

# EXPERIENCES AND EMOTIONS OF MIGRANTS IN MEXICO: JOURNEYS OF VIOLENCE, RESISTANCE AND EPHEMERAL DESTITUTION<sup>1</sup>

EXPERIENCIAS Y EMOCIONES MIGRANTES EN MÉXICO: VIAJES  
DE VIOLENCIA, RESITENCIA E INDIGECIA EFÍMERA

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## ABSTRACT

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Migrants' unauthorized journeys across Mexico are characterized by danger, violence and precarity, fostering feelings of fear and anguish that are detrimental for their present and future. Nevertheless, their willpower, agency and creativity assist them in coping with the ever-changing nature of migratory routes that encompass danger and sometimes even destitution. Migrants experiencing suffering and the

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aftermath of trauma consolidate social relationships between each other and with the civil society. These interactions attenuate marginalization and facilitate the provision of care and support. Based on ethnographic methodologies, this paper explores some realities migrants endure and oppose, while emphasizing the journey's impact on their lives.

**KEYWORDS:** *Trans-Mexican Migration, Violence, Precarity, Emotions, Hope.*

#### RESUMEN

La migración no autorizada en México se caracteriza por su peligro, violencia y precariedad, originando en los migrantes sentimientos de miedo y angustia que perjudican su presente y futuro. Sin embargo, su voluntad, organización y creatividad les ayuda a enfrentar la naturaleza cambiante de las rutas migratorias que implican peligros y a veces indignancia. Aquellos migrantes que experimentan las secuelas de traumas y sufrimientos consolidan relaciones sociales entre ellos y con la sociedad civil para atenuar la marginación mediante el apoyo y cuidado mutuo. Basado en metodologías etnográficas, se exploran algunas realidades que los migrantes padecen y oponen, enfatizando los impactos de estos viajes en sus vidas.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** *Migración transmexicana, violencia, precariedad, emociones, esperanza.*

#### INTRODUCTION

This study attempts to highlight a set of elements and constituents that characterize the period spent in Mexican territory by Central American migrants who either hope to reach the US or settle in Mexico. We consider that sentiments such as fear and anxiety function as determinative factors that connote remarkable aspects of these journeys, taking into account that the ways in which certain migrants grasp the constant changes among their realities underlines the power of their agency and self-determination. This is manifested by how most of them resist and overcome the incidence of danger and hostility, while enduring several forms of sociopolitical oppression. We found that violence and terror are important factors affecting the experience of migrants and substantiate the continuous presence of trepidation and anguish that becomes part of their everyday lives. By analyzing their journey narratives and the emotions accompanying them, this paper aims to build a critique of the US-Mexican border regime that erodes people's right to mobility and coerces them to undertake life-threatening journeys.

In order to explore the function of certain social actions and enable a broader perception of some feelings that are internalized by many of them, extensive periods of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation were conducted between 2014 and 2020 at various settings of the trans-Mexican routes in

southeastern, central and northwestern Mexico.<sup>2</sup> We spent months volunteering at shelters for migrants and gathering ethnographic data by conversing and interviewing those who temporarily stayed at the premises. Strong relations of trust and friendship were established with some migrants who shared their testimonies, especially those who were applying for international protection and therefore spent several months at shelters where we volunteered. Their stories represent a source of knowledge that provided a better understanding of the prevalent dynamics that characterize the effects of violence on their bodies and minds, as well as the transformations of reality and existence during the process of migration. Another part of our fieldwork focused on observing and taking

part in the everyday lives of ephemeral destitute migrants who either walked long distances or traveled on trains and lived at railway lines or on the streets.

By ephemeral destitution we attempt to underline that numerous individuals who migrate across México move all the time throughout marginal territories that frequently become their temporary abodes, since the risk of being detected by the authorities limits their access to safer trajectories or gaining higher living standards while being stuck somewhere. Ephemerality is used herein to underline the temporary character of destitution, at least in most cases. During the journey, their access to accommodation, food and services provided by shelters frequently becomes limited, due to geographical and practical circumstances or, even by their own choice. Concomitantly, these limitations coerce them to remain invisible within lawless territories while living in precarity. Furthermore, destitution is a deleterious condition that confines individuals into a vacuum of social exclusion through the endurance of homelessness, malnutrition, lack of medical assistance and sometimes even drug-addiction issues that remain unattended, complicating societal reinsertion. The effects of destitution can be seen in the detriment people suffer on their bodies by not having access to basic needs, such as showering, washing clothes, access to cooking and having to beg in the streets for food and small change. The selected methodology to study the particularities of these scenarios con-

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2. We decided to employ the expression 'trans-Mexican migration' instead of 'transit migration' for a variety of reasons. First, Mexico has recently become a mixture of departure, transit, destination, deportation and return country, denying univocal conceptualizations of its role within the spheres of international mobility. Secondly, the concept of transit migration has been widely criticized as it defines migration on a linear spatio-temporal interlude running between departure and destination, while frequently lacking experiential and emotional content accounting for people on journeys (Yıldız & Sert, 2019, p. 2; Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias & Pickles, 2015, p. 899; BenEzer & Zetter 2015, pp. 297-300; Hess, 2012). To the contrary, migrants frequently get stuck in Mexico, move throughout the country in search of working opportunities and mobility, while others are deported and subsequently restart their journeys, suggesting that 'transit migration' should no longer be understood as a linear, predictable and mechanical movement.

sisted in conducting fieldwork in-situ and share similar living conditions with destitute migrants, as to enable the construction of an appreciative framework that allowed comprehending the emotions, feelings, and sentiments of those who walk long distances, or ride cargo trains (López Marín & Lenti, 2019, pp. 217-219). We spent several weeks living in the streets, old train stations and the railway lines in northern Sinaloa and Sonora, we traveled on cargo trains and shared hardship with migrants staying in these violent territories. Conducting firework under life-threatening circumstances was extremely challenging but we were convinced that this was the only way to examine the nature of these settings and the development of social relations emerging therein. The gathering of data was conducted under strict ethical considerations that were partially shaped in relation to the context and reconsidered on an ongoing basis (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000; Sluka, 2012; Calvey, 2000; Jamieson, 2000; Nordstrom & Robben, 1995).

The aim was to explore the meaning and symbolism given by migrants to specific social interconnections that are prevalent within settings of violence and insecurity. Furthermore, we noticed that in spite of the extensive documentation related to transit migration in Mexico, there was little literature accounting for these settings and outside the relative safety of shelters for migrants. The dangerous nature inherent to this field of study led to a better understanding of

what danger and precarity means for different people when they are in a foreign country. The use of these methodologies opened the doors to discovering a diversity of meanings attributed to migration, while exploring social interrelations facilitated personal communication with secondary actors who cooperate with Central American migrants but remain invisible from the public eye, such as destitute Mexican people and railway companies' employees. Through the engagement in participant observation, it was possible to gather invaluable testimonies, reflections and sentiments related to migration throughout Mexico.

On these grounds, our contribution attempts to formulate an inquiry about the ways in which different people experience difficult journeys through time and space, focusing on the development of feelings and sentiments that impact the way they perceive themselves under changing realities. The methodological framework attempted to examine the variables in the ways that migrants endure the apprehension left by the effects of violence, insecurity and precarity. The intention is formulating an analysis accounting for some of the most significant emotions, sentiments and feelings, which are caused by previous experiences of dread, trepidation and injury. Uncertainty and hardship result in changeable circumstances that place the existence of many under an ephemeral period of transition, which seriously affects their lives in various ways (Lenti & López Marín 2017, pp. 37-43; Ma-

turana, 1995). In this sense, the study of migrants' emotions and sentiments represents a starting point to better understand their perceptions of the realities surrounding them and those that intertwine with their subjectivities (Lutz & Abu-Lughod, 1990; Zournazi, 2002; Le Breton, 1998, pp. 105-116). All of this unveils important and frequently overlooked facets of experience, social action, and their entanglement with culture (Jimeno, 2008, p. 270; Lutz & White, 1986, p. 431). Within the study of irregularized migration, it is relevant to explore the variety of emotions that accompany various phases of the journey, since human mobility does not only imply displacement through space and time, but across ever-changing and at times devastating emotions (Montes, 2013; Asakura, 2012; Al-Ali & Koser, 2002, p. 7; Ozkaleli, 2018, p. 19). Hence, we propose that the study of dislocated emotions can help understanding the experiences of people on the move, and the impact of the journey on their subjectivities. Such perspectives provide a tool for comprehending the personal and social dimensions of irregularized migration, offering alternative insights on the analysis of power and control.

Following this framework, we argue that the aforementioned recalls a process of liminality without a defined time frame, considering that such a period of transition implies a partial suspension of the individual's previous way of life that carries sudden transformations in their quality of life and psychosocial stability

(Turner, 1967; Vogt, 2013; Jácome, 2008). This interlude can last indefinitely depending on determinative factors such as gender, previous migratory experience, economic possibilities, and social integration. Recurrently, these migrants become trapped in situations in which continuing traveling towards US seems virtually impossible and there is no way back, especially for those who are escaping violence, persecution, poverty, natural disasters, and discrimination. As irregularized migrants, they are stuck in-between on the edges, and beneath (Khan, 2016, pp. 6-7). Still, neither regularization, nor reaching the US would necessarily mean the end of the limbo these migrants navigate through, since being foreign 'others' is something, they are unable to change (Khosravi, 2018, p. 38).

Displacement and uncertainty bring along serious psychological traumas to many, as the constant presence of anxiety and angst manifests within the disorientation and frustration they experience during their journeys. Even though many migrants consider the phase of migrating as a transitional interlude, some of them experience concerns and uncertainty about having the possibility to see another sunrise in their lives. When enduring the burdens of a life-threatening present, migrants' courage and determination sustain the hope for a different future, while often desiring that the nightmare they experience would rapidly end (Lindquist, 2006, pp. 4-7; Jackson, 2013, p. 212; Sutton, Vig-

neswaran & Wels, 2011, pp. 30; Nordstrom, 1997).

Remarkably, the fact that many migrants live under precarious conditions during their journeys suggests that their reality transforms dramatically, since for some adapting to a changeable *modus vivendi* coerces them to live under conditions of extreme poverty and social exclusion. Meanwhile, most migrants demonstrate the strength of their agency by embracing with perseverance and courage their desire to continue living, while carrying on with hazardous circumstances as they subvert the obstacles afflicting them.

This scenario is characterized by the emergence of solidarity bonds and a sense of collectivity among many, portraying a collective struggle for the continuation of life. In spite of their circumstances of hardship, they tend to engage in activities of survival, such as socializing and sharing the small amounts of food and material things they possess to alleviate common needs. This is remarkable because most of these people are not only occupied in thinking about their misfortune and vulnerability, even when uncertainty and desperation characterize their migration. Instead, the majority of them are constantly constructing different realities that change their perceptions of danger and insecurity, while reconstructing their existences by reassembling the lost pieces of their past to edify a more promising future (Nordstrom & Robben, 1995). This reconstruction of life opens the window to

look into a new spectrum that resembles positive elements of the present, giving them strength to endure the burden that implies the process of migrating, while embracing hope for a different tomorrow. Our research indicates that central relevance should be appointed to migrants' capacity to utilize their agency and reconfigure their experience and self during their journeys (Bigo, 2010; Long, 2001; Bakewell, 2010). The manifestations of resistance and independence performed by many emphasize their ability to employ the tools provided by empirical experience, collective memory, personal subjectivities and cultural backgrounds to overcome obstacles and life-threatening circumstances.

#### VIOLENCE, FEAR AND ANGUISH

This section explores the ways in which different migrants experience and deal with the presence of anxiety and fear during the course of their migration. Entering Mexico without authorization can bring serious effects in their physical and psychological condition because they embark on a process where the gradual building of angst and uncertainty becomes an inevitable part of their travels. It is important to emphasize the effects caused by fear and anguish, as they represent an inescapable reality that is incorporated into their every-day life. These feelings reflect the complexity that implies living in conditions of disorientation, danger and precariousness,

within a context of surveillance and crime. In addition, these individuals rarely have access to specialized psychological attention from institutions that concentrate on mental health due to their lack of rights and the badly managed mental health system in Mexico. They can at times access these services if they are applying for regularization or while staying at shelters for migrants, although this is rare and difficult to follow up, considering that they stay for short time in only one place, unless they become stuck or apply for international protection. Occasionally, this kind of support is provided by shelters for migrants and NGOs, which intervene as agents that assist irregularized migrants recovering from traumatic situations of violence that caused unbearable distress and desolation on them.

The ephemeral uncertainty experienced by these migrants represents a period of time that is characterized by the predominance of sentiments of apprehension about feeling unconfident and in limbo. During these journeys, uncertainty marks every step, since migrants never know what is going to happen, where, when, how, with what intensity and, with which consequences (Le Breton, 2020, pp. 19-30). This means that waiting in uncertainty resembles an agony, since the future does not provide tangible references, and the present is characterized by mystery. Such circumstance has been defined as a painful latency whose end is unknown, and it is exactly this indeterminacy that tur-

ns waiting into an open-ended torture (Turnbull, 2015, p. 62; Bayart, 2007, p. 269; Richards & Rotter, 2013; Brekke, 2004, p. 23). When a person does not know what the future may bring, feelings of frustration, hopelessness and anxiety can develop (Auyero, 2012, pp. 96-97; Crapanzano, 1985, p. 45; Bissel, 2007, p. 290). Life conditions of many irregular migrants makes their existence unpredictable and erratic, as they find themselves hanging on a fine thread that can break at any moment, leading to abrupt interruptions that disrupt the flow of time and existence (Khosravi, 2010, p. 69; Sutton, Vigneswaran & Wels, 2011, p. 30). This is precisely the reason why these populations have been defined as 'global mobilities that live in uncertainty' (Bartra, 2007, p. 32). A good example is when migrants travel through unknown and desolated territories that are the abode of criminals, kidnappers, and human traffickers, leaving migrants exposed to economies of abuse and suffering that often utilize them as human commodities to fulfill criminal activities and illegal businesses (Johnson, 2008, pp. 10-11; Vogt, 2013, pp. 765, 772-774; Meyer, 2010, pp. 3-4; Jácome, 2008, pp. 25, 32). The escalation of threat and danger has created deplorable conditions for migrants, in which they sometimes find themselves immersed, causing distress and desperation.

Such psychological states tend to be detrimental for their quality of life and can bring post-traumatic consequences that enhance feelings of despondency.

Additionally, many migrants experience feelings of fear that are accompanied by the constant angst of being caught and deported by institutional authorities (De Genova, 2016; Abrego, 2011). This is an important fact that has condemned the majority of irregularized migrants to remain invisible, as the freedom of movement becomes limited and demarcate the territorial space in which they can move and perform their everyday life activities, such as socializing, eating and sleeping (Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos, 2008, pp. 74-79; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2007, pp. 4-6; Düvell, Triandafyllidou & Vollmer, 2008, pp. 1-16; Scott, 1990, pp. 133-134).

A special case to reference is the strategy used by many migrants particularly in southeastern Mexico, which consists of trying to travel by buses, taxis, or private cars for short distances and until the proximities of migration checkpoints. Within these parameters, irregularized migrants are at times forced to walk around migratory checkpoints and pass through dangerous places where they frequently become victims of violence by criminal gangs that employ these strategic positions to perpetrate abuses that undermine migrants' integrity (Rivas Castillo, 2008; Vogt, 2013; Jácome, 2008). Passing through these areas is not an easy task and neither is dealing with anguish and fear during the treacherous passage through places where risk and danger predominate the scenario. There are many stories and incidences of the above-mentioned cases, suggesting that

the preoccupation experienced by many becomes part of collective memory. Especially in the case of irregularized migrants, anxiety arrives when their options are walking long distances or travel on cargo trains, while being coerced to rest in unsafe areas, fearing attacks while asleep.

The following testimonies give an idea of the kind of unrest felt by those living in conditions of vulnerability, in which time and space are dislocated. While conducting ethnographic fieldwork in southeastern Mexico, it was possible to confirm that the above, mentioned feelings and sentiments settle the minds of many who hope to reach the US. The testimony of Jacinto, a 15-year-old migrant from Honduras, revealed his overwhelming fear of the dangerous train, by declaring his preference for buses and taxis, despite the higher risk of being detected by institutional authorities. We met Jacinto at the shelter 'Jesús el Buen Pastor' in Tapachula, Chiapas, which is mainly devoted to women, unaccompanied minors, people with disabilities or special needs and those who have been physically injured or psychologically traumatized during unsuccessful journeys. Jacinto had been living at the shelter for nine months at the time of interview, but he did not want to continue traveling alone, as he was afraid and did not have any money. As he spoke, it was possible to perceive a genuine hope, and although he was in doubt of the future, he expressed that he dreamed about getting an education to 'become



someone' and be able to send money to his family who labored at coffee farms (Hage, 2005; Turner, 2014). For Jacinto, the foreseeing of a future in which he could get a degree in his country was extremely blurred, but it was apparent that although he was somehow trapped within these circumstances, the continuation of life was an extremely important matter for him. His quest for existential mobility infused his migration, but his spatial mobility was constrained by the difficulties and fears posed by the journey (Hage, 2009; Kleist, 2016, p. 16; Khosravi, 2018b, p. 2; Ozkaleli, 2018, p. 26).

I'm afraid of being deported, but I feel even more apprehension of being assaulted, robbed or killed. The very important thing is to survive, remain alive and actually, nothing else matters as much as that. Even if they deport me, I'll soon be back in Mexico and I'll try again, and again, up to when I accomplish my goal (Jacinto; Tapachula; April 2014).

Jacinto's testimony demonstrates that some irregularized migrants seem to be less afraid of institutional practices such as detention and deportation, than the violent abuses perpetrated by gangs and criminals. Nevertheless, the militarization of Mexican highways and the high risk of being intercepted create circumstances of adversity and frustration that tend to persuade many to risk their lives taking alternative routes, despite

the widespread knowledge about the dangerousness of such journeys. Especially for those who are escaping direct persecution, the eventuality of a deportation represents a constant fear, since returning to their countries could trigger serious consequences.

The following testimony depicts the psychological trauma experienced by many migrants after being victims of violent episodes. This is the case of Arturo, a Nicaraguan migrant in his forties who seemed to know a lot about trans-Mexican migration and whose voice echoes the desperation and hatred of numerous migrants encountered throughout the realization of our fieldwork. During the interview, he sat on the floor in a circle with approximately 25 fellow migrants in the courtyard of the shelter 'Hogar de la Misericordia' in Arriaga, Chiapas. Arturo spoke for everyone else about the difficulties of transit and angrily complained about the dangers that Mexican legislation inflicted on them, as he directed a monologue that emphasized the suffering irregularized migrants must withstand during their journeys. The narrative of Arturo manifested strong feelings of frustration and bleakness, considering that he hoped to reach the US border and had engaged in several unsuccessful journeys throughout Mexico. As he was getting exited, Arturo started shouting with a pronounced frown on his forehead and furiously stated that Central American migrants had been forgotten by the Mexican government and civil society who refused

to help them in situations of desperation and anguish.

These criminals are hidden under the shadow of impunity, and they just wait for you with their machetes and guns. They are awaiting the passing of migrants to mug and women to rape. Then they kill you in order to avoid testimony (...) They all deserve to die, because they are brothers who steal, rape and kill their own brothers. All these bastards who make our life sour, they all deserve to die! This is just the sad reality endured by all of us and nobody seem to care about doing anything at all (Arturo; Arriaga; May 2014).

Feelings related to fear further develop sentiments of dread and anxiety that are closely related to the risks of being intercepted and deported, or becoming victims of extortions, violence and abuses. Interestingly, Arturo's testimony demonstrates that violence and terror are constantly inflicted on many migrants, creating resentment and mistrust, even of each other. The fact that Arturo's several attempts to reach the US-Mexican border were unsuccessful, helped in the development of feelings such as disappointment and aggravation that turned into dissatisfaction. By the way he spoke, it became evident that Arturo was extremely frustrated, manifesting his sentiments of being deprived of his time through the multiple deportations that kept him in continuous circulation and pervaded by the feeling of 'never arriving' and 'having to restart from square

one' (Khosravi, 2018c, pp. 416-419). In addition, Arturo's feelings of communal abandonment by the Mexican State expose the sad reality that most irregularized migrants encounter and endure during their stay in Mexico.

It is important to analyze this specific case from divergent perspectives and inquire about the ways in which migrants experience the psychological consequences of bleakness, sorrow and disappointment. This assortment of feelings takes a different shape when considering the case of migrants who had their lives and existences truncated by the consequences of direct and structural violence (Galtung, 1969, 1990; Tilly, 2003; Harendt, 1970). Devastating incidents are characteristic for causing serious physical and psychological traumas, such as mental disorders and irreversible damage to the body. This is the case of serious illnesses, body mutilation and post-traumatic disorders that follow the occurrence of critical accidents, attacks perpetrated with weapons and sexual assaults, particularly of women and children. This is the case of people who endured life-threatening attacks that have drastically changed their lives and turned their realities into a process of reconstruction of life. The commencement of drastic transformations in human existence emerges after experiencing traumatizing episodes that reshape the nature of everyday life.

Within the realms of irreversible traumas, the story of Leonor illustrates the detriments in people caused by vio-

lence, as it is the case of those Central American migrants who have experienced a sudden and disturbing change in the nature of their existence. Leonor is 30-year-old Guatemalan woman who was pregnant when we met her at a shelter for migrants in Mexico City. Her story illuminates the grade of fear and anxiety that has been experienced by a persecuted single mother while in Mexico. Her smiling face contrasted with a deep and long scar that ran from the margin of her left eyebrow to the jaw, which was an unhidden reminder of the moment she almost lost her life. She was stabbed nine times after confronting her partner about the fact that he was cheating on her with her underage sister. She was hospitalized for eight days and discovered she was pregnant, but when her partner found out she had denounced him, he started threatening to murder her. Leonor was worried about her unborn baby, escaped to Mexico with her 13-year-old brother Leopoldo, and applied for asylum at the border city of Tapachula, Chiapas. After few months awaiting resolution, her older brother who remained in Guatemala died under suspicious circumstances, and some family members told Leonor that her ex-partner knew where she was. That same day she applied for relocation and she and her brother went to Mexico City. Her story suggests that violence affect the victims and beyond, including families and the community as a whole (Uribe, 2008, p. 184; Nordstrom, 1997, p. 88; Vogt, 2013, p. 765). The trauma

Leonor carries does not help healing her feelings of anxiety and angst. Even though she was awaiting decision on her asylum, Leonor did not really feel safe in Mexico, also because her ex-partner had two siblings who lived there, so she wished to apply for relocation to a third country.

I escaped from Guatemala because my ex-partner wanted to kill me, my brother and his own unborn daughter (...) We tried to hide from him and his family, but still, they kept on persecuting and harassing, while telling me that they were going to kill me. I had no choice but to migrate here and apply for asylum. (...) Since I got together with him, I learned that he was a violent person, he was always beating and insulting me. (...) I wanted to help him change that aggressiveness and many times he told me that was going to change, but it just went worst (...) He came one night and attacked me wishing to take my life. You can't say it was because of love, it was rather an obsession he had with me. The last words I heard from him were, *'If you are not going to be for me, neither for anybody else'* as he stabbed me nine times in the body. It was incredible that this girl survived, and I'm sure she was there to save my life. That's why I decided to call her Milagros (...) The truth is that I'm still alive by a miracle of God. God gave me a second chance in life and here I am, together with my daughter and brother who now mean everything to me. Yes, my daughter is a miracle, she is the little angel who had accompanied me at

all times (Leonor; Mexico City; March 2019).

Leonor's story was told with emotions and expressions of terror appearing interspersed with smiling glances of affection towards the infant she feels has saved her life. Leonor's daughter represents the living memory of her salvation, while the scar that marks her face is an indelible testimony of her pain and suffering (Mountz, 2011, pp. 381-382, 387-388; Das, 2008, p. 421; Le Breton, 1999, p. 238). Every time she looks in the mirror, she relives what she experienced, as if she was once again in front of her aggressor. Physical recovery was a long and tiring process, but rebuilding a life in peace and her process of resilience is a task she is still unable to complete. Leonor's transnational persecution shows that borders often slow down the passage of people, but violence and its spectrum do not discern territorial boundaries, legislations, or walls.

The previous examples help to comprehend how situations of susceptibility, anguish and anxiety can transform life, as it depicts the ways in which the future prospects of an individual can instantaneously be dislocated. All of this shapes an idea of how migrants reconstruct their lives on a continuous basis and recover from physical and psychological traumas. The meanings of life amalgamate in hope for the future that plays an important role among the realms of ontological reconstitution and the inevitable transformation of reality experienced by

survivors of violence. Distressing episodes are left recorded in their minds and bodies as traumas, but they help to create alternative realities and consciousness about the meaning and value of solidarity towards those who are in traumatic situations.

A similar circumstance emerges when the life of a migrant radically transforms, leading to the appearance of sentiments and emotions that relate to desperation and self-deprecation, such as frustration, shame and fear for the future that involve deprivation of liberty (Abrego, 2011). This is the case of migrants who spend time in jail, considering that incarceration is a major agency constrainer that dislocates the continuation of life and transforms the existential parameters of those who bear the weight of shamefulness and disgrace (De Genova, 2016, pp. 6-7; Coutin, 2005, pp. 203-205). This is the case of migrants who were sentenced in the US after being caught by the border patrol and deported along with a ban to reenter the country. Persevering in their attempts to migrate on repeated occasions, and violating institutional prohibitions that prevented them from exercising their right to move across borders due to their nationality and social strata was the reason for losing their liberty. Remarkably, there were a number of migrants who lent testimony of cases in which they were condemned for three to five years, without having committed any criminal offense. Considering that entering a country without permission is deemed as an admi-

nistrative offense, our findings suggest that the criminalization of irregularized migration at these levels reflects an open form of institutional violence and authoritative repression against people who did not attempt to act against the integrity of anything or anyone (International Council for Human Rights, 2010; Solis, 2003; Taran, 2001). Incarceration causes a deep psychological impact to people who remain deprived from liberty, as it dislocates life in such a manner that it impacts on their reinsertion in society (De Genova, 2016: 6). Moreover, the intransigent punishment inflicted through imprisonment has a 'educating' function towards the broader migrant community, since it aims to control and deter people through the fear of eventual confinement (Foucault, 2003; Le Breton, 1999, p. 238; Braud, 1992).

During our fieldwork in northwestern Mexico, we spend days awaiting *la Bestia*, which is a set of old and precarious cargo-trains employed by many trans-Mexican migrants to travel throughout the country. When we were doing fieldwork at Puerto Peñasco's train station, in Sonora, we met a 33-year-old Honduran migrant whose name was Wenceslao. He described a story that exemplifies the circumstances of uncertainty and bewilderment endured by those migrants who spend years in prison and then struggle to rebuild their life after regaining liberty. Many years ago, Wenceslao crossed Mexico on *la Bestia* with his 11-year-old son and jumped over the US border fence to start the

long walk across the Arizonian desert. Before crossing, Wenceslao instructed his son to contact his ex-girlfriend who lived in the US, in case of an unexpected separation. This way, the child could stay there under a currently invalidated US' humanitarian scheme, as he was still underage and had someone there who could sponsor his custody.

While we were walking through the desert, I spotted the Border Patrol and quickly hide behind a bush with my son. Unfortunately, they noticed suspicious movements amidst the vegetation. I was paralyzed by the panic I felt, but then I took the heartbreaking decision of leaving my son behind, and I started running to call the attention of agents, as I wanted to give him the chance to remain unnoticed. He was very sad and quickly said goodbye with tears in his eyes. I felt extremely sad and worried about him, but the only thing I wanted for him was a better life and access to education, which I was unable to give him in Honduras. (...) I was arrested and taken to court, where I was accused of having entered the country and breached the ban I had, so I was sentenced to seven years in jail (...) During all these years I thought of my son every day and felt extremely preoccupied, as I was neither allowed to see him nor speak with him, so I kept on asking myself about his well-being and whereabouts. I never knew anything about him until I finished my sentence and got deported to Honduras, along with another prohibition to enter US for 25 years. When I arrived, my

wife told me that my ex-girlfriend took charge of him, and he was then placed with a foster family in Pennsylvania. He is now about to finish high-school and is an American citizen. Despite the prohibition to return, I want to try my luck again to reunite with my son, as I cannot even imagine how he looks like after such a long time. (...) I'm trying again because so many years behind cell bars wearing handcuffs and under constant surveillance made me feel as a criminal. Nowadays I feel there's nothing else to lose, but I still remember those days I spent in the dark, worried about my son and family. Sometimes I felt desperate and tormented, as I didn't know whether they were safe and had money to survive (Wenceslao; Puerto Peñasco; April 2015).

The story of Wenceslao portrays the unspeakable sorrow arising from family separation, which was such a widespread practice in the US under Trump's administration (Edyburn & Meek, 2021; Frye, 2020; Ramkhelawan, 2019). For him, leaving his son behind and getting arrested by immigration authorities was a necessary, although extremely painful, exit to a dead-end road. His story demonstrates how confinement transcends spatio-temporal boundaries in relation to prison walls and sentence duration, having a strong impact on people's existence in the long-term (Allspach, 2010; Moran, 2014). After many years, Wenceslao still suffers for the distance that divides him and his son, but his hope of reunifying with him is still alive and his

agency is keeping him going on a new migration journey.

#### AGENCY, HOPE AND RESISTANCE

Even though the stories previously presented are infused with fear, anguish and sorrow, it is important to note how their contents show how migrants oppose being the subject of oppression and look for pathways to survive and continue moving. This section focuses on demonstrations of social resistance that materialize in the creativeness of specific strategies employed by migrants to endure various forms of violence and sociopolitical repression. Accordingly, several migrants deal with social and material elements that are integral parts of the territories of their journeys, finding ways to employ them instrumentally by using their creativity and skills to expand their survival opportunities (Rivas Castillo, 2008; Nordstrom, 1997). In addition, the everyday struggles embraced by those who hope for achieving common objectives whilst surviving the threats of their journeys are explored herein. The main reason for not limiting our research to factors determining vulnerability and the consequences of fear and violence, reflects the necessity to explore the experiences of migrants as willful agents, rather than mere victims of their misfortunes (Ahmed, 2014; Mezzadra, 2004, pp. 267-268; Rivas Castillo, 2008, p. 26). Particular focus is appointed to behaviors, acts and practices undertaken

by migrants and secondary actors. This is exemplified when migrants extend their solidarity with each other to overcome episodes of angst and frustration that keep constraining them through their journeys (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2012, pp. 21-22; Mezzadra, 2011). The numerous obstacles characterizing the mobility of migrants through Mexico enriched a collective memory that compiles knowledge and always remains alive through oral communication, solidifying strong awareness on how to survive the vicissitudes of the journeys.

It is important to offer some clarifications as to avoid romantic conceptions of agency and resistance. Focusing on migrants' opposition to the US-Mexican border regime does not imply underestimating the violence these people encounter on a day-by-day basis. To the contrary, migrants' agency constantly deals with uncertainty, delays, studdedness, rethinking and restarting, since the journey represents a non-linear, unpredictable, and tumultuous process (Casas-Cortés, Cobarrubias & Pickles, 2015, p. 899; BenEzer & Zetter, 2015). Similarly, the notion of agency we employ to illustrate the experiences of these migrants varies from the Western liberal idea of liberty and freedom, referring to the model of an independent subject who can make decisions and uphold an individualist capacity to exercise free-will. This is mentioned to illustrate the fact that irregularization creates conditions that hinder migrants' exercising of agency as 'free individuals',

simply because they are deprived of freedom of movement and criminalized by States. Enjoying freedom, liberty and free-will is not a privilege for everyone, considering the unequal access of different subjects to resources and rights, as epitomized by the case of migrants who temporarily live in destitution. For those whose agency is embedded in precarity and uncertainty, hope becomes the existential and affective nourishment that sustains life (Lindquist, 2006, p. 4). Thereby, migrants' mobility is not solely sustained by standardized or mechanical calculations, reflexivity, and intentionality, it also embeds their personal instincts, intuitions, feelings, and the unpredictability of unfolding experiences (Pazos, 1995, pp. 207-208; Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos, 2008, pp. 158-159). Furthermore, their response to subjection cannot be universalized a-priori because it is embodied, situated and, relational to situations and contexts (Scheel, 2013, pp. 280-282; Nyers, 2015, p. 29). This approach does not overlook the violence intrinsic in borders, it rather underlines their functioning by conceiving them as a site of tension and opposition where migrants construct their realities by means of their constrained, although existing agency (Nyers, 2015, p. 24; Sharma, 2003, p. 61). While resisting the politics that attempt to control mobility, migrants oppose resistance through the learning of abilities, the acquisition of knowledge and the creation of new forms of mobility and ways of living. All of this consti-

tutes a continuous reconfiguration of the self and its conditions, as well as an active transformation of their surrounding social space and its environment (Salazar & Smart, 2011, p. V; Ozkaleli, 2018, p. 26; Hess & Karakayali, 2016, p. 9).

Our observations reveal that sharing marginality and destitution, the common subjection to numerous forms of oppression and hardship, have the indirect effect of tightening strong solidarity bonds and social relations of reciprocal support between migrants (Scott, 2012; 1990; Nordstrom & Martin, 1992; Cunningham, 2004). The analogous perils and deprivations that connect many of them, assist in creating dialogical relationships and alliances that are consolidated neither hierarchically nor uniformly. Social interactions are not necessarily driven by nationality sharing, but rather on a basis of shared life-circumstances and the common dream of life reconstruction (Besserer, 1999; Mezzadra, 2011; Papadopoulus & Tsianos, 2007; Rivas Castillo, 2008). Even when these migrants are denied contestation to claim their rights and they remain invisible and anonymous, most of them exert some rights in a tacit manner, by moving across territories and boundaries in opposition to governmental will. This disobedience constitutes an indirect but destabilizing form of social insubordination and collective resistance, showing that these individuals do not conform to official compliance and international regulation (Scott, 1985; Coutin, 2005; Papadopoulus & Tsianos, 2007; Rosas, 2007).

Collective resistance is also an ambiguous concept that should be employed with caution, as to avoid homogenizing the diversity of different social groups, their experiences and different responses to analogous forms of oppression (Ortner, 1995, pp. 174-176; Gledhill & Scheel, 2012, p. 5). Similarly, subaltern social groups are characterized by internal dynamics that foster the production and reproduction of power relations that frequently damage certain members (Gledhill & Scheel, 2012, pp. 1-4, 7-8; Nelson, 2005, p. 234; Abu-Lughod, 2012, pp. 180-184; Jackson, 2013, p. 214; Castro Domingo & Rodríguez Castillo, 2009, p. 119). The findings of our fieldwork highlight the dangerous porosity and fragility of migrants as a marginalized social group, which sometimes permit the infiltration of hostile imposers, such as kidnappers and human traffickers. Moreover, some migrants can at times become corrupted, forced to endanger the integrity of their fellows, or discriminate and exclude others on the basis of sociocultural or ethnic difference.

The following analysis of some tactics of mobility and survival that characterize unauthorized migration attempts to explore the ingenious and creative strategies performed by migrants on a journey towards the US's border, to avoid and bypass the threats of trans-Mexican migration. Rodrigo, an 18-year-old Salvadoran, never had the opportunity to go to school because he worked in farming to contribute with the sustainment



of his family since early childhood. He left his town when he was still underage and embarked on the journey to the US, following the hope of providing a dignified life for his parents and an education for his younger siblings. Rodrigo grew up enduring the difficulties of the journey, discovered new territories, met people from different nationalities, and acquired knowledge about foreign realities and useful survival skills. We met Rodrigo at the shelter for migrants '1 de 7 Migrando' in the city of Chihuahua, just after he arrived in town by jumping off *la Bestia*. The following day, after having recovered from tiredness, he was eager to share his journey's experiences.

It was 10,00pm. when we reached Chihuahua and we were lost looking for the shelter. I suggested my comrades to find a safe spot to sleep. I don't like walking at night, it's too dangerous. We went back to the railways and we met some old men who had been living in the street for ages. They suggested a spot where we could sleep and warned us about an area where criminals operated, while saying we shouldn't go there. They even gave me a blanket because it was freezing and I could have died that night (...) We slept behind some rusty wagons, although we kept awoken in shifts, just to check that no danger was approaching us. Next day, we started our way towards the shelter, but we first dressed the only clean clothes we had, as it's unsafe to look like a migrant who travels on the train (...) We used a map one of my comrades

had to find the shelter, and we asked locals for directions, although we were always careful about who we were asking to. You never know! It's fearful to walk in an unknown city and talk to strangers, but if you wanna move away from a dangerous place, you have to do it anyways. (...) We walked almost till dusk, but when we reached the shelter it was like arriving to heaven (Rodrigo; Chihuahua; April 2019).

When narrating his story, it was possible to perceive the emotional turmoil that accompanied Rodrigo and his mates along their journey and since their arrival to the city. The knowledge and memories Rodrigo acquired about the dangers characterizing the way, nourished a growing fear for his own safety, since he was aware of the life-threatening risks of train-journeys. His concerns about walking at nighttime, making nightshifts for security reasons and thinking carefully about the risks of engaging in social interactions with strangers suggest that threatening realities are always palpable, exposing these migrants to potential dangers. The continuous necessity of 'watching one's back' during protracted timeframes converts these journeys on a limbo of fear and anguish that puts emotional weight and has serious consequences on their mental health (Auyero, 2012, pp. 64-65). Nevertheless, Rodrigo displayed self-confidence and enthusiasm during his narration, as he provided details about the difficulties he encountered on the way and the strategies he employed to overcome them. Moreo-

ver, his story reflects a symbolic appropriation of territories that frequently become migrants' only possible abode in contexts of disorientation and uncertainty, in spite of being plagued with terror (Haesbaert, 2011). The areas adjacent to the railway tracks became focal points of the journey where many migrants shape their ephemeral everyday existences, living and engaging in common activities to satisfy their basic needs such as socializing, resting or waiting for *la Bestia*. Rodrigo's resoluteness in coping with danger and risk also demonstrates that fear meant the opposite effect to paralysis, as he was able to transform terror into a source of learning and growing up. Since undertaking a journey through legal channels is not a privilege for these migrants, they have no other option but to learn the unwritten norms that govern street-life and this kind of mobility, to reach their destinations through informal and treacherous trajectories. Simultaneously, sociality becomes a matter of life or death, because while certain actors threaten migrants' safety, others become inestimable allies on the base of reciprocal support. At the same time, social interactions and interconnections tend to be created on an ongoing basis and in a variety of contexts, where migrants from different nationalities and backgrounds form groups of mutual care, support, and protection (Bojadžijev & Karakayali, 2010; Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2012). Moreover, the social networks migrants build along their paths also involve sedentary populations

that become central actors for the successfulness of these journeys, as is the case of the local destitute who instruct migrants on how to protect themselves and keep safe while staying in dangerous territories (López Marín & Lenti, 2019).

Within the surrounding areas of the railway stations we visited during our fieldwork in northwestern Mexico, it was found that these territories are strategic spaces that provide shelter to local destitute and migrants in transit alike. Those locations are the temporary abode of migrants who travel on *la Bestia* and live intermittently by the railroads as destitute individuals, while patiently waiting to hear the train's whistle announcing the next departure. Several months are required to cross Mexico on *la Bestia*, as the journeys are constantly interrupted by the necessity of hopping on and off the train to look for respite and provisions in the nearby towns and villages. These trains are frequently stopped by institutional authorities for inspection or assaulted by organized criminal groups who demand payments of up to US \$100, while threatening migrants with weapons and machetes to perform kidnapping, robbery and extortion. Hence, life-threatening circumstances constitute a palpable reality that is kept within migrants' minds at all times, as they must be ready to run away in case of emergency. There are migrants who travel long distances aboard wagons that often transport toxic materials, glass or metals and expose themselves to the har-

mful residues that constantly fly towards the passengers with the wind produced by the moving train. The nature of these journeys also compels them to endure the harsh and extreme climatic conditions characterizing the different ecosystems of Mexico. Whilst the lack of alternatives other than employing *la Bestia* might be considered a form of structural violence that situates these migrants under extreme vulnerability and incertitude, it is valuable to reflect on the emotions and thoughts that cross their minds along the train odysseys (Galtung, 1969; 1990; Maturana, 1995). Accordingly, it was observed that a deep feeling of defenselessness permanently distresses the tranquility of numerous migrants when they travel on *la Bestia*, as they are aware that hostility can appear at any moment, because anyone could climb on to the wagons while traveling. When traveling on *la Bestia*, a penetrating feeling of inquietude constantly anguishes and concerns everybody on board, especially due to the narratives of pain and suffering that are latent in collective memory. Nevertheless, *la Bestia* can also represent a symbol of mobility and hope. The following account concerning these matters will allow a better understanding of how migrants cope with all dangers, while traveling on these trains.

Julio, a 32-year-old Honduran, recalled his third trip across Mexico. We met Julio in Tepic, Nayarit during the spring of 2015, while we were awaiting *la Bestia* at the old railway station. Some hours later, Julio generously offered his

company and shared the scarce food he had during the 12-hour journey atop a cylindrical wagon that transported ammonium hydroxide, which brought us all the way to Mazatlán, Sinaloa. During the trip, Julio narrated his previous experiences on *la Bestia*,

I was at Puerto Peñasco some years ago with another migrant I met on the railroads few weeks earlier. We waited in that dreadful station for days because that bloody train wasn't passing, and we had no idea of what was happening. Finally, we heard the train's whistle... It was like hearing a gorgeous sound through my ears. Unfortunately, the train was running too fast, and our happiness started vanishing when we noticed it wasn't stopping. We didn't know what to do. We wanted to wait for the train to slow down, but if we missed this chance to hop-on, who knows when the next train was gonna pass through. Therefore, we decided to run as much as we could while it was still moving. I concentrated in controlling my nervousness and to focalize on the train's speed. Then, I utilized all my dexterity, so that the hop could reach the train and my legs would not be swept towards the wheels. With a last effort I was on, I felt completely shocked, but happy to know that I still had all my limbs (...) I was exhausted, and I was hoping to rest a bit while my fellow traveler took the first turn guarding to remain alert for any possible problem. As I was falling asleep, the train stopped and we heard a voice shouting from outside – '*Get off right now, this train is not going any*

*further, we gotta board that one other before it disappears!’ - We hopped off immediately and ran desperately towards the other train, which was actually whistling to announce departure right at that moment. We didn't know where we were and what was gonna happen on the other train, but at least we were still together (...) Oh well, in this journey lots of nasty things can happen, we all know that! (...) I think this trip is very hard and at times you would rather desist and go back home, but you know... you've to keep going and withstand all burdens and fear. I mean, if you really want to see your dreams come through, you gotta be perseverant and continue! (Julio; Tepic; May 2015).*

From Julio's story and other narratives gathered from migrants, it is possible to identify fundamental skills and dexterities that are necessary to endure and survive the journey on *la Bestia*, such as patience, courage and agility. These attributes are also primary skills to survive the hardships characterizing this kind of travel. Julio was a young person in good physical shape, although for other persons such as mothers carrying their toddlers, children, elders or individuals with physical impairments, it would be practically impossible to get on and off a moving train. In this context, the above-mentioned dissimilarities provide evidence to the arguments presented by postcolonial and black feminist scholars, concerning the differences in which a diversity of actors experience violence in distinct settings (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill

Collins, 1990; Muñoz Cabrera, 2011). This is characterized in this context by variables such as gender, age, or ethnicity, which are determinants that define whether *la Bestia* can be chosen for traveling or not, as well as the intensity of the dangers it implies.

For Julio and many other trans-Mexican migrants, *la Bestia* is not only a train in its physical expression, it represents a primary component of trans-Mexican mobility and an important symbol for many Central American migrants. A primary point of interest within Julio's narration relates to the emotions expressed amongst his words, reflecting sentiments of fear and frustration that are typically shared by migrants who employ this transport. Specifically, Julio's voice manifests the distress of disorientation within time and space, as waiting times for the train to pass are unpredictable and feel endless, especially due to the marginalized and violent character of these territories, where the value of life is extremely low, and everybody's wish is to move forward as quickly as possible. In this case, Julio's uncertainty, and dread about whether to jump on the moving train or not, demonstrates the enormous desperation and the possible physical costs that a small mistake can bring about, as well as the fear and anxiety of struggling against despair.

By pinpointing the dangerousness of traveling on cargo trains, this research does not support the US-backed implementation of the Mexican government's 'Plan Integral de la Frontera Sur' - Sou-

thern Border Plan - that prohibited the use of these trains by migrants and further militarized railway stations to deter their mobility, while enshrining a rhetoric of human rights protection and safety. Affirmatively, these migrants are not victims of the train, they are victims of the US-Mexican border regime that endangers their integrity, by limiting their access to safe migratory channels, while perpetrating cultural violence by obfuscating their everyday suffering.

Besides the personal ability, courage and willpower manifested in Julio's story, his narrative emphasizes that traveling on *la Bestia* is often a collective practice, rather than an individual one. Sharing the journey with his friends helped Julio to cope with the anguish and fear arising when traveling on *la Bestia*. In numerous stories, it has been observed that traveling with anyone trustable and able to provide practical and emotional support to endure any emerging burden in a more effective way has a strong significance for migrants in transit. The value of looking after each other in dangerous environments during periods of stasis and when the train is not running, manifest the condensation of solidarity bonds that emerge between people on a journey (Scott, 1990; 2012; Cunningham, 2004; Nordstrom, 1997; Nordstrom & Martin, 1992). In this way, border violence has at times the opposite effect to dissolution, by stimulating motivations, cementing imagination, strengthening creativity, and uniting people who share similar universes of violence

and hope (Papadopoulos, Stephenson & Tsianos, 2008, p. 101).

All along these routes, rigorous forms of sociopolitical oppression become visible in the legislative impediments that coerce migrants to travel on these trains, while being exposed to violations of rights and serious physical and psychological traumas. Yet, they are not just observing the spectacle of their humanitarian crisis inactively. Instead, they counter vicissitudes and demonstrate their opposition to the calamities of the journey by utilizing the power of their agency, which openly manifests in their exceptional determination and tenacity to overcome hardship and danger. This is also expressed within the collective practices of resistance against institutional repression, such as continuing to move in spite of governmental will and by protecting each other against the widespread violence that underlies their journeys. At the same time, these processes nourish the formation of a sort of transforming community in movement constituted by people of diverse origins who support each other in the wake of commonly shared objectives.

## CONCLUSIONS

This investigation has now offered a better understanding of the particularities that articulate trans-Mexican migration and the railway scenario, while showing some of the most significant causes and consequences on the psychological inte-

grity of migrants who bravely embrace the perilous journeys across Mexico.

Since the socio-politically constructed status of 'illegality' situates Central American migrants under conditions of marginalization and vulnerability, the temporary transformation of existence into a state of ephemeral homelessness amalgamates with the perpetual risk of interception, detention and deportation. At the same time, the lack of numerous civil rights generates conditions that systematically stimulate sentiments of uncertainty, impotency and fear, which seriously affect their wellbeing. Thus, the criminalization of unauthorized migration consolidates a panorama of discrimination, stigmatization and exclusion that frequently fosters feelings of sorrow and shame in migrants whose only 'criminal act' was to flee or leave their countries looking at alternative life-prospects.

The findings of our ethnographic fieldwork yield a significant understanding about the realities faced by irregularized migrants within the examined settings. The evidence presented herein points at one of the most prominent expressions of institutional oppression, which manifests in the direct and structural effects of the US-Mexican anti-immigration regime and the multiple forms of violence that are systematically experienced by migrants in Mexico.

If these oppressive institutional structures materialize in the US-Mexican exercise of authority to legitimately deprive migrants of rights, resistance

manifests as its pertinacious counterpart, finding expression in the assortment of everyday struggles and the strategies they use to overcome hardship and destitution.

The transcendental implications embedded within the conception of this journey as a personal and collective struggle, uphold real and pervasive sentiments of self-emancipation that reflect insightful meanings for the life and future of all those who engage in the trans-Mexican journey. Migrants tend to draw on to their agency, inventiveness and cleverness, as instruments of survival that are employed to find strategies and momentary solutions to fulfill their objectives. Even when they feed emotions of anguish and fear, all awareness and wisdom about the numerous perils that characterize the journey do not restrain the majority from fulfilling their intentions and begin a new stage in life, because such determination assists them in continuing with the journey, even after having experienced traumatic episodes of violence and terror.

Similarly, migrants' willpower and wisdom strongly encourage them to begin again and again when they become the subject of a frustrating and humiliating deportation. Migrants' perseverance is maintained and nurtured by mutual acts of collectivity and solidarity that arise in contexts of misfortune and suffering shared by migrants from different nationalities. Accordingly, the dynamics of precariousness that are common in this context consolidate unwavering

social bonds that result in genuine relationships between individuals who may initially be completely unknown to each other, but who gradually become like family under conditions of hardship, deprivation and necessity.

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