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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

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An Edgy Journey through Queer Mobility

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Abstract

Emerging from in-depth research on mobility and displacement in relation to gender and sexual diversity on the Mexico-Guatemala border, this paper reflects on the complexities of lived, queer mobility over space and time as told by Andrea, a 27-year-old Salvadoran trans woman. Her narrative – told to the reader through video – provides a rich account of her affective journeys and the forces behind them, which go beyond movement as migration. The work is part of an improvised mobile, longitudinal ethnography which evolved as a way of exploring the small and large-scale realities of mobility as lived over time. The discussion engages with Andrea's mobility as non-linear, multi-scalar, spatially and sensorially significant, and emotionally ambiguous. It invites reflection about the powerfully productive and damaging edges of precarious queer mobility, and points to the radical potential of an affective engagement with queer narratives. The queerness of mobility and survival exists not only as an abstract or symbolic edginess, but rather in, *and as*, constant frictions produced by the struggle for a life worth living.

Keywords

displacement, mobility, affect, video narrative, queer, trans, Central America, Mexico

Introduction

In the context of on-going research on violence and displacement, I have worked with a small group of trans women, tracing and accompanying their journeys remotely over a number of years after our paths first crossed at the Mexico-Guatemala border where I live.



Despite being overtly engaged with movement, it is rare for studies of mobility to move with research collaborators over time and space in this way. The mobility and displacement narratives produced through this work were unusual in their longitudinal nature, and revealed – through a kind of improvised mobile, longitudinal ethnography – rich accounts of affective, complex journeys far beyond conventional notions of migration and border crossing. This paper reflects on the complexities of lived queer mobility over space and time; it is concerned with non-linear movement, with the to and fro of ongoing journeys, the longings and nostalgias, and the constantly shifting meanings made on the way. It engages with, and moves forward conceptually, the notion of the liminality of mobility, of the spatial and temporal in-betweenness that generates possibilities for the transformation of bodies and identities (Ghannam 2011), just as it creates conditions for control. In framing these reflections, I share with Montegary and White (2015) a desire to explore not only the overt and ferocious ways in which structures of power impact on queer lives, but also how these are experienced in insidious, subtle, harder-to-articulate ways, and how people navigate, resist, and transform contexts that are materially and affectively debilitating.

The setting of this paper – the Mexico-Central America region – hosts a complex migration system operating on many scales and producing multiple forms of violence (Basok et al. 2015; Arriola Vega and Coraza de los Santos 2018). Yet if mobility is seen (as here) not as an event like, say, migration, but rather as a series of frictions, as the inescapable and inherently unjust way in which the social world becomes lived, then the act of moving, in itself, becomes less relevant, as the creative, damaging forces at play as bodies move through space take centre stage. This approach draws on a broader body of critical mobilities scholarship (for example Cresswell 2010, 2012; Hannam et al. 2006; Jensen 2011) and specifically related to migration and displacement (for example Gill et al. 2011; Rogaly 2015; Campos Delgado and Odgers Ortiz 2012). It also draws on critical transnational migration scholarship which has sought to explore complex migrant subjectivities (“migrancy”) through narrative (Lawson 2000; also Conradson and McKay 2007; Kochan 2016; Amin and Richaud 2020).

Through feminist and queer theory, an emerging body of radical studies of mobility as lived experience, have attended “to the ways in which bodies become nodal points for material and affective exchanges that have historically sustained geopolitical relations and transnational economies” (Montegary and White 2015). So, this is not about migratory controls, categories, and flows per se, but about mobility of all kinds (including migration and displacement), as social processes integral to personal and broader socio-political contexts. An example of the value of this radical rethinking of mobility as process is Giorgia Doná’s (2010) work on the relationship between dislocation, displacement, and trauma. When displacement is framed in terms of processes, she argues, geographical dislocation becomes a life event like any other; what affects its outcomes in terms of well-being are the constant *negotiations* associated with that movement (exposing as myth the idea of a linear progression from danger-flight-safety). These negotiations might be imagined as bodies jostling and clashing amidst Massey’s (1999) power geometries: those particular, uneven, socio-spatial manifestations of power that weave together the global and local scales. So, in

terms of mobility, a key starting point for this paper is the body as both a material site and a mobile social location (Gorman-Murray 2009): a space of encounter.¹

The importance of edges

Beyond the observable, and often violent ‘facts’ of precarious queer mobility, increasingly noticeable in the course of producing these narratives over time has been the importance of edges. Being on the edge may be seen in different ways in relation to queer mobility. It may be seen as being outside, other to the norm, essential to the queer gaze. It might perhaps be understood in terms of precariousness, maybe the experience of persistent, multi-faceted displaceability (Lind 2020), or teetering on the edge of survival. The edge, in this sense, is certainly a risky place to be. But it may also be seen as a site of encounter and possibility: marginality not as isolation from the centre, but rather as a meeting point between centre and periphery. The edge is necessarily a zone of contact. Indeed, the structure of all things may be seen as most meaningful, and powerful, at their edges, as they unavoidably rub up against something else. This contact, when imbued with power and scale, becomes a *productive friction*. For Tsing (2005) power without friction is like a wheel spinning in the air, such that the existence of ‘universals’ is an illusion: they do not exist except through “sticky encounters”, and it is through these real-world encounters which hegemony is made and unmade. Friction, thus understood, generates action, and may produce untold harm, but also transformation.

In this way, the margins may be seen not as exclusion zones, but rather sites of engagement and resistance (hooks 1981), or “edge politics” (Howitt 2001). In his arguments for orienting the geographical imagination away from the frontier and towards edge politics, Howitt (2001) reminds us that in ecological terms, the edges of ecosystems are often characterized by enormous diversity and complexity, making ‘edges’ not lines of separation, but rather zones of productive interaction. The margins, then, become sites of assemblage, of multiple negotiations, abuses, and reconfigurations (see also Jacobs 1996). As they are lived, encounters at (and of) the edge are necessarily multiple and simultaneous.

Imagine, for example, the myriad “forces, intensities and encounters” (Braidotti 2006, 41 cited by Alldred and Fox 2017, 1164) taking place at a material border, itself not a division so much as a visible edge of contested power. Indeed, Gloria Anzaldúa (1987, 3), whose seminal work on borderlands inspired much queer migration scholarship, evocatively depicts the US-Mexico border as *una herida abierta*, an open wound, bleeding as the “Third World grates against the first” – a violent, productive friction. Borderlands, on the other hand, is “a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants”; the

¹ This paper identifies with attempts to expose and disrupt the heteronormativity of migration studies (e.g. Luibhéid 2004; Manalansan 2006; Montegary and White 2015; Cantú 2009; Josephson 2015), and while not focusing specifically on these areas, it runs alongside emerging scholarship on queer migration and asylum (e.g. Jansen and Spijkerboer 2013; Lewis and Naples 2014; Shakhsari 2014; Sólveigar-Guðmundsdóttir 2018), and emerging work in Latin America on the symbolic, corporal and biopolitical aspects of queer (particularly trans) migration (e.g. Lucero Rojas 2020; Vartabedian 2014; Zarco Ortiz and Chacón Reynosa 2020; also García García and Oñate Martínez 2008).

focus here is on a liminal (vague, transitional), transgressive, symbolic notion of the border dweller (the queer subject), in contrast to the finite, dividing border.

Yet, I argue that in the language of borders, the notion of edges has value beyond description, bridging the divide between the physical and symbolic, and shedding light on the myriad ways frictions (power-laden encounters) are lived and negotiated by the queer subject. It allows liminality to be recast not as an in-between or transitory state of being, but rather to be seen as *lived*, through bodily, material encounters. Thus seen, encounters are embodied, sensorial, material, and mobile (see Vukov 2015; Tsoni 2019): they are deeply affective. So, the narratives created over the past few years and which shall be explored here, are infused with this complex liminality: the lived-through, “sticky encounters” of *queer frictions*.

Exploring affect and scale in queer mobilities

Turning now to explore the scalar and affective aspects of the body as a space of encounter, if affect is broadly understood as states of body and mind acting as forces and forms of encounter within and between bodies that have the capacity to both affect and be affected (Tsoni 2019), two concepts may be especially useful in examining the queering of affect: desire and orientation. Following Deleuze and Guattari (1987), scholars have explored the notion of *desire as social force* in relation to mobility and sexuality (particularly Collins 2018; also Mai and King 2009; Vukov 2015; Linstead and Pullen 2006). Serving as a bridge into this way of thinking in the current context, are the complementary notions of queer as “as a critical epistemological practice equipped to unsettle the dominant formations of power and knowledge that act upon and operate through bodies and desires (Montegary and White 2015, 5), and an understanding of desire “as the energies that draw different entities – human, non-human, symbolic – into relation with each other and in the process generates social forms and affects” (Collins 2018, 3). Seen in this way mobility, and particularly queer mobility, hinges on affect: the forces behind how one feels, wants to feel, and is made to feel. Chávez (2013) draws our attention to the overlaps between the idea of queerness as movement, and belonging as movement, whereby the desire to belong (a deeply affective way of being), is affected by moving towards and away from, and is fueled by yearnings that must be located within systems of power.

Desire, then, is a way into understanding the range of conscious and subconscious influences behind movements aimed at achieving desirable futures, or avoiding undesirable ones; not to be confused with choice or interest, it should be understood as a wider investment in social formations, caught up in a field of forces entangled in migrant lives, but which are not theirs to fully control (Collins 2018; also Raffaetà 2015). In this way, desire shapes how mobile narratives (desire for meaningful selfhood) are negotiated again and again in the search for the happier and better life (Kokanović and Božić-Vrbančić 2015), echoing Vigh’s (2009) notion of migration as a “technology of the imagination.”

Desire, then, can be disruptive. To make things queer, Ahmed (2006, 565) reminds us, is certainly to disturb the order of things, and with uneven effects given that the world is already organized around “certain forms of living – certain times, spaces, and directions.” This fundamentally geographical disturbance may hinge on how we are *orientated* in space, of knowing our bearings, and of being oriented towards familiar objects as they gather on the ground, and disoriented as objects gather quite differently (Ahmed 2006). What difference

does it make, Ahmed asks, what we are oriented toward, in the very direction of our desire? And moreover, what are the political possibilities of disorientation? Thus understood, the notion of orientation not only explicitly spatializes affect, but also queers it, and gives room to think about power-laden spatial contexts of queer mobility. Orientations are not fixed, but rather about shifting *spatial and temporal directions*. They are a force pointing us not only towards objects and bodies, but also to the past and future, to the “possibility of changing directions, of finding other paths [...], where we can find hope in what goes astray. Looking back is what keeps open the possibility of going astray” (Ahmed 2006, 560-70).

Desire and orientation thus come together in a framework seeking to explore what exactly occurs, and is blocked, and reshaped on the rough edges of power, through the affective flows and intensities of queer mobility.

The affective research assemblage

The research on which this paper is based evolved from an initial, modest interest on my part to try and understand a sudden rise from around 2014 onwards in gender and sexually diverse (GSD) groups arriving in Mexico, among the many being displaced from Central America. In this article, I use the term queer as a theoretical and interpretative tool, and not to describe those people whose narratives are presented. The term queer is not used by them or by activists in general in the region. While there is quite some variation in terms used in different countries in Latin America, the general collective terms used most often in Mexico and by collaborators from Central America are LGBTTTI, and “*diversidad sexual*” (sexual diversity), so I opt for Gender and Sexual Diversity/Gender and Sexually Diverse (GSD) here. Soon after, and in collaboration with the local organization *Una Mano Amiga* we carried out a brief exploratory study as a kind of snapshot, to document and start a conversation about the issue of gender and sexual diversity at the border, and to advocate for the needs of this community to be addressed by local institutions. The organisation *Una Mano Amiga en la Lucha contra el SIDA* (A Helping Hand in the Fight against AIDS), founded in 1998, is the only organisation in Tapachula working specifically in support of the GSD population. I also started more in-depth, long-term research alongside this.

In all my interactions with people who had fled Central America, particularly as I kept in close touch with some of them, I got the sense of flight and displacement being ongoing, of those affected living through highly unstable conditions that must be constantly, exhaustingly negotiated. As I started to follow these stories over time and space, I began to think about how to bring these initial observations to bear on the research process. My sense of the exhausting, endless negotiations of displacement echoes the ‘social navigation’ described by Henrik Vigh (2006): of movement within a turbulent and unstable socio-political environment being buffeted by currents, shifts and tides, requiring actions and trajectories to be constantly attuned to the movement of the environment we move through. The resonance of this with the narratives in my research may not have emerged so clearly without a certain amount of “following” (Fox and Alldred 2018, 199).

It seems remarkable that for a subject so fundamentally concerned with movement, journeys have not generally been a focus of migration and displacement research (see BenEzer and Zetter 2015), widely cast aside as temporary, liminal phenomena, standing between two more important ends: the ‘where from’, and ‘where to’. Yet, migration and displacement as lived processes are ambiguous, in both temporal and spatial terms: there

may be no fixed start or end point in space or time. Indeed, from this perspective, it is *all* about the journey. Yet it is rare that this ambiguity is engaged with methodologically. Moreover, the methodological fixity of mobility research has deep epistemological and political implications. In this way, BenEzer and Zetter (2015) suggest we should look for methodologies that may promote understanding of the journey *when it is still taking place*, and moreover that understand journeys not as separate experiences, but rather as complicated multi-phase and multi-scale processes. Moreover, given the protracted nature of mobility as displacement, it is a topic particularly suited to longitudinal studies yet, with few exceptions, “snapshot” studies still dominate (Nunn et al. 2017).

In the present case, being concerned about the small and large-scale realities of lived mobility over time, it became important to try and work across these scales, which in practical terms involved a kind of improvised mobile, longitudinal ethnography. Over periods of between three and five years, I kept in regular contact with a small number of Central American GSD migrants, gathering material in the form of face-to-face and phone/skype conversations, and through text, voice and video messages via WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger. But in the case of Andrea, who will be the focus of this text, most of the research took the form of video narrative.

The increasing use of video in social research is part of a re-engagement with the ‘visual’ within social science research over the last 20 or so years, and more recent interest in the role of the senses in the construction and representation of experience (the ‘sensory turn’), and a focus on memory and imagination in research practice (Pink et al. 2011; Clover 2006). This growing body of work engages with Whatmore’s (2006, 606-7) call to “supplement the familiar repertoire of humanist methods that rely on generating talk and text with experimental practices that amplify other sensory, bodily and affective registers.” Significantly, video is different to other visual media in opening up the sensory realm: indeed, it may be thought of as a sensory, rather than visual method, not only because it blends sound and movement, but because it evokes a sense of feeling (Bates 2014).

Of the many ways video may be used in research, different visual genres have a long history and close relationship with narrative research (see Hunter 2017). Narratives in themselves are interesting for studying queer displacement, in giving a window onto how people makes sense of change and turbulence as “experiencing subjects” (Eastmond 2007), of making sense of things and reaffirming the self over time (Psoinos 2010), and contesting over-generalized and de-individualizing representations (Eastmond 2007). Video narrative, in turn, extends the telling to the sensory realm.

This work, and I, were rooted in Tapachula: the largest town in the Mexico-Guatemala border region, and a hub of border and migration-related activity of all sorts. This was the site of many encounters for those I met once they had crossed the border. It was somewhere they not only lived through so much (longing, boredom, stifling heat, excitement, desperation, harm, cruelty, kindness, disappointment, hope), but it was also somewhere they could tell their story through, somewhere we met and came to know each other, and which became an emotional reference point as the work continued.

Tapachula is generally not an easy place for ‘irregular’ migrants to be. It is somewhere they can get some degree of institutional support (however patchy), apply for asylum, or perhaps stop to look for work; but their precarity makes them easy prey for those seeking to

exploit them, including organized criminal groups, corrupt authorities, and unscrupulous landlords and employers. Those who seek asylum face a months-long wait for their case to be reviewed, and many end up having to abandon the process and move on sooner than they thought. While others, for myriad reasons, find themselves involuntarily stuck. And while for many GSD migrants, continued stigmatization and harassment also intervene in their decision to carry on moving – generally, although certainly not exclusively, north – we will see that it is a mistake to view the forces shaping queer mobility in a reductive way.

Andrea

I first met Andrea in July 2017 on a two-day retreat organised by *Una Mano Amiga*, called “diversity, awareness, encounter.” A 27-year-old trans woman, she had not long arrived in Mexico having fled her native El Salvador. Her material situation and emotional state seemed precarious, and the retreat was not only a crucial chance for her to meet others in a similar situation, who would later become an important support to her, but also a space to breathe and regroup. I should note that Andrea tends to use masculine pronouns when referring to herself from the perspective of others, and also usually (but not always) when talking directly about herself, but she prefers others to address her using feminine pronouns. This fluidity is interesting in itself, but I use feminine pronouns here in line with her express preference.

Our conversations and meetings for a long time after that were informal, and my relationship with her took the form of a kind of support role: to listen and offer information or help where possible. Her journey took many turns before we actually sat down to formally recorded our conversations over a year later, which led into a series of video recordings from September 2018 to February 2019. The first of these video recordings was the most formal, where I had the support of someone else to do the filming while we spoke, and it was the only one that was recorded outside her own space (out-of-hours in a quiet open-air restaurant). The rest I filmed alone during my visits to the different places she lived. There are also sections of audio-only recording from those subsequent conversations, which correspond to times when one-to-one video recording was impractical (while travelling in a car), felt inappropriate (when she was sharing emotionally difficult experiences), or was impossible (when the camera battery died), and, as in the case of the final section of audio, a WhatsApp audio message. The visual images behind those audio-only sections are scenes filmed at the time in Tapachula. It is limited technically by my abilities as a video editor, and by poor sound quality in parts. Since we already knew each other quite well by this point, I did not feel that the camera was particularly intrusive, although of course its presence was undeniable.

While on two other occasions (with other collaborators) I used self-directed video, in the form of video diaries and peer interviewing, with Andrea the idea was to document her story through conversation, over time. She was keen for the video to be made and shared, and knew from the outset that I would use it to write about and share her experiences. I was careful in both the filming and the editing to protect her identity, in line with her own request given the threats she had been subject to, and her irregular migration status in Mexico. We decided the video should be posted on YouTube as unlisted, meaning that it can only be viewed using the link (it does not appear on searches). While distance and her own commitments precluded an active collaboration with Andrea in the production of the video (she was in the US at the time it was produced), I shared drafts with her in order for her to give

me feedback, particularly in terms of any changes she wanted in the material that was included, and she said she was happy with the video as it was, and for it to be published. I also made a more chronological, event-based video from the footage for her, which she asked for to use in her asylum case in the US.

Despite the challenges this presented later in terms of the sheer volume of material, it was crucial that the conversations recorded be as free-flowing as possible: open spaces of conversation which allowed Andrea room for reflection and to express what mattered to her (see Lutz 2017), and as far away as possible from the unrelenting biopolitical game of the “why did you come here, what is your intention” institutional interview, in which migrants must translate themselves into an intelligible, help-worthy entity. Incidentally, as she mentions in the video, Andrea sees her refusal to deliver a comprehensible script of persecution as a trans woman as likely having led to her asylum application being denied in Mexico.

I was keen for the video to tell a story on its own, as well as when seen as part of this text. In the excerpts of the conversations shown in the video, she not only relates and reflects on her past experiences both in El Salvador and Mexico, but also gives a more real time account of some of her experiences over those few months when the recording took place. She also shares her shifting perspectives on her goals for the future. I hope we achieved a kind of disorientation in the telling, to move away from a strict chronological telling of an on-going journey. Her backstory is told in text at the start of the video, to provide reference points for the viewer as her narrative moves between past, present, and future.

The process of editing video is similar to the more standard academic task of selecting and framing textual quotes and presents similar challenges in terms of representation (Bates 2014). I hoped to show something of the time and space of her mobility, of looking backwards and forwards, of the messy, frustrating, joyful, enriching, unnerving, painful, encounters with so many actors and power-laden apparatus on the way. Through the video, we show something of her affective responses to these encounters, and aimed to give a broader, richer sense of her person beyond the “migrant” here and now.



Figure 1: opening image of the video “Andrea”, available from *movilidad. sexualidad.fronteras* at <https://youtu.be/Btwj2npq5Kc>

The edgy journey

Upon listening to and watching Andrea talk about her life and experiences along this long journey, it seems impossible to articulate on paper. How to capture the mixture of nerves, pride, affection, anticipation, and worry when she talks in the opening sequence about going again to Mexico City, or her desperation and frustration as her path is constantly blocked? Keen to let the video speak for itself as far as possible, I do not wish to pick it apart, but rather reflect on some aspects that particularly resonate with me when I watch it back.

I am struck by how she makes sense of what has happened to her and all the decisions she has made; by how she draws strength at this time by making a connection between her leaving home and the protection of her family, in shielding them from persecution in the past and present, and by constructing her family as her more prosperous imagined future: a key aspect of her orientation (Ahmed 2006), of her desired future. How she constructs her telling through a retrospective logic, interweaving her past, present and future to affect her sense of self and of purpose: *I had to go through that, to get to this (and this, to get to that); I need to suffer to prosper; to make bigger plans I had to first fend for myself*. Her mobility has been consistently punctuated by violence and harm of all sorts yet, significantly, the only times she is overcome is when she talks about the sheer desperation at her enforced waiting: her encounters with the asylum system create a deeply perturbing, almost paralyzing friction. I am struck by how her gender identity comes in and out of focus, an almost ambiguous presence in her narrative, but emerging most strongly at points of friction, in her encounters with the asylum apparatus (not queer enough), religious migrant shelters (too queer), or employers (queer at the wrong time). We can glean something of how she has managed to orient herself at different times and in different spaces, and the challenges of reorientation that move around with her, of the challenges of navigating unfamiliar, power-laden landscapes, but of the possibilities that this also opens up.

The video is not a complete account of events, but rather a window onto the affective intensity produced at the edges that are queer mobility. We get a sense of the myriad “ordinary and exceptional encounters” making up her “affective borderscape” (Tsoni 2019), of how the shifting frictions of everyday life give rise to changes in her sense of herself in relation to the world, of the possibilities for her future, and of how and why she moves (Winton 2019). More than chronological time, it was about *social* time, which as Griffiths (2014) finds, is marked by emotion, particularly in connection with the future, be it in the form of fear, desire, hope or anticipation, helping to constitute the ‘more than rational’ quality of decision making, and as socially inseparable from the past (also Raffaetà 2015; Sutton et al. 2011; Shakhsari 2014). Andrea’s narrative speaks to this affective job of creating future.

What matters

In-depth, ethnographic work brings with it many dilemmas. For me, the most acute has been how to produce analytically useful work, while avoiding the depersonalization that comes with overtheorizing or typifying experiences (Lutz 2017). A central interest, drawing from Alldred and Fox (2015), has been to explore, in the context of precarious queer mobility, what a body can (and cannot) be and do, and what it can become, within its own relational assemblage. Yet in the end, the question seems to come back to something quite simple: what actually matters? On reflection, one of the main motivations behind this work has been to try and make what matters on the page (and the screen), line up in some way with what

matters to Andrea. How far this is possible without shared authorship is debatable, but as Lutz (2017, 189) suggests, the affective “turn” has, among other things, opened up new ways of engaging with the importance and politics of personhood, has exposed the intricacies of power enmeshed in more aspects of the social and material realms of the everyday than was previously recognised, and has “directed us to focus more intensely on what matters to the communities we study, what moves them through the day, and thus what makes the emergent material and social worlds in which we are immersed” (see also Walker and Kavedžija 2016; Butler Burke 2016). I would add that it has also made it possible to reflect about the powerfully productive and damaging *edges* of things, and the key role of unbalanced frictions in producing socio-spatial life, in this case those making up the assemblages of precarious queer mobility.

Narratives are an important way in to affective and emotional worlds, and by way of moving forward, I end with a question posed by Dina Georgis (2015, 2): “What conditions of learning become possible with a method that treats narrative and cultural production as emotional elaborations of the dilemmas of human survival? And how might politics benefit from learning about such emotional truths?” The queerness of mobility and survival exists not only as an abstract or symbolic *edginess*, but rather *in and as* constant frictions produced by the struggle for a “life worth living” (Butler 2006); how else, then, to align politically with that struggle, than to first engage and align with the life as lived?

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