need for love result in so much violence? [...] When we look back, [the violence] has been everywhere." She concludes that "Hope for the unknown is good. It is better than the hatred of the familiar."

Watching it at Toronto's International Film Festival in 2023, I was intrigued by the focus on women's intimate conversations of love, survival, and imagination parallel to the endured violence, which was not featured on screen. The visual absence of violence in the film did not

mean it was not present. We do not need to see atrocities to understand them. Instead, the film prompts attention to often overlooked gendered actions, spaces and relations amid the violence.

The core message of *Women Talking* aligns with the central aim of my research. I have intentionally moved beyond generalized and spectacularized notions of violence to engage with and learn with others about intimate and relational everyday experiences of love, survival, care and creativity despite the violence. I have worked explicitly with women protagonists from Central America whose lives have been crossed by and who are crossing borders (in the broadest sense) and those accompanying them.

Gordon (2008, p. 41) inquires in her book *Ghostly Matters*: “Perhaps the key methodological question is not what methods you have adopted for this research? But what paths have been disavowed, left behind, covered over, and remain unseen? In what fields does fieldwork occur?” This phrase aptly captures my intention and motivation to carry out this research. bell hooks’ words (2000, p. 110) have also been inspirational: “To be truly visionary, we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality.”

With this research, I present and analyze the conditions that differentially expose particular groups of people to precarity and violence (Butler, 2010) while focusing on the agency, imagination, and contestation practices of those most affected by these power relations (McLean, 2020). It is a political act of solidarity that centres women and their protagonism under circumstances that are not of their own making (Hyndman, 2019).

This chapter presents the evolution of the research project: what I posed as my initial research question, why I did what I did and how I conducted the work, including how I compiled and interpreted the empirical data and handled the related challenges. The overarching research

is rooted in a constructivist ontology and interpretivist epistemology. It is first contextualized, followed by an ethnographic and feminist participatory action research-informed methodology. Subsequently, I introduce myself and outline the methods (ethnographic, participatory, and arts-based), data collection, and grounded data analysis processes. The chapter also offers insights into personal reflexivity, positionality, and ethics, along with the limitations to the interpretation and impact of this research and its findings. In addition to this chapter, each substantive chapter (Chapters IV, V & VI) discusses the specific epistemologies and methodological approach(es) relevant to the explicit themes and arguments.

The fluidity of routes and feminist cross-border research

Refugee and cross-border migration research is often conducted in temporary and precarious spaces where unstable conditions are an intrinsic part of the research and pose methodological challenges (Brigden, 2018; Delano et al., 2024; Jacobsen et al., 2021; Maillet et al., 2016; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016; Vogt, 2018). This research is no exception; in conducting it, I have modified its course due to the changing character of migratory routes and people's (dis)ability to move and seek protection.

When I started this research – first through an initial assessment during fieldwork conducted for another research project in 2019 and then through the main fieldwork phase from January 2022 to October 2023 - the geopolitical, social and economic context in Mexico regarding migration was at a critical point. Combined with national immigration laws, regional political agreements to control and externalize migration governance have produced new geographies of violence and containment for border-crossers (Balaguera 2018; Meili 2019; Ruiz

Soto 2020a, 2022b).¹⁵ Initially, I wanted to study gendered geographies of violence and contestation of migrant women *residing* in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands. I had planned to use a multi-sited ethnographic approach (Marcus, 1995) to research how a gendered “migration crisis” emerged at the exclusionary southern Mexican border and focusing on how women from Central America dwell and negotiate the borderlands in Tabasco and Veracruz.¹⁶

However, new realities came to my attention: I witnessed shifting modes and strategies of travel on the part of these women, as well as disappearances and related searches. Accordingly, I partly modified the focus during the active research phase. Eventually, what was to be a study with women who were residing and waiting also became a study with women and others from Central America moving and crossing borders, including in search of their loved ones who disappeared in Mexico.

My research is not of but *with* women and other border-crossers. This means I have sought to work with women as co-producers of knowledges. As Shahram Khosravi (2022) says, “[to] understand the border from the other side” beyond state-centric perspectives, it is fundamental to embrace alternative epistemic potentialities that give rise to new questions and

¹⁵ The Trump administration’s adoption of a so-called ‘zero-policy,’ exemplified by the *Remain in Mexico Policy* in 2018, increased border controls, detention and deportations in the US-Mexico and the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands. COVID-19 deepened these militarized restrictions. In late 2021, the Biden administration, in collaboration with the Mexican government, led by President Manuel Andres Lopez Obrador, renewed the *Remain in Mexico Agreement* and extended the executive order of the Public Health Service Act (Title 42) that meant the immediate expulsion of unwanted persons from the US border with Mexico. Not until May 2023 were Title 42 restrictions lifted (Isacson, 2023). The development and geopolitics of a mega train project, el Tren Maya (the Mayan Train), in the country’s southern parts, combined with new transportation policies for people without a national identity card, are also relevant. These events have altered migratory routes and transit spaces, limiting people’s ability, particularly women’s, to find refuge where they feel safe (see Chapter IV and Appendix G).

¹⁶ The state of Veracruz does not share a geographical land border with Guatemala. However, the US and Canada’s ongoing externalization of borders and migration management to Mexico has resulted in large parts of the Mexican territory, including Veracruz, functioning as militarized borderlands for border-crossers and protection seekers.

methodologies. I maintained my initial research questions and added a few more, as the stories of women I accompanied have shifted the research in ways I did not initially expect.

Alternative geopolitical imaginaries and methodological approaches

This dissertation captures a moment in history made up of people in a specific geographical region and of infinitely layered, interconnected, and changing processes. Each chapter illuminates intersectional geographies of violence, intimacies and imaginaries along migratory routes from Central America to and through Mexico. By decentring political borders and feminized migrant bodies as sites of analysis, I incite perspectives on how the geopolitics of border militarization and migration governance beget gendered violence and political actions across borders. I place the acts and spaces where migrant women and others make life at the centre of analysis, acknowledging power structure while creating space to re-imagine protection, geopolitics, and migration anew.

Critiques of sensationalized border violence and refugee representation that lay the groundwork for some of today's more persuasive epistemologies and methodological approaches have intensified in recent years. In their work on Syrians' protracted stays in Turkey, feminist political geographers Jenna Loyd, et al. (2018, p. 1) underscore that the geopolitics of trauma not only emerges in the "cartographies of war, displacement, and resettlement but also in the minute details of performative demands of the refugee determination and resettlement process." This stance challenges dominant imaginaries of violence, trauma and displacement. It resonates with the politics and iterative effects of *slow harm*, which Hodžić (2016) frames as the violence obscured in everyday life of resettled refugees.

Focusing on war memories and commemorations, Espiritu (2014, p. 12) also notes the importance of attentiveness to (South Vietnamese) refugees as “intentional” beings who “possess and enact their own politics as they emerge out of the ruins of war and its aftermaths.” In a similar vein, Jennifer Hyndman (2012, p. 243) has emphasized the relevance of displacing attention from “borders to the crossers of borders” not as objects of analysis but as protagonists (Biorklund & Hyndman, 2022). Nguyen’s (2012) work on memory politics and Vietnamese refugees’ actions of remembrance is another significant effort to move beyond simply diagnosing and spectacularizing what she calls an individualized “refugee condition.” In her search for a *just* memory, Nguyen notes the way that the figure of the Vietnamese refugee has been deployed to revise the imperialist history of the American involvement in the Vietnam War, deflecting the memory from the US as the representative of failed military conquest to the site of refuge. A refuge that may come in the guise of a gift but has its peculiar demands for payment. Accordingly, Nguyen intentionally places the refugee figure as a potential site of resistance to official memories constructed in the post-Vietnam War era (2012).

Her thinking and intention resemble that of Gordon (2008) and Das (2006), who critically read memories and the violence of life obscured at everyday scales. Gordon (2008, p. 42) says,

...to write about invisibilities and hauntings... requires attention to what is not seen but is nonetheless powerfully real; requires attention to what appears dead but is nonetheless powerfully alive; requires attention to what appears to be in the past but is nonetheless powerfully present; requires attention to just who the subject of analysis is.

Das (2006, p. 8) further reiterates that “my interest [...] is not describing these moments of horror but rather in describing what happens to the subject and the world when the memory of

such events is folded into ongoing relationships.” Das's position of the ordinary as her lens for understanding everyday forms of violence and resistance brings to light the varying degrees of insensitivity and callousness of the (Indian) state's representation of suffering, specifically women's. Exploring the relations of violence, gender, and subjectivity parallel to the ordinary, Das's analysis challenges state-centric perspectives of power, trauma and pain.

New epistemologies of violence, displacement and survival: Why, how and who?

The production of subaltern stories, including archives and maps of critical remembering in the face of threat and erasure, offer a way to (re)make identity, community and protection outside of preconceived spaces and state-centric frames of “protection” (Espiritu, 2014). In the last decade, feminist approaches to researching violence have given more attention to *how* knowledge is produced and *who* produces it. These considerations are vital to draw attention to new, lesser-heard narratives of violence, borders, and displacement. Yet, questions about the politics of representation persist (Malkki, 1996; Spivak, 1988). Who can speak? Who represents whom? And who decides what stories are to be told?

Most research centres, agendas, and scholars with sustained funding, including myself, are still based at academic institutions in the Global North (McGrath and Young, 2019). This undeniably generates and maintains power imbalances that cannot be ignored. As scholars, storytellers, and knowledge producers, we must intentionally attend to scales and listen to voices at the margins of academic debates and public narratives. The stories we tell and the bodies that populate those stories are the ones remembered (Biorklund & Hyndman, 2022; Espiritu, 2014).

Concerned with *how* knowledge is produced, Espiritu and Duong (2018) recently called for a feminist refugee epistemology. Like other critical scholars before them, they bring feminist

praxis and analysis of women's alternative knowledge production, including art and literature, to the forefront (e.g. Hesford, 2011; Lugones, 2011; Mohanty, 2003; Nagar, 2002). In the 1980s, Anzaldua (1999/1987) developed the idea of 'mestiza consciousness.' Situating this space of critique where multiple and entangled perspectives, experiences, and knowledges of citizenship and protection emerged, Anzaldua critiqued the violence embedded in the US and Mexican statecraft, especially in the borderlands, a place that is not state-based or conventionally delineated by international borders (Biorklund & Hyndman, 2022). Espiritu and Duong's feminist epistemology is a refugee-centred approach that makes the hidden violence of the perpetrator more visible rather than the impact of violence on bodies. The central object of analysis is the often-overlooked geopolitical conditions and political forces within "the site of intimate domestic interaction and queer sociality" (2018, p. 588). In the case of my research, the less visible gendered spaces of bordering, migratory routes, and disappearances can be seen through migrants' and searchers' knowledges and actions across borders.

Shifting away from the state, the border, and the scale of women's bodies as units of analysis to the "affected spaces that exist behind, between and beyond public(sized) spaces..." (Espiritu & Duong, 2018, p. 588) is not only a methodological choice but an act of political relevance. Witnessing violence and trauma across space and time while also bringing awareness to women's "improvised, fluid and alternative home making, healing and survival strategies" (Espiritu & Duong, 2018, p. 588) can create new contested geographies of protection and imagination.

The notion of a feminist refugee epistemology, as well as ideas of alternative geopolitical imaginaries of refuge(es) (Espiritu, 2014), echoes Das's (2006, p. 7) accentuation that "our theoretical impulse is often to think of agency in terms of escaping the ordinary rather than a

descent into it,” and, further, that actual life can be recovered “not through some grand gestures in the realm of the transcendent but through a descent into the ordinary.”

Hence, epistemologies that focus on everyday acts, including the ordinary occupation of and collective assembly in social spaces (Butler, 2015; Cabnal, 2010), serve to decentre established notions of power, trauma and pain while uncovering what has long remained “invisibilized” and unseen (Gordon, 2008). Sara Ahmed has similarly argued that if migration were to be understood as something beyond lived embodiments and more in terms of complex and contradictory relations that reconnect the present with the past, we could remake communities and spaces based on “what it is that we may yet have in common” (2000, p. 187).

These critiques and alternative modes of knowledge production are increasingly applied by feminist political geographers cited throughout this dissertation (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016; Hyndman, 2001b; Katz, 1994). Romola Sanyal (2014) argues that focusing on refugees' intimate and everyday spatialities can reveal how agency is exercised by descending into the ordinary (Das, 2006). Sara Smith (2012, p. 1523) further notes that bodies and emotions are not without geopolitical importance because “as individuals are caught up in the animation of geopolitical projects, love, fear, anxiety, and pain come to play a role...”. Similarly, I situate the knowledges, relations, and imaginaries produced across borders in my research as sites of geopolitical action on and through which geopolitics is performed (Pratt & Rosner, 2012).

Bridging ethnographic and feminist participatory action research

Generating a shift towards epistemologies centring on intimate and gendered spaces, actions, and relations across borders has required considerable methodological imagination. With an extensive background in humanitarian action, social justice work and community-based

research along migratory routes, I knew why and how I wanted to conduct this research. The challenge was to fit these ideas into a conceptualized and sound scholarly methodology. After much contemplation on what methodology could do justice to the research topic, questions and, most importantly, the research participants, I landed on one that carefully weaves ethnographic and feminist participatory action research methods together. The crafting of the methodological framework and strategies was primarily inspired by my previous knowledges and the work of groups with whom I have collaborated, including border-crossers, activists, *brujas*, artists, and (re)searchers.

A multi-sited ethnographic approach

Initially, I considered framing this research as a multi-sited ethnography as it prompts scholars to follow trajectories of geographical mobilities of individuals, ideas, or artifacts (Amelina et al., 2012). As Falzon (2009, p. 1) puts it, “The essence of multi-sited [ethnographic] research is to follow people, connections, associations and relations across space” to co-produce space, time and data. Marcus (1995; 2011) further argues that such research is most creative and critical when it involves the study of distributed knowledge systems and multi-sited imaginaries. Thus, the dimension of temporality and socio-spatial relations are centred rather than the places that situate the research (Marcus, 1995; Ong, 1999).

More broadly, ethnography as a research methodology and practice focuses on local and global issues through intimate observations and interpretations of experiences. It is an act of bounding “here” and “there” (Hyndman, 2001a) and a methodology under constant reinvention and negotiation (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007). Within geography, ethnography is a strategy applied to understand how people produce and experience their worlds through various processes, including place-making, occupying social spaces, creating networks across borders

and boundaries, and representing and re-making spatial imaginaries (Megoran, 2006; Fujii, 2014; Watson & Till, 2010). As a practice, ethnography seeks to establish horizontal relationships in which the research “field” and “post-field” or in-between moments can be spaces for knowledge co-production.

Researchers who apply ethnographic methods always alter the participants' and protagonists' experiences of certain situations and moments because they become integral to and are part of their experiences. In her dissertation (2022), deriving from an ethnography at a migrant shelter in southern Mexico, Yaatsil Guevara González, includes a quote from Nguyen (2019) on the importance of the in-betweens:

[...] the important learning of the ethnographer occurs in the time and places in between, in the misunderstandings and suspicion, in the conflicts and animosities, in things going wrong, in moments and unplaces and discoveries in navigating the personal relationships and the power relations one is thrown in to as a result of entering the social world of the people one studies. Often, this means seeing one's sophisticated theoretical framework undone (Nguyen cited in Guevara Gonzalez, 2022, p. 26).

I spent significant time at that same migrant shelter, and like her, I find this quote from Nguyen (2019) insightful in conceptualizing the many in-between moments occurring while conducting research in shelters and with people crossing borders in southern Mexico.

Eventually, I opted not to frame the research as a multi-sited ethnography, while I still used a multi-sited and multi-scalar ethnographical approach for parts of it. The ethnographic methods applied in this research include the co-creation of life history narratives (Sangster, 1994; Wolf, 1996), in-depth semi-structured interviews (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013; Longhurst, 2009), observation (Pain & Francis, 2003; Watson & Till, 2010), gathering of visual material

(including photographs of murals) and creative, analytical practice (Espiritu & Duong, 2018; Hogan, 2012; Lykes & Scheib, 2017; Rose, 2001; Winton, 2016). I also wrote “fieldnotes,” although I prefer to use Charmaz’s (2014) reference to *memos* rather than fieldnotes, as the word ‘field’ creates unnecessary divisions between here and there (Hyndman, 2001a). Also, I took notes throughout all stages of my research, not only while in the “field.”¹⁷

Approaching feminist participatory action research

While useful in many ways, I realized in the early stages of my research that there needed to be more than the ethnographic approach for what I wanted to do. My positionality is deeply rooted in activism and collaborations across differences, and I did not feel comfortable leaving those practices aside for this research. Some activist groups and feminist collectives that participated in this research have been “compas” (colleagues and friends) for an extended time. Over the years, we have, as Grewal and Kaplan (2000, para. 3 in Crosby & Lykes, 2019) frame it, collectively found ways to “destabilize rather than maintain boundaries of nation, race and gender.” These relationships and relations, some of which may be conceptualized as “pragmatic solidarity” (Farmer, 2003) with survivors of border and gendered violence, have helped me appreciate the importance of new epistemologies and acts of imagination in the face of violence.

As I learned from Crosby and Lykes's (2019) critical feminist participatory action research (PAR) with Mayan women protagonists in the aftermath of genocidal harm in Guatemala, I realized that parts of the research I had previously conducted resembled their inspiring approach to study outcomes and responses to gendered racialized violence. Their work also resembles *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) doings and imaginations that I was familiar

¹⁷ The *Finding Methods* section below presents these methods and related processes. See also Appendix B for a complete list of research activities.

with. A body-territory perspective asserts the inseparable ontological relationship between body and territory; thus, our bodies are affected when our places are violated, and vice versa (Zaragocin, 2020). As a method, this prioritizes *the body* and *communal subjectivity* as scales of analysis beyond individualized subjectivities (Cabnal, 2015a, 2010; Paredes, 2008). Communitarian feminists (Cabnal, 2015a, 2010; Paredes, 2008) and anthropologists (Hernández Castillo, 2016; Varela Huerta, 2020) in Mexico and beyond have long-centred body-territory participatory action research approaches. In recent years, feminist political geographers in Latin America have also applied *cuerpo-territorio* to map violence, harm, and contestations across bodies, lands, spaces and borders (Geobrujas, 2021; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021). For feminist geographers, body mapping (drawing life-sized maps of bodies and ‘answering’ guided questions) (Hawkins 2018; McLean 2022), provides a unique way to explore embodied experiences of body-environment relations (Cruz Hernández, 2020; Sweet & Ortiz Escalante, 2017), to forge solidarities and start a liberation process (Geobrujas, 2021; Luckett & Bagelman, 2023).

Through co-creating knowledges, communities and organizations can shape and utilize the body mapping process for social transformation and activist work (Gastaldo et al. 2012). Mexican feminist geography group *Geobrujas* (GeoWitches), for instance, centres body mappings to illustrate the violence of and resistance to the geopolitics of borders on bodies crossing them (2021).

Accordingly, different PAR methods have informed my research approach (Kendon et al, 2007; Lykes & Tavera, 2020). Particularly, the parts focused on gendered spaces of making while waiting in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands (Chapter IV) and the performativity of searches across borders for people who have disappeared (Chapter VI). My interpretation of

PAR is that it goes beyond the production of knowledges by favouring exchanges that seek to transform practices and facilitate the achievement of socially just goals. Everyone involved in the knowledge construction process is a researcher with their own perspective on accumulating new knowledges about problems and possible solutions.

Crosby and Lykes (2019, p. 13) articulate that such activist scholarship typically:

[...] draw[s] on a shared set of values, including democratic or participatory knowledge production, ethical fairness in the benefits of knowledge generation and use, and researcher reflexivity, as they facilitate participatory and transformative change process with those most directly affected by social disparities and oppressions in sites of humanitarian disaster, armed conflict and postwar transitions.

More specifically, they underline that as feminists engaging with PAR, we should seek to “facilitate knowledge construction that recognizes the particularities and historical situatedness of those with whom we partner and that emphasizes researcher reflexivity” (Crosby & Lykes, 2019, p. 14). This largely reflects how and why I decided to include participatory action methods in my research. I accompanied, participated in, and organized PAR practices with three groups and collectives, including La 72 Migrant Shelter, Mujeres Organización y Tierra and the Caravan of Mothers from Central America. The practices included *diálogos de saberes* (dialogues of knowledges) (Hernández Castillo, 2016) centring conversational exchanges, storytelling, and creative workshops; performative search efforts to make visible the absence of disappeared (feminized) migrant bodies; and body-territory mapping activities.¹⁸

¹⁸ The *Finding Methods* section below presents these methods and related processes in detail. See also Appendix B for a complete list of research activities.

What and who am I?

What am I to this research, and who am I to take it on? I have been conscious of these questions since applying to the Ph.D. program.

I returned to southern Mexico in early 2019, having worked there years earlier. In 2006 and 2007, I spent time along the Mexico-Guatemala border and migratory routes while working for a social justice organization and researching the outcomes of state violence in rural communities. At that time, border management and migration geopolitics were less notable. However, we often encountered people from Central America transiting through communities in Chiapas and Oaxaca. I stayed in contact with some of the communities and groups with whom I interacted, particularly those focused on gendered violence and support to migrants entering Mexico through its southern border. Over the years, I have also been in contact with migrant shelters and activists in Mexico as part of my previous work as a humanitarian and migration advisor with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF). In 2019, I visited Tabasco and Veracruz to support research that MSF conducted along the “Gulf route.”¹⁹

During this visit, I witnessed and heard about the violence that particularly women from Central America experience, how it follows them across borders and remains a part of their survival strategies. As I learned more about the work done by different groups in that area, I felt that these were the geographies, stories, and people I wanted to engage with in my PhD research. In addition to my interest in learning more about these often-overlooked gendered narratives of violence, displacement, and imagination across borders, I have always appreciated Mexican social science and feminist scholarship. Many scholars actively combine academic work with activism, participatory action research and radical solidarity with communities experiencing

¹⁹ See Figure 2 in Chapter I

violence and discrimination. Thus, my relation to this research is inspired by personal and professional relationships developed over many years in southern Mexico.

However, that does not answer my second question: Who am I to do this research? Also, how can I conduct ethically sound, non-extractive, and collaborative research that pushes theoretical and methodological boundaries while meeting my academic institutions' and financial sponsors' expectations? I have concluded that it is only possible with much imagination, humility toward the people and spaces I engage with, and continuous critical self-reflection of who I am and how I engage in this world.

I am a scholar, a mother, a woman in solidarity, an activist, and a political agent. I am also a privileged, well-educated, cisgender woman with citizenship in two of the richest countries in the world (Sweden and Canada). I grew up in Sweden and Spain, where free education exists, and I speak multiple languages fluently. My background and work have taken me to many politically fraught and culturally rich locations, commonly topping Western governments' list of places not to go to due to perceived security risks. This has given me insight into intimate and gendered spaces in often overlooked, misperceived, and sensationalized conflict and violence-ridden parts of the world. These include migratory routes from Central America through Mexico to the US and Canada, from East Africa through Libya to Europe, from the Middle East through Turkey to Europe, and from Southeast Asia through Malaysia to Australia.

Over the years of working for one of the largest humanitarian medical organizations in the world, MSF, I became increasingly aware and critical of its colonial history and structures, and I reached a point where I felt it was necessary to remove myself from the humanitarian aid business. I had seen enough to be deeply cynical about its nature while appreciating the

organization's core purpose: to provide medical care and humanitarian assistance to those most in need and to speak out against violent and often harmful state policies and acts.

In my next undertaking, I wanted to use my accumulated experiences, knowledges, and privileges to challenge generalized and spectacularized perspectives of violence, borders, and those crossing them. From the outset of my Ph.D. research, it was thus fundamental to imagine alternative ways of thinking and doing while always maintaining awareness of my positionality.

Embodying a feminist political and methodological stance at an interpersonal level, as I have sought to do, has been enriching and radical. Yet, it has also been challenging, particularly given the sensitivity of the research subject - women's very personal experiences of violence, displacement, loss, and injustice, in parallel with hope, love, and contestation. Furthermore, the power differentials between myself and the research participants - in the case of women protagonists residing in southern Mexico and people searching for their disappeared loved ones – is also a feature that I have sought to be conscious of and, where possible, leverage through acts of solidarity. These power imbalances, which cut across multiple identity categories, including race, class, nationality, and citizenship status, have significant implications for relationality, collaborations, and constructions of knowledges (Hyndman, 2001b; Távara, Lykes & Crosby, 2018).

I do not believe it is possible to overcome power imbalances fully while conducting research as an outsider. That said, I have consciously attempted to ameliorate as much as possible the negative consequences of these imbalances and the potential revictimization and discomfort by approaching all research participants with care and respect (McLean, 2020; Schrock, 2013;). Creating safer spaces for research participants experiencing gendered violence and displacement or being affected by disappearances involves the practice of active listening

and empathy. Creating safe spaces, in the case of disappearances, also implies respecting adequate verb tenses. Thus, I refer to the disappeared in the present tense so as not to reproduce the erasure of their loved ones or diminish the hope of the families (De Vecchi Gerli, 2018). Fostering relationships of respect and trust while seeking to understand the research participants' and collaborators' experiences of constraint and agency *from their perspective* are key feminist research practices (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Grewal, 2005; Millán, 2020; Swarr & Nagar, 2010) to which I have sought to adhere.²⁰

Before initiating this research, I also took a stance regarding language and translation to facilitate mutual respect and trust. This stance implied that I would only engage with people in the language of their preference and without a translator. More specifically, this meant I only included research participants and collaborated with groups who spoke Spanish or English.

In my previous work, I conducted research in diverse contexts, including with translators who did their best to translate the experiences shared with the MSF team by survivors of gendered violence and people moving along migratory routes. Further, they translated my questions into understandable and culturally appropriate inquiries. Then, the same translator or someone else would transcribe the interviews and translate them into English, which another translator would later proofread. This generated a lot of unnecessary distance and loss of nuance from people's highly personal and intimate stories, exacerbating existing power imbalances.

²⁰ Chapter III presents the central protagonists and other characters, the processes of fostering relationships with them, and the spaces where the research occurred.

I felt uneasy conducting research and engaging with people in such a way, and I decided to avoid replicating such situations again as far as possible. I understand this does not remove the prospect of misinterpretation or representation of the stories shared by research participants. However, to minimize the imbalance, I shared and discussed the interview transcriptions with all research participants to ensure they felt comfortable with the outcomes. The methods inspired by participatory action research (Crosby & Lykes, 2019; Hernández Castillo, 2016) were also developed and later analyzed with the research participants and collaborators. More broadly, I applied a constructivist grounded theory approach to the data collection and interpretation, which identifies the researcher's (my) positionality as framing and actively shaping the collection, production, analysis, and interpretation of the data (Chamraz, 2014; Távara, Lykes & Crosby, 2018).²¹

Finding methods: Between accompaniment, collaboration, and improvisation

Deciding on methods suitable to the research's aim and philosophy was a constant pursuit throughout the research. Considering my interpretative epistemological stance – derived from the belief that knowledge is constructed through human interpretation and social interaction - I was reluctant to finalize methods before developing relationships with the research participants and collaborators. That said, I appreciate the rigours of academic requirements that researchers should fulfil and get approved before initiating any data collection. Developing the research proposal and ethics application was useful in broadly thinking through the methods I planned to use. This encouraged me to map out an initial plan for the research and prioritize methods I was sure about while leaving other activities more open.

²¹ This is discussed in the *Analysis: Back and forth* section below.

Engaging ethnographic and participatory action research methods requires that the researcher spends a significant amount of time in the places and with the people included in the study. I was committed to doing so, yet I also had two young children I did not want to be away from for long periods. So, I made six research trips to Mexico, lasting 3-4 weeks each in 2022 and 2023.²² I also conducted virtual data collection and activities before and between the trips.

The primary material was generated by creating life history narratives, conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews, and organizing “dialogues of knowledges” (*talleres de saberes*). I also accompanied collective actions, including search efforts, body mappings, and art-based makings, in parallel with continuous observation and note-taking. In what follows, I define and detail the thinking behind these methods and how I applied them.

Life history narratives

Life history narratives, or life stories, life narratives, and oral histories, as they are commonly called, are interview-based research approaches that provide the opportunity to gain rich insights into respondents’ interpretations and memories of their own experiences and social circumstances in which their story has unfolded, and how they continue to be active agents in it (Atkinson, 1998; Gluck & Patai, 1991; Roets & Goedgeluck, 2007). Life histories have long been of interest to political geographers, and feminist accounts intentionally emphasize the experience and knowledge of those whose lives and places are in danger of being hidden from history (Gluck & Patai, 1991; Sangster, 1994). More specifically, feminist life history methods serve a political purpose to “[...] negotiate openness, expose hegemonic power arrangements and

²² I am aware of these research trips’ ecological footprint and cost. I made conscious travel choices, including taking direct flights and using public transportation as far as possible. Financially, I obtained funds from the SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship, the Graduate Fellowship for Academic Distinction, and the Academic Excellence Fund.

inherent silences, highlight secrets of oppression and resistance, and revalue knowledge that risks being disqualified in current social sciences” (Roets & Goedgeluck, 2007, p. 85). Jackson and Russell (2010) underline that life history methods reduce the likelihood of research participants giving a sanitized version of their lives, considering that the aim is to generate a holistic narrative of the diverse trajectories and experiences of research participants, including violence, survival strategies and contestations. Also, life history methods can give outsider researchers insight into spaces and times that may otherwise be inaccessible (McDowell, 2018).

As with all narrative research, life history narrative creation depends on the research participants sharing intimate experiences and memories and the social encounters created with the researcher; this implies that interviews and conversations cannot be replicated or generalized. Experiences and memories a research participant shares in one moment may differ from what they remember or are willing to share in another. Ultimately, these co-created narratives are incomplete living accounts that will shift and turn as the research participant and the researcher move throughout space and time.

Recruitment, limitations, and narrative validity

I intended to co-create 10 to 15 life history narratives with women from Central America who had crossed borders and resided in different sites across south-eastern Mexico. While the women’s accounts would not be generalizable, I wanted to make sure that I had a diversified sample by including women from different countries, with different ages, immigration statuses and other identities, and who were residing in different locations, preferably not at a migrant shelter. Diversifying the sample prompted diverse themes, connecting personal stories with others’ experiences. These threads would later be analyzed as categories and woven into a broader narrative (see *Analysis: Back and forth* below).

As I developed the research proposal, the director at La 72 Migrant Shelter, where I conducted parts of the research, suggested that the staff introduce me to women who previously resided at the shelter but now lived in Tenosique town, Tabasco. Through them, I later contacted other women in other locations.

From January 2022 until August 2023, I created life history narratives with fifteen women protagonists who, at the time, were residing in south-eastern Mexico. Each narrative was created over numerous months and multiple, generally three, sessions. I first arranged a meeting with the potential research participant. These initial meetings were for the research participant and me to get familiar with each other. I outlined the aims and frames of my research, what I expected from them as participants, and the consent process. I emphasized that their participation was voluntary and that I fully understood if they wanted to refrain from participating or if they would change their mind while co-creating a narrative. We discussed “trust,” usually explicitly referring to the initial lack thereof, and how to proceed. I ensured that they knew I was open to their ideas and preferences. In total, I invited twenty women to partake. Five decided they did not want to participate, and fifteen agreed. All fifteen completed their narratives with me.

Following their agreement to participate, we arranged for the first meeting, usually the longest. The other sessions largely focused on discussing the transcript from the previous one, followed by a less guided conversation in which I asked more specific questions or discussed certain experiences or moments that the participants wanted to share.²³ Accordingly, some of the life history narratives focus a lot on research participants’ childhoods and how those experiences then are intertwined with their situations today. Others centre on the circumstances before

²³ Before initiating the research, I developed a life history narrative research questionnaire that I used as a guide and adapted as needed (Appendix C).

leaving their homes and the situations experienced during their journey to Mexico. A few preferred to look ahead and imagine their own, their children's, and even grandchildren's lives in a year, five years, and ten years.

The initial sessions were conducted in person and at the research participants' preferred location, provided they fulfilled the standards detailed in my research ethics. Most subsequent meetings were conducted in person and often in the same place as the first. However, due to the fluidity of the spaces where the women resided, some follow-up sessions were done in other locations, including online. All but one of the women used WhatsApp regularly, so we also had continuous exchanges outside the formal meetings that fed into the final narratives.

Ten women participating in this part of the research came from Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula in Honduras, four from northern Guatemala (two of whom identified as Maya)²⁴ and one from Managua in Nicaragua.²⁵ They were between eighteen and sixty-five years old, and all had children either with them, at home or in the places they aimed to reach. Ten women resided in Tenosique or its surroundings in Tabasco; five were long-term residents at La 72 Migrant Shelter. Three lived in Palenque, Chiapas, and two in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz.

Initially, I aimed for a more diversified geographical sample. However, as Tenosique was one of the locations where I spent long periods and returned multiple times, it was practical to co-create most life history narratives there. Also, La 72 Migrant Shelter and their approach to

²⁴ As per the approved Ethics Protocols, the research participants were *not* recruited based on their Indigeneity or belonging to a specific ethnicity. The recruitment criteria centred on women crossing borders and their experiences with and actions against gendered violence and discrimination. A considerable percentage of women from Guatemala who cross the Mexico-Guatemala border, who do not have the resources or ability to move northbound fast, and who experience violence and discrimination in Mexico are Maya. The Maya women who participated in this research, including two in the co-construction of life history narratives and others in the participatory action methods, were invited to participate based on their lived experiences and acts of contestation.

²⁵ The research proposal states that I would also interview women from El Salvador. However, at the time of my research, few women, and people more generally, that I met came from El Salvador. Migrant shelter personnel reported a similar trend, speaking to the political changes in the country (Romero, Interview, 19 January 2022).

accompanying women in their often months-long asylum application processes (see Chapter V) made it easier to meet women residing in one location for an extended period who had time and felt safe enough to spend hours engaging with me.²⁶ Most women interviewed were from large urban centres in Honduras and Guatemala, where (gender) violence rates are very high (ICCPG, n.d.; Monitor Centroamericano de WOLA, n.d.). I intentionally sought to focus on women who remain in southern Mexico and who cannot move quickly to their desired destination. None of the women interviewed had the money to pay a coyote/guide to help them migrate, which meant higher risks of violence during their travels to and while residing in Mexico.²⁷

As mentioned, the fifteen narratives are not generalizable, and my goal was not to produce a large number for validity purposes. The narrative sample may have been more diversified had I only centred on this method instead of also engaging in participatory action research. I am confident, however, that the amount of co-created narratives was appropriate for research as it allowed me enough time and space to accompany the protagonists. The stories generated through narrative approaches are shaped through encounters between the researcher and the participant and thus profoundly reflect on the relationality of the encounters and the interpretation of memories (Jackson & Russel, 2010; McDowell, 2016). The relationship between myself and the women with whom I constructed these deeply personal narratives has been vital in interpreting the material. Also, I have been aware of how the spaces where the conversations take place influence interpretation and my own and the interviewee's positionality.

To minimize misinterpretations or misrepresentations of the women's stories, I recorded all the interviews, took handwritten notes, transcribed them, and reviewed them with the

²⁶ Chapter III presents the workings of La 72 Migrant Shelter and other spaces central to this research.

²⁷ This is a significant indication that resource access is also gendered, discussed in further detail in Chapter IV.

participants. I rewrote when needed and meticulously analyzed all the insights obtained throughout the narrative creation process. I then translated the final transcripts into English, and with permission from the research participants, I shared them with two other Spanish and English-speaking scholars to proofread the translations.²⁸

Further, I carefully respected the research participants' preferred names and pronouns. Many women chose a pseudonym, some preferred to use their first name or initials, and others collectively asked to be referred to as protagonists to emphasize their agency.²⁹

In-depth semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews, and in the case of this research, in-depth semi-structured interviews, are verbal interchanges where one person, the interviewer, attempts to elicit information from another person by asking questions (Longhurst, 2009). Even though interviewers tend to prepare a list of predetermined questions, in-depth, semi-structured interviews usually unfold conversationally, leaving space for the participants to pursue issues they feel are important. In-depth, semi-structured interviews are commonly used in geographical research to obtain partial insights into participants' experiences, perspectives, beliefs, and behaviors, including what people think and do about societal matters. It is a method that also requires careful consideration of the researcher's positionality and how this influences the responses received from participants and the research at large (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

²⁸ We worked closely together throughout my research and helped each other in different ways. They proofread my translations, and I edited their articles to be published in English.

²⁹ See footnote 4 on page 4 defining and situating the terms *protagonist* and *protagonism*. Also, Chapter V specifically centers on women's protagonism in Southern Mexico

In 2022, I conducted 26 in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of humanitarian initiatives in Mexico and coordinators for collectives searching for disappeared persons. These interviews aimed to generate information on the geopolitics of displacement in Mexico, the context of state and humanitarian responses, and the perspectives of people working directly on these matters.³⁰ While the primary focus of this research is women from Central America who cross borders, I saw the importance of also including perspectives from responders and others accompanying migrants. I was not interested in interviewing state authorities, heads of the United Nations or development agencies, but rather representatives for smaller or specialized organizations and groups (see Chapter III & Appendix D for an overview of these groups). This decision was made because most perspectives on migration and borders come from states and UN agencies and are already publicly available. I acknowledge those standpoints in my attempt to add to and, in part, shift the focus of related debates and analysis.

The recruitment for the semi-structured interviews varied. I knew some interviewees before initiating the research and began to request interviews while awaiting ethics approval. Others were recommended to me, or I got to know them throughout the research. The recruitment criteria also varied depending on the organization the participants worked for. I focused more on the interviewees' understanding of the situation and related actions than their organization's stance. Some interviews were conducted at the interviewee's office, others at a café of the interviewee's choice. Several interviews were conducted via Zoom, partly due to COVID-19 restrictions but also because of convenience – the possibility of conducting virtual and in-person interviews allowed for a varied sample size.

³⁰ See Appendix D for more details on the interviewees and the organizations/initiatives they represent.

I developed a semi-structured interview guide beforehand (Appendix E), but I often went off script, letting the interviewee lead the direction and format of our conversation. Also, I had not planned to interview representatives of search efforts for disappeared persons; however, as that became a central part of my research, I adapted the question guide accordingly. All the interviews were recorded following the ethics guidelines and with the participant's consent. I transcribed and shared the interviews with the interviewees for comments and edits. I then translated the approved transcript into English. As with the life history narratives, the translated transcripts from the semi-structured interviews were shared with two scholars for proofreading.

Dialogues of knowledges

Dialogues of knowledges (*diálogos de saberes* in Spanish) is a participatory action method that recognizes the partial nature of our perspective. Following Donna Haraway (1988), Mexican anthropologist Aida Hernández Castillo (2016) frames dialogues of knowledges as actions to produce a new meaning for the concept of objectivity that acknowledges the historical and political context from which we construct our knowledge. “We must search for creative ways to generate dialogues of knowledges that will allow us to propose strategies for struggle that are more congruent with the complex realities we are facing” (Hernández Castillo, 2016, p. 41). Dialogues of knowledges occur not only between the researcher and the research participants but also among the research participants, all of whom have had different life paths and contrasting ways of experiencing gendered inequalities and state violence.

As a method, dialogues of knowledges derive from communitarian and decolonial feminist scholars across Latin America (Cabnal, 2010; Hernández Castillo, 2016; 2016; Lugones, 2010; Segato, 2016) seeking to move away from homogenizing Western readings of racialized

women's experiences with violence. It centres on creating transformative spaces for collective reflection and knowledge production across differences by centring marginalized bodies, voices and makings (Espiritu, 2014; Hernández Castillo, 2016; Lykes & Scheib, 2017). In the case of this research, dialogues of knowledges meant generating spatialities where migrant women, searchers, practitioners, and researchers come together and construct accountable ways to understand and represent (gendered) violence and migration while collectively imagining alternatives.

Engaging in dialogues of knowledges implies centring feelings, thinking and acting collectively beyond pre-established frameworks. This requires an openness about the format and shape the encounters might take and what the outcomes may or may not be. Hernández Castillo engages dialogues of knowledges with racialized women inmates in Mexican prisons (2016), as well as with groups searching for disappeared people (2023), to reveal quotidian manifestations of resistance and to understand alternative conceptions of justice and memory. Feminist groups increasingly use dialogues of knowledges to bring together perspectives on feminicides and gendered violence across Latin America (Melgar, 2020; *Mujer y Futuro*, 2016).

Some dialogues of knowledges I took part in and co-organized in my research were purely conversational; others led to material productions of knowledge, including collectively produced texts, arts, maps and food. A couple of them generated knowings, doings and connections that took on a life on their own, far beyond this research or my co-producers' agendas and imaginations.

The body mapping activities (that I attended with groups searching for disappeared persons and the Geobrujas collective) partly differ from conceptualizations of dialogues of knowledges, particularly the inseparable ontological relationship between body and territory.

However, after consulting with selected scholars and activists, I place them under the same method category in my research. Eventually, they all centre on body-land epistemologies, creating transnational dialogue, emotions and actions that build bridges and articulations with others, mainly women, feminists, movements and organizations. This to generate social, political, and environmental transformations that create more livable lives and territories for all (Cruz Hernandez et al., 2020).

Talleres de saberes at La 72 and with MOOTS

In 2022, I organized four dialogues of knowledges, which we called *talleres de saberes* in collaboration with women protagonists from Central America, *La 72 Migrant shelter*, *Mujeres, Organizacon y Territorios* (MOOTS), and colleagues at the University of Cadiz and Wisconsin-Madison University. I also participated in two *talleres de saberes* organized by MOOTS. With consent from all the participants, I recorded these *talleres* and analyzed the outcomes using a grounded theory approach.

Commencing the research, I considered organizing dialogues of knowledges in addition to the life history narratives. However, having witnessed the many well-meaning activities being proposed to people experiencing displacement in other contexts, I was conscious about not being another outsider coming up with ideas or extracting information yet again from someone navigating violence. During the first visit to Tenosique and La 72 Migrant Shelter in January 2022, I spent most of my time making contacts, observing and initiating the co-production of life history narratives. I was invited to attend one of MOOTS dialogues of knowledges, in which they brought together women residing at La 72 Migrant Shelter and Mexican women living in the southern borderlands.

After this gathering, ideas started to be exchanged between myself, the women at La 72 Migrant Shelter and MOOTS. We decided to organize a *taller de saberes* in one of the communities where MOOTS works, inviting women residing in the area in March 2022. In parallel, two representatives at La 72 Migrant Shelter and I discussed organizing smaller dialogues of knowledges at the shelter and in the town of Tenosique. The preparation for the *taller*, co-organized with MOOTS, was mainly led by two of their representatives with my input. In contrast, the three *talleres de saberes* organized at La 72 Migrant Shelter were prepared collectively with women protagonists residing at the shelter, shelter staff, and other scholars.

Each *taller* included between 10 and 15 participants, and though the overall focus was gendered violence and survival strategies along migratory routes and, in the borderlands, the character and outcomes of each *taller de saberes* varied greatly. One *taller* centred on verbal exchanges and learnings about intimate violence, dreams and how we position ourselves in the world. The other *talleres* also included different art-making components, including the sharing of poems and images and the collective making of a mural (see Chapter V & Appendix F for more on the organizing and outcomes of the *talleres*).

Body-territory inspired activities

Activities grounded in body-territory epistemologies to co-create knowledges of violence and contestations across bodies and territories became central to my research and analysis. Particularly, I engaged in collective actions and dialogues with women residing in southern Mexico, searchers from Central America who assembled to make visible and try to find people who had disappeared while migrating through Mexico, and others accompanying them. I had not planned for these activities per se, but they were presented to me throughout the research and in my collaboration with feminist and search collectives.

Central to body-territory-influenced activities is the act of *acuerpamiento*. To *acuerpar* means the personal and collective action of outraged bodies at the injustices experienced by other bodies that summon themselves to generate political energy, resist and act against multiple patriarchal, colonial, racist and capitalist oppressions (Cabnal, 2010). Cabnal defines this process not only as an act of indignation or search for justice but also as an act born from love and empathy (see Chapters V & VI for more on acts of *acuerpamiento*).

Together with migrant women, searchers, feminist collectives, and others, I took part in a wide range of assemblies centred on making knowledges with others through processes of indignation and care. I documented these activities in various ways, including making audio recordings, taking notes and observing. The learnings from this were analyzed using a grounded approach, including continuous dialogues with others participating in the same activities and are fundamental to my overall writing.

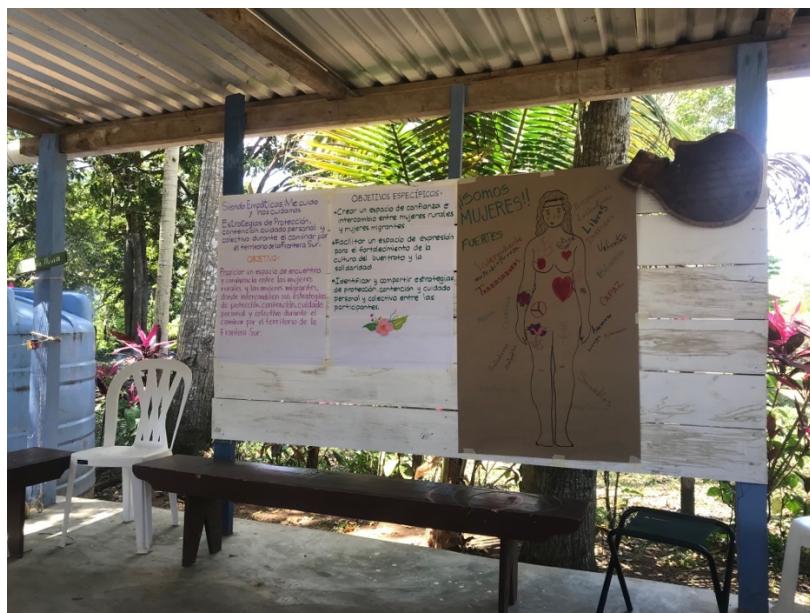


Figure 4. The objectives for the *taller de saberes* co-organized with MOOTS in March 2022, and a body map created during a related activity. Picture by the author.

Further, the making of body maps, which implies the collective drawing of life-sized maps of one of our (often women's) bodies and adorning it with the map makers' preferred images, words, and emotions, and 'answering' guided questions, are other body-territory-inspired activities in which I participated. Body maps were produced in one *taller de saberes* organized with MOOTS (Figure 4). Indigenous women who participated in this *taller* led a mapping activity centring on our bodies' unity with the southern border territories.' However, the body mappings of most importance for this research occurred during the Caravan from Central America, which was searching for disappeared migrants in April and May 2022. Parallel with the daily search efforts, the searchers assembled to narrate their collective struggle and create an alternative presence and memories of absent bodies by making body-territory maps.³¹

Observation and memos

When referring to the ways one can enter into fieldwork, and specifically to the use of participant observation, Erving Goffman noted that "[...] it's a technique of getting data [...] by subjecting yourself, your own body and your own positionality, and your own social situation to the set of contingencies that play upon a set of individuals, so that you can physically and ecologically penetrate their circle of response to their social situation (1989, p. 125). While it is a good definition of participant observation, 'getting data' sounds extractive. I consider my observations part of larger collective actions. In the assemblies of *acuerpamiento*, *talleres de saberes*, and body-mapping activities that I participated in, my role and contribution were partly to observe and, through that, to generate new knowledges.

³¹ The making and workings of body maps are discussed in detail in Chapter VI.

Beyond the observations I collected during these activities, I spent countless hours observing and conversing with border-crossers, border guards, residents, responders, searchers, artists, taxi drivers, restaurant owners, hairdressers, street vendors... living in and passing through spaces along the Mexico-Guatemala border and the “Gulf Route.” I recorded many of these interactions and related impressions in regular (though imperfect and partial) research notes and with critical self-reflection throughout all stages of my research (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). Inspired by Charmaz (2014), I refer to these notes and reflections as memos.

Sometimes, I asked to make audio recordings of people’s day-to-day dialogues while cooking, washing, or contemplating what was next. If I perceived that the presence of the audio recorder shifted the conversation, I immediately turned it off and disregarded the content. Many audio recordings and written memos of daily mundane interactions have proven helpful as background information when analyzing the material collected through life history narratives, semi-structured interviews, workshops, and other activities. I also observed by including written material (propaganda, bulletins, press releases) and collecting visual materials (Watson & Till, 2010; Winton, 2016), such as photographs of the spaces, murals with political messages and poems, and practices people engaged in. These have played a fundamental role in analyzing specific moments, spaces and discourses and the role they played for the research participants.

The ethics of informed consent is trickier for observation than informed consent in interview settings or during organized activities (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007), particularly when they derive from direct or intimate interactions. Observation raises questions about the researcher's responsibility to clarify their role and intentions (Cumo & Massaro, 2016). Knowingly or not, we always observe our surroundings, whether conducting active research or just living our lives. Often, impressions I might have had during the day came to mind at night,

and I made audio recordings or wrote a memo about them. The memos I have about in-between moments throughout this research are often the most informative to reflect upon. For instance, memos about a conversation I had with another bus passenger as we travelled from Tenosique to Coatzacoalzos; a thought that came to mind as I was at a playground with my kids about some of the people I worked with, women discussing how much rice and beans to make on that day; and women's collective beauty routines in temporal and precarious spaces.

The observations, written memos, and visual materials have grounded the research and informed my directions and methods. In combination with other interview and participatory action methods, they have helped me to, as Hitchings and Lantham (2020, p. 972) argue, "[...] surpass a decontextualized analysis of respondents' talk by seeking what further insights might come from a fuller engagement with social action in situ."

Analysis: Back and forth

Conscious of the volume and depth of the material that I sought to collect and aware of the intensity of the upcoming research phase, I set a goal to transcribe the collected material simultaneously with the data collection. Ultimately, I had more "spare" time during my research trips than at home with my small children, which helped me keep up. This was an important achievement and helped me maintain an overview of the overall research direction and engage a grounded and collaborative approach in selecting methods and related activities. The way I set up the process of constructing life history narratives with migrant women and how the *talleres de saberes*, or dialogues of knowledges were organized also required me to immediately transcribe the material collected, as it would be used as a basis for the next meeting or *taller*. It was also helpful that in the first couple of months of the active research phase, my focus was mainly on

creating life history narratives and conducting semi-structured interviews, while participatory action-influenced methods were introduced later. This approach allowed me to centre the women and their stories first and then transition into more participatory action-oriented activities, including with the same women, feminist collectives, and search groups.

What turned out to be more time-consuming was the translation of all the transcripts from Spanish to English. Initially, I aimed to translate all the material collected. Later, I decided to translate the full life-history narratives, semi-structured interviews, and some of the informal conversations. In contrast, only excerpts of the *talleres de saberes*, collective actions, and most informal dialogues were translated. I collaborated with two scholars who proofread my translations. Their readings gave me confidence that the translated transcripts reflected (as much as possible) what had been said during the interviews and interactions. As discussed above, translating and interpreting data is a highly political, intimate and sensitive part of the research. As researchers, “we are involved in multiple acts of translation,” not only from one language to another but also the translation of “oral testimony to written document” (Pratt, 2009, p. 6). Thus, engaging in these processes with others is vital to generating new and ethically sound knowledges and memories about violence, borders and related practices.

I implemented an open coding process for the data analysis following the Constructivist Grounded Theory Approach (CGT) (Charmaz, 2014, 2017). Even if the postulates of Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, [1967], 2010) emphasize the central importance of inductive methods, for this research, it was fundamental to situate additional occurrences potentially influencing including “the historical, social and situational conditions of its production,” and the “background, values, actions, situation, relationships with the research participants” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 209).

Another advantage of how I organized the research into multiple visits and stages was that it generated natural breaks. While many research participants were persistent throughout the visits, this setup helped categorize the material into different phases, contexts and categories. The approach also provided opportunities to reflect on the material collected and collaboratively set the focus for the upcoming visit. Thus, I could make a comparative analysis during the data analysis, even with the material from the same research participants, which is essential for grounded theory.

Some of the questions I stressed during the analysis were: how had the women I co-created life histories with changed their narrative over the months while living at La 72 Migrant Shelter or in Tenosique? How did their way of appropriating spaces change over time? Or how had their relations with other women residing at the shelter or with Mexican women along the southern border changed? For searchers, how did their search efforts change over time, including with news about their disappeared loved ones? And how had relations with other search collectives, including in Mexico, influenced their public messaging to create a presence of what is absent?

To achieve efficient systematization, I used the qualitative data analysis and research software NVIVO as the analytical platform for storing my data. While useful in many ways, NVIVO was sometimes limiting, particularly as it does not accommodate analysis in languages other than English or bilingual analytical practice. So, in addition to NVIVO, I manually completed parts of the analysis using Post-it notes, handwritten codes, and Microsoft Excel. Further, I used Microsoft One Note to store memos, audio, and visual materials. The combination allowed me to be more creative in the analysis process by generating codes and categories that reflect action, i.e., that end with “ing” (Charmaz, 2014). Also, I found the

manually analyzed materials easier to show and discuss with the research participants and collaborators.

From the hundreds of codes I generated from the transcripts, I grouped them into clusters, analyzing them back and forth until I was able to identify analytical categories (such as the role of gender, bordering practices, (dis)abilities, survival and protection strategies, the importance of place and body, the centrality of migration policies, as well as acts of making, protagonism and collective self-care). The amount of material I coded and categorized made it overwhelming to generate more theoretical analysis at first. However, I could complete the theoretical analysis more productively after dividing the analytical categories into three topic clusters.

The topic clusters, each of which contains its codes, core categories and theory building, are 1) gendered and intimate geopolitics of *vias Pa'l Norte* centring on women's experiences along changing migratory route and the outcomes of feminization of waiting, 2) undocumented bordering practices, protagonism and spaces of making in southeastern borderlands, and 3) performative searches for disappeared across borders. These clusters also gave rise to the dissertation structure, and the three substantive chapters each center on one of the topics, along with corresponding analytical theories and empirical data (Chapters IV, V & VI).

The materials obtained from observations and collected administrative paperwork, policy documents, press releases, and materials produced by the research participants, including poems and artwork, have also been central to situating the analysis. For me, it was very important to consider the situations (people, spaces, more-than-human elements and moments) both from a broader context and those elements that are often overlooked (Clarke et al., 2015). This includes the aesthetics and organization of spaces and how these affect relations; murals adorning the

walls of migrant shelters with messages about peace, borders, migration, hope and love; and the relations of presence and absence in the case of the disappeared and those searching for them.

Navigating back and forth between my data and relating the codes and categories from the grounded theory analytical approach with my observations and additional materials, I gradually generated “situational maps” (Clarke et al., 2015) for each of the three topic clusters.³² Using multiple methods in this research allowed for the implementation of diverse analytical perspectives to approach the data. The data triangulation also helped to select the material to be excluded from the dissertation, including the geopolitics of humanitarianism and migration governance, forced returns, the political economy of mega-projects along the “Gulf route,” and gendered reproductive labour processes. These are topics that I have either focused on in previous research or that I aim to develop in future research (see Chapter VII).

Non-final thoughts: Aftermaths of actions and collaborations

Engaging feminist ethnographic and participatory action-inspired research methods in precarious, fluid and intimate transnational spaces and with people experiencing violence and uncertainties is vital to, as Khosravi (2024) says, understanding the border from the other side. It means embracing alternative epistemic positionings that give rise to new questions and methodologies. It also generates personal and emotional ties beyond the research, creating opportunities and challenges. Feminist research that intentionally crosses borders and blurs boundaries (Cuomo & Massaro, 2016; Hyndman, 2001b; Katz, 1994) is an embodied and embodying form of knowledge production (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2007, p. 176). It is a political

³² The situational mapping exercises, often done on large whiteboards or posters, made it easier to classify and analyze the empirical data from the participatory actions.

act that prompts attention to gendered actions, spaces and relations that have been disavowed, left behind, covered over, and remain unseen (Gordon, 2008). Further, it is an affective research approach in which the researcher is one of its central protagonists, and power imbalances are constantly present, in parallel to the co-creation of knowledges and imaginations of worlds we collectively believe in.

The most challenging part of the process was thus ending the research. How do we end something that is still not finished and may never be finished and that brings us together with people and spaces we want to see more of?

The end date for my first ethics approval was December 1, 2022. That date and officially set boundary came way too quickly. I was not ready to finish my research, and I had more questions to seek answers to and ideas to complete before I could wrap it up. However, I was conflicted about whether extending it was right or more about my emotional attachment to something I wanted more time with. After much contemplation and an opportunity to dialogue with a central protagonist in my research, whom I had not yet had a chance to exchange with, I submitted another ethics application, permitting me to continue the research until June 26, 2024. It felt good to have more time. Still, the question about how and when to bring it to an end lingered.

During my conversation with Juanita, whose story is narrated in Chapter VI, on October 12, 2023, we discussed disappearances across borders and the aftermath of her release from prison after arbitrarily being held for almost eight years. I strongly felt that this should be the last material to be collected for this project since our conversation made me realize that my thinking concerning gendered geographies of violence and contestations across borders will and should remain non-final. Also, the relationships developed throughout this research were ready for a

new phase beyond the frames of this study. I aim to continue working with some of the research protagonists and characters in future projects to further conversations and project ideas that have emerged throughout this work (see Chapter VII for more on future research).

The following chapter is a continuation of this chapter. It situates the sites, protagonists, characters, and my relationships with them that have been fundamental to this research.

Chapter III. Situating the research: Sites, protagonists, and other characters

Introduction

When I started my Ph.D. in September 2019, I also held a research position at the Dahdaleh Institute for Global Health Research at York University. I co-led a research project on the humanitarian and legal outcomes of temporary protection for people experiencing displacement in Mexico and Turkey. In Mexico, our focus was primarily on people from Central America who remained in the southern borderlands (Biorklund & Ferguson, 2021; Ferguson & Biorklund, 2020). I interviewed state officials and humanitarian and human rights organization representatives about the temporary protection program in Mexico. Through this work, I made new connections that also came to play a central role in my Ph.D. research, particularly in pointing me to some of the research sites and people where and with whom I spent much time. My research developed over several trips or “stays” and by accompanying women’s, feminist, and search collectives in Mexico. The active research phase was between January 2022 and October 2023, yet as mentioned, some collaborations started long before that and continue today.

In this chapter, I contextualize the places, protagonists, and characters central to this research, including my relations with them and how they have influenced the project. First, I introduce the three main research sites. Then, I present the women protagonists and other characters vital to realizing this project. The information in this chapter is based on conversations with research participants, formal interviews, and participant observations.

The sites of this research

Throughout the research, I spent time at migrant shelters and surrounding transit sites, including border crossings and points of entry from Guatemala, bus and train stations, restaurants, bars where some research participants worked, and agricultural farms employing migrants in the states of Tabasco, Chiapas, and Veracruz. I conducted interviews and attended events in Mexico City. Given COVID-19 restrictions during the active research phase, I also conducted interviews on Zoom and WhatsApp and attended events in diverse online spaces.

Three places in/with which I stayed for an extended time were particularly imperative to the research: 1) La 72-Shelter for migrant persons in Tenosique Tabasco, 2) Las Patronas women's collective in northern Veracruz and 3) the *XVI Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas* (XVI Caravan of Central American Mothers) searching for disappeared across southern Mexico.

La 72 migrant shelter and surroundings

La 72 is a migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco, about 60 km from the Mexico-Guatemala border. Tenosique is one of the southernmost towns on the “Gulf route,” where migrants crossing into Mexico from Guatemala transit through and increasingly stay for prolonged periods. The transpacific freight train, *la Bestia*, commonly used by border-crossers, departed from Tenosique up until August 2020, when it was halted as the development of the mega train project, el Tren Maya, began.³³ La 72 is the only migrant shelter in the state of Tabasco and one of few in southern Mexico that provides long-term (up to nine months) refuge to people belonging to what is commonly referred to as “vulnerable groups.” These include women, minors, elders, and others experiencing discrimination due to their gender, race, age or

³³ For more on el Tren Maya, see Chapter IV and Appendix G.

sexual preference. La 72 was named after a violent event in 2010, where seventy-two migrants, mostly Central American, were found murdered on a ranch in the state of Tamaulipas.

The shelter can host up to 300 persons, and everyone is welcome to rest for at least a night or two if there is space, provided they do not bring in any objects deemed dangerous or drug substances. As per Mexican law, authorities are not allowed to enter the shelter under any circumstance, nor can they detain anyone who remains in the surrounding space (see Chapter V). Thus, many undocumented migrants also take advantage of the non-policed zone and temporarily stay outside La 72 in what can be compared to make-shift camps before moving elsewhere. The total size of the space, including the surrounding area, is approximately 750 metres x 750 meters, with the space inside the shelter divided into multiple units (based on recorded personal observations and calculations). One unit is designated for people who stay for a night or two as a resting spot, two units host women and children staying between three and nine months, and a small long-term unit for men. Another unit is allocated for LGBTIQ+ identifying people who prefer to stay in a separate space, and one for unaccompanied minors. The shelter's centre has a kitchen and a canteen, where residents cook on shifts and serve three meals daily, and spaces for leisure. An office supports asylum applications, and a small medical clinic inside the shelter is complemented by a larger one just outside its gates, plus a pharmacy: one-stop services integrated into this vast centre. Lastly, there is a unit with offices of the managing staff and partners on the bottom floor and two dormitories on the upper floor where volunteers and guests, including researchers, can stay up to three months.

La 72 2014-2017

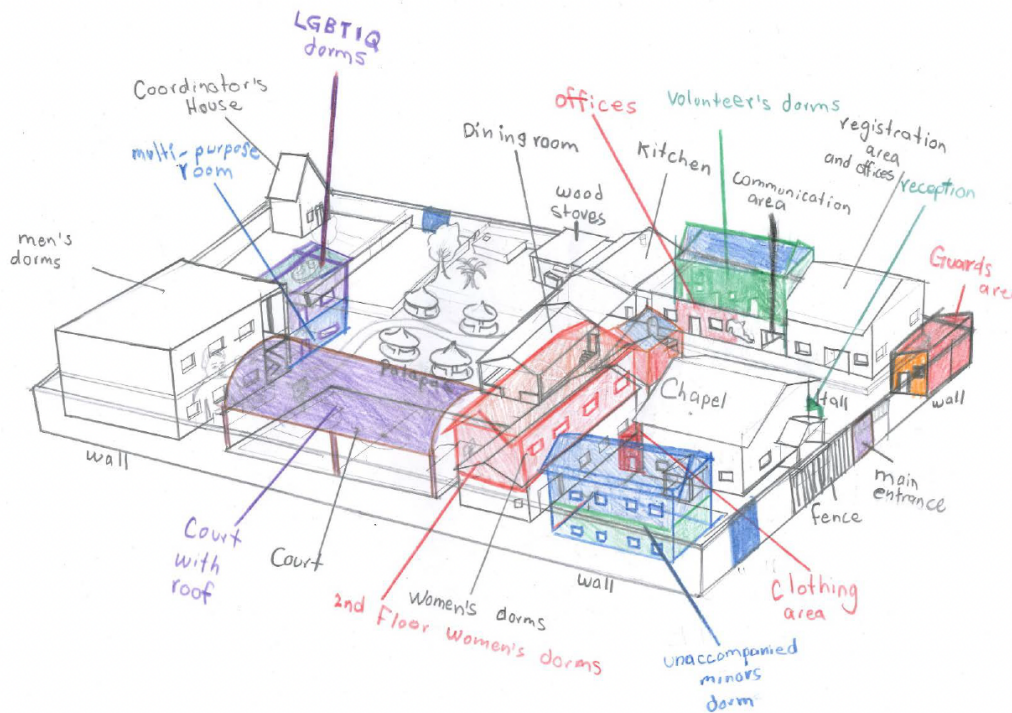


Figure 5. La 72 in 2016. Source: ©Josue Estrada. 2019 included in Guevara González (2022, p. ix)

During my four separate stays at La 72 and Tenosique, which lasted approximately two weeks each, I alternated between staying overnight at the shelter and a nearby hotel. I appreciated the hospitality at La 72, as it gave me more time to form relations with the residents and staff and understand the related intimate spaces, reproductive labor and home-making practices, even if temporarily. At times, however, I felt the need to get some distance and not have to comply with the shelter's regulations. These included a curfew, specific COVID-19 restrictions, and the expectation that the residing volunteers and researchers would take on related tasks if an emergency happened at night when the regular staff were not present (La 72, 2020). Security staff were at the shelter 24/7, so the "urgent matters" needing attention at night mainly included tasks such as providing migrant residents with toilet paper and water, helping

mothers heat water to make formula milk for their children, or just taking the time to chat with those feeling the need. I did not mind taking on these tasks; rather, the opposite. Still, my presence sometimes generated confusion about my role at the shelter. Also, I was conscious about not participating in permanent processes or regulations, as my stays in and contributions to the shelter were temporary.

The organization of space at La 72 (see Figure 2 above) includes gender-specific dorms that largely influence how relations and intimate spaces develop within the shelter. The space allocated for temporary stays, where people transiting through can stay for a night or two, is fluid and generates intense energy. People staying there usually arrive after having travelled, often on foot, for days, crossing multiple militarized borders. They are tired, often hungry, and have medical needs. Yet they are set on continuing and are often more focused on finding the best means and companions for their onward journeys. Many stay up all night, exchanging stories with others about their experiences while strategizing for the next stretch. Most are men, but many women, children and adolescents also pass through this temporary space.

The women and children who reside in the shelter for up to nine months are allocated a bed, locker, and a place for their belongings. House rules define expected behaviours and the schedules for cleaning responsibilities, shower times, and childcare. These rules also limit time spent in the dorm. In the past, issues arose with people spending their days in bed, not taking on required house-related responsibilities, engaging in money-making activities or pursuing their pending asylum applications. A social worker shared with me that the residents have often experienced life-changing and violent events, and only upon arriving at this relatively safe space - even if temporarily – do they start to process what they have been through. For some, this

causes anxiety and fear, making them prefer staying in their beds and dorms (personal conversation, 14 January 2022).

Outside the women's sections of the shelter is a courtyard with palapas (tables and umbrellas), and the kitchen, where the food and other necessities are stored. Women residing at the shelter tend to spend a lot of time socializing and engaging in diverse activities of making, including arts and food (see Chapter V). These are highly gendered and transformative spaces where I spent much time during my stays. Another such space is the clothes dispensary, where donated items are kept for passing migrants. It's a small 'free' store that offers people clothes, shoes, toys and other necessities at no cost.

I interacted with people on the move in these spaces at various social and communal levels. I did not conduct any interviews in these spaces, though I met people I later interviewed in an allocated private space that the shelter director kindly offered me. However, most of the life history narratives and in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in the Tenosique area were conducted outside the shelter in spaces chosen by the research participants.

La cocina de las Patronas (Las Patronas's kitchen)

Las Patronas is a women's collective in Guadalupe, La Patrona, located in Amatlan de los Reyes in Northern Veracruz. The collective compassionately provides food and shelter to migrants passing by on (the rooftops of) the transpacific train, *la Bestia*. Since 1994, this group of approximately 20 women has fed and accompanied migrants travelling towards the Mexico-US border. The story goes that one day back in 1994, Leonila, or *Doña Leo* as she is commonly called, who lives next to the train tracks, asked her daughters to share some of their food with migrants travelling on the train. As the train slowed, her daughters shared their bread and milk

with several northbound travellers from Central America. *Doña* Leo was aware that the local authorities did not appreciate solidarity acts with migrants, and she was conscious of her community's conservative outlook on foreigners and on women who engaged in labour outside their homes. Still, she felt she had no option but to start providing food for the passers-by. She recruited other women from the village as volunteers. Many were reluctant, but a few joined, and she engaged all her children. They started on a modest scale, making beans and rice that they put into tiny bags that could be thrown to people riding the train (Romero, Interview, 31 January 2022).

Initially, they had little support, so the food was sparse, and many locals opposed their activities. Yet, their solidarity with migrants became more known in surrounding communities, particularly as the number of people from Central America transiting through the area on their way north rapidly increased. The word spread among mobile communities that La Patrona in Veracruz was one of the few locations along the migratory route where they could get food and support. Las Patronas had difficulty keeping up, particularly as increased demand meant higher costs that they could only cover with external support (Romero, Interview, 31 January 2022). With time, they became more known among other migrant solidarity groups in Mexico and within humanitarian circles, partly due to documentaries released about their actions in the early 2000s (Dávila & Álvarez, 2015; González Villaseñor, 2014; Previdi, 2019).

The group started receiving financial support from diverse donors, including the United Nations and the Red Cross, enabling them to expand their activities. The financial support also permitted them to buy the property next door to *Doña* Leo's home, next to the train tracks. They built a large communal kitchen where they could prepare food, and a guest house was constructed for migrants needing a safe space to rest for a night or two. The guest house has 30

beds and additional space where mattresses can be placed when the number of guests exceeds the bed capacity. Over the years, they have also hosted migrants for extended periods, particularly people injured from travelling on the train and needing to recover, as well as families travelling with young children. Those who stay longer become a part of Las Patronas collective and are expected to provide support in preparing food and doing chores around the guest house. Today, the collective receives food donations from local actors, farmers, and supermarkets and financial support from religious groups. They stop short of accepting donations from political parties to avoid both influence from and association with them. However, this position is difficult to uphold strictly, as many religious groups have close ties with local, state, and national political leaders (Romero, Interview, 31 January 2022).



Figure 6. Upper left: Mural at the entrance of Las Patronas illustrating *la Bestia*, the Statue of Liberty, and Doña Leo's portrait under the text: "The via where the paths of bravery and love come together," photo by the author. Upper right: Las Patronas preparing water bottles. Lower left: Member of Las Patronas handing out food to migrants travelling on *la Bestia*. Lower Right: Doña Leo providing water to passengers. Source ©Las Patronas.

I spent two weeks at and with Las Patronas in January and February 2022, participating in their day-to-day activities. I interviewed some of the members who are currently the most involved in Las Patronas' administration. While there, I stayed in a part of Las Patronas's guesthouse reserved for supporters, volunteers, and visitors who are not from the area. In exchange for the housing, visitors are expected to help. They have a rotating schedule to delegate tasks such as preparing food, ensuring water bottles are filled up, picking up bread and food items from nearby markets, and taking on night shifts as the train often passes in the late evenings or at night. Some members say handing out food when it is dark is the trickiest part. It is harder for migrants to see them and to trust that they are not the police or immigration authorities seeking to detain them (personal conversations, 28, 29, 30 January 2022).

In recent years, train routes have changed a lot (see Chapter IV), particularly since 2020, when *la Bestia* stopped operating in the southern parts of the country, and trains have been passing by La Patrona less regularly. As a result, people coming to stay at the shelter have been staying longer while waiting for the next train (Romero, Interview, 31 January 2022). Some arrive at the shelter by foot after walking long distances throughout Veracruz. One member of Las Patronas told me that she observes fewer migrants now than in previous years but that those who arrive are often in more urgent need of assistance. She says many have not eaten for days so when they arrive, they eat a big meal and sleep for long hours (Ramirez, Interview, 31 January 2022).

Beyond the direct assistance to migrants, Las Patronas' communal kitchen and guest house have also become a space for hosting gatherings and events. They organize parties for *Doña Leo's* birthdays and anniversaries. They host events to raise awareness on topics such as migrants' rights, gendered violence, and disappearances. The yearly Caravan from Central

America searching for disappeared migrants often makes its way to Las Patronas. A large parade is then organized with local search collectives throughout the small town, ending up at Las Patronas, where food is served, and the searchers and migrant support groups may spend a night exchanging experiences.

The larger events tend to attract public attention as Las Patronas increasingly holds press conferences to draw attention to issues affecting migrants. For instance, when there has been a train incident in which migrants have been killed or injured or when migrants have been violently arrested. In May 2022, as I accompanied the search Caravan and we spent a day with Las Patronas, they collectively organized a press conference centring on the increasing number of disappeared migrants in Mexico and how it relates to gendered violence and migration policies more generally. The next day, Las Patronas issued a press release detailing the group's position (2022). One of *Doña Leo*'s daughters, now a leading collective figure, spends much of her time on public relations, including with other collectives, journalists, filmmakers, and researchers. She and other members travel nationwide to raise awareness about their activities and frequently receive international invitations. Thus, Las Patronas has also become a transnational space connecting groups in different parts of the world.³⁴

XVI Central American Search Caravan and related spaces

The XVI Caravan from Central America, searching for people who have disappeared while migrating through Mexico, is another vital space in my research. Annual transnational searches for their children, siblings, parents, and friends – who left their homes, crossed into Mexico and then disappeared – are a kind of socio-spatial praxis generated by heterogeneous

³⁴ For more on Las Patronas' political acts, see Chapters V and VI.

groups (including but not limited to mothers). The Caravan comprises search collectives from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and at times, Mexican search collectives and other supporters, including psychosocial workers, journalists, researchers, and advocates. Collectively, they create geographies (both present and absent), and their stories of violence, resistance and hope are intertwined in these transnational search spaces. This space looks and feels different every year as the disappeared, the searchers, the routes, the places searched and occupied, and the collaborators continuously change (Lopez, Interview, 6 May 2022).

The searchers whose loved ones have disappeared while migrating are, first and foremost, searching for their missing person, and they do so along migratory routes and in cemeteries, clandestine mass graves, detention centres, prisons, and hospitals. Beyond their aim to find (or find out about) their person, they grieve and collectively contest the violence that migrants face as they search for safety in Mexico.

In May 2022, I accompanied the XVI Caravan from Central America through four Mexican states (Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, and Mexico) as participants called attention to and demanded action for their disappeared loved ones. We stayed in different places every night, at hotels, migrant shelters, churches, and at Las Patronas. We marched in each place and occupied a central town space, often collaborating with local feminist groups. A final march in Mexico City, with multiple Mexican search collectives, was the culmination of political actions carried out in several cities. This final march in which thousands of searchers attended, was organized by *Movimeinto Migrante Mesoamericano* (the Mesoamerican Migrant Movement), *Puentes de Esperanza* (Bridges of Hope), and other national search committees. While the Caravan reached its destination in Mexico City, other searchers continued. For instance, Juanita's community

from Guatemala, whose search efforts I write about in Chapter VI, carried on to the Mexico-US border.

Some searchers have participated in the Caravan since it was established in 2005. Others whose loved ones disappeared between 2020 and 2022 joined the Caravan (that I accompanied) for the first time as the COVID-19 pandemic prevented them from participating earlier. Carrying portraits of their missing loved ones, more than 60 searchers formed the 2022 caravan to search and to “*acuerpar*” their grief and political grievances publicly. In the words of Mayan communitarian feminist Cabnal (2010), *acuerpar* involves taking personal and collective action by gathering family members and friends, outraged by the injustices experienced by their loved ones, to generate political pressure. In patriarchal contexts of feminicides, gendered violence and disappearances, embracing others and putting collective self-care into practice is a revolutionary act of listening, hugging and sharing (Vázquez Colmenares, 2023). As one of the mothers partaking in the 2022 caravan told me: “This shared fight of grievance and hope momentarily displaces my pain. It gives me the strength to continue the search and to denounce the systemic violence towards migrants” (personal conversation, 10 May 2022).

The transnational search Caravan is an important space for collective self-care across borders. The concept of collective self-care is commonly used by Caravan participants and embeds interconnected processes of femininity, self-defence and political agency (Vázquez Colmenares, 2023). This makes the Caravan a space where, along with grieving, both personal and collective care are cultivated among the searchers who share the pain and indignation of not knowing if their disappeared loved ones are dead or alive and, if living, what they are enduring. Together, they build a network of care and a space that represents both hauntings of the past

(Gordon, 2008) and longings for what is yet to come.³⁵ Honor Ford-Smith and Beverley Hanson (2022, 375) relatedly emphasize that enacting collective self-care is a way of “shifting the notion of justice from a punitive, carceral and painful disciplinary [...] to one that is profoundly restorative, reparative and accountable.”

According to a psychosocial worker from Guatemala accompanying the searchers, the collective self-care generated during the Caravan creates relationships and understandings that are not commonly seen elsewhere. She says, “The Caravan, which takes place a few weeks every year, receives much media attention. This is good, but we do much more than that. All the work and care shared throughout the rest of the year is equally important” (Lopez, Interview, 6 May 2022). Related spaces of care and activism created around the Caravan continue to exist, change, and grow every day of the year. These spaces, in which collective actions and healing for oneself and others are centred, are what many searchers consider the most notable difference in their search and grief process (personal conversations, 2 -19 May 2022). The psychosocial worker further explains that the search and all the spaces it embraces, including the transnational Caravan, become a community and a central part of searchers’ identity. Many remain active in the search groups even after they receive notice about their loved one who has disappeared. By then, they are often so committed to the search and the support they both receive and give that it is a central part of their lives (Lopez, Interview, 6 May 2022).

³⁵ Feminist scholars have written about the centrality of collective self-care in migrant and search caravans across borders in Central America and Mexico (Biorklund, 2022; McLean, 2020; Varela Huerta et al., 2017; Vogt, 2016). Ford-Smith’s work on self-care emphasizes the intersection between self and community and the question of justice, considering neoliberalism’s differential outcomes, which is also relevant (Ford-Smith & Hanson, 2022).



Figure 7. Left: One of the coordinators for Guatemalan search groups by the train tracks in Coatzacoalcos during the 2022 search Caravan. Right: Caravan partakers and coordinators approaching Las Patronas collective after hours of marching through La Patrona town. Source © Felix Melendez, 2022.

Members of Las Patronas women’s collective in Veracruz introduced me to the organizers of the search Caravan organizers in 2021. Hence, it was particularly special when the Caravan visited and engaged in collective actions with Las Patronas. Following months of conversations and virtual collaboration after the introduction in 2021, I was asked to join the Caravan as one of their “feminist scholar-activists,” as noted in their invitation. I was to assist the coordinators of search committees and other professionals in *accompanying*³⁶ the participating mothers, families, and community members. To accompany the participating searchers, I was also asked to (co)produce materials from the searchers’ political acts and conversations and interviews with the coordinators, counsellors, and searchers. The co-production of knowledges has been occurring in multiple ways.³⁷ This approach has allowed me to accompany searchers and the organizers in spaces beyond the 2022 Caravan, participating with them and drawing on our shared activities to produce new materials for the searches and this dissertation.

³⁶ *Accompanying* is understood here as lending one’s body (in this case, my body) to the other’s pain (Das, 1996, 2006). See Chapters V and VI for more detailed discussions on the meaning and significance of “accompaniment” in the context of disappearances specifically and related to the broader geopolitics of borders and displacement. See Appendix A, situating Das’s writings on accompanying others in their pain.

³⁷ For more on co-production of knowledges see Chapters II and VI.

While my presence at activities related to the Caravan implied a minimal security risk for me, the insecurities and constant threats experienced by searchers and others accompanying them in Mexico, including journalists, are exponential (Article 19, 2022). The presence of other outsiders, including me, generates a certain level of security for the participants. Thus, them inviting “foreigners” to accompany the Caravan is not only a way to generate knowledges but also a strategy to reduce violent encounters with authorities and other actors along the routes. In her work, *Alter-geopolitics*, Sara Koopman (2011) conceptualizes these dynamics by centring on how international volunteers in Colombia use their privileged Western bodies to build alternative securities for more “precarious bodies.”

The protagonists and other characters

Starting with the protagonists, this section introduces a list of the characters I have learned from, worked with, and been challenged by. The relationships I developed with them made this research possible.

Women from Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and Nicaragua who had left their homes, often accompanied by their children, crossed borders and walked long distances to arrive in southern Mexico. They are the protagonists who inspired me to conduct this research. Their intimate and highly political acts of agency, survival and imagination - often overlooked in critical border and Refugee Studies scholarship - provide deep insight into the geopolitics of borders, violence and care. I engaged with approximately fifty women from Central America who had crossed borders for safety reasons and resided in southern Mexico for some time. The majority had left their homes in the context of gendered and intimate violence. I constructed life history narratives with fifteen women and spent a great deal of time with other women

conversing and making things together, particularly with long-term residents at La 72 Migrant Shelter. Oftentimes, these engagements were casual, including cooking together. We also organized activities to exchange knowledges and thoughts, including with women from communities in southern Mexico, at art workshops and public events.³⁸ Moreover, I developed relations with women whom I encountered at other locations along migratory routes, including in Tapachula (Chiapas), Palenque (Chiapas), Ixtepec (Oaxaca), Coatzacoalcos and La Patrona (Veracruz), as well as Mexico City (Mexico).

People on the move, more broadly, are a group of people I have continuously engaged with throughout the research. I spent time conversing with men, mainly those who had left their homes in Honduras in the context of gang violence and who often spent time in the safe zones outside migrant shelters. In early 2022, a large migrant caravan formed in Honduras and grew as it headed north. They were stopped by authorities when they reached the Guatemala-Mexico border. I encountered people who spoke about their experiences with this caravan. Throughout 2022 and 2023, I also met people from Venezuela, Ecuador, Haiti and African countries. A lot of Haitians had been living in Brazil and Chile for years but left due to increasingly strict migration policies. People from Uganda, Cameroon, Burundi, and Nigeria shared that they had flown into countries without visa requirements and then travelled on foot with other migrants to Mexico. Many sought to reach the U.S. and Canada. Others planned to stay in Mexico.

My relationships with members of various *women's and feminist collectives* in Mexico have been vital to this research and are discussed throughout the dissertation. These include *Las Patronas*, organizers and participants in *the XVI Central American Search Caravan*, coordinators

³⁸ For more on these activities, see Chapter II.

for national search committees from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador— and other scholars and journalists accompanying the Caravan. Also included are the founders/directors of *Mujeres Organización y Tierra (MOOTS)*, an organization working with women in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands, and members of *Las Brujas del Mar* with whom I collaborated in events and dialogues on femicides and disappearances in the state of Veracruz. Further, *Geobrujas*³⁹ is a group of feminist geographers who organize and in body-mapping workshops with communities across Mexico and beyond. I attended one of their online workshops in May 2020. This led to more interactions, which have been central to my understanding of why and how to generate body-territory mappings. Engagements with *feminist scholars* centring migration, borders, and gender violence in Mexico have also been significant.

Mural artists and art collectives in Mexico are other influential characters. In 2019, I learned about a project titled ‘Murales No Muros’ (Murals, Not Walls) that the Human Rights Commission conducted in collaboration with mural artists (CNDH, 2018) promoting the collective making of murals along migratory routes, with key messages for and from migrants. One of the participating muralists, Eva Bracamontes, who made the mural below, has been central to my work. This includes advising on art-based activities organized at La 72 Migrant Shelter (see Chapter V).

³⁹ The use of the term *bruja*s in their names is in itself a theoretical and methodological approach to counter more conventional discourses, including maternalistic and state-centric discourses about violence. For more on this, see Chapters VI and VII.



Figure 8. A mural in Mexico City created by ©Eva Bracamontes (2018) that was included in an article in the *Oxford Monitor of Forced Migration* titled: ‘Better than Nothing’ Approaches to Protection and the Violence of the Law in Turkey and Mexico, by Rhonda Ferguson and me, Linn Biorklund (2020).

Migrant shelter personnel across southern Mexico have played an important role in my work. Specifically, staff at La 72-migrant shelter, including coordinators for “humanitarian assistance,” the women and gender unit, and a program called “structural change.” An important part of my contextual knowledge concerning the geopolitics of the routes, migration policies, and related state practices was obtained in conversations with staff at different migrant shelters and representatives of other organizations assisting people on the move in southern Mexico.⁴⁰

Representatives of humanitarian and migrant support organizations are other noteworthy characters. My previous work with MSF facilitated contact with humanitarian organizations and

⁴⁰ Many shelters are led by or have close contact with religious groups. The *Franciscan Network for Migrants* is a religious group that provides assistance to migrants in Mexico. I have encountered it in multiple locations throughout my research. In light of border and migration governance geopolitics, further research and analysis could be done on the role of the Franciscan Network for Migrants and other religious actors in Mexico and beyond.

diverse groups assisting migrants arriving from Central America.⁴¹ My engagements with representatives for the Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migration (IMUMI) (*Institute for Women in Migration*) that focus on often-overlooked aspects of migration that women, particularly racialized women, experience in Mexico have been specifically insightful.

Lastly, *disappeared persons* are characters and protagonists that have deeply influenced and challenged my thinking. This character group is very different: more visceral, methodological, and theoretical than the others listed above. I did not initially plan to focus on disappearances (see Chapters I & II), and my research proposal from 2021 only briefly mentions disappearances as one aspect of the gendered violence experienced by migrant women. This changed throughout the research as new learnings made it obvious that the disappearance of migrants, particularly women, requires further research and attention. The relationship I have with people who have disappeared while crossing borders is difficult to describe. It is undeniably imbalanced, as I know much about their experiences and lives from working closely with families and communities searching for them, and they know nothing of me or that I have spent endless hours thinking about their disappearances. In Chapter VI, I focus on the geopolitics of disappearances and performative search efforts across borders. I close that chapter with a conversation I had with Juanita, from Guatemala, who had disappeared in Mexico and who was “found” and freed after eight years of arbitrary imprisonment. While Juanita’s story is hers and, of course, differs from other disappeared persons, it deepened my admiration for all women who cross borders, knowing that the risk of experiencing violence, including being made to disappear, is extremely high. These women are the protagonists who made me want to do this research and

⁴¹ These included Save the Children, the International Rescue Committee, CARE, Asylum Access, as well as the International Organization for Migration, the National Human Rights Commission, UNHCR, and *La Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados* (COMAR) - the Mexican Refugee Commission.

the inspiration for continuing to co-produce knowledges about gendered violence and contestations across borders in the future.

The first of the dissertation's substantive chapters is the one that follows. It focuses on often overlooked gendered and corporal experiences embedded in northbound migration routes, or *vías Pa'l Norte*. The analysis draws on life history narratives and semi-structured interviews and points to a geopolitically produced gender exclusion to cross borders, including Mexico's "vertical border" and the outcomes of the newly constructed fast-speed train, *el Tren Maya*. Further, it explores women's differential experiences and strategies as they move across borders and wait in violent, precarious spaces in their search for safety.

Chapter IV. “We pay with our life and our body:” Gendered and intimate geopolitics of *vias Pa’l Norte*

Introduction

On December 9, 2021, fifty-five persons lost their lives, and over 100 were injured while travelling *Pa’l Norte* (towards the north) in the back of a cramped trailer that crashed in southern Mexico. The trailer transporting more than 160 people, mainly from Guatemala and Honduras, overturned on the highway as it rounded a curve at high speed 10 kilometres south of Tuxtla Gutierrez in Chiapas, some 200 kilometres from Mexico’s southern border. It became detached from the tractor unit and inverted as the tractor crashed into the base of a pedestrian overpass. Photographs and video footage showed disturbing scenes in the aftermath of what publicly became known as a “horrific accident” (Garduño, 2021; Reina & Garcia, 2021). The driver fled the scene immediately after the crash, and so did many of the surviving passengers, fearful that state agents would detain them if they stayed.

The expression *Pa’l Norte*, which people on the move in Mexico often use, is not limited to *towards the north*, in a literal or geographical sense. My research with women crossing borders and experiencing displacement and others accompanying them in southern Mexico shows that it is understood as an actual and imagined destination that holds a variety of relational intimacies, including safety, hope, bodily autonomy, fear, and trauma. *Pa’l Norte* elucidates gendered transnational processes of violence, love and survival. This chapter explores accounts of women protagonists from Central America navigating the *vias* - vehicles, routes, and environments (Walters et al., 2022) in Mexico. In particular, the chapter explores how their invoked exclusion to move fast and safely coerces them to pay with their time, body and even

life, and how this gives insight into the gendered and intimate geopolitics of borders and bodies crossing them (Geobrujas, 2021).

In what follows, I present an intimate lens to the geopolitics of visas centring on gendered experiences of travelling (or not) on northbound vehicles and how the construction of el Tren Maya (the Mayan Train) in southeastern Mexico has altered routes. Then, I focus on lived experiences, relations, and survival strategies that women from Central America bring with them and create across borders. I also emphasize how the meaning of these concepts changes over time. Drawing on life history narratives constructed with fifteen women in southern Mexico in 2022 and 2023,⁴² I unpack some of their most common statements, including

“and they were supposedly the lucky ones”

“we pay with our lives and our body”

“slow movement is my strategy. I pay with time instead of money”

“I am *a madre luchadora* [or *guerrera*]” (a fighting mother).

Britany's mother

In May 2022, I attended a commemorative ceremony in Tuxtla Gutierrez, where the deadly trailer incident occurred. The ceremony was organized by people from Central America searching for their children who disappeared while migrating through Mexico.⁴³ There was so much heartache in the air as flowers were placed on the very ground that was covered by dead

⁴² The chapter also derives from semi-structured interviews with representatives of humanitarian initiatives and ongoing participant observation. See Chapter II for more on how this research was conducted.

⁴³ The reference to disappeared *children* refers to them being the children of someone, not that they are minors. Most of the disappeared migrants in Mexico are adults. Referring to the disappeared as children is also a strategy those searching apply to make them recognizable as subjects with familiar identities (Biorklund, 2022; Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Wright, 2017). See Chapter VI for more on disappearances and related debates.

and scarred bodies only a few months earlier. The scenery, with one of the most biodiverse rainforests in the world, a high mountain range looming on the horizon, and eagles circling above us, was disconcertingly breathtaking. Colourful murals adorned the nearby walls, conveying messages with an undertone of deep frustration about the violence built into the vias intending to prevent bodies from enacting cross-border and vertical mobilities in Mexico.



Figure 9. Mural in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas, painted in commemoration of the 55 persons who died on December 9, 2021, while moving Pa'l Norte in the back of a cramped trailer. Photo by author.

We stood there in extended collective silence, following an emotional speech from a paramedic who was one of the first to arrive on the scene of the incident in December 2021. Many then went to embrace someone, and thoughts were quietly shared among those in attendance. I was taking in the moment and reflecting on who the people travelling in this trailer were. What were the events that led to embarking on this journey? One woman beside me,

wearing a sign saying: “Have you seen my daughter?” whispered, “and they were supposedly the lucky ones.” “What do you mean?” I said. She continued:

The people travelling in these trailers pay thousands of dollars to prevent anything from happening to them. They are told that their arrival at the United States border is guaranteed. My now 22-year-old daughter, Britany, who disappeared here in Mexico more than two years ago, was never even given that false guarantee. When she had to leave Honduras, we did not have the money to pay for a space in one of these trailers, so she and her cousin planned to travel on *la Bestia* [“the Beast”, the commonly used transpacific freight train to reach the US].

I spoke to her the day she entered Mexico and the next. She was happy that the migration agents had not stopped them and that her ex-partner had still not found her. She told me that they were going to walk to Coatzacoalcos [a city located in the state of Veracruz along the Gulf route],⁴⁴ which now is the place where *la Bestia* departs from as the [Mexican] government has decided to build a new train [el Tren Maya].

I got so worried as I did not know that place. It felt far away, and I had heard stories about what could happen, especially to young women travelling alone. I asked myself: “How will she walk hundreds of kilometres?” and “How will she protect herself?”

Walking far distances and riding *la Bestia* [the cargo train] *Pa'l Norte* does not cost money, so we poor people do it. Instead of money, we pay with our life and our body. We take risks that no one should have to take (Personal conversation with Britany’s mother, 2 May 2022, emphasis added).

Applying an intimate lens to the geopolitics of vias

Through stories like the deadly trailer incident, Britany’s mother searching for her daughter, and other women crossing borders, this chapter situates people moving *Pa'l Norte* and

⁴⁴ In 2022, the Mexican government (Secretaría De Gobernación, 2022) reported that Coatzacoalcos and the migratory route known that “la ruta del Golfo” (the Gulf route) is the most used and the most dangerous. See figure 3.

the vehicles and routes they embark on (or not) within a context of transnational violence and intimacy. They are accounts that conceptualize differential gendered and corporal migration experiences along what is commonly referred to as the world's most extensive 'vertical border' (González Velázquez, 2011; Hernández, 2015; Varela Huerta, 2020).

The term vertical border denotes Mexico's geographical and geopolitical position in a border project established to prevent millions of people from Central America and elsewhere from moving north (Campos Delgado, 2021; Varela Huerta, 2020). At the United States (and Canada's) insistence and with considerable financial and political incentives, Mexico functions as a deliberate bottleneck where certain bodies moving across borders will always be more controlled than others (Coleman & Stuesse, 2016; Ehrkamp, 2019; Hiemstra, 2018; Menjivar, 2014).

Drawing on intimate geopolitics of violence and borders (Pain & Staeheli, 2014; Smith, 2012; Sundberg, 2017) and political geography literature focused on bodily autonomy (Loyd et al., 2023; Tanyag, 2018; Hall & Wilton, 2016), I rescale linear narratives of the vertical border that commonly expose the able, fast-moving body whose destination is steadfastly the US (Vogt, 2018). First, I introduce Walters et al. (2022) geographical concept of *viapolitics*, centring on the vehicle and its journey as critical sites of knowledge and struggles in migratory processes. I do so to document how the construction of el Tren Maya, a mega infrastructure train project that began in 2020 and has supplanted *la Bestia*'s southern routes in Mexico, has shifted how people move. I argue that el Tren Maya has reinforced historical exclusions and impedes the autonomy of feminized bodies striving *Pa'l Norte*, illuminating how gender intersects with people's ability

to travel on the fastest and safest routes.⁴⁵ In a recent paper, Loyd et al. (2023) similarly emphasize how disability and harm are produced geopolitically in the entanglement of violence and migration governance.

To further enhance the literature on migratory routes and to trace less visible dimensions of the continuum of violence experienced by migrants, particularly women, in their places of origin and Mexico, I draw attention to relational and everyday intimacies of the *vias* (Christian et al., 2016; Ehrkamp et al. 2022; Hyndman, 2019; Pain & Staeheli, 2014).⁴⁶ As Smith (2012, 1523) notes, bodies and emotions are not without geopolitical importance as “[while] individuals are caught up in the animation of geopolitical projects, love, fear, anxiety, and pain come to play a role.” I situate intimate and embodied accounts - how the body reflects and absorbs our social place in the world - as sites of geopolitical action on and through which geopolitics is performed (Pratt & Rosner, 2012).

Vehicles and excluded bodies

In the last decade, scholars have begun to reconceptualize the political geographies where borders are enacted, materialized, and performed (Brambilla & Jones, 2020; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2019; Parker & Vaughan-Williams, 2016; Sundberg, 2017). Decentering political and material borders enables a focus on other spatialities, which Walters et al. (2022) understand through the frame of ‘viapolitics’ where migration is “visualized, problematized, policed, and contested’ (Walters 2015, 9). Building on biopolitics (Foucault,

⁴⁵ While not my topic here, this research points to the importance of giving *ableism* and cross-border migration further thought. Specifically, how infrastructure can disable certain migrants from certain journeys across borders.

⁴⁶ Intimate geopolitics builds on feminist geopolitics, which has aimed to dismantle and reconfigure artificial and hierarchical state-centric scaling (Hyndman, 2004; Pain, 2009; Pratt & Rosner 2006, 2012) by attending to lived experiences of geopolitics since early 2000 (Barabantseva, et al., 2021; Berlant, 1997; Fluri, 2017; Fluri, & Piedalue, 2017; Hyndman, 2001b, 2007; Secor 2001; Smith, 2012, 2017).

2008) and counting the exclusion, surveillance and other techniques states use to control and govern bodies moving across borders, Walters et al. (2022) introduce the concept of viapolitics. Viapolitics is “drawn to events, ruptures, and controversies where the black box of migration is opened” (p. 9). It centers on vivid, on-the-ground interactions between people in transit, networked transportation infrastructures, and the geophysical environments on which they travel. Cutting across different temporalities and geographical scales prompts analysis of how the vehicle and its journey are a space-time of hope and fear.

However, more nuanced readings of militarized borders, migration policing and vias beyond and distant from US and European jurisdictions still need to be established. Readings that centre on gendered and intimate experiences, including bodily autonomy (or the lack thereof). This section describes how the halting of the transpacific train *la Bestia*’s southern routes in 2020 (Gasparello & Nunez Rodriguez, 2021) and the subsequent construction of el Tren Maya have shifted migratory routes and people’s (dis)ability to move in Mexico. Emphasizing how material inequalities and exclusions are exacerbated through broader geopolitical projects (Loyd et al., 2023; Tanyag, 2018), it discusses how these shifts expose new temporalities of gender violence and discrimination that follow women across borders. Specifically, it considers who can get on fast-moving vehicles, who cannot, and how, when, and why these exclusions are experienced and felt differently.

Riding la Bestia

Mexican railways stopped offering passenger travel and transitioned to freight exclusively in the 1990s. This privatization process, which occurred in parallel with the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) negotiations, was a neoliberal tactic steered by the

World Bank and foreign companies. It led to the structural repurposing of “national” infrastructure and the opening of new territories across Mexico for resource extraction and capital accumulation, while social services were deprioritized (Anderson, 2009; Villa & Sacristán-Roy, 2013).



Figure 10. A mural map at a migrant shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco, close to the Mexico-Guatemala border, where *la Bestia* departed from up to August 2020. The map holds information about the train routes, danger areas, and where to find sanctuary. At the top, people have stuck money bills from places they are from or have transited through. Some also leave photos of themselves on the wall in case something happens to them. Photo by author.

Hundreds of thousands of people from Central America (mainly men and women travelling in the company of men) moving *Pa'l Norte* have since kept using these cargo trains, widely known as *la Bestia*, by climbing up on the rooftop of their wagons. In her book *Lives in Transit*, Vogt (2018, p. 67) quotes a man yelling from the rooftop to another man trying to get on the moving train: “You need a firm grasp, do not hesitate, jump up with one uninterrupted motion. If you are not aggressive and strong, the train will suck you underneath.” *La Bestia* got its name because of the extreme dangers of riding on their roofs. It has long been perceived as

the fastest and cheapest way of completing some sections of migratory journeys through Mexico (Grieves-Williams, 2019).

Britany's mother, who is searching for her disappeared daughter, and other women I have come to know during this research in southern Mexico assure me however that this mode of transport is anything but cheap for them. "Instead of money, we pay with our life and our body" (quote from Britany's mother, 2 May 2022). Selected scholars have written about the geographies of *la Bestia* and how they are intertwined with capitalist patriarchal ideologies (Brigden, 2018; Casas-Cortés et al., 2015; Grieves-Williams, 2019; Vogt, 2018; 2013), and countless media narratives have portrayed (often sensationalized) brave, criminalized (mainly men) and victimized (especially women) migrants transiting toward the US. Stories of extortion, death, mutilated bodies, kidnappings, disappearances, and gendered and sexual violence are frequent (Borzacchiello et al., 2022; Tazzioli & De Genova, 2020; Yates & Leutert, 2020).⁴⁷ Shelter workers and migrants have also told me countless accounts of violence and trauma experienced by people riding *la Bestia*.

Doña Mayra from Honduras, whom I constructed a life history narrative with, in Tenosique, Tabasco, a town located approximately 60 kilometres from the Mexico-Guatemala border, describes her experience with *la Bestia* and violence:

It is my second time here [in Mexico]. The first time I reached Tijuana [at the US/Mexico border] before we were caught. I travelled on *la Bestia* together with my daughter. I was so scared she would fall off. There was only one other woman close to us. Some of the

⁴⁷ Doctors Without Borders (2017) reports that 68.3 percent of migrants they attended to in Mexican shelters in 2015-2016 reported having experienced some violence during their journey. This violence should be understood as a product of ongoing legacies of (transnational) borders and the systems, norms, and values around them (Balibar, 2004; Saldivar, 2007).

men touched her body and called her names. She did not stop them, nor did I. I was too scared.

This time, I had to leave my home from one day to another. They [*Las Maras*] came to tell me that I had to pay *la quota* [tax]⁴⁸ or they would kill me. I did not have any money, so I fled. [...]. Arriving here [in Tenosique], I discovered that the train [*la Bestia*] no longer passes by. A group of young men from Honduras said they will start walking Pa'l Norte tomorrow to catch it [*la Bestia*] in Coatzacoalcos. Maybe I will join them. "Do you know how long it takes to walk there?" [...]. I am not sure my 62-year-old body will be *capaz* [able] to keep up with those youngsters. I am not as strong as them, so even if I make it to Coatzacoalcos, getting onto *la Bestia* after that long walk will be very hard for me (Interview, Doña Mayra, 18 January 2022).

In May 2022, I interviewed Olivia, who lives beside the train tracks in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, supporting people hoping to get on the train. She offered insight into situations that she has witnessed, particularly women's restricted ability to move safely along the vias:⁴⁹

O: This place is *Abajo del Puente Avenida 1* [Below Bridge Avenue 1]. Over there [pointing to the left] is a migrant shelter. It is always full, especially now that the train only leaves from here, so many migrants sleep under the bridge as they wait for the train to arrive.

L: How long have you lived here?

O: 8 years. So, I have seen a lot.

L: I can only imagine.

O: It hurts seeing how they [migrants] are treated. I have witnessed many die and others lose body parts because the authorities do not let them get on the train. See the corner

⁴⁸ *La quota* or *la renta* are commonly used terminologies among migrants from Honduras. They refer to a sort of monthly taxation that Las Maras and other criminal groups demand from civilians, and particularly from local business owners, or else they will be killed. The tax tends to imply 10-15% of a person's or local business monthly earnings.

⁴⁹ O stands for Olivia and L for Linn.

over there [pointing to the left]. A young woman fell there last year. The train crushed her legs because they chased her, and she did not manage to jump on. And over there [pointing in another direction], another woman fell off the train and died not too long ago.

L: Do you encounter a lot of women passing by here?

O: Not as many as men, but the ones I meet stay in my heart. I know that it is much harder for them to travel this way. You must be capaz [able] and strong. Many of the women I speak to tell me they have no choice. Seeing them destroyed hurts so much. The feeling they all seem to have when they are in such pain, thinking they will die, is love for their children. They are *madres luchadoras* [fighting mothers] doing this for their children. Often, they scream out their names (Interview, Olivia, 4 May 2022).

Salomon, a representative at La 72 migrant shelter by the Mexico-Guatemala border that I have regularly visited and supported, underlined that state agents have long sought to prevent migrants from travelling on *la Bestia*, using highly militarized and deadly tactics to impede them from getting on. While authorities argue that prevention tactics are justified because of the dangers of the vias and train riding, Salomon and others stress that they need to be situated in the context of how Mexico is policing migratory movements on behalf of the US. The tactics, including increasing the train's speed, building concrete barriers along the tracks, and preventing people from getting on the trains, exacerbate differential corporeal experiences. These violent bordering practices by states exclude particularly women (travelling with children) from getting on. Reports of sexual violence and intimidation of feminized travellers further illustrate how gender is invoked as a harmful tool to prevent northbound movement (Cantalapiedra, 2021; Instituto Para Las Mujeres en La Migracion A.C, 2022; MSF, 2020, 2017).

An underground railroad?

La Bestia's southern routes halted in 2020 as the el Tren Maya construction began. For now, Coatzacoalcos is its most southern location. Getting to Coatzacoalcos from the Mexico-Guatemala border is dangerous and expensive (Urrutia, 2022). Speaking to Federico, a human rights defender walking the routes with people from Central America to Mexico's northern border, about the halting of *la Bestia*, he noted that:

They [the Mexican authorities] try to prevent people from riding *la Bestia* because they know the world is watching. They want all eyes on those migrants and feed the narrative of them being criminals. It helps to keep attention away from the ones travelling with a *guia* [coyote] and in smuggling trailers. Those with money are the 'the wanted' migrants because everyone earns from that multimillion-dollar business [...]. That is why the government said that the trailer incident that killed over 50 persons in December [2021] was a tragic accident. That it is tragic yes, but it was not an accident. How can it be if people were in it because it is too unsafe to seek safety in other ways? (Interview, Federico, 3 February 2022)

Other actors working on migration in Mexico whom I have interviewed, including representatives of the National Commission for Human Rights, Médecins Sans Frontières, and migrant shelter personnel, made similar statements to Federico's. They highlight that many, including authorities, benefit from the "multimillion-dollar smuggling business" (Jordan, 2022). This conceptualization of migration as a business and migrants as a commodity is not new (Coddington et al., 2020; Martin & Tazzioli, 2023; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2012; Sanchez, 2017). In his work on "Europe's illegality industry," Andersson (2014, 8) argues, for instance, that immigration enforcement is not just about repressive border controls but about the 'productivity' of such authority. Martin (2020) further speaks to how geographies of migration control have become "carceral economies", producing new ways of valuing people on the move.

According to Federico, who accompanies people along the routes, many pay as much as USD 10,000 for the whole trip from their home or up to USD 5,000 for a spot in trailers departing from southern Mexico daily, such as the one that crashed in Tuxtla Gutierrez, Chiapas (Asmann, 2022). Federico continues:

They [trailers and *guias*] are like the underground railroad transporting people with deep scars and big dreams. They move day and night but only hit the spotlight when something terrible happens or there is much talk about the need to stop the migrant smuggling business. That is when the images emerge, and public debates are held about how the authorities have successfully tracked down a smuggling network or halted a truck full of “illegal” migrants. You know when there is an urge to justify new restrictive measures. I imagine it was the same with the underground railroad, but each trailer is worth half a million USD here today (Interview, Federico, 3 February 2022)

I ask Federico how people leaving their homes in Central America have those amounts of money for a spot in a trailer. He first answers that anyone with family in the US can afford it, insinuating the cross-border migration journey economy. Then, he reframes and speaks to how this very much depends on people’s gender, class, and other locations. He says:

The reality is that most people travelling with *guias* and trailers are adults, often men, who have planned and saved up for their trip *Pa’l Norte*. Younger people, women, and families with small children who suddenly must leave their homes due to threats do not have that kind of money. They are the ones I meet when I walk along the routes. They walk long distances, they wait at bus stations, and they are most likely to experience violence, disappear and be deported [...]. Men risk being kidnapped for money or coerced into criminal groups. Women are sexually abused, forced to work at bars, and trapped along the way. Then you have queer and trans folks who experience violence no matter how and where they travel (Interview, Federico, 3 February 2022).

The policing and commerce of migration combined amplify systems of economic stratification and gender exclusion along the *vias*. Sexual and gendered violence statistics are hard to document, particularly among groups who do not remain in a specific place and may actively seek to stay undocumented. Also, estimates of gendered violence tend, when not carefully contextualized, to overshadow the intimate stories and temporalities behind these numbers. That said, a figure commonly cited by scholars and humanitarian organizations (Infante et al., 2020; MSF, 2020; Vogt, 2018) is that 60 - 80 percent of women travelling alone or with children are sexually assaulted, and many are forced into transactional sex or other precarious labour conditions to pay for their journeys. This is discussed further below. Furthermore, Federico's last point on the violent experiences of trans and queer folks portrays another dynamic of harm along *vias Pa'l Norte* that, with few exceptions (Balaguera, 2018; DasGupta, 2019; Macedo, 2020), is understudied.

Banned from el Tren Maya and public buses

The highspeed train project, el Tren Maya, which, when complete in 2024, will run 1500 kilometres across five states in southern Mexico,⁵⁰ was framed as a reason to end the southern routes of *la Bestia* in August 2020 (Romero, Interview, 19 January 2022; Urrutia, 2022). The idea of el Tren Maya has existed for a long time. Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador made it central to his election campaign in 2018 and the current efforts to industrialize Mexico's south, putting it into motion in 2020. Critics of el Tren Maya express wide-ranging concerns, from the environmental impacts and imperiled Mayan archeological sites to violence and violation of territorial and social rights among campesinos, often Indigenous, populations

⁵⁰ Chiapas, Tabasco, Veracruz, Yucatan, and Quintana Roo, as of 2024.

(Ansotegui, 2021; Gasparello & Nunez Rodriguez, 2021; Green, 2022).⁵¹ Less has been said about how el Tren Maya is part of a geopolitical project, producing differential gendered and corporal migration experiences across borders. Many communities have been, and more will be, forcibly and often unlawfully dislocated from their lands, adding to the already convoluted narrative of forced mobility and violence in Mexico.

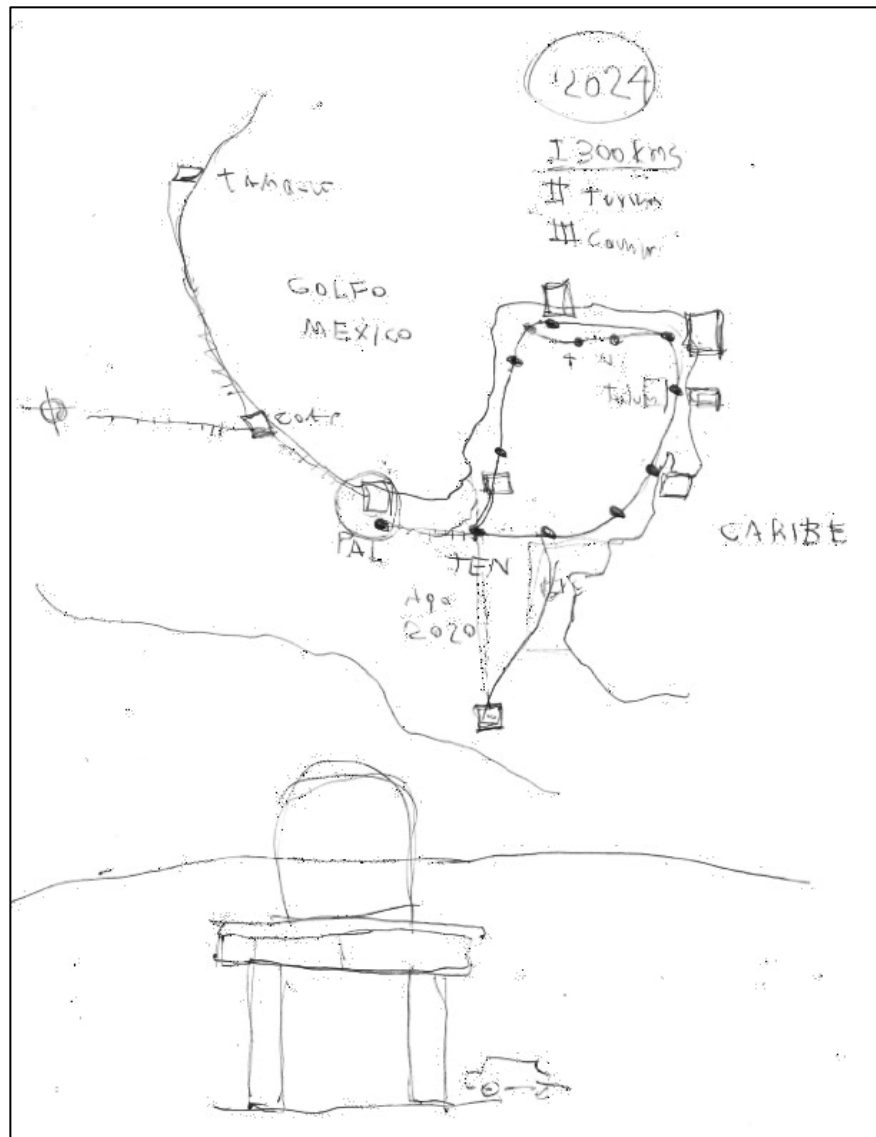


Figure 11. A map of el Tren Maya drawn by the director of a migrant shelter in Tabasco as he explained its future routes and the implications that he foresees for migrants and residents.

⁵¹ See Appendix G for more on the geopolitics and development of el Tren Maya.

The above map illustrates the route of el Tren Maya. TEN stands for Tenosique, PAL for Palenque, and Coatz for Coatzacoalcas, where el Tren Maya and *la Bestia* will connect. The image below the map, of a bridge and a car driving under it, shows how the tracks will run above many of the city centres and highways in the southern states. According to Fray Romero, former director at a migrant shelter in Tabasco, this is partly to prevent ‘unwanted passengers’ (migrants) from accessing them (Interview, 19 January 2022).

Eva, a psychologist at a migrant shelter close to Palenque, Chiapas, one of Mexico's best-known Mayan archeological sites located on a major migration route, shared her perspective on the gendered outcomes of the new train, developed the last couple of years:

There will also be a Tren Maya cargo train [leaving from Palenque], you know, that will connect with *la Bestia* further north [in Coatzacoalcas]. But they [the government] are making it impossible for people to get on it. Many of the stations are being built outside of the urban centres. In Palenque and Tenosique, where many migrants transit through daily hoping to get on the train, the tracks are even constructed upon high bridges that will be hard to access. **How could a mother with her children climb up on a bridge and get on a train passing by at full speed? This is not even possible for the fittest person.** So, the simple answer to your question [about what the outcomes will be] is that el Tren Maya is, and certainly will continue to, impede unwanted migrants' access to safety, particularly women (Interview, Eva, 16 March 2022, emphasis added).

Conversing with Marisol, a representative at *Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración* (Institute for Women in Migration),⁵² about the gendered impacts of el Tren Maya and the halting of *la Bestia*, she underlined that these changes could not be understood without also

⁵² Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migración A.C. (IMUMI) is a nationwide civil society organization based in Mexico City that centres the defence and promotion of human rights for women who are migrants and their families.

considering recent changes to public transportation policies violating social rights more broadly (Interview, 2 February 2022). Marisol said:

Here in Mexico, we tend to overlook migratory restrictions' gendered outcomes. Most public narratives about migration are about men and young, strong people. Less attention is given to how women, often travelling with children, mainly have used public transport to proceed on their journeys. Until recently, women and children were allowed to board public buses from the south towards the north. Sometimes, the bus driver would not let them on because of his personal views toward them or because other passengers were protesting, but most of the time, they were let on without too much fuss.

“I notice that you speak in the past tense,” I told Marisol during the interview. “Yes, she responded, because there have been major unconstitutional changes in the last years that relate to how migration is managed here and to how we [Mexico] have accepted the US request to prevent people from arriving at the [northern] border.” “Can you tell me more, please?” I asked, to which she replied.

In 2020, a new policy was quietly implemented as el Tren Maya project started to develop. I am saying quietly as the [Mexican] government did not officially announce it, but we learned about it from women who approached our local offices in the south. This policy bans people without valid identification [which is the case for most migrants] from buying a ticket or boarding any public vehicle. It has been implemented in parallel with increased checkpoints, police, and military presence at bus stations and along northbound routes. [...] This policy affects not only migrant women but also Mexican nationals without identification proving their citizenship [as the bus companies demand to see a valid ID for all passengers]. They are often Indigenous women from rural parts of southern Mexico. Since these travel restrictions were implemented, we have attended to an increasing number of migrant and Indigenous women who have experienced discrimination. Sexual assaults and gendered violence among women walking the routes

instead of travelling by bus are reported to us more frequently now (Interview, Marisol, 2 February 2022).⁵³

As Marisol indicates, the prohibition against buying a bus ticket or getting on any public vehicle has led to migrants seeking more dangerous routes in recent years. Women with precarious migratory status and limited bodily autonomy have increasingly been walking long distances, waiting for prolonged periods, and experiencing augmented impediment and harm. Accentuating gendered and racialized geographies of displacement and violence, Hernández Castillo (2016; 2019) argues that *social death* (Cacho, 2012)⁵⁴ is equivalent to physical death in Mexico, as racialized illegality of the most vulnerable bodies designates them as disposable. She notes that Indigenous and migrant women's bodies have become spaces "to be invaded, violated and incarcerated" (Hernández Castillo, 2019, p. 636).⁵⁵ Silvia Federici (1999) has relatedly spoken to the disposability of feminized bodies, examining the ties between witch trials, patriarchy and the creation of capitalism. Further, Federici argues that there are obvious parallels between the way accusations of witchcraft are deployed and how unwanted women border-crossers are portrayed and governed (Federici, 2018; see also Chapter VII). In Chapter V, I speak explicitly about how the feminization of waiting in southern Mexico is embedded within a geopolitical structure of gendered violence and borders. This relates to Ehrkamp et al.'s (2021)

⁵³ October 6, 2023, IMUMI announced that the Collegiate Court on Administrative Matters of Mexico City deemed the act of requesting an immigration permit to buy a bus ticket to travel within the country a violation of the right to free transit. The court determined that the Mexican National Migration Institute's power to request immigration documents from foreigners is *limited to the borders*, as per Mexican Migration Law (2011). Accordingly, IMUMI concludes that there is no jurisdiction to do so in bus terminals, and even less so for the state to charge bus companies to act as immigration agents.

⁵⁴ Cacho (2012) identifies the social death of racialized unwanted others in the U.S. One's social death is driven by a life in which one's persona, one's acts and the spaces one inhabits are criminalized through their juxtaposition with what is normatively valued as an appropriate way of being in the world.

⁵⁵ See also Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Wright, 2006; *Geobrujas-Comunidad de Geógrafas*, 2021; Segato, 2016.

arguments on how the Global North's intentional efforts to externalize and contain refugee populations produce gendered geographies of protracted waiting and trauma.

In this section, I have illustrated that gender, class and ability influence people's experiences along the *vias/routes Pa'l Norte*. These include personal and bodily security and autonomy, the speed at which one moves, and vulnerability to violence. The Tren Maya project and related changes to migratory *vias* in southern Mexico have altered all three of these dimensions: security, migration speed, and vulnerability. It also shapes socio-spatial realities, revealing how gender forms one's experience and ability to move. The Tren Maya project exposes how young, able-bodied men with enough money can travel the fast, safer routes. Women who travel alone or with children often experience continuous violence that impairs their search for safety across borders.

Still, as the next part of this chapter explores, the violence that impedes bodies - in this case, feminized bodies - from moving fast and safely also creates intimate spaces of knowledge, relational practices, and bodily autonomy beyond individual strength and productivity (Gibson, 2006; Hall & Wilton, 2016).

Intimate strategies of love and survival

Scholarly and public accounts of migratory routes and spaces of displacement commonly centre on people's visible embodied conditions, including corporal punishment or harm, as discussed above. In contrast, more intimate aspects of limited bodily autonomy and related experiences, including personal relationships and survival strategies for *becoming able* (Hall & Wilton, 2016), are often overlooked. In an interview with Mauricio, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) coordinator at the Mexico-Guatemala border, he shared that:

We [MSF] primarily focus on their [migrants'] notable traumas, but I am also very concerned about less visible conditions. In sessions with our psychologists and psychosocial workers, migrant women speak to their deep fears about the violence that follows them, how they miss life at home, and how it sometimes paralyzes them to continue. Others, including young men, come to us with a physical health problem, which appears to be a symptom of their invisible hurt. Emotional pain tends to be put aside by mobile populations. It is a coping mechanism, so it may be hard for them to accept or even understand when our medical staff explains that their physical condition results from something else (Interview, Mauricio, 16 March 2022).

The way that Mauricio speaks about the invisibility of hurt and emotional pain and its corporal dimensions resonates with feminist geographic perspectives on the “global intimate,” how global processes, including migration and gendered violence, are inextricably linked to the daily folds of intimate and emotional life (Ehrkamp et al., 2019; Fluri, 2017; Smith, 2012). And, how bodies are caught up in geopolitical projects and how this is known and felt through the body. Intimate geopolitics centres on the way “that geopolitical struggle is entangled in and comprised through our day-to-day intimate interactions with one another” (Smith, 2020, p. 282). It intentionally rescales analysis to emphasize the neglect of particular bodies, voices and processes from state-centred geopolitics (Mott & Cockayne, 2017). Hyndman (2019) explains that the intimate holds not only entanglements rooted in the everyday here and now but also the subtlety of their interconnectedness to everyday intimacies in other places and times. Furthering this thinking, the subsequent section presents a handful of women's intimate everyday accounts of love and survival across borders. Centring on their stories and unpacking some of their most common statements, I show how their lived experiences with violence and intimate relations enable alternative strategies across borders that are intertwined with those of other women in other geographies and times.

Rosa: “Moving slowly is my strategy”

Sitting at a little café outside a migrant shelter located next to the old train tracks in Tenosique, Tabasco, Rosa from Guatemala, who was travelling alone with her three children, and I conversed about gendered violence, intimacies, and her strategy of moving slowly:⁵⁶

R: I feel safe here [at the shelter where she was staying] because unregistered people cannot come in, so I hope they cannot find us.

L: May I ask who ‘they’ are?

R: The ones who threatened us and to do things to Viola [her daughter] back home in Guatemala. They have eyes and ears everywhere. I lay awake at night, worrying they come and find us.

L: If your asylum application is approved, will you go somewhere you feel safer?

R: Yes, we cannot stay here. The reason we have not already left is that we cannot. The only option to reach *Pa’l Norte* for us is first to get asylum because we cannot buy bus tickets without that piece of paper [refugee ID], especially not with my face.⁵⁷ I do not have money to pay a *guia* [guide] to take us there or to travel in those trailers and riding the train [*la Bestia*] is too dangerous. How could we even get on? We can walk, I guess. But it is dangerous, too. So, **I pay with time instead of paying with money. Moving slowly is my strategy.**

L: Moving slowly... What do your children think about that?

R: They did not want to leave Guatemala. Nor did I. But our lives changed quickly. Since my first child was born 13 years ago, my husband has abused me. He would not even let me put makeup on. I thought that was normal. He was also violent towards my children, so last year, I finally reported him [to the police], but instead of getting help, I was left with his problems.

⁵⁶ This conversation was part of one of three meetings Rosa and I had to construct her life history narrative. She chose the location because she considered it more private than inside the shelter or other nearby locations. The café was empty, and the owner, also a woman from Guatemala, was Rosa’s friend. R stands for Rosa and L for Linn.

⁵⁷ I believe Rosa refers to indigeneity here. In a previous conversation, Rosa spoke more specifically about how her indigeneity further limits her ability to move safely across borders.

L: What do you mean?

R: He took all our money and left *Pa'l Norte* when I reported him. My family helped me start my little second-hand clothing store, and I was so proud. But after only a few months, I discovered he [husband] had unfinished business. So, when I started to earn money, they [the ones he had unfinished business with] wanted it. One day, they told me they watched Viola's steps and wanted my son to work for them. We left that night, leaving everything behind [...].

L: What are your feelings about what is yet to come?

R: This might sound strange [Rosa says, half smiling]. I have never felt freer. **I am so scared every day and dread what we have ahead of us, but I am free of the cage I was in for so many years.** In a way, I am glad I do not have money because if I did, we might have been in that trailer that crashed last year [in December 2021], killing so many people from my country. Also, here [in Mexico], I have met people who make me feel less alone. Many women have stories that are like mine. We help each other and share fears, laughs, food, strategies and even beds on those nights we cannot stop crying (Interview, Rosa, 4 March 2022, emphasis added).

The reference to *moving slowly* and *paying with time*, and sometimes *with their bodies*, is a reoccurring locus throughout the recorded life history narratives that reflect other works on geographies of displacement and waiting (Ehrkamp, 2019; Loyd et al., 2018), including the feminization of waiting (Biorklund, 2023b; Hyndman & Giles, 2011). All three concepts are intimate, embodied and highly nuanced. In particular, the reference to ‘paying with their bodies.’ Some women with whom I constructed narratives note the physical toll the journey - which often implicates long walking distances and enforced waiting - has on their own and other bodies, including sickness, injuries, malnourishment, and even death. Others concern the lack of bodily autonomy. The violence women experience along the *vias/routes* to and in Mexico, including at

times in exchange for money, and how it relates to historical exclusions and geopolitical border projects are embedded into their movements, experiences and emotions.

They know that having no option but to walk, being forced to wait, or searching for a disappeared loved one along these routes are facets of gendered (and classed) intergenerational harms that follow them across borders. Many note how their experience is intertwined with the experience of their mothers and grandmothers or other women. They often refer to these violent processes as obstacles that need to be overcome or even as the beginning of something new that may be scary, exciting, and somewhat comforting all at once, as Rosa insinuates. For them, the term *Pa'l Norte* embraces all those nuances. These intimate strategies, including walking, moving slowly, and waiting along migratory routes, are geopolitical acts that challenge generalized notions of borders and movements across them.

Yani and Yoli: "We are the new cover girls"

The subsequent narrative concerns two young sisters, Yani and Yoli, from Honduras, starting with an image of them published in *La Jornada*, a Mexican national newspaper. Like the previous account, it shows how their alternate strategies to search for safety are nestled with violence, contradictory stories and other women's experiences.



Figure 12. Photo of Yani and Yoli in La Jornada, published 18 January 2022, with an article titled: “Guatemala deports more than 500 migrants from Nicaragua and Honduras.”

On 18 January 2022, during one of my visits to a migrant shelter in Tabasco, I wrote the following memo reflecting on my encounter with Yani and Yoli:

While reading *La Jornada* [newspaper] this morning, I was surprised to see this photo [above] with a text about how its protagonists had been returned. It stated that hundreds of migrants who formed part of the [most recent] walking caravan that left Honduras, 23% of which were under 18 years of age, were stopped at the Guatemalan border. Guatemalan state agents declared that *all* the “illegal” migrants had *peacefully* been detained and returned to their countries.

I’m surprised because I know these two young women and the baby. They were not returned to Honduras but arrived at the shelter last night, and I briefly spoke with them then. To the left is Yani. She is 17 (turning 18 tomorrow) and six months pregnant. She arrived with her husband, Jafet, who is also 17, her sister Yoli, who is 20 (to the right in the picture) and Yoli’s 1-year-old son. Yani’s husband [Jafet] only briefly entered the shelter when they arrived last night, but he left, saying he preferred to stay outside the

gates. This is not the first time I have heard that young men [in this case, a minor] arriving with relatives choose not to enter a shelter but rather stay in their proximity, deemed as “humanitarian safe zones.”

According to Mexican law, migrant authorities and federal police are not allowed to enter the areas surrounding migrant shelters in Mexico as they are so-called “humanitarian safe zones” or sanctuaries (Brigden, 2018; Casillas, 2021). Thus, people without official permission to reside in the country often remain in these areas while resting and being close to their family and friends inside the shelter. Many shelters only allow persons identifying as women and children (minors) to enter. Men often deemed “less vulnerable” are asked to stay outside in the “safe zone” where they may receive one or two meals per day (La 72, 2020). The gendered spaces and violence that appear and replicate are notable. While women and children are supposedly protected from outside perils, men are more prone to experience diverse kinds of threats. Yet, they are also more likely to rapidly find alternative ways to move *Pa'l Norte*, often spending less time waiting in the borderlands. As these spaces are free from migration authorities and federal police, they are also locations where *guias*, other smugglers, drug cartels and small business owners manoeuvre their economic activities more easily (Vogt, 2018).⁵⁸

Another excerpt from my memo on the day that I saw Yani and Yoli portrayed in the news, reads:

Seeing this picture of Yani and Yoli, I first thought they might think of appearing publicly as a risk, as the people they fled from in Honduras could locate them more easily. I showed it to them, and contrary to my presumption, they got very excited, particularly Yoli. She told me that the photographer had asked for permission and that he

⁵⁸ See Chapter V for more information on the politics and workings of migrant shelters in Mexico.

had also interviewed her. There is no direct quote from Yoli in the article. She seemed slightly disappointed and said she was embarrassed about how she looked in the picture. Then, she called for Yani to come and see. “Yani” she yelled across the room, “come see, **we are the new cover girls!**” Yani came running, and they laughed out loud, looking at the newspaper.

“This was a few days ago in Guatemala,” said Yani. “I had fought with Jafet [husband], so Yoli, Jose [Yoli’s son], and I had gone away from him, and this [heavily armed police blockade] is what we encountered. The police were throwing teargas at us, arresting people, and forcing others onto white buses, taking them back to Honduras.⁵⁹ We had been walking for days and were so exhausted. Jafet must have seen us with the police because he returned for us, and we escaped.”

The discrepancy between the headline and the story in the newspaper (La Jornada, 2022a) and the people pictured in the story was dramatic. Many, but *not all*, had *violently* been detained and deported. Yani and Yoli had not been deported or detained but had made it across the Mexico-Guatemala border and to a migrant shelter. A few days after I wrote the above memo, I had a more extended conversation with Yani, who told me they had to flee Honduras as the situation with *Las Maras* (the Maras), a network of criminal street gangs, was no longer sustainable. She lived in a part of San Pedro Sula (the second largest city in Honduras), which is controlled by “Barrio 18” (18th Street Gang), and her mother lives in another part of the city

⁵⁹ The reference to “white buses” is of importance. They are widely known as “deportation buses” in relation to border enforcement projects. Along migratory routes in Southern Mexico and Guatemala, “white buses” are commonly seen heading south. They are buses whose passengers (most times) have been forced on and who (often unlawfully) are being deported from Mexico and Guatemala. The passengers are frequently arbitrarily detained before they are forced to board these buses. In the 2022 fiscal year, over 2.38 million people were detained in southern Mexico (La Jornada, 2022b). Others have been picked up by police and immigration controls along the routes and are immediately deported to their home country or to one of the countries they have transited through before entering Mexico (Romero, Interview, 19 January 2022; Representative at El Ceibo (Guatemala) migrant shelter, Interview, 7 October 2022).

where a rival Mara group governs.⁶⁰ She says that the constant lack of safety has significant implications for girls and women's lives and autonomy. It had reached a point where she was no longer able to visit her mother or go out alone, and they had to leave due to continuous threats. Her sister, Yoli, decided to join them with her baby, fearing that the threats would then be directed toward her.

When the above picture was taken, they had reached the Guatemala-Mexico border. They were trying to negotiate passage with the police, reasoning that Yani was a pregnant minor and Yoli was travelling alone with a baby. Yani explains, “The police only let you through if you pay them. We had no money, so we decided to escape before they forced us onto one of those white buses, returning us to Honduras. We cannot return home; we just cannot” (Interview, 22 January 2022).

The reference to migrants having to pay the police in Guatemala has been repeated in interviews and conversations during this research, including by representatives at migrant shelters in Guatemala (La 72; Fuentes & Hernández, 2021). One shelter representative in Guatemala reiterated that the bribing system is widely known, so many migrants have calculated this cost beforehand. However, the ones leaving their homes in a rush, like Yani and Yoli, Rosa and her three children, Britany, whose mother is searching for her, and other women featured in this chapter, are less likely to have such funds. Thus, they run higher risks of intimidation and violence, including abuse, detention, and deportation.

⁶⁰ Barrio 18 and MS 13 (also known as Mara Salvatrucha, with “salvatrucha” meaning street-smart Salvadoran in Spanish) are two rival “pandillas” criminal street gangs that are fighting over territory and managing contraband in El Salvador and Honduras, but also in Guatemala, North America, and parts of Europe. Barrio 18 and MS 13 were formed in the US in the 1970s-80s and were developed further as people were deported from the US to El Salvador (mainly) and Honduras. These two groups and the taxation they demand from people in the areas they control are commonly cited reasons people leave their homes and country to seek refuge in Mexico and beyond (Cobos, 2018).

Yani continued to share her experience with me:

We walked through the jungle [the Guatemala-Mexico borderlands] for days without eating or drinking. Look at us; how thin we are. The nurse here [at the shelter] even said my sister and her baby are malnourished and that I also need to eat more as I am pregnant. Walking, we encountered people's backpacks, shoes, and even underwear. We also saw skeletons. I think they were from other people. It was so scary and not what we had imagined.

Leaving Honduras with one of the migrant caravans felt safe. When many people walk together, you feel more protected. We care for one another and cheer each other up.⁶¹ But, since the caravan we took part in was stopped, and we escaped the police in Guatemala, **I have felt nothing but fear. It feels like the fear follows me.** I miss my mama.

It is so hard to migrate when you are a woman without any money. Now, **I only want to rest.** Jafat [husband residing outside the shelter] fears they [*Las Maras*] will find us and wants us to continue *Pa'l Norte*, but I prefer to stay with my sister. She is the one who has been with me through life; we share everything, and I trust her. But I am carrying his baby, you know, so I also have an obligation towards him. That was the last thing my mama told me before we left. She said: "Do what he says, or else he might leave you alone with the baby." It happened to her, so she does not want that for me (personal conversation, 22 January 2022, emphasis added).

I left the shelter the following morning for meetings in Coatzacoalcos. In the afternoon, I received a message from the shelter director, saying that Yani and Yoli had decided to leave with

⁶¹ Central American migrant caravans, also known as the Viacrucis del migrante (Migrant's Way of the Cross) are caravans with often large numbers of people traveling by foot from Central America (commonly commencing in Honduras) and aiming to reach the Mexico-US border. The caravans have long been a strategy used by people on the move to obtain a certain level of safety, yet they only obtained public attention in 2017-2018. The caravans are usually violently stopped or dissolved in Guatemala or at the Guatemala-Mexico border. A few caravans have managed to continue beyond the Guatemala-Mexico border but have later been dissolved in Mexico's southern states, including Chiapas, Oaxaca, and Veracruz. People partaking in the caravans are commonly deported. See Glockner, 2019; Varela Huerta et al., 2020.

a group of other women heading north. They had mentioned that staying close to the border felt unsafe and that they wanted to reach their intended destination before Yani gave birth. As they departed, Yani had asked the shelter director to: “Please tell Linn Maria⁶² to look out for us. Maybe we appear as cover girls again soon.” More than two years have passed, and I have heard nothing. I often think about them and how much our encounter and the intimate insights they shared with me about the continuum of violence, love and survival came to guide my readings of the *vias*. Not a day has since passed without me reading *La Jornada*’s migration section, hoping to see them there again, this time with an uplifting story.

Cecilia and other madres luchadoras

Being a *madre luchadora* (fighting mother) commonly appears in the recorded life history narratives. All the women whom I have interviewed are mothers. Not because that was a set criterion but rather a reflection of the circumstances. As my research shows, women from Central America over 18 years who consider themselves forced to leave their homes (due to violence and/or to provide for their family) and who cross borders in slow ways (not in trailers or on trains) are likely to have children with them, at home or in the place they are aiming to reach.

Being a mother is often stated as a reason for moving in the first place and how they move, albeit with gender disabilities. They make choices, including leaving their homes, waiting, and moving at a pace they believe to be the safest for their children. Women in this context habitually refer to themselves as *madres luchadoras*, with a lot of heart and pride. The term *madre luchadora* calls attention to the specific vulnerabilities of women as mothers (both pregnant and with children) and how they navigate their decisions. It is an intimate and highly

⁶² Linn Maria is my (the author’s) full name.

political term, illuminating the relevance of these life histories' intergenerational and cross-border facets.⁶³

de Alwis (Ruwanpura et al., 2022) and other feminist scholars (Bejarano, 2002; Kron, 2016; Wright, 2007) have problematized the motherhood vocabulary within a patriarchal society and how it may legitimize a system that reinforces sex roles and encourages masculinized violence. Yet, as de Alwis (Ruwanpura et al., 2022) underlines, it is essential also to consider the reasons, strategies, and potential usefulness behind women self-categorizing as mothers, including as *madres luchadoras*. Intentionally centring on women's self-identified motherhood in this geopolitical context of violence and borders invites analysis beyond individual experiences here and now. It prompts focus on what Pain (2020, p. 5) refers to as 'Geotrauma,' centring on the 'commonness of experiences of gender-based, racist [...] violence that challenges assumptions of cohesion of security before or after trauma.'" In other words, the shared experiences of mothers' bodies and actions moving across borders now with those of other feminized bodies that move or previously have been moved (Valentine, 2008).

Cecilia, from Honduras, who was waiting in southern Mexico with her three children in 2022 and 2023 and with whom I constructed a life-history narrative, said:

Leaving my home and becoming displaced implies much more than I had ever imagined. In addition to our fears and worries, people trying to help us often see us as victims of everything. **They do not seem to understand that we still control our bodies and how we decide to live.** Of course, **we are victims** of violence, borders, and xenophobia, in my case with my black body, **but whether we live in victimhood is up to us.** I do not see myself as a victim or a failure because I cannot get my family to safety as fast as others

⁶³ Chapter VI and parts of Chapter V analyze the centring of motherhood and maternal roles in violence, migration and activism contexts in more detail.

can get theirs... **I prefer waiting here for the right moment to proceed instead of waiting for them** [referring to her children] **in heaven if I die trying.**

My children have already been through enough. Seeing other children's shoes and personal belongings scattered along the routes we walked for several weeks made me change the initial plan to move fast. When I see that they [her children] are ready to go, we will start walking again, but until then, we stay right here. I am a *madre luchadora*, and I have promised my mother, and she promised her late mother, bless her heart, to keep the children safe. This is my way of loving and keeping them safe, and **I do not seem to be the only one waiting and paying with time.** I have faith (Interview, Cecilia, 27 January 2022, emphasis added).

Cecilia's decisions to move and to wait and how they are closely interrelated with the needs of her children and other interfamilial and intergenerational ties relate to Yani, Rosa, Doña Mayra, Britany's mother, and other women's stories. Some aspire to move across space in the fastest possible ways, notwithstanding the barriers. Others consider slow movement the most viable strategy to defend their bodily autonomy while loving and caring for their family. As Britany's mother told me, they all take risks and pay with their lives and bodies.

Furthermore, the presence of Britany's mother and others searching for their children, who disappeared while moving along the *vias*, adds another layer to these routes' gendered and intimate geopolitics and the significance of the term *madre luchadora*. Their material presence and actions elucidate how migration and intimate, often gendered, outcomes are felt across borders and generations. They are also paying with their bodies, and in so doing, they make the continuous violence and connection between bodies that move today and bodies that have moved at other times both more visible and urgent.

Having recently encountered a group of mothers searching for their children in Chiapas, Donna, from Nicaragua, who was residing at a nearby shelter with her teenage daughter and young son, anxiously shared this story with me and some other women over a meal:

We left Nicaragua because I was worried for my daughter. She was so depressed [...]. I hoped that coming here would help [...], but now she is more depressed because here she has no autonomy, especially not since I found out how young women walking the routes are assaulted [...]. I do not want her to be one of them... you know, a girl who disappears or is abused. I feel connected to the mothers [who are searching for their children]. I, too, have been separated from two of my children, who are still in Nicaragua. My children are my everything, and I must stay strong for them. Coming here to Mexico is a way to show them that I will do what it takes for us to be safe (Personal conversation, 16 March 2022).

Listening to Donna's concerns, Nadia, who was eating lunch with us, looks troubled and says: "I am one of those 'girls,' but I am also a *madre luchadora*. I escaped the violence, thanks to that. Because I could not stand the feeling of letting my children and my mother down." "Ay *perdón*" [sorry] says Donna, "I did not mean to offend." "I know, it is ok," responds Nadia. "My two-year-old son is with me here, and my daughter is in Honduras with my mother. I came to earn money to make life easier for all of us." "So, what happened to you?" asks Donna. Nadia thinks for a minute and then quietly responds:

Too many things. Crossing the [Guatemala/Mexico] border, armed men abducted us, and they forced me to work in a bar, but I did not get any money. I got nothing but scars. One day, after several months, they [captors] let me take my son to a park. I said to myself, "It's now or never," and we escaped. I was so scared. I still am. It is six weeks since a

shelter staff member helped and brought us here (Personal conversation, 16 March 2022).⁶⁴

Donna left the shelter after a few days to find a safer place nearby for her daughter. Nadia and her son remained for months, and we regularly conversed. We did not record a life history interview, but I asked if I could support her in any way. A few days after I asked, Nadia suggested: “I know what you can help me with. I want you to help me write a leaflet for women about abduction and assaults.” She said that she wanted other women moving along the *vias* to understand that the violence they experience at home from when they are young, based on oppressive and patriarchal systems, relates to how they are treated at borders, in transit and in the new places where they arrive. “I don’t want others to think that it is their fault these things happen to them and their bodies. It took me so long to realize that. I still haven’t, but I don’t want my children or other women to think it is ok to be treated like I have been throughout my life,” said Nadia as we worked on the leaflet. “I want my daughter and son to be free from all that trauma” (Personal conversation, 2 May 2022).

In May 2022, at the commemoration ceremony for the victims of the trailer incident in Chiapas which opened this chapter, I showed Britany’s mother the leaflet Nadia made. She looked at it for long and then said:

This both breaks and fills my heart. I feel connected to everybody experiencing these situations. I think about other families and *madres luchadoras* who are searching. Searching for their children, searching for better lives for their children, and searching to be free. I do not know where my Britany is or what happened to her. That is what I am

⁶⁴ I later asked Donna and Nadia separately if I could include our lunch conversation in written work related to my research. They agreed and provided me with their preferred pseudonym.

trying to find out. I have not heard from her for two years. The silence is killing me [...]. Today, as we remember the people who died here in that trailer and along these routes, I mourn her as well, and tonight, I hope she will visit me in my dreams. She often does (Personal conversation, Britany's mother, 2 May 2022).

Concluding thoughts

Drawing on my research along migratory routes in southern Mexico and bridging intimate geopolitics, critical border studies and bodily autonomy literature, this chapter presents differential gendered and corporal experiences embedded in the *vias Pa'l Norte*. The geopolitical violence and commodification built into the landscapes and train routes commonly travelled from Central America through Mexico by people seeking safety reinforce historical exclusions. It points to the mobility necessary to make these journeys, in parallel with the persistent lack of bodily autonomy experienced by migrants, particularly women in their homes, transit and host locations. Specifically, the ways that a) the *vias* in southern Mexico have changed, in part due to the construction of the Tren Maya megaproject, b) these changes have affected women travelling with children and little money differently from other people on the move, and c) that these journeys to safety are anything but safe in the current context, with the transpacific cargo train *la Bestia* and public transportation being less accessible and the borders more enforced than ever, even south of the Mexican border.

Assuming invoked gender exclusion, the chapter intentionally brings attention to intimate, less visible situations and strategies intertwined with the *vias/routes* and vehicles people embark on (or not). I unpack how women's experiences of moving slowly and paying with their bodies, and at times their lives, in southern Mexico today relate to other women's experiences in other spaces and times. While some of these women continue to head *Pa'l Norte*

to cross more borders and others stay “in place” (for now), their actions are all contemporary expressions of the “global intimate” (Pratt and Rosner, 2012) and of the bordering practices that inhibit their movement to safety in the face of violence. Their lives are shaped by violent processes at different scales (intimate, national, global), from unrepentant domestic violence or forced labour with sexual exploitation to border enforcement policies to changes in train infrastructure and schedules. Yet, their decision and actions to survive, strive and love across borders also shape these same processes and the meaning of viapolitics *Pa’l Norte*.

The next chapter centers on how the feminization of waiting in southern Mexico is a facet of gendered violence that women from Central America experience. Yet how waiting is also a pre-condition for protagonism and generates transformative spaces where people on the move contest the bordering practices by the state and form networks of collective self-care across borders.

Chapter V. Undocumented bordering practices: Protagonism and spaces of making

Introduction

The title *Undocumented bordering practices* has a double meaning. Undocumented practices contestations are carried out by people who have left their homes in a context of gendered violence and whose current legal status is uncertain or precarious. Undocumented also points to how few scholarly efforts have been made to document bordering practices ‘from below’ performed by women protagonists on the move and those accompanying them beyond the southern borders of the United States and Europe.

Bordering is commonly understood as an integral part of a hostile masculinist geopolitical migration infrastructure, particularly states’ tactics to control people’s movements across borders (Campos-Delgado, 2020; Jones, 2016; Samaddar, 2020). Such bordering practices, central to displacement and cross-border lives, combine national immigration laws and regional political agreements to externalize migration management (Biorklund Belliveau & Ferguson, 2021; Jones & Johnson, 2016; Menjivar, 2014; Yuval-Davis et al., 2019).⁶⁵ The outcome of these practices is more violence, arbitrary detentions and forced deportations experienced by a steadily growing number of people applying for asylum and waiting in southern Mexico without an official protection status (Asylum Access, Interview, 18 March 2022) (Hiemstra, 2018; Instituto Para Las Mujeres en La Migración A.C, 2022).⁶⁶

⁶⁵ See footnote 10, on page 31, for more on *Title 42*, introduced in 2020, and the *Remain in Mexico* under the *Migration Protection Protocols* introduced in 2018 and renewed in 2021.

⁶⁶ In 2021 alone, the US expelled unwanted persons more than a million times to Mexico, including two hundred thousand families with children that were denied the right to apply for protection in the US (IMUMI 2022; Interview

Less is known about how women from Central America who carry the embodied accumulation and memory of violence and dislocation in their lives (re)make life and wait in borderlands, and how their actions contest the bordering practices by the state. As Cecilia, a Honduran woman waiting in southern Mexico, told me during an interview on 27 January 2022:

Life-making is a complicated, long, and scary process, particularly when it includes re-making it in a new place and with persons with whom we may not otherwise have chosen to do life. Making food, crocheting together, and accompanying each other through laughs and tears help.

This chapter contributes to the literature on bordering, refugee studies and feminist political geography by exploring the role *waiting* and *making* plays in enabling affective and political spaces amid a highly volatile environment for women protagonists from Central America who reside in southern Mexico. I define their acts and sites of making in the context of waiting as undocumented bordering practices. These collective practices of making while waiting, which spawn from crocheting, murals, newsletters, and cooking, foster care networks and mobilize critical solidarities at different scales, including with Mexican women, contesting ongoing legacies of borders.

Explaining the process of making a ‘mural-on-the-move’ after a *taller de saberes* in March 2022 Sayra, one of its creators from Honduras, said:

This mural is not like those painted on walls. It is made on a canvass so we can share it with others when we go places. It holds more than forty women’s messages and

Asylum Access, 18 March, 2022). In the 2022 fiscal over 2.38 million people were detained in southern Mexico (La Jornada, 2022b).

emotions. With it we demand justice for victims of feminicide and other gendered violences and express the power of *el buentrato* [good treatment]. You know, actions where I take care of me, and we take care of us [collective self-care] (Interview, 14 March 2022).

The protagonists and other characters featured in the chapter are predominantly women. This is because, as in other displacement and border contexts, there is a palpable feminization of waiting (Hyndman & Giles, 2011) in Mexico that is absent in most geopolitical analyses. After discussing this chapter's specific methodological approach and the theoretical influences for my thinking on 'making while waiting,' I situate the feminization of waiting within a context of gendered violence and feminicides.⁶⁷ I argue that having no option but to wait in southern Mexico, which is often the case for many women from Central America (Uruttia, 2022, Vogt 2018), is a systemic and overlooked gendered form of 'slow harm' (Hodžić, 2016) of state-bordering practices. Then, I challenge the vernacular of (feminized) waiting as passive or generalizable by focusing on affective geographies of making and solidarity that emerge in the wait. I centre on women protagonists' collective makings of a 'mural-on-the-move' commemorating International Women's Day in 2022 and a newsletter titled *Breaking Barriers: When women migrate, life migrates*. Lastly, I focus on the intimate geopolitics of accompaniment and collective self-care (Varela Huerta, 2018; Ford-Smith & Hanson, 2022) in

⁶⁷ Wright (2017) describes the first protests against what is now known as *feminicidio* in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, in the early 1990s. Concerned residents claimed that there was an official denial that women and girls were being killed and abducted at alarming rates. The focus was initially on the way that violence was "normalized" in the context of maquilas (export production factories). By the end of the 1990s, Mexican officials were facing increasing national and international scrutiny, and a new word emerged in Spanish: *feminicidio* (feminicides in English), which means the killing of women and girls with impunity. See footnote 9 on page 11 for more on the definition of feminicides versus femicides.

kitchens (intimate kitchen geopolitics) and across borders. In conclusion, I call for more scholarly works highlighting gendered bordering, waiting and making spaces.

Methodological approach

Expanding our understanding of bordering practices through feminist geopolitics by attending to lived and intimate experiences of geopolitics (Mountz & Hyndman, 2006; Pain, 2009; Sundberg, 2017) and through geographies of making (Hawkins & Price, 2018) to engage with non-conforming performances can lead to a new iteration of geopolitical spaces and protections.

The materials and analysis in this chapter derive from life history narratives produced with women protagonists from Central America, semi-structured interviews with representatives of humanitarian initiatives, and four *talleres de saberes* and related processes of making organized with La 72 Migrant Shelter and with feminist collectives active⁶⁸ in the southern Mexican state of Tabasco in 2022 and 2023.

Inspired by selected feminist scholarship, I centre migrant epistemology by positioning women from Central America waiting in southern Mexico as authors of their own journey under circumstances not of their own making (Espiritu & Duong, 2018; Hyndman, 2019). Their protagonism/self-authorship and acts of making cultivate affective geographies of displacement that help rewrite and challenge dominant narratives of bordering.

To my knowledge, my argument for ‘making while waiting,’ as bordering by people on the move who contest the bordering practices by the state, has not previously arisen in the

⁶⁸ *Mujeres, Organizacon y Territorios* (MOOTS), *Movimiento Migrante MesoAmericano*, (MMM). They co-organize the annual Caravan of Mothers from Central America, which searches for their disappeared loved ones. Las Patronas, in the state of Veracruz, and *las Brujas del Mar*. See Chapter III for more on these groups.

literature. As with affective geographies, when focusing on making, it is not the personal or interpersonal that is of political or ethical central importance, but the relationship, flow and openness between bodies and across scales (Pile, 2009; McCormack, 2003; Ahmed, 2013). Research on both protagonism and affective geographies of making demands that we rethink epistemologies and ontologies that have commonly framed our view (Crosby & Lykes, 2019; Espiritu & Duong, 2018; Price & Hawkins, 2018). Standard methods and research practices can, as discussed in Chapter II, be challenged by making space for the consideration of embodied practices that centre the everyday, community-spirited, and mundane performances (Das, 2006; Espiritu, 2014; Sanyal, 2014). Price and Hawkins (2018) underline that making holds transformative power over the materials, bodies, and social relations involved. In this case, reference to the body as a maker has been conceptualized by feminist scholars as sites of geopolitical action on and through which geopolitics is performed (Dowler & Sharp, 2001; Hyndman, 2010).

Contesting bordering: Making while waiting

The following section addresses the theoretical and epistemological relevance of (re)considering the concepts of bordering, waiting, and spaces of making. I discuss how these concepts combined can contribute to novel scholarly understandings and approaches to bordering and displacement as everyday and transformative political acts.

Rethinking Bordering

Reflecting on borders, feminist geographers and critical scholars from other disciplines have explored acts of bordering as everyday constructions through ideology, cultural mediations, discourses, and political institutions (Anzaldúa, 1999/1987; Sundberg, 2017; Wright, 2019;

Yuval-Davis et al., 2019). More theoretically infused human-centred versions of bordering practices have appeared, including the intentional displacement of attention from “borders to the crossers of borders” (Hyndman, 2012, p. 243), not as objects of analysis but as protagonists.

‘Border thinking,’ Saldivar (2007, p. 339) wrote,

emerges from the critical reflections of (undocumented) immigrants, migrants, bracero/a workers, refugees, campesinos, women, and children on the major structures of dominance and subordination of our times. Thus envisaged, bordering thinking is the name for new geopolitically located thinking of epistemology from both the internal and external borders of the modern (colonial) world system.

Juanita Sundberg (2017) and Melissa Wright (2019) relatedly emphasize the intimate frontiers of geopolitics at the US-Mexico border, while Chiara Brambilla (2015) defines the southern European borderscape as a fluid and constantly shifting space. It is a space traversed not only by bodies but also by discourses, relationships and memories that define inside and outside, citizen and non-citizen, host and guest across the state, regional and other symbolic boundaries (Nyers, 2015; Perera, 2006). Understanding borders and bordering in these ways challenges state-centred accounts as it brings political innovations through conceptual (re)framings of social, political, economic and cultural spaces (Brambilla, 2015). Ioana Tsoni (2019, p. 49) refers to *affective borderscapes* as “liminal, overlapping landscapes that function as contact zones and as charged fields of interaction between shifting configuration of relationally positioned animate and inanimate actors.” Thus, insinuating that borderscapes are shaped by various actors’ affectively charged practices and interactions in borderlands. Also, Martha Balaguera’s (2018) work on refugee agency and confinement at the limits of sovereignty in Mexico creates nuanced

narratives about who the border-crossers are and how their experiences influence their practices, desires, and the spaces within which they dwell.

I see the above standpoints as versions of what Anzaldua (1999/1987) called ‘mestiza consciousness,’ where the border is perceived as a material and imagined dividing line. The related borderlands are an unnatural boundary zone in a constant transition state. She situates mestiza consciousness as a space of critique where multiple and often opposing perspectives, experiences, and knowledges of citizenship and the borderlands emerge. More recently, Espiritu and Duong (2018) have called for an “a feminist refugee epistemology” that similarly challenges state centrism and the notion of “spectacles of crises” in refugee contexts by intentionally focusing on the affected and affective spaces that “exist behind, between, and beyond public(zied) spaces [...]” (Espiritu & Duong, p. 588). Like Anzaldua (1999/1987), Das (2006) and others work (Doná, 2015; Sanyal, 2014), this perspective engages the idea of condemning violence and trauma across space and time by bringing awareness to border-crossers “improvised, fluid, and alternative homemaking, healing and survival strategies” (Espiritu & Duong, 2018, p. 588) as new contested and intimate geographies of care and critical solidarity (Biorklund & Hyndman, 2022; Dixon, 2016; Loyd et al., 2018).

Narratives of waiting

Waiting intentionally brings attention to time and the socio-temporal disruption that protractedness in spaces of displacement and refuge may generate (Auyero, 2012; Conlon, 2010; Ilcan, 2020; Vanyoro, 2019). Experiences of displacement are central to humanitarian temporalities that arise from them (Brun, 2016). Khosravi (2021) says that keeping refugees and others in a protracted state of waiting is an expression of power influenced by gender,

citizenship, class, and race. Protracted waiting makes refugees' lives unpredictable and can "engender uncertainty that maintains historical structures of dependency and subordination" (Khosravi, 2021, p. 12; see also Anderson, 2014). Thus, enforced waiting can be understood as embodied experiences of violence and harm across space and time.

Hodžić (2016; 2023) calls enforced waiting a "slow harm" as it underscores the invisibilized violence, deriving from a racist and nationalist world order, embedded in processes of waiting that displaced people experience in the everyday (Cacho, 2012; Hyndman & Giles, 2011; Nguyen, 2012). Yet, Hodžić also underscores the importance of refraining from generalized notions of waiting, as these can generate discrimination and lead to misperceptions about those experiencing waiting as passive victims who are in need of assistance only. Likewise, rejecting rescue narratives, Arendt (2017/1943) opened "We Refugees" by refusing the very term: "In the first place, we don't like to be called 'refugees' [...]" and concludes by reclaiming the political significance of such framing.

Whereas waiting in the context of displacement and migration is an imposed act of violence that generates harm, the outcome of it is highly nuanced and can also spur protection, creativity, and resistance (Vanyoro, 2019). Like any lived experience dependent on the baggage brought, waiting is a process that is always lived and felt differently (Ahmed, 2013; Auyero, 2012). Brun (2015, p. 29) argues for the notion of 'agency-in-waiting,' reflecting how those experiencing waiting are rarely passive. Waiting also frequently signals a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a desire for the future to change, which can, in turn, engender contestation (Brun, 2015; Vandevordt & Fleishmann, 2021). Others reason that waiting is often active and transformative as those waiting can strategically use the time in productive ways, including by challenging hegemonic power structures (Ilcan, 2020; Rotter, 2016). Waiting also involves hope

(Brun 2015) and is often caring, as “one cannot be indifferent to something and wait for it” (Rotter, 2016, p. 82).

Women protagonists in southern Mexico with whom I have worked closely during this research regularly shared their reflections on what waiting means for them. Combined with the frustrations and fears of waiting, recurrent features conveyed in the narratives, *talleres de saberes*, and other interactions are the affective relationships, care networks, and collective makings that develop as they wait. These everyday bordering practices illustrate women’s protagonism and creativity while waiting, even if undocumented.

Affective geographies of making

In recent years, geographers have increasingly become interested in processes of making, drawing attention to often taken-for-granted processes, materialities and bodies and how these interact on various scales in overlooked spaces - from sheds to kitchens, hair salons and community centres. Laura Price and Harriet Hawkins (2018, p. 2) consider how making transcends scales and sites and its unique ability to form interactions between bodies, materials and processes. They illustrate how making works across not only spaces but also between different bodies and how it is framed by the ideas, skills, creative choices, and motivations of those involved in making. Further where making takes place matters.

In this chapter, making occurs in overlooked and feminized spaces waiting of the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands. Making is often associated with money-making and development rather than makings that do not primarily generate income. Speaking to spaces where non-economic makings are carried out, Edensor et al. (2009, p. 1) describe making as “an

understanding of vernacular and everyday landscapes of creativity honour[ing] the non-economic values and outcomes produced by alternative, marginal and quotidian creative practices.”

Reflecting on this, Doña Mayra, who was one of the protagonists making food at La 72-migrant shelter while she was awaiting a response about her asylum application, shared:

Back home in Honduras, I worked at a maquila [export production company] that makes underwear for ladies in other countries. My daughters still work there. It is a different kind of making. There, the making is about earning money. We are the machines of maquilas. I often worked 16-hour shifts with one short break. The only way to get a longer break was to say that the sewing machine broke now and again. Here at La 72, I make food for free. It does not generate money, and that stresses me, but the connections I have made here have changed my life (Interview, 20 March 2022)

As in any other process, the bodies that populate spaces of making are messy, fleshy bodies but also thinking, feeling bodies with habits, skills and memories produced by, but also productive of, their spatiotemporal realities. They are making subjects shaped by their making practices (Hawkins & Price 2018). Thus, the communal aspect of making and how it intertwines with narratives of contestation and care amid geopolitical realities are fundamental. Stitch ‘n Bitch is, for instance, a name that social knitting groups have used since the 1950s (Stoller, 2003). Today the term is used by feminist and women’s groups in diverse geographies across the globe, contesting political and social structures at different scales.

The scholarly emphasis on different sorts of making is a critical standpoint that requires rethinking how we understand and do research (Hawkins & Price, 2018; Kihato, 2013). As Gibson and Carr (2017, p. 23) note in their work on methods that “animate making:”

Our interest has been piqued by the many ways [...] geographers working on making have brought their own life histories, bodies, material and ideas to bear on fieldwork encounters and in their writing. We are particularly interested in how geographers have put their own bodies to work alongside those of participants or have called upon longstanding making (and remaking) pursuits outside of academia to extend understandings of the everyday, embodied accumulation of skill and tacit knowledge.

Espiritu and Duong's (2018) feminist refugee epistemology is also helpful in theorizing undocumented bordering of making while waiting. It emphasizes how refugee artwork, including art made in collaboration across differences, can make alternative archives of identity, community and protection outside preconceived geographies and frames of displacement and refuge. It invites considerations of how focusing on making can generate new understandings of what (re)making a life across and while waiting at borders can feel and be like.

Feminization of waiting in Mexico

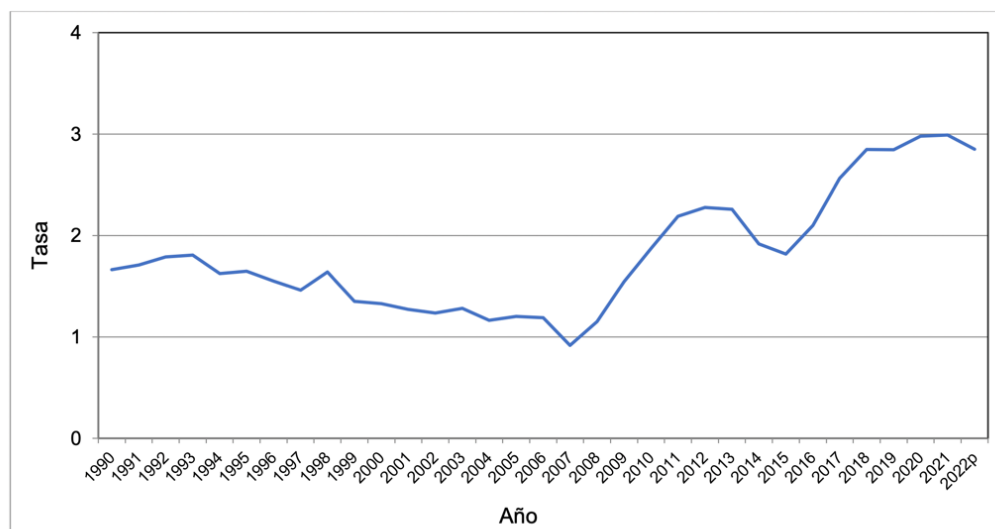
Understanding the slow harm (Hodžić, 2016) of waiting is essential to situating women protagonists and their undocumented spaces of making and contestation, particularly in the context of the ongoing feminization of waiting in southern Mexico (Basok et al., 2015; Cantalapiedra, 2021). A focus on feminization of waiting stands in contrast to more state-centric geopolitics, such as physical borders and militarized tactics preventing people from moving. This section contextualizes the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands and the people living there with a narrative analysis of gendered violence, state-bordering practices, and accompaniment.

Gender, race, class and other locations intersect, as discussed in Chapter IV, with the way people move and how they are treated when seeking safety and protection (Coleman & Stuesse, 2014; Hiemstra, 2018). Women moving from Central America moving across borders in the

region have often experienced violence for prolonged periods and previous displacements, coupled with limited access to protection and social services (Dupraz-Dobias, 2021; Prado Pérez, 2018). Accounts of gendered violence experienced in the places they left behind and in Mexico are alarming (Instituto Para Las Mujeres en La Migracion A.C, 2022). Protagonists I have worked with commonly speak of the gendered violence that follows them across borders and still manifests in their lives. Hernández Castillo (2019, p. 363) correspondingly accentuates that: “[...] migrant women’s bodies have become spaces to be invaded, violated, and incarcerated.”

Femicide statistics related to gendered violence and impunity rates in Mexico, Guatemala and Honduras are, as indicated in the introductory chapter, exceptionally high (Impunidad Cero, 2022; Melgar, 2020; Sánchez, 2022; Sánchez & Pesce, 2022). *Impunidad Cero* (2022), a nongovernmental organization that studies the high impunity rate in Mexico’s justice system, has noted that the rate of feminicides in 2021 was 1.55 per 100,000 women, 125% higher than six years ago. Also, according to *Instituto Para Las Mujeres en La Migracion A.C* (2022), and similar to other contexts, most victims know or have some relation to the perpetrator. Access to official protection mechanisms for gendered violence is limited in Mexico, particularly for racialized non-citizens residing in or transiting through the country.

**TASA DE HOMICIDIOS POR CADA 100 MIL HABITANTES A NIVEL NACIONAL
ENERO A JUNIO DE LOS AÑOS SEÑALADOS
(MUJERES)**



Nota: El denominador para el cálculo de la tasa para el periodo 1990-2019 corresponde a las proyecciones de población 2016-2050 del CONAPO y a la Conciliación Demográfica de México, 1950-2015. El denominador de los años 2020-2022 corresponde a la estimación de población que elabora el INEGI con base en el Marco de Muestreo de Viviendas con referencia al 31 de marzo.

^{p/} Cifras preliminares (enero a junio 2022) con corte al 16 de enero de 2023, debido a que aún no concluyen los procesos de generación de la estadística de defunciones registradas.

Fuente: INEGI. Estadísticas Vitales. Estadísticas de Defunciones Registradas

Fig 13. Official femicide statistics in Mexico since 1990. In the first half of 2022, the rate of femicides was 3 per 100,000 women. Source: INEGI, 23 January 2023.

Women crossing the Mexico-Guatemala border, especially the ones moving across borders alone or with their children and who are experiencing displacement under circumstances of gendered violence, most often intrafamilial and sexual violence, are least likely to have the capacity to go elsewhere safely (Chapter IV, *IMUMI*, 2022; Sanchez, 2017). They often stay in the country's southern parts, waiting for significant periods (Macedo, 2020; Urrutia, 2022; Vogt, 2018, 2013). Many engage in reproductive labour, frequently presenting dispersed levels of harm due to their precarious status and other discriminations. They often do not have someone to care for their children while working (Rojas Wiesner, 2018), which adds to their already precarious situations. Others remain in the borderlands while awaiting financial support from family members and while resting before deciding on the next move.

The feminization of waiting in southern Mexico also relates to the politics of protection and the dynamics of so-called “humanitarian borders,” which are zones of humanitarian intervention or “humanitarian capture” along the territorial edges of nation-states that emerge from state-bordering practices (Brigden, 2018; Walters, 2015; Williams, 2015). In Mexico, the way migrant shelters operate can be seen as an illustration of this. In the southern parts of the country, they form a social service infrastructure that, since 2011, has deemed them legally sanctioned sanctuaries (González-Murphy, 2013). There are approximately 60 shelters in the country, and they are the most common places that people on the move turn to for help in Mexico (Brigden, 2018; Casillas, 2021). Many shelters along the southern border hold pride in creating safe spaces for “vulnerable groups” that are legally off-limits to government agents and, at times, to anyone but women and children (see Chapter IV).

Nevertheless, while their support for women on the move and how they often denounce the violence they observe is positive, they are undeniably part of a geopolitical system that aims to prevent people from moving north, and that has generated a feminization of waiting. In their work on waiting, Hyndman and Giles (2011, p. 362) frame this as a system in which “those who remain ‘in place’ are both feminized and depoliticized through the purported benevolence of humanitarian aid [...]” An example of this is, how humanitarian agencies and shelters in Mexico and beyond characterize migrant women as a “vulnerable group” and often as victims in need of assistance, while men residing outside of the shelters are encouraged to care for themselves.

Documenting spaces of making and solidarity at different scales

Aware of the feminization of waiting and homogenized representations of the gendered displaced victim that passively waits, selected shelters and migrant solidarity initiatives in

southern Mexico are increasingly self-critical about their role in supporting this waiting. Some are taking action to change how they work. For example, they engage in critical solidarity approaches, including intentional acts of accompaniment that foster spaces of making and collective self-care.⁶⁹ These are central to the undocumented bordering practices I speak of. From an intersectional lens, Varela Huerta et al. (2020) emphasize the power of collective self-care. Though they focus on collective self-care in the Central American migrant caravans, the concept can be applied to women's actions as they wait in southern Mexico. These are spaces where affect and resistance exist in parallel with other geographies of violence and protection (Biorklund & Hyndman, 2022; Gluckner, 2019; Macedo, 2022). Put differently, collective self-care attempts to make spaces of waiting "ordinary" through processes that try to reclaim life and create a "home" (Doná, 2015; Sanyal, 2014; see also Ford-Smith, 2021).

In a personal conversation I had with one of the directors at *La 72*-migrant shelter, where we discussed the significance of adhering to critical solidarity, they stressed that:

For a few years now, our strategy has been engaging critical solidarity. It is a strategy that opposes *asistencialismo* [aid dependency] and the structures of saviourism and victimization it reproduces. Instead, we focus on intentional acts of *acompañamiento* [accompaniment] that are everyday gestures to support refugees and other people with precarious status [...] Here at *La 72*, we offer housing, safety and legal support for people who tend to stay up to a year. Upon arrival, we inform them about how they are about to enter a communal space where care and respect are honoured but that we are not there to do everything for them, like cleaning their room, making their dishes, or entertaining their children. We encourage everyone to work, study English and engage in other activities rather than just sitting around doing nothing while they wait (Santiago Cancheca, Interview, 14 March 2022).

⁶⁹ See Chapters II and VI for more on critical solidarity approaches and Appendix A on the accompaniment of others in pain.

A psychosocial worker who is part of *el Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano*, a movement that stands in solidarity with migrants in Mexico and Central America and that supports the yearly organizing of transnational migrant and search caravans, similarly told me:

To accompany someone means to recognize their humanity and to journey alongside them without expecting to understand, to explain or to be able to categorize what they are experiencing. It is an intentional act of solidarity and sometimes a contestation of power structures and other ideologies that cause harm. At my organization, we accompany migrants and their families, but more importantly, they accompany each other (Lopez, Interview, 6 May 2022).⁷⁰

From a scholarly stance, Koopman (2011) and other critical scholars (Hernández Castillo, 2016) argue that solidarity is more than sameness or assisting someone in need. Solidarity builds on connections across differences. The practice, emotions and imaginaries involved in those connections work to change uneven relationships between here and there, us and them. I frame these spaces of solidarities and makings in this section as undocumented bordering practices. I explicitly focus on the geographies and outcomes of two projects: a mural-on-the-move commemorating International Women's Day and a newsletter conveying the harms of gendered violence, migration policies, and the related experiences and collective contestations. I also document intimate geopolitics arising in kitchens and through the collective making of food.

⁷⁰ Though critical/radical solidarity approaches and acts of accompaniment are more conscious of diverse powers, they are still likely to imply power imbalances. This includes elements of class and race privileges associated with these acts. Being able to accompany others through their pain or struggles requires that the person accompanying finds themselves in a certain (often more privileged) position to do so. See Appendix A for more on accompanying others in pain.

The making of a mural-on-the-move and other undocumented contestations

We are all warrior women. We made it thus far and have achieved many things despite the violence. We are not perfect and make mistakes, but no one should be allowed to make us feel less again. We are worthy and can make important things here, now, there, and tomorrow if we support each other [...].

The quote above comes from a woman participating in one of the *talleres de saberes* organized with La 72 Migrant Shelter in March 2022, in which women from Central America and Mexico came together to converse, create, and think about how to care for themselves, each other, and the environments that surround them. These workshops centred on collective reflection and geographies of *el buentrato* (good treatment). They generated affective spaces for women to interchange their protection strategies, perseverance, and care practices, in part by making things together.⁷¹ As the representative for one of the co-organizing women's groups MOOTS framed it when introducing the philosophy behind one of the *talleres* (8 March 2022):

We seek to create a space strengthening a culture of *buentrato* [good treatment] and solidarity that can multiply across the participants' communities. We use *buentrato* to contest dominant narratives of *el maltrato* [maltreatment] women experience. The fact that *buentrato* does not exist in the Spanish dictionary illustrates how the dominant culture centres on gendered violence and related *daños* [harms]. At the same time, acts of care and good treatment occur every day in overlooked peripheries. Our intentional focus on *buentrato* should be seen less as a nice gesture and more as a political act of radical empathy and solidarity.

⁷¹ In 2022, I organized four *talleres de saberes* in collaboration with La 72 Migrant Shelter, MOOTS, and colleagues at the University of Cadiz (Spain) and Wisconsin-Madison University (US). I also participated in two workshops organized by MOOTS. For more detailed information, see Chapter II and Appendix F.

In response to MOOTS introduction of *el buentrato*, a participant of the *taller* who came from one of the Mexican border towns expressed that she wanted to share an example with the other participants of what this can look and feel like:

Before, when I saw [migrant] women passing through my village, I pitied them [...]. Now I realize they have taken a step many women I know, myself included, still have not dared to take. They have stood up against *el maltrato* and decided to leave to take care of themselves. Contrary, I and other women continue here, fearing what may happen to our daughters and us, but I am too afraid to leave. Coming to these workshops feels like a relief. I learn new things. Not only about different ways of living but also new skills. Another participant who is not here today but whom I got to know in a *taller* some time back is from Honduras. I would probably not have spoken to her a year ago if I had seen her on the street, but now that has changed. She is excellent at crocheting, and we have wanted to learn how to crochet in my community. So, she now comes every Tuesday afternoon with her sisters to teach us how to crochet. We make hats, sweaters, and other things while drinking coffee, and we chat about how we can change our macho culture (8 March 2022).

The woman this participant refers to is Sayra, one of the protagonists I produced a life history narrative with and with whom I worked closely during the *talleres de saberes*. Sayra is one of four sisters, *las hermanas Gomez* (the Gomez sisters), who resided at La 72 Migrant Shelter 2022. The sisters fled Honduras with their six children following various attacks in 2021. They believe the threats were partly because of their non-heterosexuality. Two of the sisters were pregnant as they fled. The Gomez sisters are all talented artists and spent much of their time waiting in southern Mexico, creating different kinds of art. They were the ones who proposed that in addition to conversing in the *talleres de saberes*, we should start making things together. Following their advice, making together and what emerges from the process became central to

my research methodology and, more importantly, to many of the women protagonists' daily routines while residing and waiting in southern Mexico. Explaining the significance of making while waiting, in one of the conversations we had Sayra said (14 March 2022):

Initially, my sisters and I started making things to make the waiting less boring. We were waiting for our mandatory COVID quarantine to end, for a response about our asylum application, and for an interview date with *COMAR* [Mexican Commission for Refugees]. Using our hands to make things was also a way to think less about the life we left behind in Honduras.

Now, a few months into the wait, this has become much more. I feel empowered and see making as healing for myself and others. We are still not allowed to work here in Mexico legally, so every day, we occupy a space at the shelter or nearby to set up an art workshop where not only us four and our children but also other women who live in the area come together to crochet, make paper flowers covered in wax, and to draw or write poems. It has become a space where relations are made, and conversations are held about anything from how to make the best beans for many people to good memories from home and hardships faced here in Mexico [...]. This is also how I have gotten to know women from the local communities and other activists who stand against violence towards women and migrants. We have a lot in common. One local women's group has hired my sister and me to come and teach them how to crochet. Another recently asked us to come and show them how to make paper flowers. They want to make one for each woman killed by their intimate partner or a family member in this state [Tabasco] in the last ten years [...].

All these conversations and exchanges of knowledges are how the idea of making a mural-on-the-move together for International Women's Day started. We wanted to make something that expresses our anger and frustration about the violence we experience from the day we are born, and that follows us throughout life. One of our inspirations for the mural was the '*Canción sin miedo*' [Song without fear, which has become a feminist hymn in Latin America in recent years] that says, "*nos queremos vivas*" [we want us

alive] and “*si tocan a una respondemos todas*” [if they touch one of us, we all respond].⁷²



Figure 14. Women protagonists perform Quintana's *Canción sin miedo* (Song without fear) with the co-created 'mural-on-the-move' in the background at an event organized by Universidad Juárez Autónoma de Tabasco in 2022. Photo by La 72

Making murals (muralism) in Mexico and Central America has long been used to communicate political and emotional opinions, including about borders and violence. Like other creative makings, they link conventional geopolitics, everyday experiences, and activism (Orozco Mendoza, 2018, 2019). Murals are central features in the Mexico-Guatemala

⁷² See Chapter VII for more on this and Appendix H: *Canción sin miedo* (Song without fear) lyrics.

borderlands, including at the walls of migrant shelters. The making of this mural-on-the-move (Figure 14) was initiated at one of the *talleres de saberes* organized with La 72 Migrant Shelter in 2022 to make public the exchange of words and affect that occurred in these intimate feminized spaces and to contest gendered violence and the politics around it collectively.

The original idea for the mural-on-the-move was to make a traditional mural with paint. But to take advantage of all the artmaking and different creative skills, the women protagonists participating in this project decided to make it on a cloth. This approach, they said, would also allow them to move it around and bring it to places where they usually do not have a space to make their voices heard. The initial mural-on-the-move holds over 40 women's (from 12 countries) personal and collective messages expressed in different art forms. With time, more messages and contributions have been added, as a goal was to keep its content fluid and alive. Introducing the mural to state officials and NGO representatives at an event commemorating International Women's Day in March 2022, Jasmine, one of its makers, detailed that:

The colourful images in the inner circle are our personal expressions of what leaving violence behind feels like, and our demands are the words in the outer circle. We demand this for ourselves and other women who may still be in violent situations and feel uncomfortable speaking up. The flags are included for two reasons. To show the countries where we come from, where we have so many good and bad memories, [...] including the violence we fled from. And to illustrate that, our care for each other goes beyond **your national borders** [directing her words to the state officials] (UJAT Event, 7 March 2022).

A flag's imagery is always contradictory and contested, as it comes with realities of borders that indicate who belongs and who does not. The usage of flags can further be seen as reinforcing borders in contexts where people want to upend them. As Jasmine alludes, there is a

tendency to hold pride in your flag, origin, and culture, even though it has caused you harm and even when it forced you to leave. The inclusion of flags in this mural can thus be seen as an intimate undocumented bordering practice that is made public, increasing its symbolism. It is a reminder of how deeply embedded and unconsciously embodied nationalism may be. However, when presented by women protagonists from different places who collectively resist the impact of state-influenced violence, flags can also represent the solidarities that grow between and beyond borders.

In the invitations to this specific event with state officials and NGO representatives and to other events in Mexico that have since followed, several protagonists who made the mural were asked to share their violent experiences across borders. After much contemplation, they declined such invitations and said they would only attend these public events if invited as panellists, speakers, or artists with knowledge. Thus, they collectively decided they would refuse to share their intimate experiences of violence or place themselves in the role of a victim in public forums, even knowing that state officials would be present and that their sharing could generate more public pressure. In an interview with Cecilia from Honduras, she emphasized how she and other protagonists want to be seen and listened to beyond their stories of suffering. Her points give insight into the intimate scale of the geopolitical circumstances they are experiencing (27 January 2022):

Us sharing our experiences with violence does not mean we want to speak about them all the time. When we started to get noticed because of our art and activism here in the borderlands, many of us fell into the trap of thinking that we needed to share our feelings and scars to get heard [...]. Then we decided that we did not want to be known for our traumas but for our commitment to stand up against the reasons behind them [...]. We have so much knowledge together, so now we only accept invitations where we can speak more generally and express what we think the authorities and humanitarian

agencies should do to help us. [...] We are women who have crossed borders and activists pushing against this culture of violence and who know too well what living in it feels like. The more those supporting us understand this, the more we can achieve.

Now I only share my story publicly when I am part of an event or *taller* with other women in similar situations. Especially if women who are still in abusive relationships are participating. Being with others who express what they have lived through and what they are doing or want to do about it has helped me so much [...].

Before another public event, some protagonists who had been invited to perform their messages visually gathered in one of the spaces where they usually met to make art and chat. They had decided to get ready for the event together, and knowing that it would be a stressful morning, they had divided tasks. Two women brought breakfast for everyone; two were acting stylists helping everyone who wanted to put on make-up and to style their hair. One was tasked with bringing her hair straightener, and she also ensured everyone's outfits were intact. Some others were responsible for all the children. "It is chaotic and messy, but so much fun to do this together. We are all so different but also so the same. That is probably why it feels very special," said one of them. Another woman, Rosa from Guatemala, whose daughter was going to do a performative dance enacting their collective messages (Figure 14), told me as we both were serving coffee to everyone (7 March 2022)⁷³:

Today, I feel free like a butterfly, even if I know that is still far from reality [...]. Compared to my situation back home less than a year ago, I now feel free and colourful. Then, I was not allowed to go out alone or to put on makeup. If I did, I knew that violence awaited me at home [...]. Now, I am the one deciding where to go and how to appear. It feels strange and good at the same time. The connections I have made with

⁷³ Before and during these events, I tried, as much as possible, to accompany the protagonists, in part by being present if they needed support. On some occasions, this meant helping to serve the morning coffee to everyone. Other times, it implied acting as the audience when they practiced for their future speeches and performances.

others who also wait here help me. Some of the other women here today were the ones who encouraged me to let my daughter perform at this event [the event we were preparing for]. They have even influenced decisions I have recently made about what to do next which will change my life.

Their multifaceted references to how interactions through art-making and related socio-spatial relations create diverse forms of solidarity and accompaniment, including activism, echo Hawkins & Price's (2018) argument on how making transcends scales and sites while forming interactions between bodies, materials, and processes. Further, it illustrates how collective self-care can generate alternative forms of protection and activism in waiting (Ford-Smith, 2021; Rotter 2016).

Breaking barriers: When women migrate, life migrates

The art-making activities continued by a group of approximately 40 women protagonists waiting in southern Mexico throughout my research. The participants were increasingly getting comfortable expressing their perspectives on gendered violence in public and how they relate to states' management of migration in the region. They also realized how, with time, this would change. Their presence in southern Mexico was generally temporary. Some also sensed that their outspokenness on these topics might negatively influence their asylum application and expressed that they would not jeopardize their (often only) chance at obtaining international protection and a regularized legal status.

In parallel, connections with local communities and women's groups had grown deeper. In one of the *talleres de saberes* we organized in May 2022, some participants spoke about how they felt they were part of a care network that crosses borders. Partly as they were establishing

relations with Mexican communities and groups and partly because women who were no longer waiting in southern Mexico but had continued their journey elsewhere were still transmitting care and support from afar. In thinking about how these dynamics could be maintained and further developed, the idea of making a newsletter emerged, later titled *Rompiendo barreras: Migran las mujeres, migra la vida* (Breaking barriers: When women migrate, life migrates) (2022). The idea was to draw on everyone's experience by documenting and conveying narratives about how women's stories of harm, care and imagination can and have already upended some borders and barriers.

La 72 produces a journal, *Voy Caminando* (I'm Walking), three times per year in collaboration with different humanitarian agencies and academic institutions, depending on the theme of the specific edition. In March 2022, when I met with the group of women for the second *taller de saberes*, the theme for the upcoming edition had still not been decided. Thus, during the *taller*, the participants prepared a pitch of their idea to the ones deciding on the journal themes. The pitch was accepted, and the process of making this newsletter began.

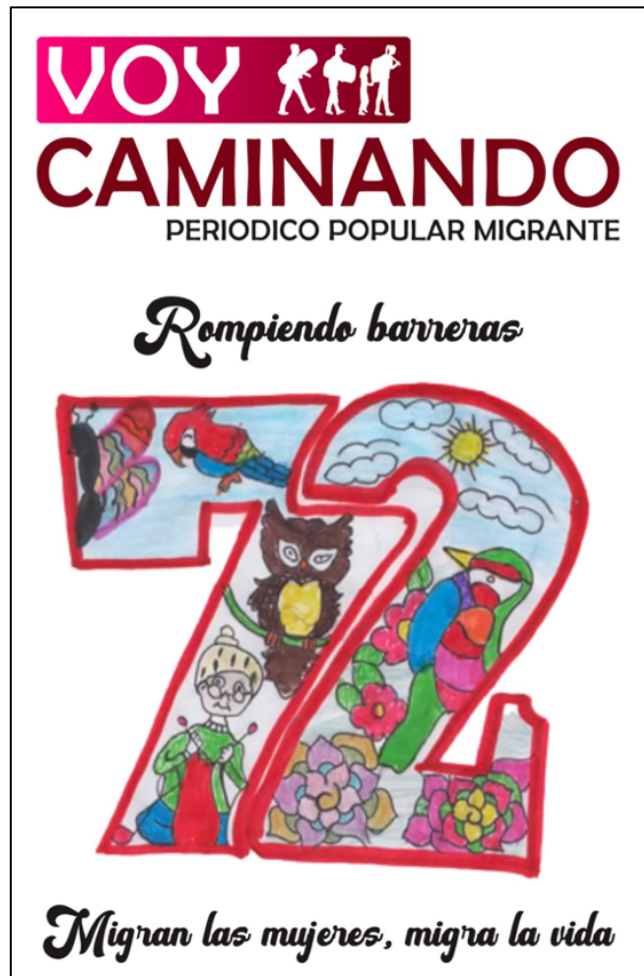


Figure 15. Front page of the April/May 2022 edition of the journal *Voy Caminando*, by women residing in southern Mexico with local activists and La 72.

The initial discussions among the protagonists centred on what the core message of this newsletter should be and how to convey it in a way that felt right to everyone involved in making it. Some wanted to share a personal story from home, a quote that makes them get up in the morning, or their favourite recipe. Others did not want to write anything personal but preferred to interview Mexican migrant activists or convey their thoughts and feelings through art.

Speaking about the process of making the newsletter, Andrea, one of the coordinators at La 72 who centres what she calls a radical solidarity approach, shared this with me:

Making this newsletter with the women at the shelter and with some of the local activists they wanted to interview is a telling experience of how we often get it wrong when we try to help. They knew what they wanted to say and how, so I was there to listen and offer support should they need it. I played music with lyrics about how as women, we are strong together to get them into the mood [laughing], but I am not sure that was needed. They were very motivated. Also, like you, I was there as an outsider to share my perspective about what to include and what not to.⁷⁴ That was probably good. Otherwise, we might have ended up with a whole book. The most challenging thing in making this newsletter was that everyone is on the move. Some contributors obtained asylum during the process or relocated elsewhere, so they could not finalize their contributions. Others joined the process halfway through making the newsletter (Interview, 14 May 2022).

The editorial piece opening the newsletter states that its content draws on encounters where patriarchal society, violence, machismo, and sorority among women protagonists have been reflected on between tears and laughter (Rompiendo barreras, 2022). The introduction further reads:

Write, edit, re-write and comment. What do we want to say? And who are we speaking to? These stories aim to inspire other women to move forward. The fight for women's rights must be daily and carried out in all spaces, for those who are no longer here, for those who are still to come, and for ourselves [...]. We want us free and alive!

Making this newsletter was, as noted, a long and not-always-easy process, as with any knowledge-making that welcomes and even thrives on differences among its makers. This difference brought richness to the content and helped create spaces where new ideas about how

⁷⁴ With other supporters, including staff at La 72 I helped them edit and translate the newsletter into English to widen their potential audience.

the material produced could be used. Speaking to the challenges of this knowledge production, one of the contributors - referring to herself as PNM - was initially unsure about participating as she felt that others did not appreciate her presence or her skills (personal communication, May 2022). In conveying this sentiment, other women expressed similar feelings, so it was decided that a meeting would be held to see if these differences could be addressed. In the meeting, everyone agreed that submissions should be anonymous and that an election later would be held to decide what materials to be included and what not.

The final outcome is a mosaic of art, stories, facts, and ideas that have been shared widely in Mexico and beyond. PNM's poem, *Of Course, we can*, was one of the selected contributions. Here is an excerpt:

She wants to be stronger than she has already been, regardless of the criticism from others.

I want to overcome any problem that life throws at me. I want to feel better every day that passes. Feel that I am imposing for good. I want to stop crying. I want to smile more, feel alive again, and not let anything turn off my aura, my essence. [...]

She always asks for strength, wisdom, and understanding to move forward and be a better mother. That tomorrow they feel proud of her. [...]

I want to stop being unkind to myself and stop thinking that I can't because deep down, something tells me I can. I have been strong, and I can and want to move forward. [...]

She and I want them to respect every woman's right to live. We want men to stop thinking that we are only good at domestic work and to know that we can be wrong because we are human beings and make mistakes that we can change. We should not think that we can't just because they have told us we cannot. Look at us; of course, we can! (Rompiendo barreras, 2022)

The contributions of those protagonists who took on the role of interviewers and sought to interview local women activists in the borderlands also created noteworthy dynamics as the preconceived roles were reversed. Women from Central America, usually the interviewees, were now asking questions about violence and how Mexican women experience the southern border. The interviews are presented as an interactive conversation in the newsletter. Several interviewees express that growing up, they were told to maintain distance from migrants passing through. Further, how their present support for people on the move has caused problems for them and their families, including with the authorities. And, in some instances, with their husbands whose perspective of migration may differ from theirs. One, referred to as “C.D 1”, explains her solidarity and activism (Rompiendo barreras, 2022):

I greatly admire your [referring to the interviewer's] firmness and strength in deciding that “I am going to walk, and I am going to get where I have to go no matter what.” How can I not do what I can to support that? The small chapel in my village often stands empty at night, so I let people on the move come to rest there, and when I have time, I make them something simple to eat. I do not expect anything in return, but it is extra special when you establish a connection, and sometimes even a friendship, as we have done.

Maura, from Nicaragua, conducted another interview for the newsletter with *Doña* Lupita from Tabasco, who oversees the kitchen at La 72. It, too, speaks to the care generated among women in ordinary spaces and across differences. *Doña* Lupita shares that working in a place where she interacts with migrants daily has completely changed her perspective. “I used to say,” she confesses, “they [migrants] come because they want to. But getting to know them and listening to their life stories while cooking together has changed me. I now consider myself a migrant activist” (Rompiendo barreras, 2022). These dialogues between local and migrant

women present the dynamics in these spaces where women collectively break barriers by documenting and imagining bordering practices ‘from below.’

Breaking Barriers was published in May 2022, both in print and online. It attracted much attention, and its contributors were asked to do interviews in local newspapers. Mexican migrant solidarity groups referenced it in their social media feeds and expressed an interest in partaking in the care networks that had been initiated (Facebook La 72 Tenosique, n.d.; MOOTS; Brujas del Mar; Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano). A few months after the newsletter was published, I also asked for the contributors' permission to use the newsletter as material for one of the *talleres de saberes* organized (in October 2022) with other scholars and activists, which other women from Central America, now waiting in southern Mexico, attended. We used the stories and art published by women waiting to generate conversation and make new and interconnected knowledges. Quoting the printed stories or poems and occasionally adding to them became, for some participants of the October 2022 *taller* (Figure 21), a way to speak about what they had gone through or felt without sharing their own stories.



Figure 16. Collage made by participants in the October 2022 *taller de saber* using different materials, including from the newsletter *Breaking barriers: When women migrate, life migrates*. Photo by author.

Intimate kitchen geopolitics

During the *taller de saberes* where we used the Breaking Barriers newsletter as a tool, one of the stories referenced multiple times was the interview with *Doña* Lupita in the kitchen of La 72. Many said they could identify with what she said about how kitchens and making food together can be healing and a way to get to know other women, regardless of their backgrounds. Also, they expressed that the presence of persons like *Doña* Lupita in different places throughout their migratory journeys has helped them feel safe, at least momentarily.

Observing the impact *Doña* Lupita had on women protagonists waiting in southern Mexico, I later asked her about this consensus and why she thought the section about her in the newsletter was titled “The Heart of La 72.” At first, she laughingly said, “ah, those ladies, they

just want me to continue making them good food; that is why they say I am the heart of this place.” Then she got more serious, and we discussed how collective food-making builds relationships and changes how we understand and interact in this world. In the words of *Doña Lupita* (Interview, 6 October 2022, emphasis added):

Making food for and with people is my way of helping. It is healing to share this space with other women. They come to help me cut onions, carrots, and all that, which is good, but I think they mainly come to spend time together and talk about their day-to-day stuff [...].

Women who migrate run a high risk of being violated. It is a trajectory of violence that they are on. They need support and a safe space to share their thoughts, feelings, and fears. My kitchen has become this, I think. Making food while talking is a good combination. Also, sometimes, just making food without discussing anything else but how long we should cook the beans is healing.

I see how women become friends here in the kitchen, how they help and care for each other, and sometimes how they let their tensions out while fighting over who should cut what vegetable and who gets the best knife. Five minutes later, I hear how they plan for what is next. They become united.

The collective food-making has been discussed during and often carried out after the different *tallers* I co-organized and participated in. Food-making has also frequently occurred in interactions with other women’s groups in Mexico that accompany migrants. As *Doña Lupita* says, making food is presented as a way of caring for oneself and each other. It is a collective self-care. Women protagonists participating in this research have also emphasized that cooking together is a way to try and feel normal again, like artmaking: to maybe forget, for a few hours, about what has happened, laugh together, and grieve together.

Nelly, a member of Las Patronas, the women's collective giving food to migrants passing by their community for over 25 years (see Chapter III), told me during a visit that they also transmit their solidarity with migrants through food. What started as a small-scale sporadic activity initiated by Nelly's mother has become an organized thing, where some 20 women in the state of Veracruz offer food and shelter for passing migrants. Today, they are frequently invited to speak about their actions at public events, where they often take the opportunity to denounce the violence and harm they witness and how it relates to migration policies and authorities' enforcement of them.

The way of living here in La Patrona is very traditional [Nelly tells me]. Women who form part of Las Patronas collective are seen as the feminists in town. Not necessarily in a good way. Some years back, the saying here was that if you joined Las Patronas, you would soon be without a husband [laughing]. That is not the case, but there is some truth to it. Working closely with other women and spending time together in the kitchen cooking, eating, and drinking much coffee, we share a lot and encourage each other. Our standing joke is that we can never get rid of our shared kitchen table here at La Patrona [migrant shelter] because of all the conversations, memories and secrets it holds that we might not want others to know about.

What brought us together was our aspiration to accompany migrants who were thirsty and hungry [...]. Back then [in the late 1990s], I could never have expected how much this group of women and the space we have created together have helped me. It has changed me and many of us - these women and what we do together have made me realize my worth. What started as making ten meals of food per day for migrants, which is still a woman's task here in our society, has become my way of living and doing politics. Before, I was scared to upset those in power. Now, I take every opportunity to make known what migrants go through in my country (Interview, 31 January 2022).

Other members of Las Patronas similarly expressed to me that they did not feel very good about themselves and their situation and relations before they became part of this collective. One said, "Before, I was just at home, like a housewife, in a bad relationship... Now I am making food daily with so much love and heart" (Ramirez, Interview, 31 January 2022). They refer to themselves as humble women who want to help, nothing more than that. Just doing what they think is the right thing to do, and by doing that, forming a community that encourages them to stand up to the violent circumstances that they, and the migrants they accompany, experience.

The following statement by Las Patronas (2015), released for their 20th anniversary, is a compelling way to close this section on the intimate geopolitics of kitchens and food making. The statement illustrates how Las Patronas, similar to other women's groups and collectives in Mexico, strategically position their womanhood and claim their roles as caretakers as a way to perform radical and political solidarity and activism at different scales:⁷⁵

Much is said of the help we give migrants, but the truth is that they [migrants] have also helped us along the way. Thanks to our work, we have assumed a position as humans and as women that we didn't know or ever thought would be able to make such a difference.

Many told us that we could not help others, that we would go to jail, that we would face justice, and that the assistance we were providing was illegal. The only thing illegal is leaving another human being to die of starvation. They told us that we were women facing problems out of our reach. And yes, our work started from our position as women from traditional families of customs that did not permit feminine actions outside the home or your community. We passed the days caring for and giving love to our families, and it was just that that gave us the character to care for many others as well. Thinking that each man and woman on the train [their community La Patrona is located next to *la*

⁷⁵ This statement, written and released by Las Patronas in 2015, has been translated and edited for clarity.

Bestia's train tracks, the transpacific cargo train commonly used by migrants]⁷⁶ was part of our family, it is only natural to take care of them.

Through this work, we gained one of the most precious pieces of knowledge over the past twenty years: being a woman in our country is not a limited position as we were led to believe. On the contrary, in our society, to be a woman should be a place of power and possibilities... endless possibilities, insofar as we are allowed to extend our love as humans, sisters, wives, and mothers... the way God loved the world. We recognize ourselves as women capable of generating changes, our participation in community decisions and societal problems is not only necessary but a matter that opens doors to spaces, struggles, dreams, and expressions of humanity that appear nowhere more than in those who dare to look beyond their daily lives and decide to love [...].

Don't stop walking and dreaming. Let's make that dream a reality. Growing and discovering. We are not a moral issue but a social one. All of us are needed. We'll keep walking. We will not stop.

Concluding thoughts

Borders are at the centre of our everyday lives. The outcomes, which are gendered and often deadly, exacerbate harm across space and time. The feminization of waiting is a slow harm embedded in the political powers of borders. This includes state-bordering practices, such as US and Canadian policies to externalize migration governance to Mexico. Yet, feminized waiting in the context of displacement can also be a necessary pre-condition for creating socio-spatial relationships that generate affective geographies of making and transformative spaces of solidarity, care and contestation across borders.

This chapter documents bordering practices 'from below,' *Undocumented bordering practices*, performed by women protagonists from Central America experiencing waiting in

⁷⁶ See Chapter IV for a more in-depth analysis of *la Bestia* and other vehicles and vias to and through Mexico.

southern Mexico and those accompanying them. By centring on women's protagonism and collective acts of making (art, food, and connections) as they wait, and the related geopolitical spaces of care, knowledges and activism that emerge, the chapter expands debates on bordering and protection. Further, it shows how co-participatory and affective research methodologies building on protagonism and geographies of making across differences can generate new critical spaces of reflection, agency, and resistance. The chapter contributes to various scholarly fields, including feminist political geography, refugee studies, and critical border studies.

Three examples of undocumented bordering practices are presented, including the making of a 'mural-on-the-move,' the making of a newsletter titled *Breaking Barriers: When women migrate, life migrates*, and intimate geopolitics of making and sharing food in borderlands (kitchen geopolitics). All of them illustrate how practices of making while waiting transcend spaces and bodies, fostering new synergies of collective self-care and political action. The featured makings and personal stories challenge homogenizing narratives of bordering and women crossing them as victims who only need assistance. They accentuate what, as Cecilia from Honduras eloquently said: 're-making (life) in a place with persons who we may not otherwise have chosen to do life in or with' can be and feel like. Thus, collective making illustrates how to re-imagine more accountable ways to define and understand bordering while supporting alternatives to caring for people seeking safety and protection across borders.

The following chapter presents the story of Juanita from Guatemala and other women who were made to disappear as they migrated through Mexico. It centers a *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) lens and draws on participatory action research with a search Caravan from Central America and participant observations of their assemblies. this chapter emphasizes the gendered geopolitics of disappearances and performative search efforts for absent bodies across

borders. I argue that disappearances are another facet of states' bordering practices to control gendered and racialized bodies. Further, the chapter explores how search efforts for the disappeared and related demands for justice are less documented processes of bordering and memorialization activism that span generations, geographies and identities.

Chapter VI. Freedom for All Juanitas! A body-territory epistemology of the disappeared and performative searches across borders

*Memoria de un corazón ausente (Memory of an absent heart)*⁷⁷

To search, then, not only refers to the disappeared person but also to the urgent need to recover an important element of the life of the person who remains. When searching, we also try to find ourselves in the nonsense of disappearances. It is like a journey in which it is a question of returning to the former state. The expression of a present heart to another that is absent is thus a sign of love from one person to another.

Jorge Verástegui González, 2018

Introduction

In the following statement from a press conference held on 19 May 2022, Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador demands that Juana Alonso Santizo be immediately released. Juana (or Juanita as her community calls her) is a Maya woman from Huehuetenango in Guatemala who disappeared as she was migrating through Mexico in 2014. She disappeared because she had been arbitrarily imprisoned in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, near the Mexico-United States border for almost eight years. During the first four years of Juanita's disappearance, no one was aware of her whereabouts, as she was denied access to a lawyer, a translator, and any outside communication. President López Obrador asserted:

Yesterday, a colleague [referring to a human rights defender] spoke about a migrant woman detained [in Reynosa, Tamaulipas]. Well, I already have the answer. This colleague is right. There is evidence that [Juanita] was tortured and has been imprisoned

⁷⁷ The poem *Memoria de un corazón ausente* (Memory of an absent heart) was originally written in Spanish and has been translated by the author of this dissertation.

in Tamaulipas for 12 or 14 years.⁷⁸ The Tamaulipas authorities, including the state prosecutor's office, have even agreed to release her because they accept that it was an injustice. Hopefully, the governor [in Tamaulipas] will help us, and this migrant is released today [...]. When they arrested [Juanita], she did not speak Spanish [...]. You see [there are] many things at play here, so we immediately need to solve this special case (quoted in Centro Prodh, 2022; TN23 Guatemala, 2022).

Within two days of the President's demand, in which he insinuates the *uniqueness* of such state violence, Juanita was released from the Reynosa correction facility. Framing the violence Juanita experienced as unique is part of the violence, however. Disappearances of Central American migrants in Mexico have quadrupled in recent years (Diaz, 2022; SJES, 2022), and in March 2024, the official number of disappeared persons, including Mexican nationals, was just under 100,000 (Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda, 2024; Zerega, 2024).⁷⁹ Women who disappear are commonly absent in the official statistics. Following pressure from civil society search groups, the Mexican authorities have acknowledged that the numbers of disappeared are likely higher, centering drug-related violence as the main reason for these events (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Searching family members and advocates assert that disappearances of migrants in Mexico also trace back to structural gendered state violence, including transnational border policies, immigration detention and prisons, in which persons who cannot prove their Mexican residence are held while being subject to injustices (Hernández Castillo, 2019; Ecologies of Migrant Care, n/a; Rosas, 2019).

⁷⁸ Juanita was arbitrarily detained for almost eight years, not 12-14 years, as indicated in this public address by Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador.

⁷⁹ By 2023, the official number of disappeared persons in Mexico reached 111,000 (Fundación Para La Justicia, 2023), but in March 2024, the Mexican government adjusted the number to just below 100,000.

In an interview on the day of Juanita's release on May 21, 2022, her aunt Anja, who had performed widescale searches to find and free her over the past eight years and who, together with other community members, received Juanita outside the prison, said:

Juanita's crime was being an Indigenous woman from lands that are exploited and who could not speak Spanish when she left to go and provide for her family. Who is going to pay for that scar? We will take care of her, but who cares for us except us as mothers, women, and migrants? We want *Libertad Para Todas Las Juanitas* [Freedom for all Juanitas]⁸⁰ (Centro Prodh, 2022)

In this brief message, Juanita's aunt Anja condemns the intergenerational *daños* (harms) imposed on feminized Indigenous and migrant *bodies* and *territories*, including the geopolitics of borders and related disappearances in Mexico. She conveys that the violence inflicted on their bodies is also done to their lands. In closing, she appeals on behalf of *all Juanitas* (referring to all feminized disappeared persons) that they be freed (Personal conversation, 25 May 2022)

In reaction to Anja's call to *free* all feminized disappeared persons, this chapter narrates Juanita's story and performative acts carried out by her community and other groups that assembled the *XVI Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas* (XVI Caravan of Mothers from Central America) to search for and make visible the disappearances of their loved ones. To say something is *performative* amounts to a (localized) ontological affirmation. I understand performative searches for the absent and the disappeared as vital embodied political acts that transfer and transmit social knowledge, (counter) memory, and a sense of identity function as an epistemology (Butler, 2015; Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Ford-Smith, 2021; Taylor, 2003).

⁸⁰ #*LibertadParaJuanita* (Freedom for Juanita), #*JuanitaLibre* (Free Juanita) and #*LibertadParaTodxsLxsJuanitas* (Freedom for All Juanitas) were slogans used by Juanita's community, and others searching and seeking justice for Juanita and other persons that have disappeared while migrating through Mexico.

Influenced in part by Judith Butler (2015), I define a performative act as the assembly of bodies claiming public space and demanding political change.

In this chapter, I particularly ask, what is the embodiment of disappearance? How do *buscadorxs* (searchers) create a presence of bodies in the absence of the disappeared? And what is the role of performative searches across borders?

To answer these questions and to fill persistent epistemological gaps in the literature on the geopolitics of disappearances (Wright, 2017), specifically across borders, I move beyond existing theoretical frames that predominantly concentrate on state-centred analyses of disappearances or on the maternal mourner that performs apolitical searches for her disappeared child only. Informed by my research with search collectives in Mexico and centring on Juanita's experience, I understand disappearances and performative searches for the absent loved one as processes that span generations and geographies (Boss, 2000).

I introduce the communitarian decolonial feminist conceptualization of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) to existing feminist readings of disappearances (Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Gordon, 2008; Hernández Castillo, 2023; McLean, 2020). A body-territory lens asserts the inseparable ontological relationship between body and territory, meaning that when the places where we live are violated, our bodies are affected, and vice versa. As a method, it prioritizes *the body* and *communal subjectivity* as scales of analysis beyond individualized subjectivities and harms (Cabnal, 2010, 2015a; Paredes, 2008). By introducing a body-territory epistemology to the study of disappearances, I intend to contribute conceptual and methodological tools that make more visible the material and statistical absence and its effects in relation to disappeared migrants, particularly of feminized disappeared bodies across borders.

This chapter derives from narrative creation with searches and feminist participatory action research in Mexico in 2022 and 2023, mainly from collaboration with groups that organized the XVI search Caravan from Central America. The materials presented are co-created with these groups, and I have weaved them with relevant scholarly works and news reports to complete the narratives. The quotes and personal notes, originally in Spanish, have been translated into English (see Chapters II & III). This chapter is divided into three sections and a closing epilogue. First, I conceptualize the geopolitics of disappearances by introducing a body-territory epistemology, and I map violent and gendered features of Juanita's and other migrants' disappearances in Mexico. Then, I further define and document performative searches, including assemblies and body-territory mappings, to find and make present the disappeared. In closing, I share parts of a conversation with Juanita in October 2023.

A body-territory approach to disappearances

In April and May 2022, Juanita's aunt Anja and other community members travelled from their home in Guatemala and across large parts of the Mexican territory, demanding justice for Juanita and other migrants experiencing similarly violent situations across borders. The community had spent years raising funds, seeking visas and permissions to enter Mexico to conduct search efforts for Juanita. They joined groups of mothers, other family members and supporters from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua who also are searching for their disappeared loved ones, forming the *Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas*.

Unlike the other sixty (or so) searchers participating in this Caravan, Juanita's community had recently discovered that she was alive, and they were also aware of her whereabouts. Most of those searching only knew where their disappeared person was last seen

months or years back. Some had even reached a stage where they, as the Mexican poet Sara Uribe Sánchez (2012, p. 23) writes, “search for [the] corpse, to give body to what is absent to say goodbye.”⁸¹

This search Caravan is a yearly transnational praxis event organized by el *Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano* and search committees from Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala in which heterogeneous groups (including but not only mothers) assemble to search for their children/siblings/parents/friends who have disappeared while migrating through Mexico. Speaking about the performativity of assembly, Butler emphasizes that to “assemble is [...] a way of making a demand with the body, a corporal claim to public space and a demand to political powers” (2016, n.d.). The assembly of bodies searching for absent bodies is thus a performance that entails “both the processes of being acted on and the conditions and possibilities for acting” (Butler, 2015, p. 63). Here, I put these conceptualizations of performativity and bodily assembly into conversation with what communitarian feminist Cabnal (2015a) calls *acuerpamiento*, or to *acuerpar*, namely, the material gathering of (initially Indigenous feminized) bodies outraged by the injustices experienced by other bodies, including their territories, collectively generating affective and spiritual energies and political pressure.

The groups forming this Caravan systematically search for disappeared bodies, both living and dead, along migratory routes and in cemeteries, clandestine mass graves, detention centres, prisons, and hospitals. Concurrently, they become the epitaph, or the haunting (Gordon, 2008), of the disappeared by assembling to collectively perform their grief and political

⁸¹ In Spanish “[...] va en busca del cadáver [...]; para darle cuerpo a lo ausente para poder despedirse” (Uribe Sánchez, *Antígona González*, 2012, p. 23)

grievances, sometimes in coalition with Mexican groups searching for their disappeared persons (Bjorklund, 2022; Riviera Hernández, 2017; Varela Huerta, 2016).

In the words of the coordinator for *Madre Luna* (a Mexican search collective in Veracruz) as she spoke with the Caravan participants at a congregation at Las Patronas in Veracruz on 5 May 2022:

You [searchers from Central America] can always count on us! You are not alone – mothers here in Mexico experience similar situations. We search hills and rivers to find our children. We excavate grounds wherever we go. We understand your pain and admire the determination you portray. Our eyes and bodies accompany your search to find your persons (personal notes from this event. See Figure 17 on p. 166).

Situating the maternal searcher and moving beyond

The disappearance of a loved one causes irreversible damage to mothers, families, and communities who search and try to find them under any circumstance. They become searchers whose efforts are intensive labour processes that require material resources, time, dedication, and bodily and emotional strength. Their acts are embodied performances to love, grieve, and create a presence of the disappeared, including in public spaces, in part to subvert hegemonic powers of borders and gendered racial violence (Diéguez Caballero, 2021; Hernández Castillo, 2023). As Jennifer Schirmer (1989, p. 5) underlines: “the absence of bodies creates a presence of protest.” Dominick La Capra further distinguishes between *loss*, which involves specific events, spaces and times, and *absence*, which is more abstract, transhistorical, and disembodied (1999). He underscores that when a loss converts into absence, the mourner, now a searcher, “faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and aporia in which any process of working through the past [...] is foreclosed [...]” (1999, p. 698) hence instigating a continued

search. Pauline Boss (2000) describes the search as an emotionally complex journey of “ambiguous loss,” a condition in which the grieved person’s status is more uncertain than in confirmed death cases (de Alwis, in Ruwanpura et al., 2022).

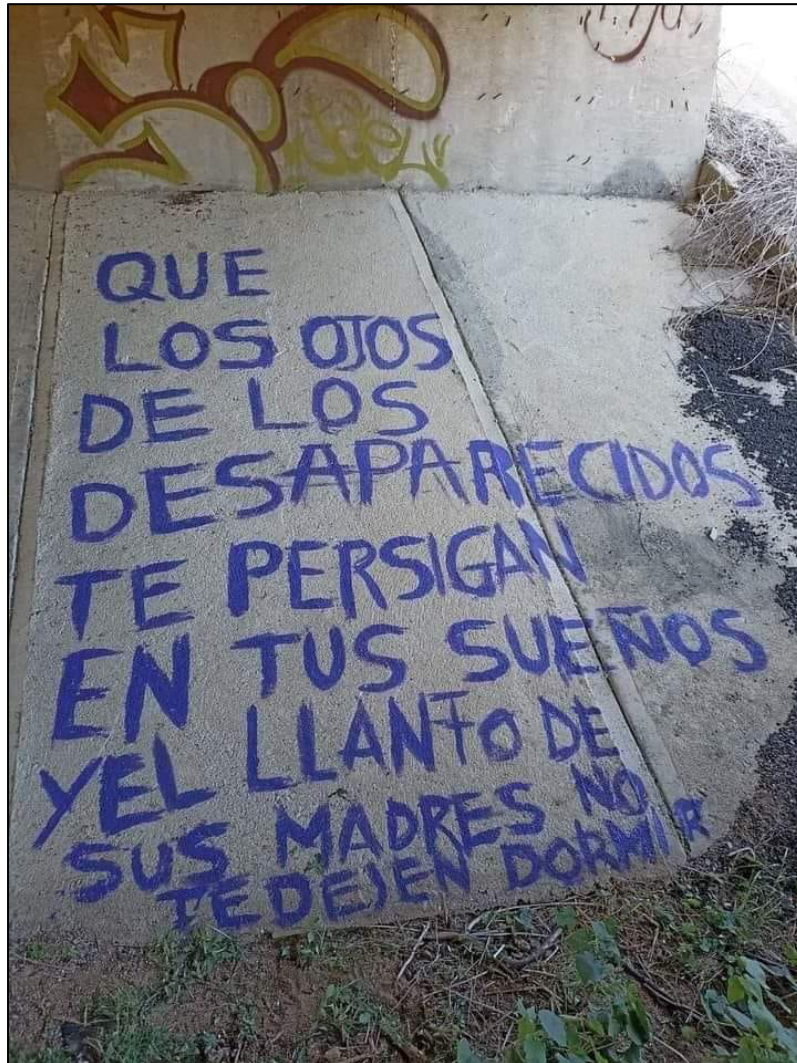


Figure 17. Message from searchers along the Gulf route in Mexico. Photo by R. Figueroa, 2022.

The image above (Figure 17) illustrating a message written on a wall along the Gulf route in Mexico is an example of such public testimony. It says: “Let the eyes of the disappeared haunt you in your dreams, and the chanting of their mothers prevent you from sleeping.” Feminist scholarship on disappearances has centred and debated the fundamental importance of *the*

mother figure searching for her disappeared child, being the one to transform her related pain and emotions into public testimony and action (Schirmer, 1989; Strejilevich, 2006; Wright, 2007).

Since the 1970's many groups searching for disappeared people in Latin America have applied a conservative mother-activist image to seek justice and appropriate political spaces, with the *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo* (Mothers of the *Plaza de Mayo*) in Buenos Aires, Argentina as the most cited example (Bejerano, 2002; Bouvard, 1995, 2002; Boss, 2000, 2004; Schirmer, 1989; Taylor, 1997). The mothers of *la Plaza de Mayo* were the first among many groups of maternal figures to express their anger and embody their children's disappearances in public spaces and the realm of repressive state violence (Schirmer, 1989). The *plaza* (central square)⁸² is thus a location where, as Gordon (2008) articulates, the spatial and cosmic bodies are metaphorically integrated through homologous symbolic structures where violence is making itself known. Cabnal (2010) similarly defines the *plaza* as a space where indignant bodies assemble to generate affective energies and political pressure. Further, the reference to a *conservative mother activist* image alludes to the continuous, and at times strategic, portrayal of a highly gendered search figure who neatly fits into a heteronormative family unit and whose actions to find her disappeared flawless child through the performance of assembly at a *plaza* are continuously reduced by authorities to a devotion driven by maternal instincts and pain only (de Alwis in Ruwanpura et al., 2022; Bejarano, 2002).

Speaking about mothers' naked protests in a United Kingdom detention centre, Imogen Tyler (2013, p. 222) underscores, for instance, how the politicization of motherhood is a strategy and subjectivity around which to mobilize. Wright (2007, p. 406) has called anti-femicide

⁸² *The plaza* (central square) has had enormous relevance in the region as a place of civic expression that becomes a space for opposition and resistance in response to the violences exercised by authorities.

protests in northern Mexico a “politics of mother activism.” This strategy, Wright notes, reveals how the presence of mothers on the streets, motivated by their personal experience as mothers, indicates that “something is terribly wrong” (Wright, 2007, p. 406). The yearly Caravan from Central America searching for disappeared migrants has also been characterized as a collective of *maternal subjectivity* whose actions challenge systems of social inequality and discrimination through their public grief and struggles for justice at *plazas* and across borders (McLean, 2020; Vogt, 2017). Varela Huerta (2016, 175) has called the search Caravan a maternal act of “powerful disobedience against the global border regime.” These perspectives illustrate that the searching mothers use their systematically portrayed role as apolitical mourners by authorities and other spectators to enter political spaces and make the violence of absence visible.

Applying a body-territory epistemology

Centring on Juanita’s story in this chapter, I accentuate the critical insights that can be gained from recognizing the conceptual framing of grief for the disappeared and related search efforts as a maternal subjectivity or assembled motherly acts of disobedience. Such insights are *not* limited to this analysis. Mothers and maternal figures are unequivocally central in disappearances, yet mothers are not alone in grieving and making present the imposed absence of a loved one. Search groups are coalitions uniting diverse searchers, subjectivities and performances. The histories of disappearances start long before the absence of a material body and must always be contextually situated. My research shows that experiences that cannot be generalized, including violence and contestations of *all* implicated bodies, the places they have left behind, and the public spaces they have trespassed on, are vital to studying disappearances and performative searches.

A feminist political geography approach has emerged in Latin America (Cruz Hernández, 2017; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021) that derives from communitarian Indigenous feminism grounded in the unity between body and communal subjectivity, or territory (Paredes, 2008; Cabnal, 2010, 2015a). Inspired by this approach, I move beyond narratives of maternal subjectivity as the primary scale of analysis to the notion of a *body-territory* that understands the body as our first territory and recognizes the territory in our bodies. When the places where we live are violated, our bodies are affected, and when our bodies are affected, the places where we live are violated. Our (collective) body embodies life and memory, and the senses connect us with the territories.

Introducing body-territory epistemology to the study of disappearances can generate epistemologies that make more visible the (material and statistical) absence and affects of disappeared migrants, particularly of feminized disappeared bodies in Mexico and across borders. In this case, I intentionally explore how Juanita's community and others searching for their disappeared people also center body-territory (Cabnal, 2015a; Zaragocin, 2020) to narrate their struggle and to create a presence of absent bodies through the *acuerpamiento* (material assembly of their bodies) as a way of memorializing, contesting, and reimagining (Cabnal, 2015a). As such, I understand grief for the disappeared and collective search efforts in this context, not as "individualized human subjectivities" but as embodied, relational, and situated experiences (Sultana, 2011; Butler, 2004). My interpretation of body-territory in analyzing disappearances also derives from initiatives carried out by Mexican feminist (geography) collectives, including *Geobrujas* (GeoWitches) and *las Brujas del Mar* (the Sea Witches), centring a body-territory epistemology to (counter)map violence and resistances to the

geopolitics of borders on bodies crossing them.⁸³ Their use of the term *bruja*s (witches) is also an interesting stance that defies salient maternalist and state-centric discourse in relation to violence and disappearances (see Chapters VI & VII).

Centring a body-territory epistemology to research transnational search efforts for disappeared migrants in Mexico has led me, in collaboration with searchers, to seek ways to dialogue about and (counter)map outcomes of violence endured by associated bodies and territories. In so doing, we have intentionally centred on how violence towards territories, including enforced state borders, is felt in the bodies of the disappeared and those searching and how such harms are intertwined with the material state and wellbeing of their territories. The insights from collaborating with diverse groups searching for disappeared bodies have been invaluable to this part of the research, notably the invitation I received to accompany the XVI Caravan from Central America in a weeks-long search effort and political activism throughout Mexico in 2022.

The women's collectives, Las Patronas, with whom I worked closely throughout the research, initially introduced me to the organizers of this search, Caravan. After months of conversations and virtual collaboration, I was asked to join the upcoming Caravan as one of their "feminist scholar-activists," as noted in their invitation. I was to assist the coordinators of search committees from Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico in accompanying the participating mothers, families, and community members. Embracing Das's (1996, p. 70) words "that the experience of pain cries out for [a] response of the possibility that my pain could reside

⁸³ The applied epistemologies, counter mappings and resistances are part of collectively creating body territory maps to convey what is happening inside the body and start a liberation process (Geobrujas 2021). See Chapter II.

in your body,”⁸⁴ one of the Caravan’s coordinators told me that I could understand such accompaniment as lending my body to the searches pain (personal notes, March 2022). Silvia Riviera Cusicanqui (2018, p. 93) has referred to accompaniment as a “*politica del cuerpo*” (body politics) centring the act of “*poner el cuerpo*” (putting the body) for others who cannot or who are present but whose bodies are less “valued” in a regime of racial capitalism. Ilena Dieguez Caballero (2021) further reflects on the fluidity of accompaniment across time and space and considers whether “temporal accompaniment” is a more accurate reflection of solidarity initiatives to accompany others in their pain and specific moments, including during search efforts for the disappeared.⁸⁵

During this Caravan, which lasted several weeks, workshops and dialogues engaging body-territory methodologies to map embodied violence and related contestations of lost loved ones were organized in parallel with the intense program of active search efforts (Chapter II). As a way of accompanying the participating searchers, I was also asked to (co) produce different kinds of materials and narrative accounts deriving from conversations with the coordinators, counsellors, and searchers, including the ones searching for Juanita (Biorklund 2022; Biorklund & Peraza 2022). What follows is this co-produced account of Juanita’s disappearance, weaved together with other narratives of disappearances and performative searches.

Juanita’s disappearance: Mapping harms across absent feminized bodies and geographies

Juanita has lost her youth. No woman should suffer like this [...]. Her [Juanita’s] disappearance shows how Mayan identity is not recognized, and our territories are not respected. Many have no option but to leave their homes. We must have services in our

⁸⁴ Das (2006) argues that the body can become the conduit by which one can at least attempt to experience the pain of another. See Appendix A for more on Das’s conception of accompanying others in their pain.

⁸⁵ Chapter V, discusses further the practice of accompanying people moving along migratory routes, including searches for persons that have disappeared, to assist beyond patronizing categories and care networks.

languages and not be forced to speak in Spanish. Juanita is not alone! (Personal conversation, community member searching for Juanita, 1 May 2022)

To situate Juanita's disappearance and the fact that her family and community were unaware of her whereabouts for over four years, it is relevant to first ponder the intersectional outcomes of violence experienced by people crossing borders in the region and the related harms inflicted on the places they call home. Authorities commonly frame disappearances in Mexico as isolated acts of violence related to criminal groups, including intimate feminized violence (Hernández Castillo, 2019; Segato, 2016; Sánchez & Pesce, 2022). The involvement of state actors in migrant disappearances, including how it relates to restrictive border practices and gendered violence, is a less common analysis of violence (Crocker et al., 2021). Still, in Central American communities from where displacement and cross-border migration are prevalent, everyone appears to have a story about someone they knew having disappeared en route. The violence intertwined with migration in the region exposes the state's role and militarized borders in disappearances (Anderson & Reineke, 2023; Mandolessi & Rico, 2022; Paley, 2021, 2018). Transnational efforts to prevent people from moving north and Mexico's assumed role as a buffer for the United States (and Canada) further augments violences along the routes, including death and disappearance.⁸⁶

Leaving San Mateo Ixtatán

In August 2014, Juanita left her hometown of San Mateo Ixtatán, a municipality in the Guatemalan department of Huehuetenango, close to the Guatemala-Mexico border. San Mateo

⁸⁶ See Chapters I, IV & V for detailed description and analysis of the geopolitics of violence along migratory routes in North America.

Ixtatán is a community predominantly populated by people who identify as Mayan Chuj. According to Guatemala's 2018 Census, 88 percent of the Mayan Chuj population speaks Chuj, and 60 percent of the women do not know how to read or write in Spanish (Longo, 2022).

Like others from San Mateo Ixtatán, Juanita left the community in her mid-20s. Her goal was to make it to the United States, where she planned to work to provide for her family. This was mainly because her mother had become chronically ill from a burn injury and could no longer work outside the home (Interview, Anja, 10 May 2022). The geographical area of Huehuetenango has become increasingly insecure in the last decade due to transnational drug-related commerce and tensions around foreign extractive projects, impacting the population's safety (Calles, 2022; Fuentes & Hernández, 2021). Huehuetenango has historically been one of many regions in Guatemala where Indigenous territories and (feminized) bodies face extensive discrimination. It was one of the areas most heavily hit during the armed conflict when the Guatemalan state targeted Indigenous communities (CEH, 1999; Crosby & Lykes, 2019; McAllister, 2017; McAllister & Nelson, 2013; Nelson, 1999). An extensive scholarship has analyzed the geopolitics of resource extraction in Guatemala and its societal impacts (Copeland, 2023; Nolin & Stephens, 2011; Weisbart, 2018). According to Calles (2022), a journalist covering this region, since 2013, a planned installation of two hydroelectric projects funded by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) has reignited a series of social problems. Tensions initially arose following the authorities' response to acts of resistance in which the community expressed its disapproval of the hydroelectric projects (Calles, 2022; Ejolt, n.d.).

Carrying the accumulation of harm inflicted on their territories and (ancestors') bodies, the community refused to back down despite the violence and threats from authorities. In 2016, they approached IDB's human rights investigation mechanism, arguing that the people affected

by the installations were not recognized, gendered impacts were not evaluated, and that likely damages to sacred sites, environments and culture were not addressed (Bordatto, 2016; Calles, 2022).

Following years of struggle in which community members have lost their lives, and many others, including Juanita, have opted to leave the community, in 2022, the IDB investigation concluded that the hydroelectric company had violated rights in response to all the concerns noted above and demanded that the project be immediately halted. Speaking about this with Juanita's uncle Pablo during the Caravan in Mexico in May 2022 before she was released from prison, he noted:

In parallel with our struggle to free Juanita, we battle against what they [foreign companies and authorities] continue to do to our lands. These harms are related, you know. Many people from our community have left *Pa'l Norte* [to the North]⁸⁷ because they could not survive in our bleeding lands [...], and Juanita is not the only one who has disappeared [...].

He then went on to tell me,

The difference between her [Juanita's] absence and that of others disappeared is that after much effort, we discovered that she is alive [...], so our focus shifted from searching to fighting for her freedom [...]. I know this is not true for most searchers participating in this Caravan. Their [the searchers] experiences with disappearance are often linked to death [...]. We are fortunate. It gives me hope (personal conversation, 8 May 2022).

Juanita's uncle's thoughts on the synergies between her disappearance in Mexico and relationships with the land, including his reference to how their lands are bleeding, suggests a

⁸⁷ See Chapter IV for more on the definition and meaning of *Pa'l Norte*

body-territory ontology. It illustrates how he sees the community and territory as a single political subject that experiences harm but also resists violations against (women's) bodies and territories as the same process (Cabnal, 2010; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021).

From Gracias a Dios to Reynosa prison

According to Pablo, *Gracias a Dios* was the first community where Juanita arrived as she crossed the Mexico-Guatemala border. Conscious of the dangers facing migrants, particularly Indigenous and other racialized women, along migratory routes (Hernández Castillo, 2019; Instituto Para Las Mujeres en La Migración A.C, 2022), Juanita hired a *guia* (guide) to help her reach the Mexico-US border as safely as possible. Her brother, who was already in the US when she left her home in 2014, had paid for the *guia*, and she travelled with people who had purchased the same service (Interview, Maria, 1 May 2022).

Maria, a member of Juanita's community participating in the search efforts in Mexico in 2022, recounted her understanding of Juanita's migration experience in Mexico: "It had taken them less than a day to reach and cross the Guatemala-Mexico border, and they were hopeful as they transited through the village Gracias a Dios, unaware about what was yet to come." She continued explaining that throughout the journey, Juanita had struggled to communicate with the others in the group as she did not speak Spanish. The guiding *coyote* continuously reassured her that everything was okay and they were approaching their destination, Reynosa, and she had little choice but to trust him. However, according to Maria, Juanita's inability to speak and defend herself in Spanish would soon prove to be more than a barrier. "It was violently used against her" (Interview, Maria, 1 May 2022).

Every year, thousands of people from Central America leave unsafe circumstances to enter and cross Mexico's territory to reach the United States and Canada. With restricted abilities to move in authorized ways due to their often precarious legal status and due to expanding border controls, detention, and deportation practices in the region, many people strive to travel with a *guia* guiding them (Varela Huerta et al., 2020; Vogt, 2018). Others seek to cross borders solo, often through unknown and unsafe territories due to the high costs of such services (Biorklund, forthcoming). Participants of this research (Interview, Federico, 3 February 2022; Interview, Romero, 19 January 2022) and other scholarship focusing on the geopolitics of borders in Mexico (Campos-Delgado, 2021; Torres, 2018) underline that *guias* and criminal groups are known to kidnap and extort people moving along routes and abandon them in inhospitable situations.

Migrant deaths are also commonly narrated in Mexico (Hiemstra, 2018; IOM, 2023; Schindel, 2020), and the number of reported disappearances has rapidly increased in recent years (Anderson & Reineke, 2023; Crocker et al., 2021; International Committee of the Red Cross, 2022). An uncertain but high number of border-crossers experience what Maurizio Albahari (2015) calls "traceless deaths." Border deaths, Albahari affirms, frequently go unnoticed because "migrants die in remote places [...] or in closed places, situated in the margins of society (like detention centers)" (2015, p. 114). Many disappeared migrants are names without bodies - persons known to have left their homes and crossed borders but whose whereabouts are unknown, or they are bodies without names - unidentified corpses found by strangers (Salter, 2012). A spokesperson of the United Nations Human Rights Office has called the crime of enforced disappearances "one of the worst things, for the families, precisely because they never get closure and rarely sadly are bodies found" (UN News, 2022).

The disappearances of Central Americans in Mexico quadrupled in 2021 (Diaz, 2022; Romero Luna, 2023; SJES, 2022). Data from the *Comisión Nacional de Búsqueda* (National Search Commission) (2024) in Mexico shows that in 2024, just under 100,000 persons, including Mexican nationals, are officially listed as missing. About a quarter of the officially disappeared are identified as women (Brewer, 2022; National Search Commission, 2023). Searchers and non-governmental groups accompanying them estimate that the number of disappeared is much higher than 100,000 and is growing daily while state efforts to find people are largely inadequate (Linares, 2021; Romero Luna, 2023). Non-Mexican residents and people without a national identity card, including Indigenous and migrant women, are often unaccounted for in these statistics. As a result, no one knows how many persons have disappeared in Mexico. *El Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano* (2018) calculates that the number of migrants kidnapped and made to disappear (even if momentarily) in Mexico between 2006 and 2018 exceeded 250,000. Another estimate shared by search groups is that 70,000 Central American migrants are presently disappeared in Mexico (Hernández Castillo, 2023).

Gendered discrepancies in the official numbers of disappearances constitute another continuously disregarded and understudied matter. In an interview with Elisa from Honduras, one of the coordinators for the search Caravan from Central America, she stressed that: “the absence of female bodies, particularly female migrant bodies, is more common than the absence of male bodies [...]. The absence I am speaking about is not only corporal but also in the statistics” (Interview, Ramirez, 7 May 2022).

Elisa’s emphasis on *both* the material and statistical absence of feminized migrant bodies is one that I have heard repeatedly throughout my research in Mexico. This dual definition of absence has often been presented to me by searchers and advocacy groups as common

knowledge. Its significance must be situated within the broader geopolitics of gendered violence and femicide, which, as previously noted, is not limited to Mexico or Central America but a product of transnational patriarchal and racial power structures (Crosby & Lykes, 2019; Hernández Castillo, 2016; Theidon, 2016). In 2021, official femicide statistics reached 1.55 per 100,000 women in Mexico (Biorklund, 2023b; Impunidad Cero, 2022),⁸⁸ which meant that on average, ten women were killed daily. At the same time, tens of thousands are made to disappear. They are officially unaccounted for, as in the case of Juanita from 2014 to 2018, when no one except select state agents and other prison inmates knew her whereabouts.

Juanita's case is exceptional in the sense that she was found alive and freed from prison. The large majority of disappeared women are never found, and if they are it is often their lifeless corpse that is encountered by strangers. During the conversation with Elisa (the Honduran search coordinator), I asked if she could elaborate further on her understanding of absent women's bodies in the context of disappearances. After some reflection, she said:

Our [search groups and coalitions] efforts to find disappeared persons, even if it is their lifeless bodies, uncover realities the authorities do not want us [or the public] to be aware of. Our searches take us everywhere, and by everywhere, I mean brothels, clandestine mass graves, state prisons, detention centres and more. We know that many of us will not find our loved ones in life or even their lifeless body. Unfortunately, that is the painful reality [...]. But we also know that many migrant women are kept captive by trafficking networks and in hidden locations. Prisons are filled with undocumented [persons] who have not been convicted or even had access to a lawyer. Many imprisoned have not even been [judicially] processed - especially women who do not have a [Mexican] ID card and do not speak Spanish.

⁸⁸ According to statistics from Mexico's federal government, in 2020 85% of the people held in the country's prisons had not been convicted or sentenced (Animal Politico, 2020)

We know that Juanita is one among many. So, our goal is to search prisons and other hidden locations across Mexico more systematically. *No Descansaremos Hasta Encontrarlx*s [We will not rest until we find them] is not just one of the slogans we use during our searches. We mean it! I will never rest (Interview, Ramirez, 7 May 2022).



Figure 18. This image, with the slogan *No Descansaremos Hasta Encontrarlx*s, used by search groups in Mexico, glued to a light post in central Mexico City was taken by the author while accompanying searchers in 2022.

Considering the violent conditions she faced, Juanita's transit through Mexico in 2014 was initially relatively smooth, according to her family, who compared it to the accounts of other migrants moving along these routes. She travelled more than 1600 kilometres from her

hometown in Guatemala and reached Reynosa, in the state of Tamaulipas, close to the Mexico-US border, in less than a week. Arriving in Reynosa, however, things quickly took a turn for the worse. In an interview with the UN Office of Human Rights conducted in the Reynosa prison in 2018, soon after she had been “found,” Juanita reported that the *guia* that had guided them through Mexico and other unknown men had kidnapped her and two other women travelling with her as they approached Reynosa. She said they were kept in an isolated and hidden house and that they were forced to work for their captors whose faces, she says, she did not recognize (OHCHR, 2018).

A state-administered absence

In the same OHCHR interview from 2018, Juanita says that after some time, one of the women captured with her in Reynosa eventually found a way to contact the local police. She said this had made her hopeful that she would soon be freed, even if that meant potentially being deported to Guatemala (OHCHR, 2018). However, according to her uncle Pablo, during the supposed rescue operation by police forces, the two other women who were also kidnapped accused her of collaborating with the men who had kept them captive. Pablo thinks the other women were forced to blame her. He says that Juanita recalls how she was initially unaware of what was being said to the police as she could not understand the other women's claims in Spanish against her (Interview, Pablo, 9 May 2022).

With these accusations and what followed, Juanita was imprisoned in the Reynosa correctional facility for almost eight years. During the first four years, she was denied access to translators, legal support, and external communication, not even to inform her family that she was alive. Her experience echoes findings from a report on the criminalization of migrant

women by the Interamerican University in Mexico and various human rights bodies, emphasizing that criminal trials and institutions are launched against migrants and Indigenous peoples in Mexico. Moreover, the report states that access to interpreters is practically unavailable, and inequality before the law is severe in the case of women (Centro Prodh et al., 2017; Instituto Para Las Mujeres en La Migracion A.C, 2022).

After Juanita's release in May 2022 and soon after she had returned to her home in Guatemala, she told the following to a local journalist (Domínguez & Hernández, 2022) that:

Arriving at the place where we were held captive [in 2014], the police officers supposedly asked me about my participation in the kidnapping of two migrant women. I did not answer as I did not understand what they were saying. They detained me, and during the interrogation at the local police station in Reynosa, I was again unable to answer their questions.

In another interview she gave while still in prison (OHCHR, 2018), Juanita shared that during the interrogation at the local police station in Reynosa, the officers beat and threatened her at gunpoint. They also forced her to sign a self-incriminating declaration admitting she was part of an organized group of *polleros* (migrant smugglers) operating in the area. Recalling the fear this created, Juanita says:

After having spent four years in prison, I learned some Spanish from interacting with other inmates, and only then could I understand the [criminal] accusations that had been made against me. It was horrifying, and what made it worse was that I was denied any external communication for those first four years. I could not even tell my mother that I was alive. As far as she [her mother] knew, I was *gone* [...]. As I learned to communicate [in Spanish], even just a little, the slow process of justice has finally begun. Other migrant women with similar experiences are also here [at the prison], and I am sure their families are searching for them (OHCHR, 2018).

At one of the public marches organized in the Mexican state of Veracruz during the Caravan of searchers from Central America in 2022, representatives of a Mexican feminist collective called *las Brujas del Mar* (the Sea Witches) who had joined the event echoed Juanita's words about the violence of a woman's body suddenly being "gone." Veracruz is one of the states in southern Mexico that migrants transit through on the way to the Mexico-US border. It is also a place where feminicides and disappearance rates have significantly increased in the last decade (Arroyo, 2021; Carrion, 2018; La Jornada Veracruz, 2020). Amalia, one of the Sea Witches, told me the following as we walked the streets of Veracruz toward the central *plaza* and the Governor's office:

[...] Women do not just disappear, you know. Someone makes them disappear. And then someone, and with someone, I also mean the state officials, prolong their absence either with their inactions or because the woman who has disappeared and the ones chanting [and searching] for her are not their priority. We see the violence against women and the impunity for all this violence as part of the same system [...]. There are not sufficient efforts to find people, particularly disadvantaged women, who have disappeared even when they [authorities] know that many can be found in their own spaces [referring to prisons and other state institutions] (personal conversation, 6 May 2022).

The Caravan representatives did not get to speak with the Veracruz Governor on that day of the march. Amalia and other *Brujas del Mar* members were unsurprised about this. "[...] He tends to make himself disappear whenever we [*las Brujas*] show up" (member of *las Brujas del Mar*, 6 May 2022). But his staff could surely hear the loud protests and demands chanted about Juanita and other disappeared migrants on the central *plaza* outside their open office windows. "We know they [Governor's office] heard us because the windows were open when we arrived

an hour ago [...]. Look at them now. They are all closed, so we chant even louder,” said another of the *brujas*.

A couple of days before this assembly in Veracruz, all the search Caravan participants, including those of us accompanying them, had been invited to a breakfast with another governor - the one for the state of Tabasco. Tabasco is geographically located south of Veracruz and borders Guatemala. Like Veracruz, it is a state where migratory routes are very active, and violence against migrants, including forced deportations, is commonly reported (Secretaría De Gobernación, 2022). Recounting her experience of what she referred to as a “pretentious breakfast,” Kata, who identifies as Maya Guatemalan and works as a psychosocial worker accompanying the searchers and who was placed next to the governor, shared this with me:

Sitting up there next to the Governor, looking at the rest of you [searchers and other Caravan participants], felt strange. We talked briefly [...]. The Governor asked me what brought me here. I thought it was an odd question from the Governor and told myself, “This is your opportunity to speak your mind.” I was nervous, so I quoted a Mexican writer saying, “According to González Villareal, disappearance is not an excess, nor an error; it is a specific repressive technology [...] an assemblage of actions, omissions, confusions, in which many agents participate.” The Governor looked surprised at me, and I continued: “I agree with him [González Villareal]. We are all here to give our disappeared loved ones a face, a name [...] and demand justice for them. You can help us by permitting us to search the prisons here in Tabasco.” He did not speak more to me after that [Kata says giggling] (Interview, Lopez, 6 May 2022).

At his public address following this breakfast, where Kata had called out the violence of disappearances, the Tabasco Governor promised that he would do what he could to facilitate search groups access to prisons now and in the future. Further, he promised that his government and the National Search Commission are as committed as the searchers to finding their

disappeared and ending this violence (personal notes, 3 May 2022). Kata and other Caravan members said they were cautiously encouraged by the Governor's words, mainly about how more access to search in prisons might be granted to them from then on.

Andrea, an El Salvadoran Search Commission coordinator, was less convinced, stressing to other searchers:

I have heard these nice words before. We do not need more empty promises or support from them [officials] sitting behind their desks. We want them to do widescale on-the-ground searches for all disappeared people, including in their institutions. Make it happen now! As a mother who has been searching for her disappeared child for 20 years, and as a representative for many families in El Salvador whose loved ones disappeared but who cannot afford the search, I am telling you, do not give up or give in to their words. We want action.

They [the disappeared] are missing in our hearts, bodies, and lands. We are in this together and we will not rest until we find them and can bring them home, even if that means bringing them home to say goodbye (excerpt from Andrea's public speech, 10 May 2022).

After decades of searching, Andrea is one of many searchers who has reached a point beyond the hope of finding her person alive. She articulates that she is searching for a corpse or any material evidence to fill the void and ambiguity generated by the prolonged absence. Like many others, Andrea wants to give *cuerpo* (body) to what is absent and bring them back home to say goodbye. Andrea's frustration and longing for closure, Kata's strong message to the Tabasco Governor, Juanita's reference to being "gone" in her mother's eyes, and the Sea Witches' anguish about how women do not just disappear but are made to disappear and how some are considered as more "searchable" than others, are all critical analogies for the harms that are simultaneously

inflicted across absent bodies and geographies (or territories). In this context of gendered and racialized violence, my research shows that feminized migrants who disappear often become materially and statistically absent bodies in hidden geographies who are made unable to speak, including in state-administered prisons (Spivak, 1988).

Performative searches: Reappearances, assembly and body mappings

Two months before Juanita was released from the Reynosa prison in May 2022, her aunt Anja and other community members assembled outside the Mexican consulate in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, to commemorate International Women's Day by protesting Juana's imprisonment. They had travelled 8 hours from their hometown and held banners with the messages *Juanita Libre* and *Libertad Para Juanita* while chanting, "We are with Juanita! Women fight, and the world changes! We want justice for all Juanita's." Addressing other activists and spectators who had come to witness their gathering, Anja demanded:

[Mexican authorities] must let Juanita go. They discriminate against her, torture her, and do not even have evidence to keep her there [in Reynosa prison]. There is so much injustice. We, women, have rights and have come to demand these rights for Juanita. [...] She can be proud, not sad, for being a Maya woman and that we are here to fight for her [...] (Longo, 2022).

Like other scholarly works on the politics of disappearances, my research shows that a search effort always begins with an absence. In the context of people who disappeared while crossing borders, these search efforts also become family members' and communities' performative acts of refusal to let their people be forgotten. As Gordon (2008) says, their search acts are hauntings that propel something needing to be done. Their bodily assembly and collective indignation (*acuerpamiento*) (Cabnal, 2015a) convey that what has been done to their

disappeared loved ones is also done to them and their lands. The searchers are reminders that disappearances are violent and material acts that shape and are shaped by the decisions to leave their homes and cross borders (Dowler, Hyndman & Sharp, forthcoming).

Thus, in the circumstances of a *reappearance* from a state of being gone, this something that is terribly wrong, as Wright (2007) has framed it, is made visible. The violence of disappearances is made visible either through a corporal reappearance (living or dead) of the person who has disappeared or through searchers' performative action and assembly (Butler, 2015) to contest the violence and associated harms by transmitting how it feels in their (collective) bodies and, by doing so, creating a presence of the absent. In parallel with public performances to generate pressure, this presence of absence is also produced in more intimate spaces where acts of contestation and solidarity, including making body-territory maps to produce alternative memories and narratives, are taking place. For many, searching becomes an enduring part of their lives. A way to stay connected to their loved ones who are missing in their hearts and to situate themselves in "the nonsense of disappearances" (Verástegui González, 2018).

#JuanitaLibre

My work with search groups further shows that the unveiling of something being terribly wrong (Wright, 2017) rarely entails both the material reappearance of someone who has disappeared and performative searches for this same person. Bodies, particularly feminized bodies that have crossed borders and disappeared, commonly remain materially and statistically gone. Meanwhile, search efforts across these same borders comprise extensive limitations, including searchers' restrained access to the territories where their people disappeared, language

barriers and the financial and emotional cost of these efforts. Juanita's case is unusual in that sense, as it entails both her reappearance and search efforts. She was found alive after years of her community searching for her and intentionally unveiling related violent processes as part of their search, and later, she was freed from prison and returned to Guatemala.



Figure 19. One of the slogans Juanita's community and supporters used was #JuanitaLibre. This poster went viral as she was released from prison. It says: Finally, Juana [...] regained her freedom and can return to her family in Guatemala. For the non-criminalization of Indigenous people and migrants! Until dignity becomes customary!

Juanita's aunt and uncle quickly took the lead in the community's search efforts following her disappearance in 2014. Her mother was unwell and could not speak Spanish, limiting her ability to search. Moreover, her brother was in the US with a precarious migratory

status, so he was unable to perform searches beyond what could be done through some social media exposure. Juanita's uncle Pablo recalls the initial period following her disappearance as dark, saying:

For the first four years, we were searching in the dark, with no support or understanding about any of this. I knew people from Guatemala had disappeared, even from our neighbouring communities, but I had not given it much thought. It angers me that young people from my land must leave to survive, and then this [disappearance] is done to them and to us. When she [Junaita] disappeared, we could not just cross into Mexico to search for her. It does not work like that. We would be treated as illegals. Her mother was scared and thought she [Juanita] was dead, but Anja [Juanita's aunt] and I were hopeful we would find her. No one listened to us in the beginning, and we had no money to travel. Not even to the [Mexican] consulate in Quetzaltenango to find some answers and get help (Interview, Pablo, 7 May 2022).

With time, Juanita's community found support groups for family members of persons from Guatemala who disappeared while migrating through Mexico. These groups, which exist across Central America, though mainly in larger urban centres, offer advice on how to carry out transnational searches and provide different types of solidarity spaces for searchers. Anja and other searchers I have worked with have all emphasized how these assembled support networks (Latour, 1995) for family members of disappeared persons are fundamental to their continued search efforts and activism. According to Kata (the psychosocial worker who addressed the Tabasco Governor and who accompanies searchers, particularly from Maya communities in

Guatemala), collective self-care⁸⁹ is a central part of the performative searches that foster relationships and understandings among searchers.

Speaking about her work with searchers in Guatemala and during the yearly transnational Caravan, Kata further explains that due to high demand, these care groups are now increasingly organized in Maya communities that may require different support than searchers in other geographies. For instance, translation services and activities that more actively recognize and expose how the violence of disappearance is intertwined with continued experiences of dispossession. Explicitly describing the activity of collectively making body maps as part of these assemblies and how it is integrated with the search for what is absent, Kata said:

It is so important to understand each searcher's pain and needs and to guide them into a shared struggle. I want them to realize that their collective efforts help the search for all disappeared persons. It is a type of resistance. Without that, we would not come together, and no yearly search Caravan would occur. We must become better at sharing our tools across borders [...].

When I work with these [Maya] search communities, our activities connect deeply to the land. For instance, we converse about what the violence of disappearance feels like in our bodies, including territories. Sometimes, we plant seeds to add life where there has been destruction. We also make body maps, including with plants, to illustrate these knowings and add life to what is gone [...]. We generate new knowledges and memories about what is absent to us. Like yesterday when you accompanied us [in a body mapping activity with multiple Caravan participants]. I think this tool [the making of body maps] can also be helpful to search communities in other locations, as there is no question about the relationship between missing persons and violence in their homelands (Interview, Lopez, 6 May 2022).

⁸⁹ Chapter V centres on the collective self-care of women protagonists from Central America residing in southern Mexico. One of the protagonists defined collective self-care as acts “where I take care of me, and we take care of us” (Interview, Rosa, 4 March 2022)

Kata then informs me how she wants me to explain these activities to others who may not be attuned to this context of disappearances or the relevance and meaning of body mapping:

When you explain how we do these counter mappings, please remember to tell them that we make body maps to transform our experiences with violence into a struggle for justice and liberation. It is like we create new memories. It is a collective activity; we first draw one of our bodies on paper [...]. It is often a woman's body, and it should be her actual size. Then, we add our feelings and pains, creating a collective visual and interactive map that emerges within a woman's body.

For instance, in yesterday's workshop, Lola [one of the searchers] added a bleeding uterus with barbed wire around it to the body map to show the pain of how borders made her child disappear. Someone else drew a lung filled with smoke and said it represented the damage to their land. And two other women, I do not remember their names, drew a broken heart on fire. They said it was to show the fierce energy they and we collectively put into finding our people in this Caravan (Interview, Lopez, 6 May 2022).

Correspondingly to Kata's explanation, various feminist political geography collectives whom I have also learned from, including *Geobrujas*, and *Colectivo Miradas Criticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo* (2017) similarly draw attention to how struggles, passions, anxieties, and resistances are reflected in the body. Further, they focus on how the collective act of making a map of one's own body allows us to analyze (us) by understanding it as a disputed territory in which hegemonic economic and political systems are intertwined (Cruz Hernández & Bayon Jimenez, 2020).

My attendance at the specific body-mapping activity that Kata speaks to above, and in other body-map-makings organized by searchers and feminist collectives in diverse spaces and geographies to map violence and resistance, have profoundly influenced my understanding. In

part, how family members and communities searching for their loved ones conceptualize and situate disappearances and how they perceive their roles as searchers and relations with others. Indigenous scholars and activists have long engaged in body mapping activities, which are increasingly used in other spaces, including transnational search communities such as the Caravan I accompanied. Members of Juanita's community also partook in the mapping activity to which Kata refers, in which someone drew a bleeding uterus with barbed wire around it.

Conversing with Maria, a friend of Juanita's who had been active in the search for years, she made me realize that through these activities and spaces of solidarity organized back in Guatemala, Juanita's community had gotten to know other searchers. Thus, they found out about the yearly search Caravan. Maria said that as more community members actively started to search for Juanita, the interest and publicity around her case rose. From not having had any support, advocacy groups and media outlets, including U.S.-based, started to offer them more legal and financial assistance. Initially, efforts were focused on finding her from afar, as they did not have legal permission to search in Mexico. They relied entirely on other searchers, including search collectives and social justice organizations in Mexico, to keep Juanita in mind during their searches in prisons, shelters, brothels, and hospitals along migratory routes.

Recalling the day they finally found out that Juanita was held in a Reynosa prison and was alive, Maria says: "I will never forget that day. Anja [Juanita's aunt] was the one who told me. First, we were just relieved and celebrated that she was alive. Then, the rage took over for me." I ask her to tell me more about that, and she continues:

Imagine that Juanita had been alive all these years while we were mourning her being gone. Imagine the injustice she has been through. They [authorities] have disrespected her life and our life. We had to do something about it, so we started to make sure the world knew that Juanita was not forgotten and that we want her home free and alive now.

That is where the slogan, #JuanitaLibre, comes from. My friend created it [the slogan],⁹⁰ and we all started to use it. I even put that on the body map we made the other day [referring to the body map noted above]. I put #JuanitaLibre as words coming from the woman's mouth. #JuanitaLibre means so much more than freedom for our Juanita. It means freedom from violence for all women (personal conversation, Maria, 1 May 2022).

Juanita's community found out that she was in life and held in Reynosa in 2018, four years after she had disappeared. Since then, organizations and communities in Guatemala have united in their efforts not to forget her and to demand her freedom. That same year, the UN Human Rights Council's Working Group on Arbitrary Detention determined that Juanita's arrest was arbitrary and recommended that she be freed (Longo, 2023). Pablo and Anja were granted permission to visit her in prison in 2019. However, due to slow visa procedures followed by COVID-19 and the closure of the Mexico-Guatemala border, their visit was delayed and later done virtually. "The most important thing for us was to make sure Juanita knew that she was not forgotten and that we were fighting to get her out of there" (Interview, Anja, 2 May 2022).

In early 2022, following much political pressure, it became apparent that the possibility of Juanita being released shortly was high. So, with extensive external support from an American documentary film crew, preparations to join the transnational search Caravan planned for May 2022 began in Juanita's community. All the searchers who were going to participate in the Caravan needed to obtain temporary visas to enter Mexico to perform searches, and they had to make sure they had the means to arrive in Reynosa at the Mexico-US border in time for her upcoming release. All while keeping up the public profile of her case.

⁹⁰ Figure 19, p. 188.

The #JuanitaLibre campaign became a central feature of the Caravan in 2022. Some of the searchers who have attended the Caravan for many years and whose persons are still absent expressed mixed sentiments about how the #*JuanitaLibre* campaign somewhat overshadowed, in their minds, less publicized searches for their disappeared people, the large majority of whom have been gone for years or even decades.

One of the mothers from Honduras searching for her daughter Britany, who disappeared in southern Mexico some years back,⁹¹ expressed some misgiving one evening. As we were having dinner together with Elisa (the coordinator for the Honduran search committee) and Kata (psychosocial worker), she stated: “I feel that the attention this [Juanita’s] case gets takes away focus from my own daughter’s disappearance. Britany is out there, somewhere. She needs me. I need her. I want to feel close to her. Maybe she is also held in a prison? I need to find her.” Britany’s mom’s words reminded me of a poem by Verástegui González (2018, p. 10) about what disappearance can feel like for the one left behind. It goes: “You walk in the footsteps of the stolen heart, of the fractured emotional bond, of the meaning that life has, of those who are looking for the one they need.”⁹²

Elisa and Kata appeared unsurprised about the feelings Britany’s mother shared with us as we ate. “This is normal,” Elisa said, “I encounter these feelings all the time. Do not feel bad about having them. Everyone hopes their person will be the one who is found in this year’s Caravan.” Kata nodded and added:

⁹¹ See Chapter IV for a more detailed narrative about Britany’s mother’s experience and active search for her daughter.

⁹² The original quote in Spanish is: “*Se anda tras las huellas del corazón arrebatado, del vínculo emocional fracturado, del sentido que tiene la vida de quien busca en aquel que le hace falta*” (Verástegui González, 2018, p. 10)

Your [referring to all the Caravan participants] efforts are hard work, and sometimes it is difficult to feel the political pressure and support we create together. Even if you are here fighting for everyone who has disappeared, your number one priority is of course the one who is absent in your heart and who made you a searcher (4 May 2022).

As I chatted with Anja, Juanita's aunt, in the following days, I asked her what she thought other searchers might feel about Juanita's case becoming such a central part of the Caravan and that even the President of Mexico was aware of and speaking about her. "It must be tough to see how we [Juanita's community] are no longer searching for Juanita but preparing to receive her," she responds. "I would have found that very hard, but hopefully, it also gives them hope," she continues. "This is also why I repeatedly call for *todas las Juanitas* [all Juanitas] to be freed." Anja then says something many other searchers have told me: she will always be a searcher. "Finding and getting Juanita home is my main goal, but I will not rest after that. Now that I know what happens to people, especially women like us [migrants, Indigenous], my search for Juanitas will continue. Once a searcher, always a searcher" (Interview, 5 May 2022).

"The search is a part of me"

Anja's certainty that she would remain a searcher after Juanita was no longer gone indicates that even if the search is prone to start with the absence of a loved one, it often becomes a sustained embodied and performative political act to contest this violence at different scales. Also, as searchers frequently mentioned, the communities and bonds they have created with other searchers and those accompanying them through their performative efforts across borders are not comparable to their other relationships. The deep scars of loss, uncertainty, and hope to find what is absent foster assemblies and communal identities of grief and grievance (Butler,

2004; Stierl, 2016) that create what one of the searchers described to me as “raw spaces of power and love” (personal conversation, 15 May 2022). Spaces where individuals’ grief for what is absent are transformed into collective spaces of grievance and affect (Biorklund & Peraza, 2022). Spaces that intentionally center the pain of the multiple oppressions felt in the body, as de Alwis (2009) has avowed, begin a process of liberation and emancipation of individual bodies and the body politic in general (see also Lawson, 2018).

A common saying among Central American and Mexican search collectives I have accompanied is that they intentionally seek *treasures* (including material signs of the disappeared and for justice and support). Many have reiterated that they avoid talking about corpses or the dead to the extent possible, except in moments when generating a visible presence of the disappeared and their mortality is necessary. Such occasions may be when their testimonies and bodily presence in *plazas* and other public spaces can increase pressure and enhance access to otherwise hidden spaces, including prisons and detention centres.

While limited, select scholarship on search efforts for disappeared persons similarly indicates such intentionality imposed among searchers. Namely, not to centre death and loss but to focus on hope, affect and collective indignation about wanting their missing persons back alive (Bermudez Qvortrup, 2022; Martinez Castillo, 2021). Elisa, the search coordinator from Honduras, shared with me that part of the reason for creating a reappearance (presence of the absence) is to invoke an image or an imagination in the spectators’ minds that their disappeared loved ones are still alive and need their attention. That the disappearance is not a violent act of the past but a continuous process of violence and injustice that is still occurring today (Gordon, 2008)

The searchers have also repeatedly expressed to me that the authorities and others, including criminal groups and networks who make their people disappear, perceive them as a threat as they make visible ongoing processes of violence that have been invisibilized (Interview, Ramirez, 7 May 2022; Personal conversation, Federico, 16 March 2022). The constant threat experienced by the searchers in Mexico shapes their performance and how relationships between active searchers are formed across borders. Federico, a human rights defender who accompanies the yearly search Caravan and who also searches for his brother who disappeared in 2021, explains:

Our presence along migratory routes and in places where our family members have disappeared makes them [authorities and other groups] uncomfortable. We make it hard for them to hide the problem of disappearances. Not only of migrants but also Mexicans. I've been searching for my brother since 2021, and I constantly receive threats. Searching is very dangerous; you never know what you will find or what can be done to you. Many families are too scared to search.

It helps to search collectively, like this Caravan or other organized search groups and events where we come together. We help each other, and having many searchers in one place makes our efforts more public. When I organize searches, I also try to have outsiders accompany us. The likelihood of receiving threats is less when persons like you [academics and journalists from other countries] are with us (Personal conversation, Federico, 16 March 2022).

Another searcher with whom I have worked closely with is Xiomara (Xio). Her experience further illustrates how, as Juanita's aunt and others have explained, the search generates a collective identity and becomes an integrated part of families' and communities' lives spanning generations and geographies. Xio is one of the search coordinators from Guatemala who has been attending the annual search Caravan for years. She was also the one

who introduced Juanita's community to the transnational Caravan back in 2020. Her history as a searcher goes back to 1984 when she was only two years old. She told me that in 1984, her mother left their home in Guatemala to go and provide for the family in the U.S as their lands no longer gave them enough produce to survive. Her mother never came back, and until this day, they do not know what happened to her. Xio says that growing up, her father was always away or absent-minded because he was absorbed in the search for her mother. She told me that he did not manage to work much or take care of the family. "My mom's disappearance also took my father away from me" (personal conversation with Xio, 7 May 2022). Xio explains that one of her older sisters took care of her and the other siblings and that her childhood was embedded in violence and feeling unsafe. This sister later migrated to the US as the family needed financial security and she never returned. Telling me how and why she became a searcher, Xio describes:

I spent many years resenting my mother for leaving and disappearing and my father for letting it take over his life. I also resented my sister, who left 22 years ago and created a life there [in the US]. Everyone I loved left me. Their search became my enemy, and I distanced myself. But I also missed them. I especially missed speaking to my father after I had my two children. So, one day, 8 years ago, I joined him [father] for a [local] gathering with other searchers.

What can I say [...]. It changed me. I went from hating the search and everything about it to slowly accepting that it is part of me. It will always be, no matter what. Since then, I have become an active searcher, and for the last two years, I have been one of the coordinators in southern Guatemala. My father can no longer perform searches due to his condition, so I also search for him and for others who also cannot afford it [...]. I also do it [search] for my sister, who, like so many other women, is stuck in a situation where she cannot even return home [to Guatemala]. And I do it for my children so they do not have to become searchers [...] or disappear in the future. That thought haunts me (Interview, Xio, 8 May 2022).

Like other searchers, Xio refers to the search as an embodied and intergenerational way of engaging in the world. A way to grieve and seek justice for the violence experienced by her family, other women, and the place she calls home. She is searching for her mother, yet maybe more broadly, for relations, safety and love violently withheld from her when she was younger. The search as she defines it can also be understood as an insurance against one's children doing it, and an action on behalf of other family members who cannot. As we were conversing, I asked her more about the search efforts, and she responded:

Here I am, bringing a lot of pain and suffering from what happened to my family and to women I love. [...] I feel connected to them when I am here [in the active search]. It motivates me to do the search, and it motivates me to ask for justice. Enough with the violence towards women!

The support I feel here makes me continue year after year. We are an extensive search family. Our neighbours and friends at home do not understand us [searchers]. But between us [searchers], we do understand and support each other across differences. What can I say? The connections we establish among ourselves are like on another dimension or something (Interview, Xio, 8 May 2022).

The way that Xio, Juanita's community, and others searching for their disappeared sisters, mothers, daughters, and friends across borders speak about their experiences reveals how they often (initially) wade through unguided and lonely processes of grief for their disappeared (Reineke, 2016). Yet how grief, too, can become a tie of care that binds across borders. Butler (2004, p. 23, in de Alwis, 2009) has relatedly underscored that grief is the:

[...] thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we

might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control... I am gripped and undone by these very relations.

Concluding thoughts

The Caravan and other collective search efforts are sites that bind personal and collective experiences, the past and the present, and the dead to the living (Gordon, 2008). The lived experiences of all implicated bodies (including the bodies of those of us who accompany searchers), the places that have been left behind, and the various spaces where the searchers *acuerpan* and assemble to “Free All Juanitas” are interdependent. Understanding the synergies between these bodies and territories is vital to uncovering, contesting and reimagining the absent geographies of disappearances across borders. It reveals the something that is terribly wrong, namely how histories of disappearances that start long before the absence of a material body are closely intertwined with gendered and racialized geopolitics of violence and borders.

Further, situating performative search efforts as body-territory assemblies of grievance and affect that link the absent bodies, the searchers' acts, with their land here and now, there and then, provides essential conceptual and epistemological insights for further research on the geopolitics of (feminized) disappearances. The searchers' performative acts, including in prisons, mass graves, along migratory routes and at *plazas*, as well as in more intimate spaces, such as when creating counter maps and memories of what disappearances feel like, are collective and participatory feminist approaches. They are approaches that intentionally provoke the presence of absent bodies and reveal related processes of violence while offering insight into new geographies and hopes to find treasures. The introduction of body territory as a concept and a method hence becomes a feminist means to analyze violence and to initiate the healing of bodies and territories more broadly. Thus, it should also be of interest to feminist scholarship, focusing

on the violence of borders, performative agency, and contestation beyond Mexico and Latin America.

Closing epilogue, Juanita's return

Juanita was released from the Reynosa prison on May 22, 2022, only two days after President López Obrador publicly addressed her case and asked for her release. Her community, including Anja, Pablo, Maria, and others whom I had gotten to know during the Caravan across Mexico, were there to receive her as she exited the prison gates after almost eight years of having been gone. There was a lot of media attention as Juanita became a “free” woman, and she was immediately expected to attend to journalists' questions about her experience in prison and Mexico more generally (Personal conversation, Anja, 25 May 2022). The next day, she returned to Guatemala and her community, where she was received with an extensive celebration and more media attention. Her relatives helped her change from jeans and a Nike t-shirt she had gotten from the prison into traditional regional clothes. In her first public interviews in Mexico following her release, Juanita appreciated the state agents and institutions facilitating her release. With time and when having returned to her hometown, she spoke candidly about her experience. Juanita has since repeatedly referred to the continuous harms related to the physical violence that she endured before the imprisonment, followed by years of injustice and being denied access to her fundamental rights, including to speak with her family. She has also reiterated that her experience of violence and disappearance is not unique. Underscoring the structural aspect of Juanita's experience, Netzai Sandoval, head of Mexico's federal public defenders' office, said: “All her [Juanita's] rights were violated *because* she is a woman, she is an Indigenous person, she is a migrant, she is poor, and she did not speak Spanish” (Al Jazeera, 2022).

I was not present at Juanita's release in Reynosa, nor as she returned to Guatemala, partly because I was still accompanying other searchers in Mexico, and it was not my place. Even if it felt then and still feels like I know Juanita, I have developed a closer relationship with some of her family and community members featured in this chapter. Also, I was hesitant to be yet another unknown person who reached out to speak with her during this very intense time. That said, through Juanita's aunt and uncle, I had asked permission to narrate her story in light of disappearances and performative search efforts in this dissertation. Since I got to know them, they have taken the initiative to inform me about their progress (before Juanita was released) and, more generally, about how they are all doing following her release and what this has meant to their community. Like other searchers I have accompanied, they send me updates about search efforts for disappeared migrants, including support provided to active searchers.

As I was writing this chapter, however, I increasingly felt that it would be pertinent to chat with Juanita herself. I wanted to ensure she agreed with what I had written, and I was keen to better understand her perspective on disappearances and searches across borders. We had a memorable conversation about 17 months after she was released from prison and nine years after she first left Guatemala for the U.S. To end this chapter, I want to share a part of our exchange (personal conversation, 12 October 2023).

Juanita: I hear you know my aunt [Anja] and one of my sisters [Maria].

Linn: Yes, I have learned so much from them and you. It feels like I know you, but you do not know much about me. How are you doing today?

Juanita: I am free, which makes me feel good. I am very happy to be with my family. It was so hard not to see them for all those years. Most days, I feel thankful to be free and alive, but some days, I cannot stop thinking about those days in Reynosa. It has changed

me, and I miss my friends whom I spent so much time with [in prison]. It angers me to think about all these injustices we must live through.

Linn: I imagine. Do you have contact with some of the women who were in prison with you?

Juanita: No, they cannot communicate with us here on the other side. Like me, they are immigrants and some Indigenous. They are not kidnappers. I never thought something like this could happen to me or other women. This happens because we have no opportunities at home, so we must leave. It happened to me because there was never a translator, there was no one [...] but right now, thank God, I am free. Many others are still gone. They disappear and never come back. I tell those who want to go *Pa'l Norte* to be careful, but I also understand them.

Linn: Do you think you will stay where you are?

Juanita: Crossing that border scares me, but I also have good memories. I have gotten to know some of the searchers who accompanied my community to search for me. I may join one of those Caravans one day. But for now, I must take care of my mother. She was ill before I left. My absence for so many years worsened her condition. It changed her. It changed me. It changed our community. So much pain but also much good has come out of all this. As my aunt says, we want Freedom for All Juanitas.

Linn: That is a very compelling slogan. I use it as one of my titles.

Juanita: I saw that. We are migrants who want to be free, not someone to be disrespected or to be put away.

The following chapter, *Sin miedo* (Without fear), concludes this dissertation. In it, I present the main findings and core arguments made throughout, spell out my work's contribution to selected fields of thought, and discuss potentialities for future research and collaborations.

Chapter VII. Conclusions: *Sin miedo* (Without fear)

Introduction

On March 7th, 2020, Vivir Quintana, Mexican singer, poet and activist, performed *Canción sin Miedo* [Song without Fear] alongside the women's choir El Palomar at the *zócalo* (Central Plaza/square) in Mexico City to commemorate International Women's Day. *Canción sin miedo* has since become a feminist hymn performed as an act of contestation in Mexico and across borders. Its lyrics, explicit and blunt, are both a tribute and a cry of outrage at feminicides and gendered violence, including discriminatory state-bordering practices and forced disappearances.

An excerpt of *Canción sin miedo* recites (emphasis added):⁹³

*A cada minuto, de cada semana
Nos roban amigas, nos matan hermanas
Destrozan sus cuerpos, los desaparecen
No olvide sus nombres, por favor, señor Presidente*

*Cantamos **sin miedo**, pedimos justicia
Gritamos por cada desaparecida
Que resuene fuerte "**¡nos queremos vivas!**"
Que caiga con fuerza el feminicida
Que caiga con fuerza el feminicida*

In English, it translates to (emphasis added):

⁹³ See Appendix H for the full lyrics, including an English translation.

Every minute, every week
They steal our friends, they kill our sisters
They destroy their bodies, make them disappear
Do not forget their names
Please, Mr. President

We sing **without fear**, we demand justice
We shout for every disappeared woman
Our voices echo strongly, **“We want us alive!”**
Let the feminicide fall with force
Let the feminicide fall with force

Speaking about the significance of *Canción sin miedo*, Quintana says,

[T]his song is no longer mine. [It] belongs to all the comrades who are no longer here and the ones fighting for those who are no longer here. I want this song never to be sung again because of its significance. Singing it means that there is a problem. So, while I am filled with joy when I hear that the song is taken up everywhere, I am also filled with a lot of anger and sadness when I hear that there are more and more names [of women victims of feminicides and gendered violence], added in each region [...] (Quintana interviewed by Carrión for CNN Chile, 27 August 2020)

* * *

I begin this closing chapter referencing *Canción sin miedo*, as its presence has been a constant symbolic feature throughout this doctoral research project from September 2019 to May 2024. The research protagonists, women from Central America crossing borders and pushing boundaries, and other central characters, have all engaged with this melody in various ways and at multiple scales. Some have gently referenced the lyrics to convey their own intimate stories of violence or shared with me the sentiments that arise as they listen to it. Others have assembled to

sing and enact it aloud as a way of contesting gendered violence, including feminicides and forced disappearances, that women and girls moving across borders in Mexico and beyond experience.

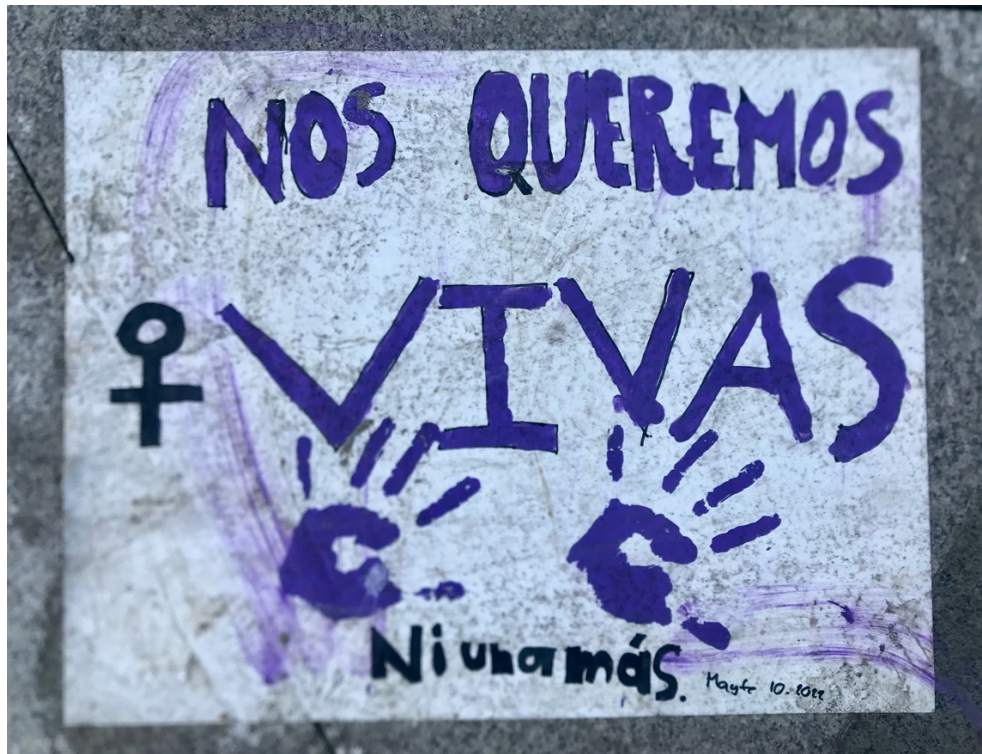


Figure 20. *Nos queremos vivas* (We want us alive) is a slogan from *Canción sin miedo*. This picture (by the author) is from Puerto de Veracruz during a march in May 2022 with the Caravan from Central America searching for disappeared and local feminist collectives, including *las Brujas del Mar*.

Like this dissertation, *Canción sin miedo* connects women's stories and experiences across space and time, producing intimate and gendered narratives of livingness. The related acts *sin Miedo* (without fear, or perhaps *despite* the fear is more accurate) carried out by women border-crossers, searchers, makers and *brujas*, including those of us accompanying them, unapologetically generate a presence of violences that have been invisibilized. The echoing chorus "*Si tocan a una, respondemos todas*" (If they touch one, we all respond) and "*Nos*

queremos vivas” (We want us alive) (Quintana, 2020) elucidates the collective (yet often overlooked) sentiments of indignation, contestation and solidarity despite violent geographies.

Inspired by communitarian feminist Cabnal’s (2010) and *brujas*’ collective (Geobrujas, 2021) conceptualization of *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) when performing *sin miedo*, some women also articulate the unity of these violences towards feminized bodies with violations of their lands and of borders crossing them. “*Si nos tocan la tierra nos tocan la sangre, y si nos tocan la sangre nos tocan la tierra*” (If they touch our land, they touch our blood, and if they touch our blood, they touch our territory) (Cabnal, 2015b, p. 49), was, for instance, one of the slogans chanted by a Maya community from Guatemala participating in the 2022 Caravan from Central America to search for Juanita and other migrants who have been made to disappear in Mexico.

* * *

By examining migrant and body-territory epistemologies, everyday politics, and arts-based contestations linked to the geopolitics of violence, displacement, and disappearances in southern Mexico, this dissertation reconceptualizes bordering practices. The grounded theory analysis arises from the research I carried out in southern Mexico between January 2022 and October 2023, consisting of feminist ethnographic and participatory action research with migrant women protagonists, feminist and women’s groups, search collectives and others accompanying border-crossers. I make *presentes* (present)⁹⁴ the lives, (dis)abilities, aspirations and intimate spaces of love, care and imagination that women bring with them and collectively produce across violent borders. To do so, I emphasize their stories – daily practices, and how they maneuver and

⁹⁴ See the poem *Presentes* [Present], by Guisela Lopez (2013) in the Introduction Chapter of this dissertation.

shape social spaces under circumstances not of their own making (Das, 2006; Espiritu, 2014; Hyndman, 2019). As such, the dissertation seeks to move away from approaches emphasizing pain and suffering so as to generate counter-discourses based on border-crossers agency, consequently challenging hegemonic state-centric perspectives. Here geopolitical conceptualizations of borders, bordering and related experiences are reframed by producing narratives illuminating geographies and spatialities largely absent in scholarly debates.

Centring an intimate transnational geographic lens, this dissertation addresses these questions:⁹⁵ How is violence gendered, navigated and contested across borders? What are bordering practices along the southern Mexico border with Guatemala? How can engaging with migrant and body-territory epistemologies foster a re-imagination of socio-spatial relations, protections, and waiting? And what is the function of performative searches, including across borders, for disappeared persons?

The corresponding materials and contributions are derived from various research methods conducted in Tabasco, Veracruz, and Chiapas. These included co-creating life history narratives with women protagonists from Central America residing in southern Mexico, in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of initiatives supporting border-crossers and organizing *talleres de saberes* - creative workshops framed as “dialogues of knowledges.” Essential to the research was also the accompaniment of collectives from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to search for and make present disappeared migrants in Mexico. Participant observation of performative acts of contestation (acts *sin miedo*) and continuous conversations with migrants residing in the borderlands, state agents, residents, humanitarians, searchers,

⁹⁵ See Chapter I for a complete presentation of the research questions that guide this research.

artists, and activists also contributed to the findings. Three sites were critical to this research: 1) La 72 Migrant Shelter in Tenosique, Tabasco; 2) Las Patronas women's collective in northern Veracruz; and 3) the *XVI Caravana de Madres Centroamericanas* (XVI Caravan of Central American Mothers) across southern Mexico. I also spent time at other sites commonly visited by border-crossers, including other shelters and surrounding transit sites, border crossings and points of entry from Guatemala, and bus and train stations, e.g. sites where the stations for el Tren Maya (Maya Train) were being constructed, restaurants, bars, and farms.

While I am solely responsible for the text presented in this dissertation, the stories, knowledges and actions it draws upon are constructed with the research protagonists and all the other characters who made this research possible. Throughout the dissertation I critically analyze my own positionality and presence, including in acts of accompaniment and contestation, and how it has influenced the course and outcomes of this research.

* * *

The remaining parts of this chapter present the key findings and contributions related to my research questions, theoretical influences, and methodological approach. I then discuss some limitations, followed by three ideas for future research based on the findings of this research and the scholarly gaps identified. Lastly, I close with remarks that seek to inspire and generate further action.

Findings and contributions

This dissertation questions reductionist representations of women who maneuver cross-border lives. It challenges narrow accounts of state-bordering practices and their outcomes, arguing that generalized conceptualizations that overlook people's differential gendered,

racialized and classed experiences are an extension of hostile geopolitical migration governance. By invoking gendered and intimate geopolitics of the everyday and transnational feminist understandings of space, protagonism and performance, this dissertation reconceptualizes theoretical debates on spaces of violence, waiting, making, and searching in borderlands and along migratory routes. I argue that these are spaces where the conditions that differentially expose particular groups of people to precarity and violence are entangled with the protagonism, imagination and practices of contestation by those most affected by these power relations. By placing women's nuanced stories, multi-scalar and situated knowledges and acts in conversation with established critical border, feminist political geography and refugee studies scholarship, this research and its related outcomes seek an epistemological shift towards survival strategies, protagonism, care and creativity amidst the violences of borders and disappearances.

The findings and contributions can roughly be divided into four parts corresponding to the research questions and following the structure of this dissertation. The first concerns how my methodological approach fosters new knowledges about borders and acts of people *sin miedo* crossing them. The other three are empirical and theoretical contributions from the analysis in the dissertation's substantive chapters. This includes a gendered and intimate geopolitical analysis of how women navigate and contest violent experiences across borders, a re-conceptualization of bordering centring on protagonism and spaces of making while waiting in borderlands, and a reading of disappearances as violence towards (feminized) bodies and territories and performative searches beyond maternalist and sensationalized discourses.

Firstly, my methodological approach, bridging ethnographic and feminist participatory action research across territorial and scholarly realms, generates new insights into borders and how they are managed and experienced. Attending to scales and listening to voices at the

margins of academic and public debates, I tap into narratives and knowledges that, as Gordon (2008, 41) contemplates, “have been disavowed, left behind, covered over, and remain unseen [...]” Feminist political geography and critical border studies scholars have long asked questions to challenge state-centric perspectives of violence and borders (Hyndman, 2019, 2000; Ehrkamp et al., 2019; Smith, 2012). However, less effort has been put into incorporating knowledges from certain feminist spatialities, including Mexico, Central and South America, on how and by/with whom alternative narratives can be produced. The continued epistemic dominance of Anglocentric feminist geography and lack of transnational feminist dialogue with geographically peripheral feminisms, Zaragocin (2021) argues, risks the reproduction of hegemonic narratives (see also Naylor et al. 2017). By reading across these boundaries and, in part, inspired by feminist theory and practice in Latin America, intentionally centring on migrant and body-territory epistemologies, this dissertation attends to new questions, conceptualizations, and methodology. The co-production of life-history narratives with women from Central America residing in southern Mexico generates dialogue between women’s individual and differential yet deeply interconnected experiences and memories of violence, borders and migration. This forges new knowledges about invisibilized intimate and gendered spaces, actions and relations across borders. Such insights further enable the application of participatory action methods, including collective acts of making art, body maps, food, and accompanying diverse performative assemblies and other counter-narratives. The persistent bridging of scholarly research and praxis throughout this research has resulted in various contributions. I have (co)authored publications in leading academic journals, such as the *Journal of Refugee Studies* (Biorklund, 2023b), *Political Geography* (Biorklund, forthcoming), and *Geopolitics* (Biorklund & Ferguson, 2021), and published stories about gendered outcomes of border closures and disappearances in

international news outlets (Biorklund, 2023a; Biorklund, 2022; Biorklund & Peraza, 2022).

Further I have performed a range of presentations, keynote addresses and advisory roles across academic, policy and migrant protection forums and debates in multiple locations.⁹⁶ The applied research approach has also fostered the production of creative knowledges, such as making a “mural-on-the-move” (see Figure 14 & Chapter V). This mural, made by some forty women protagonists residing in southern Mexico, was one of the outcomes of a *talleres de saberes* that I organized with La 72 in Tenosique, Tabasco. Initially made for International Women’s Day in 2022, it is now a symbolic feature that other women residing in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands take to public events where gendered violence and women’s rights to protection and safety are centred. The collective making and publication of a newsletter titled *Rompiendo barreras: Migran las mujeres, migra la vida* (Breaking barriers: When women migrate, life migrates) (Rompiendo barreras, 2022) following another of the *talleres* is also a notable outcome, that illustrates the dialogical and transformative approach of this research project. With my support, the newsletter, developed and edited by women protagonists, brings together women’s stories of violence, hope and survival. Further, I believe that my acts of accompanying collectives searching for disappeared migrants, including lending my body to assemblies, acts of solidarity and search efforts, and writing about their activism, led to the reappearance of and partial justice for two disappeared women from Guatemala and Honduras (see Instituto Nacional de Migración, 2022, & Chapter VI).

Secondly, the first substantive chapter (Chapter IV) contributes to critical border studies, feminist geopolitics and political geography scholarship by highlighting differential gendered

⁹⁶ Including in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Canada, the US, the Netherlands, Spain, Italy, Sweden, the UK and in online spaces.

and corporal experiences embedded in violent state-bordering practices and migration governance in borderlands reproduced by power-laden structures. The presented findings illustrate how infrastructural projects, like the mega-train project – el Tren Maya – in southern Mexico, are increasingly used by states to hamper mobility and the arrival of unwanted people at their borders. I explicitly show how el Tren Maya, along with discriminatory migration policies implemented since 2020, has shifted how people move in Mexico, making it harder for particularly women and girls to reach their intended destinations safely. This analysis rescales linear narratives and generalized experiences, drawing on material from life history narratives and semi-structured interviews and bridging intimate geopolitics of violence and borders (Pain & Staeheli, 2014; Smith, 2012; Sundberg, 2017) literature focused on bodily autonomy and harm (Loyd et al., 2023; Tanyag, 2018; Hall & Wilton, 2017). Assuming an invoked gender (classed and racial) impediment to move, the chapter brings attention to intimate, less visible scales and survival strategies intertwined with the migratory routes and vehicles that women from Central America embark on (or not). It further theorizes how these women's experiences of moving slowly, waiting, and paying with their bodies in southern Mexico today relate to other women's experiences as they cross borders in different spaces and times. The findings give insight into how women - often moving with their children and because of gendered violence experiences that follow them - make decisions and maneuver precarious spaces. Specifically, it considers how their actions to love and re-make life across borders are acts of contestation that reshape these violent experiences and their memories of them.

Thirdly, the findings in the second substantive chapter (Chapter V) contribute alternative conceptualizations of bordering, waiting and care. Centring on migrant women's protagonism and collective acts of making (art, food, and relationships) as they wait in the Mexico-Guatemala

borderlands, this chapter offers a two-fold lens of enforced waiting. It shows that the feminization of waiting (Ehrkamp et al., 2021; Hyndman & Giles, 2011) in southern Mexico is a slow harm (Hodžić, 2016) embedded within a geopolitical structure where the US and Canada intentionally seek to externalize and contain unwanted migrants far from their borders. This produces gendered geographies of uncertainties and trauma. In parallel, I present findings demonstrating that the feminization of waiting is also a necessary pre-condition for generating affective geographies of making and transformative spaces of solidarity and contestation across borders. The focus is on what I refer to as *undocumented bordering practices* and acts *sin miedo*, which are understudied gendered processes that contest the violences of borders, challenges homogenizing narratives of waiting as passive and women waiting as victims only. Placing materials from the *tallers* and life history narratives in dialogue with processes of art making and other knowledge productions – including a ‘mural-on-the-move’ and a newsletter titled *Breaking Barriers: When women migrate, life migrates* – by women waiting in southern Mexico, this chapter contributes nuanced accounts of women’s cross-border lives and (collective) self-care practices. The analysis attends to the intimate geopolitics of making and sharing food in borderlands and how this transforms spaces of transit and refuge. The findings further show that the benefits of these care spaces are not limited to women who migrate but extend to other border-crossers and groups accompanying them. The last part of this chapter explicitly illustrates how the acts of accompaniment of members at La 72 in Tabasco and Las Patronas women collective in Veracruz are now an essential source of care and agency in their own lives and communities.

Lastly, the third substantive chapter (Chapter VI) fills gaps in the dominantly state-centric and patronizing literature on the geopolitics of disappearances and violence. Introducing a body-

territory epistemology (Cabnal, 2010; Cruz Hernández, 2016; Zaragocin & Caretta, 2021) and adding a gendered and intergenerational lens, this chapter shifts the framing of disappearances and related performative search efforts across borders. Featuring the story of Juanita, a Mayan woman from Guatemala who was made to disappear in Mexico in 2008, the findings demonstrate how the material and statistical absence of (feminized and racialized) migrant bodies in Mexico are inherent to processes of gendered and territorial violence that span generations and geographies. Explicitly, I address how the forced disappearance and absence of women are an extension of states' bordering practices via the control and capitalization of gendered and racialized bodies. The applied body-territory lens and focus on performative assemblies carried out by searchers and various *brujas*, including those of us accompanying them, also serve as a counterweight to the maternalist discourse regarding violence and disappearances. While acknowledging the centrality of maternal subjectivity in disappearances, the analysis is intentionally situated beyond individualized suffering and the sensationalized role of the mother grieving her child only. This chapter provides intimate accounts of embodied and relational search and grieving processes across borders, subjectivities and generations to advance theoretical conceptualizations of disappearances. They manifest that disappearances are felt across *all* the implicated bodies, including the communal (territories). The presented accounts further contribute to feminist debates in which disappearances are understood as a state where both death and life are present and possible, but uncertainty and ambiguous loss occupy all the space (Boss, 2000; de Alwis in Ruwanpura et al., 2022; Dieguez Caballero, 2021; Gordon, 2008). Focusing on performative search efforts and acts *sin miedo*, the findings further invoke dialogue about the livingness of disappearances. It draws attention to how searchers assemble across differences to uncover, contest, and create counter-maps and memories about the absent

geographies of disappearances across borders. The related analysis adds comprehension about how these assemblies are intimate geopolitical processes that produce transnational spaces of care and survival.

Limitations

This dissertation's gendered and intimate narratives of violence, borders, and contestations are nuanced and immensely rich. Still, they do not do justice to the in-depth knowledges and learnings produced with the research protagonists, other characters, and collaborators. They represent the research participants' partial memories and my interpretations and impressions of situated experiences occurring in selected moments and within specific geopolitical processes. Whereas the research records and maps invisibilized geographies of violence and contestations, revealing patterns and layers of living and agency generally obscured in public and academic narratives, it remains persistently partial, nongeneralizable and nonreplicable.

My focus on three interrelated yet specific facets of bordering in southern Mexico -- gendered experiences of migratory routes, women's undocumented bordering practices in waiting spaces, and geographies of performative searches for the disappeared -- contributes a comprehensive account to multiple scholarly fields. However, each theme and corresponding research question set merits a separate research project.

One limitation is that the research is exclusively centred on the border experiences of present and absent women. More attention must also be given to other border-crossers' - young men, elderly people, and children -- gendered and intimate experiences. My findings show that young men are, for instance, more able than women and children to move rapidly across borders

and along migratory routes and are less exposed to enforced waiting conditions. Further, they are also less likely to obtain protection and humanitarian assistance at migrant shelters. This results in the production of highly gendered and male-dominated spaces and political economies surrounding shelters located in the Mexico-Guatemala borderlands. A more thorough analysis of the socio-spatial relations forming in these spaces could provide further relevant insights.

Another limitation is that my conceptualization of women's undocumented bordering practices mainly emphasizes gendered non-economic reproductive labour processes, including diverse alternative, marginal, and quotidian creative practices, care work and other contestations that do not generate economic compensation. Part of the research material collected for this dissertation, disregarded in the analysis (except for parts of Chapter IV), also provides initial though undeveloped insight into gendered political economies unfolding in precarious waiting spaces. This includes how women from Central America and elsewhere make a living as they wait in southern Mexico and how these activities are entangled with violent and commodifying processes of migration governance. Many women in this study worked long hours to pay their daily expenses and save for a northbound move. Their labour varied from mundane jobs offered by governmental institutions, such as cleaning city centres or official buildings, to working informal jobs at restaurants, bars, farms, and factories. The research participants commonly spoke about exploitative labour conditions, discriminatory treatment, and persistent uncertainties embedded in these jobs, particularly the informal ones. Further, some women indicated that rather than getting paid for their work, they were "offered" "free" housing, or they were promised future transportation for themselves and/or their children to the northern Mexican border with the US.

The span of the part of my research, centring on disappearances and performative searches, is another potential limitation. As mentioned in Chapter II, I had not initially planned to focus on the geopolitics of disappearances. I identified the epistemological gaps, particularly regarding the disappearance and absence of feminized migrants, as my research began to reveal the links between the geopolitics of feminicides, borders and disappearances. Accordingly, I incorporated questions to examine disappearances across borders, relationships, and searchers' actions into my research. Through acts of accompaniment, I also recognized that introducing a feminist body-territory lens to the study of disappearances could, as discussed, contribute to a shift in the framing of disappearances across borders. While novel, the related research activities were arguably limited regarding the number of disappearances and search efforts investigated. I specifically accompanied one search Caravan in 2022, bringing together various search collectives from Central America, and I focused on a small number of the disappearances, including Juanita from Guatemala. Disappearances, both the material absence of persons and in the sense of their scholarly interest, are rapidly increasing and changing. Related search efforts, acts *sin miedo*, and care carried out by collectives in Mexico are growing. Therefore, my contribution represents a small but significant sample and stance that can be advanced further.

Future research

Over the last few years, feminist scholarship on borders, violence, and displacement has increasingly offered insights into gendered and intimate outcomes at multiple scales (Espiritu, 2014; Hernández Castillo, 2019; Hyndman, 2019, 2004; Pain & Staeheli, 2014; Smith, 2012; Varela Huerta, 2020; Vogt, 2018, Zaragocin, 2020). My dissertation contributes to this growing field of study by focusing on a geographical area, the southeastern borderlands of Mexico, and epistemologies that have received little attention in the literature. Reading across preestablished

scholarly boundaries and geographies throughout this research, I have identified at least three areas for future research corresponding to the above-mentioned findings, contributions and limitations: i) political economies of undocumented bordering practices, ii) bewitched (subversive) geographies of violence, and iii) the livingness of disappearances.

i) Political economies of undocumented bordering practices

Contemporary migration governance practices are indissociable from histories of state violence. The objectives of infrastructural development projects, such as el Tren Maya in southern Mexico and neoliberal export production industries, are aligned with efforts to prevent unwanted people from moving across borders. These state practices and mega-projects generate gendered geographies of mobility, including enforced waiting, in which migrants and their practices are increasingly perceived as a commodity. Racialized women crossing borders in search of safety, who do not fit into the narrow “refugee” protection category and who do not have the means to pay for alternative modes of transport, spend significant amounts of time waiting in precarious and uncertain spaces in remote borderlands. This dissertation has centred on women’s protagonism and selected bordering practices in southern Mexico as they wait. A related topic that warrants further scholarly consideration is the outcomes of women’s waiting practices from feminist political economy and social reproduction perspectives. How does the commodification of migration, including women’s bodies, amplify systems of economic gender stratification? How do geopolitical migration governance and extraction processes influence women’s reproductive labour? And, in what ways do women’s economic activities across borders shape spaces of waiting?

ii) Bewitched geographies of violence

Throughout this dissertation, I centred migrant and body-territory epistemologies to gaze beyond generalized and spectacularized notions of violence, harm and displacement. Engaging in collective acts of contestation and accompaniment, acts *sin miedo*, across borders (material, theoretical, methodological) has produced insight into less studied notions of violence. In recent years, feminist scholars and activists, including political geographers in Mexico and parts of Latin America, increasingly examine and (counter)map gendered violence from a body-territory lens that understands the body as our first territory and recognizes geographic territory in our bodies (Borzacchiello et al., 2022; Cruz Hernández et al., 2020; Segato, 2016; Territorio y Feminismos, 2017; Bayón & Zaragocin, 2019) Emphasizing the unity of violence towards feminized bodies and territories (communal bodies) generates narratives beyond individualized subjectivities as the primary scale of analysis. Some of the leading feminist collectives in this regard use the word *brujas* (witches) in their names—for instance, *las Geobrujas* (the Geowitches) and *las Brujas del Mar* (the Sea Witches) (see Chapter III & VI for more on their work). The use of the term *brujas* serves as an appealing counterpart to state-centric and maternalist discourses concerning violence and harm. *Bruja* and *brujeria* (witchcraft) have been charges historically levelled by political powers to criminalize behaviours and certain social groups perceived as subverting societal institutions and to put the blame on those conveniently considered different or non-conformist. Women deemed as *brujas* have been tortured, imprisoned, and burned because of their magical, rebellious, and free-spirited energies to both harm and heal bodies and territories (Federici, 1999, 2018). And “witchcraft” has been defined in such a way that it encompasses all sorts of practices. Today, state violence, including the geopolitics of migration governance, employs similar tactics, capitalizing on often gendered and

racialized groups of people (Federici, 2018). In many Western societies, *bruja* carries a derogatory connotation and is commonly used as a gendered slur.

Introducing, more explicitly, an alternative *brujas* lens centring how women's presence, acts and imaginations, to feminist political geography and transnational feminist readings of violence, i.e. theorizing bewitched (or subversive) geographies of violence and corresponding gendered spatialities of contestation and care work, into future research could deepen analyses on how the outcomes of violences, including borders, are experienced, negotiated and remembered across feminized bodies and territories.

iii) The livingness of disappearances

Chapter VI of this dissertation addresses invisibilized geographies of disappearances, including performative search efforts across borders. Focusing on searchers' collective acts to make visible the visceral absence of their disappeared loved ones eventually implies adding life to bodies and territories that have been deemed dead or violable. It forges an urgent presence and a remembering of what has been violently dismissed. Anna Tsing (2015, p. 6) illustrates that "places can be lively despite the announcement of their death." The same can be said for the spaces that disappearances generate. While filled with pain and emptiness, they can be lively and transformative so long as they are not forgotten. This notion gives insight into how there is agency and living amid destruction, grief and uncertainty. A relevant area of research would be focusing explicitly on the "livingness" of disappearances. More specifically, how do violent acts of disappearances produce new collective and transnational spaces of living? What is the livingness of absence? And how can this livingness provoke alternative ways to remember and memorialize what has been made to disappear?

Epilogue

Recently, while driving along the southern Mexico border and coastline with my family, I saw thousands of people, women, and children of all ages walking and using different means of transportation along northbound migratory routes. Many who enter Mexico from Guatemala now move along routes and wait in spaces not commonly used only a few years back. Seeing these people searching for safety today made me think of the ones who were searching for safety yesterday and who will be searching for safety tomorrow. It also made my mind wander to the women and transitory spaces that are not seen. The ones I had the opportunity to know since 2022 and 2023, and those I have not crossed paths with but have spent endless hours thinking about and searching for. As I was deeply into this thought, I heard my six-year-old say from the backseat, “Mama, I think that if the bosses of Canada were here, they would help. They should give candy to all the children, especially those that walk, because I do not have enough for everyone.”

Entering a gas station in Oaxaca the following day, my nine-year-old, who understands my research and work well by now, brought me to a wall in the back of the little store. The wall was filled with posters and different kinds of information. He pointed to a picture of a young woman and a handwritten note below saying, “*¿Has visto a Valeria de Venezuela? Desaparecida desde febrero de 2024. Si la ves dile que nunca dejaré de buscarla. Este es mi número: ... /Mari*” (Have you seen Valeria from Venezuela? Disappeared since February 2024. If you see her, tell her I will never stop searching for her. This is my number: ... / Mari). We reflected on the meaning of this message, and as we exited the store, my son said: “What if Mari has to search forever?”

These intimate encounters, with the presence and absence of people searching for safety across borders today, are urgent reminders of how current and vivid the outcomes of the geopolitics of state-bordering practices and gendered violences are. They are constant yet fluid, visible yet unseen, personal and local yet public and transnational, corporal yet spiritual.

Like this dissertation, these intimate encounters narrate hope, imagination, and love across geographies. They are acts of contestation *sin miedo* (or despite the fear) that impose a significant presence from “the other side of the border” (in the broadest sense). They are reminders that the stories told and the bodies, spatialities, and knowledges that populate those stories are the ones remembered.

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Appendix A. Veena Das on accompanying others in their pain

My understanding of *accompaniment* is influenced by critical solidarity approaches to violence and pain, applied by some of the research participants of this research, that distance themselves from sensationalized and supposedly apolitical humanitarian aid narratives (Santiago Cancheca, Interview, 14 March 2022; Lopez, Interview, 6 May 2022). To accompany is an intentional and embodied act of solidarity with others who are experiencing pain (i.e. the outcomes of violent and discriminatory power structures) including people crossing borders and living in precarious spaces, people who have disappeared, or people whose bodies are considered less “valued” (Castillo, 2016; Koopman, 2011). The act of accompaniment is thus a body politics that implies lending your (more privileged or pain-free) body to someone else’s pain, including through everyday and intimate gestures as well as in more public performances (Dieguez Caballero, 2021; Riviera Cusiquanqui, 2018).

This interpretation of accompaniment largely derives from Veena Das’ work (1996, 2006) on the possibilities (or not) to accompany others in their pain. In *Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain* (1996, 67), Das emphasizes that “In repeatedly trying to write the meaning(s) of violence against women in Indian society, I find that the languages of pain through which social sciences could gaze at, touch, or become textual bodies on which this pain is written often elude me.”

Wittgenstein’s work on the possibilities of imagination of pain is a crucial source of Das’s thinking. Citing Wittgenstein’s, *The Blue and Brown Book* (1958) on the question of how someone’s pain may reside in another body, Das writes (1996, p. 69-70):

In order to see that it is conceivable that one person should have pain in another person’s body, one must examine what sorts of facts we can call criteria for pain being in a certain place...

Suppose I feel a pain which on the evidence of the pain alone, e.g. with closed eyes, I should call a pain in my left hand. I do so and looking around perceive that I am touching my neighbor’s hand... This would be pain felt in another’s body.

Wittgenstein’s example of someone’s pain inhabiting another body suggests, Das says, the institution that the representation of shared pain exists in the imagination but is not experienced. Or that the experience of pain cries out for this response of the possibility that my pain could reside in your pain and that the philosophical grammar of pain is an answer to that call.

In her book *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary*, Das (2006) further studies how pain can be shared through speech. Writing about women who were assaulted during the 1984 Sikh riots in Punjab in Northern India and the degree to which it is possible for an outsider scholar

to understand such experiences, she asks, “If I cannot claim to know the pain of the other... what is it to relate to such pain?” The absence of standing languages for pain does not preclude the ability to share pain. The body, she argues, can become the conduit by which one can at least attempt to experience the pain of another by accompanying them in it.

In dialogue with Cavell and Wittgenstein, Das argues that locating the pain of another is the task of imagination, a bridge toward another by which something inexpensive can begin to be understood. They write, “the fact that my pain may not be located in my body opens up the possibility for the body to be shared with someone else, an idea of lending my body to the other’s experience... I am necessarily the owner of my pain, yet the fact that it is always located in my body is not necessary” (Cavell in Das 2006, p. 41). Thus, pain may lead itself to be located elsewhere in another body.

From *cuerpo-territorio* (body-territory) ontological and epistemological perspectives, this body is inseparable from our territories and the communal body. Thus, pain in someone's body could arguably be transmitted to more-than-human bodies, including our territories. Likewise, a territory’s pain resulting from destruction is transmitted to the bodies of people who live there. Whether this is imagined or experienced remains debatable.

Appendix B. Research activities overview

The following presents selected information regarding the life history narratives, in-depth semi-structured interviews, and the *talleres de saberes* (knowledges workshops, deriving from the method of “*dialogos de saberes*” (knowledges dialogues) Hernandez Castillo, 2016) conducted in Mexico in 2022 and 2023. Note that it does not include activities of accompaniment, including with the Caravan of searchers from Central America.

Life History Narratives with Women Protagonists

Name	Interview Dates	Birth Year	Country of Origin	Children	Location	Where now
Cecilia	27012022, 06032022, 02102022	1990	Honduras	3	Tenosique and online	Quebec, Canada
Suyapa	20012022, 03032022, 12052022	1959	Honduras	8	Palenque	Mexico
Mayra	18012022, 10032022, 06062022	1962	Honduras	3	Tenosique and online	Honduras
Donna	10062022, 13052022	1975	Honduras	4	Tenosique	Honduras
Fransis	14032022, 12052022, 03102022	1966	Honduras	6	Tenosique	Oregon, US
Maura	23012022, 14022022, 10052022	1977	Nicaragua	5	Tenosique	Canada
Maria	21012022, 14032022, 03052022	1977	Hondruas	5	Palenque	?

Mary	25012022, 04062022, 30042022	1984	Guatemala	4	Tenosique	Guatemala
Nati	15032022, 28042022, 12062022	1980	Guatemala	3	Palenque	?
Sayra	09032022, 24052022, 22112022	1985	Honduras	3	Tenosique and online	Baltimore, US
Rosa	04032022, 20052022, 07102022	1982	Guatemala	3	Tenosique and online	Michigan, US
Yani	22012022, 25012022	2004	Hondruas	1	Tenosique	?
Sarai	13062022, 18052022, 100072022	1988	Guatemala	5	Tenosique	Huston, US
Paula	28012022, 04052022, 10062022	1993	Guatemala	2	Coatzacoalcos and online	?
Pati	03032022, 11032022, 170052022	1995	Honduras	2	Coatzacoalcos and online	?

In-depth Semi-structured Interviews with ‘Humanitarian Actors’ and others

Name	Interview Date	Location	Organization	Title
Duverger	12012022	Mexico City	Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos	Protection Officer
Guadalupe	18012022	Tenosique	La 72 Casa Migrante	Human Rights/Asylum Lawyer

Romero	19012022	Tenosique	La 72 Casa Migrante	Director
Martinez	240122	Tenosique	La 72 Casa Migrante	Paramedical
Romero	31012022	La Patrona de Amatlan	Las Patronas	Director/Leader
Ramirez	31012022	La Patrona de Amatlan	Las Patronas	Patrona
Gonzalez	03022022	Mexico City - via zoom	Instituto Para Las Mujeres en la Migracion (IMUMI)	Communication and Research Coordinator
Rodriguez	03022022	Mexico City – via zoom	MSF	Head of Mission
Figueroa	03022022 16032022	Mexico City/North Carolina - via zoom	Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano and Puentes de Esperanza	Buscador/Founder
Santiago Cancheca	15032022	Tenosique	La 72 Casa Migrante	Humanitarian Assistance Coordinator
Romero	16032022	Palenque	MSF	Field Coordinator
Hermana y Eva	16032022	Pakalna/Palenque	Casa del Caminante Jtatic	Director and Psychologist
Morales Gomez	18032022	Palenque	Asylum Access	Office Director
Ale and Claudia	19032022	Palenque/Villahermosa - via zoom	Mujeres Organizacion y Tierra (MOOTS)	Executive Directors/Founders
Carrasco	02052022	Tapachula/Tuxtla (Caravana)	Comite Sur de Busqueda (Honduras)	Representative/Buscador
Gabriela	04052022	Coatzacoalcos (Caravana)	Independent/Resident by Train tracks	Humanitarian
Lopez	06052022	La Patrona (Caravana)	ECAP Guatemala	Social Workers
Hernandez Torres	08052022	Mexico City (Caravana)	Search Committee in Guatemala	Coordinator/ Buscadora/Ama de Casa
Escamilla	09052022	Mexico City (Caravana)	Search Committee El Salvador	Psychologist

Ramirez	09052022	Mexico City (Caravana)	Search Committee in Honduras	Coordinator/Buscadora
Shimabukuro	19052022	Mexico City	Comision Nacional de Derechos Humanos (CNDH) and Tres Gatos	Protection Officer Producer
Salmoren Basquez	03102022 and 06102022	Tenosique/El Ceibo	La 72 Casa Migrante	Deputy Director
Juan Ca	06102022	El Ceibo, Guatemala	El Ceibo Casa Migrante	Representative
Dona Lupita	06102022	Tenosique	La 72 Casa Migrante	Cook
Anja	02052022, 25052022	Mexico	Searcher	Searcher
Pablo	07052022	Mexico	Searcher	Searcher
Juanita Note that this was a personal conversation not an interview. Yet considering its significance it is included in the list.	12102023	Zoom	Protagonist	Protagonist

Talleres de Saberes

Title	Date	Location	Participants	Organizers
<i>Mujeres, Violencia y Cuidado</i>	02152022	Tenosique, Tabasco	12 participants, nine women from Central America, two shelter workers, and me	La 72 and Linn

<i>Mujeres, Violencia, Cuidado y el arte</i>	03032022	Tenosique, tabasco	13 participants, 10 women, along with two shelter staff and me.	La 72 and Linn
<i>Encuentro de historias, sabores, colores y olores en la Frontera Sur</i>	15032022	Bejucal, Tabasco		MOOTS and Linn
<i>Taller de Narrativas de la violencia y el cuidado</i>	03102022 - 06102022	Tenosique, Tabasco	A total of 12 migrant women, the three of us, and Ale from La 72 participated	Inma Antolínez Domínguez (Cadiz University), Esperanza Jorge Barbuzano, (Wisconsin-Madison University), Linn
<i>IWD at Universidad Juarez Autonoma de Tabasco</i>	07032022	Tenosique/Universidad Juarez Autonoma de Tabasco	Women at La 72, students, professors	Deputy Director, staff at Juarez Autonoma with support from Linn

Appendix C. Questionnaire guide for life-history narratives

These are examples of the questions initially developed to guide the development of life-history narratives with migrant women protagonists.

What year were you born, and where?

Can you describe the place you grew up in?

Tell me about your family. What memories do you have of your family times back home?

How did your family make a living?

Why did you leave your home?

Please tell me more about yourself.

When did you first see the Mexico-Guatemala border?

What does this border mean to you?

When did you first cross this border? What do you recall from that?

Could you describe the events that led up to this?

What were your aspirations then? Are they the same as today? If not, how have they changed?

Questions for meetings following the first session/meeting

Tell me about how you came to Tabasco/Veracruz?

What's your typical day like in Tabasco/Veracruz?

Is the present better or worse than before coming to Mexico? Why?

Describe your current home. What do you like about it, and what not? Do you sleep well?

How do you make a living?

Do you work outside of your home? If yes (and if you have children) who takes care of them when you are at work?

Do you feel good at work? If not, why?

What helps you manage hardships that you encounter?

Do you have friends and family in Mexico? Where are your other family members?

Who do you trust and what makes you feel protected?

Who and what has been the most helpful since your arrived in Mexico?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me, or to ask me?

Appendix D. List of semi-structured interview participants

A total of twenty-six in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted throughout this research. Nine of the interviewees were representatives of different migrant shelters across south-eastern Mexico and one in Guatemala: La 72 Migrant Shelter in Tenosique, Casa del Caminante Itatic Samuel Ruiz García in Palenque, Casa del Migrante Diócesis de Coatzacoalcos, Casa del Migrante Belén, El Ceibo in Guatemala, and Las Patronas in La Patrona.

Three interviewees were representatives from international humanitarian organizations Médecins Sans Frontières and Asylum Access.

Six interviewees were representatives for national human rights and migrant initiatives: the National Human Rights Commission, Instituto para las Mujeres en la Migration, Mujeres Organizacion y Tierra, Movimiento Migrante Mesoamericano, and *Puentes de Esperanza* (Bridges of Hope).

Four interviewees were representatives of Central American search collectives/groups for disappeared persons: Comité de familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos Amor y Fe (Cofamideaf), Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Fallecidos y Desaparecidos de El Salvador, Comité de Familiares de Migrantes Desaparecidos de Guatemala, and Juanita Libre.

Lastly, two interviewees were representatives of organizations providing psychosocial support to searchers from Central America: COFAMIDE and Equipo de Estudios Comunitarios y Acción Psichosocial (ECAP).

Appendix E. Semi-structured interview guide

These are examples of the questions initially developed to guide in-depth semi-structured interviews with representatives of humanitarian and migrant support initiatives.

Preliminary remarks to interviewees: During the interview, I will be asking you about your personal experience and individual insights relating to the provision of assistance to displaced people and migrants by the Mexico-Guatemala border. Please note that I am not asking you to speak on behalf of your organization (if applicable). Tell them about myself.

Tell me about yourself and your role within your organization, or your work in general.

How is the current situation in Tabasco/Veracruz? Is it safe to carry out your work? Is it safe for displaced people and migrants to engage with you and your colleagues?

What are the most common reasons for displacement among migrants here? What concerns do people arriving from northern Central America express to you?

What does humanitarianism (humanitarian assistance) mean to you?

What services are available to migrants in southern Mexico? Unavailable?

How do you collaborate with other humanitarian organizations/initiatives in the region?

What is the relationship between humanitarians and regulators (border patrols, police forces, local authorities)? What is your personal relation with regulators?

What are the challenges in providing assistance?

How do the geopolitics of border enforcement influence the provision of assistance and/or the outcomes of people accessing it?

What changes, if any, do you see in access to services and care for displaced people and migrants?

If you had all the resources and decision-making power to assist displaced people and migrants here, what would you do?

Appendix F: *Talleres de saberes* (Knowledges workshops)

In 2022, I organized four dialogues of knowledge, which we called *talleres de saberes* (knowledges workshops), in collaboration with women protagonists from Central America, La 72, Mujeres, Organizacon y Territorios (MOOTS), and colleagues at the University of Cadiz and Wisconsin-Madison University. The idea of the *talleres de saberes* draws from the method of “*dialogos de saberes*” (dialogues of knowleges) (Hernández Castillo, 2016). They are focus group workshops centring dialogues on violence and care and artmaking across differences. In addition to the four *talleres* that I co-organized, I also participated in two similar events organized by MOOTS. With consent from all the participants and organizers, I recorded the four *talleres de saberes*, and the other two workshops.

Each *taller de saberes* included between 10 and 15 participants. The overall theme was gendered violence and survival strategies along migratory routes and in the borderlands. At the beginning of each *taller*, the participants set specific objectives.

The first *taller de saberes* organized at La 72 in February 2022 included 12 participants, nine women from Central America, two shelter workers, and me. One of the shelter staff wrote a letter about her experience with violence and what she imagined her life would look like in a year. She shared it with all the participants the day before the taller, and we used it to initiate the dialogue. From the moment the *taller* started, and for four hours, there was a constant word exchange. Several participants said the letter made them comfortable sharing parts of their story. Also, the trust grew as we identified overlapping experiences between our and others’ feelings and dreams. Some played songs representing their experiences or memories from home. As we concluded, the women proposed to meet again.

The second *taller de saberes* was organized at La 72 in early March 2022. Six out of eight women residing at the shelter attending the previous *taller* also participated in this one. Another four residents joined, along with two shelter staff and me. This time, we were writing a poem or text in preparation for the *taller*. The dialogue initially took a serious focus, as some of the participants felt that they wanted to share their violent experiences. The growing trust was noticeable. Following a story shared by one of the participants about how women who cross borders are *luchadoras* (fighters), the dialogue took a turn. More stories about strength, love, and determination to reach their destination were shared, parallel to frustrations about patriarchy and borders. Another woman showed a drawing she had made, emphasizing that we could also make art together. She said it is easier for her to express her feelings through art. Others agreed, and it was decided that the next *taller* would be centred on art making.

What proceeded was a series of art-making gatherings of women residing at or near the shelter. Four sisters from Honduras, all skilled artists, led the development of different art projects, including the collective making of a mural for International Women's Day, to which approximately 40 women contributed. The mural and its messages were later published in a Newsletter titled *Rompiendo barreras: Migran las mujeres, migra la vida* (Breaking barriers: When women migrate, life migrates) (Rompiendo barreras, 2022) prepared by a group of migrant women protagonists.

The third, *taller de saberes*, was co-organized with MOOTS in a small town by the Mexico-Guatemala border in March 2022. A total of 22 women participated. The overall objective was to create a space of dialogue between rural Mexican women and migrant women where they could exchange protection strategies, including personal and collective care, while “walking” the Southern border territories. We spent a full day together, engaging in conversations and activities. MOOTS later made a short film about the *taller*, and we co-created other materials from it, including a booklet with stories and drawings about women's experiences in the borderlands titled *Encuentro de historias, sabores, colores y olores en la Frontera Sur* (Meeting of histories, flavours, colours, and scents at the Southern Border) (Appendix I).

The fourth *taller de saberes* was organized at La 72 in October 2022 in collaboration with two scholars from the University of Cadiz (Inma Antolínez Domínguez) and Wisconsin-Madison University (Esperanza Jorge Barbuzano). The idea for this taller was born following the publication of the *Rompiendo barreras* newsletter. Some women who made this newsletter possible and had attended the first two *talleres de saberes* proposed that we organize another before they left Tenosique. In parallel, I worked closely with Inma and Esperanza, and we had discussed visiting Tenosique together. We agreed to co-organize a two-day taller with La 72. The objective was to generate a collective narrative about the migratory route and how it affects women. The question we asked ourselves for this taller was, what do our bodies and the bodies of women who walk the route tell us? A total of 12 migrant women, the three of us, and Alejandra from La 72 participated. We engaged in various dialogue activities, including making a collage about the migratory route and our bodies using materials from the *Rompiendo barreras* newsletter, including stories and art from women who had attended the other *talleres*. I write about this in Chapters II & V.



Figure 21. Participants of the fourth *taller de saberes* celebrate the closing of two full days of activities, dialogues, laughter, tears and artmaking. Picture by La 72 Volunteer.

Appendix G: El Tren Maya (The Mayan Train)

When initiating the research in 2021, I had not yet grasped *el Tren Maya's* (the Mayan Train) geopolitical importance, including how it, before it even operated, shaped how Central Americans and others moved across Mexico. Beyond the implications for cross-border migration, observing over the last years how the construction progress has taken over city centres and rural spaces in the country's southern parts has become a "mini ethnography" outside the scope of my research. Specifically, how the infrastructure has made the historical state violence toward Mayan Indigenous Peoples (and rural communities) and sites more visible. The train route goes through Mayan historical sites and communities in Chiapas and the Yucatan Peninsula (Estrada, 2022; Frabes, 2022; Mateos & Vergara, 2022).

For decades, various Mexican administrations have fomented el Tren Maya. Mexican President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador made it central to his presidential campaign in 2018 and to the current "fourth transformation" project to industrialize the southern parts of the country. It is promoted as regional development and integration, boosting tourism and creating thousands of jobs (Tren Maya website, n.d). The highspeed train, a 20-billion project, was inaugurated in early 2024 (yet sections were still under construction in May 2024). It will run 1,500 kilometres across four southern states (Yucatan, Quintana Roo, Chiapas and Tabasco). Key stations align with critical industrial hubs for extraction and merchandise production (including mono-crop and agri-food products (Nunez Rodriguez & Gasparello, 2021).

Tren Maya's final station will be Palenque, Chiapas, a central transit hub for people moving along migratory routes in recent years. It will connect with the transpacific Gulf Coast train vias and, hence, with essential oil and gas extraction sites starting in Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz. Precarious workers (including migrants) have increasingly become a labour source for these extraction sites due to the crushing of trade unions in the energy sector preceding and as a result of the 2013 energy reform (Arroyo and Zalik, 2016), increasing tensions with local residents.

Critics of el Tren Maya and other continentally integrated infrastructural projects express wide-ranging concerns, from environmental impacts and compromising archaeological sites to violence and violations of territorial and social rights among campesinos, often Indigenous, populations (Ansotegui 2021, Green 2022). As a result of these developments, large areas in the south are rapidly gentrifying. Many communities face forced dislocation from their communal lands (Estrada, 2022, Frabes, 2022). Critics stress the environmental repercussions of related extraction of natural resources, including the overuse and privatization of water. During the fourth National Assembly of Water and Life, held in

March 2024, the outcomes of both the construction and now operation of el Tren Maya were central topics of discussion (Conferencia de Prensa 4ta ANAVI).

Further, the term “Maya” appropriation for a mega project that is not perceived to benefit Mayan communities is widely criticized. Critics argue that the use of “Maya” for such a project is yet another facet of the violence continuously inflicted on Indigenous and rural communities in Mexico. One of the trending hashtags used is specifically [#NoAlMalLlamadoTrenMaya](#) (No to the Misnamed Mayan Train).

Appendix H: *Canción sin miedo* (Song without fear) lyrics

(English translation below)

*Que tiemble el Estado, los cielos, las calles
Que tiemblen los jueces y los judiciales
Hoy a las mujeres nos quitan la calma
Nos sembraron miedo, nos crecieron alas*

*A cada minuto, de cada semana
Nos roban amigas, nos matan hermanas
Destrozan sus cuerpos, los desaparecen
No olvide sus nombres, por favor, señor presidente*

*Por todas las compas marchando en Reforma
Por todas las morras peleando en Sonora
Por las comandantas luchando por Chiapas
Por todas las madres buscando en Tijuana*

*Cantamos sin miedo, pedimos justicia
Gritamos por cada desaparecida
Que resuene fuerte "¡nos queremos vivas!"
Que caiga con fuerza el feminicida*

*Yo todo lo incendio, yo todo lo rompo
Si un día algún fulano te apaga los ojos
Ya nada me calla, ya todo me sobra
Si tocan a una, respondemos todas*

*Soy Claudia, soy Esther y soy Teresa
Soy Ingrid, soy Fabiola y soy Valeria
Soy la niña que subiste por la fuerza
Soy la madre que ahora llora por sus muertas
Y soy esta que te hará pagar las cuentas*

¡Justicia, justicia, justicia!

Por todas las compas marchando en Reforma

Por todas las morras peleando en Sonora

Por las comandantas luchando por Chiapas

Por todas las madres buscando en Tijuana

Cantamos sin miedo, pedimos justicia

Gritamos por cada desaparecida

Que resuene fuerte "¡nos queremos vivas!"

Que caiga con fuerza el feminicida

Que caiga con fuerza el feminicida

Y retiemblen sus centros la tierra

Al sororo rugir del amor

Y retiemblen sus centros la tierra

Al sororo rugir del amor

* * *

Let the State tremble, the heavens, the streets

Let the judges and the judicial system fear

Today they take away our calmness, us women

They planted fear in us

Wings grew on us

Every minute, every week

They steal our friends, they kill our sisters

They destroy their bodies, make them disappear

Do not forget their names

Please, Mr. President

For all the comrades marching on Reforma

For all the girls fighting in Sonora
For the commanders fighting for Chiapas
For all the mothers searching in Tijuana

We sing without fear, we demand justice
We shout for every disappeared woman
Let it resound loudly, "We want to stay alive!"
Let the feminicide fall with force

I set everything on fire, I break everything
If one day someone closes your eyes
Nothing silences me anymore, everything is too much for me
If one is touched
We all respond

I am Claudia, I am Esther, and I am Teresa
I am Ingrid, I am Fabiola, and I am Valeria
I am the girl you forced upon
I am the mother who now cries for her dead
And I am the one who will make you pay the price

Justice! Justice! Justice!

For all the comrades marching on Reforma
For all the girls fighting in Sonora
For the commanders fighting for Chiapas
For all the mothers searching in Tijuana

We sing without fear, we demand justice
We shout for every disappeared woman
Let it resound loudly, "We want to stay alive!"
Let the feminicide fall with force
Let the feminicide fall with force

And let the earth tremble at its core
At the thunderous roar of love
And let the earth tremble at its core
At the thunderous roar of love

Appendix I. Booklet made by women protagonists

The below image illustrates the front page of a booklet by women protagonists attending one of the *talleres de saberes* (knowledges workshop) with MOOTS in Tenosique, Tabasco, in 2022. The full title of the booklet is *Encuentro de historias, sabores colores y olores en la Frontera Sur* (Meeting of stories, flavours, colours, and scents at the Southern Border). The complete booklet is over 30 pages long and thus too large to include as an Appendix. I would happily forward you the booklet in a separate file. If you would want this, please contact me at: linnbio@yorku.ca

