Gioconda Herrera • Carmen Gómez
Editors

Migration in South America

IMISCOE Regional Reader

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IMISCOE

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Between Hostility and Solidarity: The Production of the Andean Region–Southern Cone Transit Migratory Corridor

Soledad Álvarez Velasco

3.1 Introduction

I met Angela, a 27-year-old Dominican migrant, in November 2015 in Quito. We used to get together to have coffee and talk about life at a bakery located a couple of blocks from her job. 6 months after we met, via WhatsApp, she extended this invitation: "Let's have coffee at my place. My address: three blocks south from the Santa Clara Market you will find a tall wine-coloured building, third floor, apartment 301. If you get lost just ask for the *Edificio de los Migrantes* [the Migrant Building]. Anyone will guide you."

The encounter was exceptional. We met at her place in a seven-story building where South American, Caribbean, African, and Asian migrants shared flats, hence its colloquial name. Angela's flatmates—Tania from the Dominican Republic, Rosa and Amelia from Cuba—joined us. I not only witnessed the bonds of solidarity and community they had woven as an essential living strategy, but also how the four of them were planning their departures. On the table, our coffees were lost amid scribbled papers containing routes with towns to be crossed, bus fares, names and rates of hotels, and even telephone numbers of the "guides" to be counted for border crossings. In those pages, Angela and her Caribbean flatmates had organized their transit from Ecuador southwards.

While they explained their routes to Peru and Chile, the four showed a clear sense of exhaustion with their life in Ecuador and a desire to move elsewhere. Later, as we said goodbye, Angela said to me: "I assure you, *mami*, that in most of the seven floors of the *Edificio*, my neighbors are planning departures. We migrants endure much, but there is a limit. We've learned what it means to leave our home

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country and we can definitely leave this country that does not want us. We hope to find a better place." Though that was the last time I saw Angela, we kept in touch via WhatsApp while she transited southwards.

This fragment of Angela's migratory trajectory is by no means unique; trajectories like hers are part of the new geography of South American migration, characterized, among other things, by the relentless increase and complexification of South–South undocumented transits. Over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, most South American countries have turned into sending, receiving, and transit spaces (IOM, 2020). The arrival of a global mobilities comprising Caribbean, African and Asian migrants and asylum seekers, together with the unprecedented massive expansion, since 2015, of Venezuelan intraregional migration, largely explains this transition.

As in Angela's case, Caribbean and extra-continental migrants reach Ecuador to try their luck there. Yet, everyday precarization and the tightening of Ecuadorean migratory policies have nudged migrants to transit to Peru and on to Southern Cone countries. The Venezuelan experience, on the other hand, has been driven by irregularized transits back and forth between Venezuela and neighbouring countries, while being exposed to extreme precariousness and threats to life en route. Thus, the Andean Region has turned into a global space of undocumented transits whose dynamics have had a spatial effect: the recent outline of the Andean Region–Southern Cone transit migratory corridor, or southern corridor.

In the Americas, the study of this type of migrant mobility and its spatial reverberations has concentrated on northbound migratory corridors, be it the historic Mexico-U.S. corridor (Anguiano Téllez & Villafuerte Solís, 2016), the Central American corridor toward the U.S. (París-Pombo, 2016; Varela, 2021), the corridor that connects the Andean Region with Central America, Mexico, and the U.S. (Álvarez Velasco, 2019, 2021), and the corridor connecting Brazil and Mexico (Miranda, 2021). Since transits from the Andean Region southwards are recent, scholarly research on the topic has not yet been produced. However, reports from civil society (Red Humanitaria, 2021; Bolívar, 2021) and regional journalists (Corredores Migratorios, 2021) have proliferated, making these sources essential to understanding this recent spatial formation.

Drawing upon key contributions from the geographies of mobilities and critical migration and border studies, as well as ethnographic data collected between 2015 and 2021, this chapter analyses the formation of the Andean Region–Southern Cone transit migratory corridor. The chapter takes a multi-scalar approach (Swyngedouw, 2004; Hyndman, 2004) examining the dynamics at work across this space at a regional scale, and, at a scale of the body, comparing experiences of Dominican, Cuban, Haitian, Sudanese, Nigerian, and Venezuelan migrants within short and long-term irregularized transits, to understand how they contest South American border regimes, organize their South–South mobilities, and deploy strategies of solidarity and care to protect their lives. This multi-scale approach sets out the argument that runs through this chapter: the Andean Region–Southern Cone migratory corridor should be seen as a transnational, contingent space of dispute—a product of the tension between mobility and control.

Four sections comprise this chapter. First, I do a theoretical revision of the relation between mobility, control, and spatial production. Then, I analyse the dynamics implicated in the formation of the southern corridor. By zooming into and contrasting six migrant trajectories, I then explore the social organization of transit migration and the migrant struggle across the corridor. I conclude by reflecting upon the significance of this corridor in South America and the global migratory map.

3.2   Mobility, Control, and Spatial Production

In its *Glossary of Migration* (2019), the International Organization for Migration (IOM)—whose influence is preponderant in policing the migration patterns of poor migrants around the world (Geiger & Pécoud, 2010)—neither includes nor defines the term "migratory corridor." Nevertheless, in its annual *World Migration Report*, it identifies the "Top 10" migratory corridors in the regions studied across the world, understanding them as "an accumulation of migratory movements over time" between a country of origin and a country of destination (IOM, 2020, p. 58). With this vague conceptualization based on migration figures, the IOM identifies the following as the most relevant migratory corridors in Latin America and the Caribbean: Mexico–U.S.; El Salvador–U.S.; Cuba–U.S.; Dominican Republic–U.S.; Guatemala–U.S.; Venezuela–Colombia (IOM, 2020, p. 99).

Setting aside this perspective which suggests migratory corridors are accumulations of unidirectional movements between two bounded binaries—a country of origin and a country of destination—and using a critical geographical perspective, following Lefebvre (1991), I argue that these are *abstract spaces* which cannot be understood through a fixed traditional conception of space, because they exist as a social production laden with historical relations. I define migratory corridors as transnational unequal everchanging spaces of dispute, arising as the product of the tension between migrant mobilities and control. These spatial formations are inexplicable if not for their embeddedness in unequal geographical development, their interconnectedness and interdependencies with global, regional and translocal socio-economic and political processes (Wolf, 2010; Trouillot, 2016).

Within the "mobility turn" in the social sciences (Urry, 2012), the dialectical relationship between mobility and immobility—understood as an embodied, differentiated, and racialized social experience—was placed at the center of spatial production (Cresswell, 2006; Sheller, 2018). In interpreting this dialectical relationship—following Tim Cresswell (2014)—it is possible to discern Henri Lefebvre's argument that the social production of space follows a "rhythm" imposed by capitalism that determines the movement of bodies and objects, maintaining the social (and spatial) production and reproduction of contemporary societies (Lefebvre, 2004). Under capitalism, that rhythm cannot take place under equal conditions; it is a "geometry of power"—echoing Doreen Massey (1993)—that defines the differential and unequal speed of movement and friction: which bodies (or objects) can

move, and to where and how they can move. Therefore, mobility, control and space are mutually constitutive (Cresswell, 2014, p. 203).

Controlling migrant mobility—or ensuring its immobilization—has been a *sine qua non* function of the nation-state since its inception (Scott, 1998). This function legitimizes two state fictions: a sovereign dominion over a territorially "fixed" and bounded space and the governing of a national population differentiated from those constructed as non-nationals (Balibar, 1991). It also feeds national capitalist accumulation by regulating the entry and exit of exploitable labour power embodied in migrant workers (De Genova, 2017). That is why the tension between mobility and control resides at the heart of unequal global geographical development and its border regime (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), while also helping to explain the transnational production of migratory corridors.

Not just one type of mobility or a single form of control that are involved in this spatial production (Álvarez Velasco, 2019, 2020a). On one hand, diverse, unequal (im)mobilities, short, or prolonged transits, pauses, returns, and restarts via mobility logistics through air, land, and sea routes are part of these spatial formations, constituted by multiple temporalities overlapping between waiting and crossing times (Khosravi, 2021). These diverse (im)mobilities are embodied in migrants in transit or asylum seekers—adults and minors, with gender, ethnic, class, and nationality diversities (Mountz, 2020). Thus, migratory corridors also encompass internal circuits of (im)mobilities (Simon, 1995; Audebert, 2017): there are spaces and times of waiting, and spaces and times of crossing, with everchanging epicenters of temporary settlement and hubs of transit.

On the other hand, multiple actors exercise direct, indirect, imaginative, and symbolic control in these transnational spaces (Collyer & King, 2015). While the state plays a preponderant role, because it has monopolized control over the "legitimate means of movement" (Torpey, 2018, p. 5), para-statal actors (such as migrant smuggling networks, organized crime, paramilitaries), humanitarian, and other social actors also exercise control over migrant mobility, consequently taking part in this spatial formation while configuring economies that fluctuate between licit, illicit, legal, and illegal practices (Van Schendel & Abraham, 2005). Those actors constitute the "border regime" or, following Mezzadra and Neilson's definition, a heterogeneous assemblage of institutions, logistics, practices, and procedures whose purpose is to domesticate the labour and life embodied in mobile subjects as a function of the incessant production and circulation of capital (2013, pp. 19–20). This regime exists to domesticate and regulate the mobility of migrants and asylum seekers, seen simultaneously as victims and threats, consumers, and exploitable and deportable bodies (De Genova, 2002).

The spatial dispute that delineates migratory corridors transcends national spaces. Transcending methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002), we should understand that these spatial formations take place across several countries and regions, and borders play a preponderant role. As historical constructs determined by the post-colonial tracing of global space, borders are contested by migrants' mobilities (Grimson, 2000; Wilson & Donnan, 2016). Cross-border practices established around mobility and control confirm how borders are malleable,

corruptible, flexible, and enabling as much as violent and even lethal (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). Moreover, this malleable and mobile character of borders allows central states, such as the U.S. and the European Union, to externalize their borders to the south and, via remote control from third territories, to continue regulating migrant mobility (Mountz, 2020). This control mechanism, typical of the inequality of power between central and peripheral countries, is a key element of the border control regime and a determining factor in the configuration of migratory corridors (Walters, 2010).

To capture the spatial complexity of migratory corridors, it is worth focusing on one type of migrant mobility, in this case undocumented transit migration. From the autonomy of migration perspective, this type of mobility cannot be conceived only as an "irregular situation between emigration and settlement" (Papadopoulou-Kourkoula, 2008), but must instead be understood as a contingent social force (Mezzadra, 2011; De Genova, 2017) that by migrating responds to systemic violence and border control. Migrants deploy practices and strategies of solidarity and care, while negotiating with the various actors of the heterogeneous border regime. These practices of (im)mobility that constitute their spatial struggle, which is a struggle for life (Varela Huerta, 2017), consequently shape these migratory corridors.

In the light of this approach, I conducted a multi-sited ethnography in Ecuador (2015–2017) and turned to a migrant-centered perspective to reconstruct the trajectories of 20 migrants in transit—16 from Syria, Iraq, Nigeria, Sudan, Zimbabwe, Cuba, Haiti, and the Dominican Republic, and four Ecuadorians deported from the U.S.—of diverse ages, professions, and class backgrounds.[1] Due to "migrants' digitalities" (Leurs & Smets, 2018), I became a digital ethnographer, virtually accompanying their transits. To complement my initial ethnography, between 2020 and 2021, I conducted a net-ethnography (Kozinets, 2015) to include voices from locations across the corridor to reconstruct Venezuelan trajectories and capture the changeable dynamics of their mobilities, particularly during the pandemic. I also reviewed journalist investigations which have been fundamental in making visible the complexity of undocumented transits.

3.3 New Mobilities, Reinforcement of Control

At this border we are habituated mostly to Colombian migrants. However, there have been unusual overland movements, mainly of Venezuelans heading south. This does not apply only to this border: my colleagues in our office in Huaquillas, who are used to working with Peruvians, have also registered unusual movements of Haitian, Cuban, sometimes even African migrants heading south, too. They say that these border crossings have taken place since Ecuador approved its new constitution. I don't know if it is so precise, but this is

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[1] That ethnography forms part of my doctoral research submitted to the Department of Human Geography at King's College London (2014–2019).

happening along the southern border with Peru and not necessarily through the official check point, but via irregular tracks. New migrants are arriving, but not everyone stays here (Field Technician of the Jesuit Refugee Service in Tulcán. Personal communication, Tulcán, September 2016).

It was mid-2016 when I interviewed the field technician in charge of the office of the Jesuit Refugee Service (JSR) in Tulcán, an Ecuadorean town a few kilometres from the Ecuador–Colombia border. Because JRS's mission is "to accompany, serve, and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons,"[2] he and his colleagues took the pulse of migration dynamics in Ecuador. As he explained, migrants from various Caribbean and African countries had joined the traditional population of Colombians and Peruvians and the already-increasing numbers of Venezuelans.

His perceptions were consistent with Ecuadorean official data, which for 2015—the time range that captures migration dynamics when the interview was conducted—recorded these as the nationalities with the highest positive migration balance: China (~1.700); Senegal (~1.500); the Dominican Republic (~2700); the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela (hereinafter Venezuela) (~7.500); Colombia (~6.200); Peru (~9.000); Haiti (~12.000); and, Cuba (~13.700) (INEC, 2020a). As the JRS field technician indicated, this migrant presence did not necessarily stay in Ecuador: some apparently continued to Peru through the official checkpoint or via "irregular tracks."

Ecuador has been used in cross-border migrations between its neighbours Peru and Colombia. This type of mobility is part of a historical pattern of intraregional migrations within South American nations, which account for 70% of migration flows there (IOM, 2017, p. 2). In fact, South American states have sought agreements to enable free intraregional mobility and residence as part of their regional political tradition (Domenech, 2017; Stang, 2009).[3] Yet, this type of migration does not explain by itself the configuration of the southern migratory corridor. The conceptual argument that runs through this chapter is that the tension between mobility and control produces transnational spaces of dispute or migratory corridors. This recent spatial formation and the reinforcement of control may be understood in light of the arrival of new extra-regional South–South mobilities, or "unusual movements," to echo the JRS field technician.

The new millennium brought an increase in extra-regional migrants in South America (IOM, 2017, p. 4). The deepening of systemic inequality, the proliferation of conflicts and wars, and "fortress Europe" (De Genova & Tazzioli, 2016) encouraged migrants from diverse Asian and African countries to divert their routes toward

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[2] See: Jesuit Refugee Service (2021).

[3] Among the most notable regional integration agreements adopted since 1990 to facilitate intraregional mobility are the Andean Community of Nations; the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR), the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and the Union of South American Nations (Stang, 2009). The Agreement on Residence for Nationals of the States Parties of MERCOSUR and Associated States represents a fundamental tool for access to legal residence in South America (IOM, 2017, p. 30).

South American countries (Winters & Reiffen, 2019), which traditionally have embraced more pro-migrant policies.

Apart from its intraregional free mobility agreements, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration—which proposed a much more extensive legal definition of "refugee", paving the way toward inclusive national legal frames to guarantee this right (Freier & Gauci, 2020)—is an iconic example of South America's alleged exceptional migratory legal framework, which climaxed during the first decade of the twenty-first century. Then, Pink Tide leftist governments in Argentina (in 2004), Uruguay (in 2008), Ecuador (in 2008), and Bolivia (in 2013) reformed their constitutions or regulations, adopting progressive legal perspectives on migration matters (Domenech, 2017).

This progressivism also attracted Caribbean migrants, predominantly from Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti (IOM, 2017), countries with a long-standing migratory history to the U.S. (González, 2011). Because U.S. anti-migrant policies have intensified since the new millennium and violence has increased en route (Vogt, 2017), Cubans, Haitians, and Dominicans have also diverted their trajectories, notably augmenting their presence in South America (IOM, 2017). In the Haitian case, the effects of the 2010 earthquake and the granting of humanitarian visas in several South American countries, like Ecuador and Brazil, multiplied those movements southwards (Trabalón, 2018).

Amid South American progressivism, Ecuador stood out as the most radical case for its 2008 constitutional principles of free mobility, universal citizenship, equal rights for nationals and foreigners, and the adoption of the executive decree that turned it into a visa-free country for visits of up to 90 days[4] (Álvarez Velasco, 2020a). The Huaquillas colleagues of the interviewed SJR field technician were not mistaken when they flagged the role of Ecuador's constitution. Ecuadorean legal openness, along with its dollarized economy and geographical position, turned it into a magnet for global South–South migrations (Góngora-Mera et al., 2014).

Some migrants arrived with the intention of staying. Pulled by the "American Dream", others travelled to the U.S. via the Andean Region–Central America–Mexico migratory corridor (Álvarez Velasco, 2019, 2020a), while many more, fascinated by the constructed image of Chile, Argentina, and Brazil as promising destinations (Canales, 2018; Zubrzycki, 2019), turned southwards, defining the Andean Region–Southern Cone migratory corridor.

Haitian migrants transited from Ecuador to Peru and from there to Brazil, Chile, or Argentina (Vásquez et al., 2015); Dominican and Cuban migrants moved from Ecuador to Chile and Argentina (Tapia & Liberona, 2018), while some African migrants, especially Nigerians and Senegalese, crossed Ecuador to Peru on their way to Argentina (Espiro, 2019; Zubrzycki, 2019). It is the Venezuelan migrations, however, that are the most predominant presence among the "unusual movements" crossing the southern corridor, despite being part of intraregional mobilities.

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[4] Presidential Decree published on June 20, 2008, in Press Bulletin No. 398 of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Integration.

A regional migrant-receiving country between the late 1970s to the 1990s, Venezuela has become the continent's major migrant expeller. Its political, economic, and social collapse has triggered unprecedented migrations, which since 1999 have diversified, complexified, and become massive, overturning the regional migratory dynamic (Gandini et al., 2019). If ~700,000 Venezuelans emigrated in 2016, by 2020 that number reached ~5 million. Most arrived in Colombia (~1.8 million), while others transited to Ecuador (~400,000), Peru (~830,000), Chile (~470,000), Argentina (~140,000), and Brazil (~280,000) (IOM, 2020).

The director of the Human Mobility Unit of the provincial Government of Pichincha in Ecuador—a local entity providing legal, economic, and social services to worldwide migrants in Quito and the setting for a good part of my multi-sited ethnography said: "[…] the arrival of migrants to Ecuador and their transits to other countries *ha traído cola*,[5] and I mean two things: it is enough for one migrant to leave and open a path for others to follow him or her; and that regrettably governments nor societies in the region have liked this, so migratory policies have hardened" (personal communication. Quito, August 2016).

She was accurate. As shown in the next section, the organization of transit migration is indeed socially determined: migrants' experiences have had a multiplying effect triggering more transits southwards. Her reflection was also historically situated: it arose in a context where visas were selectively re-imposed on certain nationalities in the countries comprising the southern corridor, and where a violent operation to deport Cuban migrants from Ecuador had also taken place in the Summer of 2016 (Correa, 2019; Colectivo Atopía, 2017). That's why she was so precise when stating that migrant transits *han traído cola*—have had repercussions—in the sense that state control had strengthened against them.

Alison Mountz (2020) argues that combating migrant smuggling and the supposed protection of its "victims" have been the justifications used globally by states to conceal mechanisms to halt the arrival of undesired migrants coming from impoverished countries and to deny the recognition of the right to refuge (2020, pp. 41–42). That combat has been likewise the unquestionable justification for the U.S. to subtly externalize border control (Miller, 2019). This is exactly what has happened in the countries that configure the southern corridor.

For the past decade, state officials, border agents, and police from South American countries, including Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Chile, Argentina and Brazil, have been trained by the U.S. in tactics to combat transnational crimes, like migrant smuggling, and in profiling suspected terrorists, smugglers, and undocumented migrants, among other topics related to border control (ILEA, 2020). In a revival of the School of the Americas in Panama, since 2005 the International Law Enforcement Academy in El Salvador, among other U.S. institutions, has served to externalize U.S. borders across South America in a "soft and subtle" way that contrasts with the more conspicuous measures imposed on Mexico and Central America

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[5] The phrase *traer cola* literally means "to bring a tail" but is used colloquially to mean "to have serious repercussions".

(Miller, 2019, pp. 30–34). Further, combating migrant smuggling has been one of the prime justifications for the "punitive turn" (Domenech, 2017, p. 21) across the region.

Disregarding its progressive constitution and dismantling the executive order that turned it into a visa-free country, in 2010 Ecuador re-imposed visas for those countries of origin whose migrant presence had increased and whose citizens were allegedly at risk of falling victim to smuggling networks (Álvarez Velasco, 2021). This was the case for Nigeria (in 2010), Senegal (in 2015), Cuba (in 2015), and Haiti, for which Ecuador selectively imposed a virtual registration system in 2015, which operates as a filter to control Haitian mobility (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Human Mobility, 2015). Peru, Chile, and Argentina already required visas from residents of various countries in Africa and Asia as well as Cuba (Online Visa, 2020). Nonetheless, under the same argument of combating migrant smuggling, in 2012 Peru imposed visas on Haiti (Trabalón, 2018); in 2018 Chile and Argentina adopted the same measure, while in 2012 Argentina imposed visas on the Dominican Republic, followed by Chile in 2019 (Trabalón, 2018; Blanco, 2018). Tossing aside any vestige of South America's exceptional openness, in 2019, Ecuador, Peru, and Chile imposed visas on Venezuela (Finn & Umpierrez, 2020).

Visa requirement has not been the only punitive mechanism adopted. Rejections have occurred at borders and airports when, for instance, Cuban or African migrants arrived in Ecuador (Álvarez Velasco, 2020b), Haitians and Dominicans in Chile (Tijoux & Córdova, 2015), or Haitians, Dominicans, or certain African migrants in Argentina (Trabalón, 2018). As scholarly research suggests, the entrance of Caribbean, African, and Venezuelan migrants has generated social and state resistance, producing accounts of South American systemic racism and xenophobia against those "unusual movements" (Álvarez Velasco, 2020b; Tijoux & Córdova, 2015). Rejections at borders and visa re-impositions have revealed processes of criminalization and racialization against migrant populations from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

In addition, migratory policies in the countries comprising the southern corridor have become tougher, limiting regularization processes and multiplying migrants' illegality in the region (Domenech & Díaz, 2020; Álvarez Velasco, 2020b; Duffraix Tapia et al., 2020), while denying the recognition and guarantee of the right to refuge (Gómez & Malo, 2019). Meanwhile deportations—smaller in number and less spectacular than those occurring in the U.S. and Mexico—have been set into motion (Domenech, 2020). Examples include the deportations of Cubans from Ecuador (Colectivo Atopía, 2017), Venezuelans from Colombia (Migración Colombia, 2019), and Haitians, Colombians and Venezuelans from Chile (Blanco, 2018).

South American borders have been militarized on several occasions since 2016, "orderly control flows," especially when visa requirements have been adopted. Migrants have been consequently stuck in borderlands, confined to long waiting times and lack of state protection, often in makeshift camps managed locally with the cooperation of UNHCR and IOM (IOM, 2019). This was the case, for instance, for Haitian migrants stuck between Ecuador and Colombia in 2016 (Benalcázar, 2016) or Venezuelan migrants trapped in 2019 at the Peru–Ecuador

and Ecuador–Colombia borders (*Noticias Telemundo*, 2019). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the borders between Ecuador and Colombia, Ecuador and Peru, and Peru and Chile have not only been closed but also militarized, multiplying the confinement spaces where mostly Venezuelan, Haitian, and African migrants have been stuck under inhumane conditions ((In)Movilidades en las Americas, 2020).

The multiplication of "unusual movements" *ha traído cola* indeed, for a punitive turn has taken place across the southern corridor confirming clearly how state control practices analogous to that of the global border regime are operating across this transnational space (Domenech & Díaz, 2020). Precisely because of this, migrants have not ceased to organize their transits as part of their incessant search for a decent and safe place to live.

3.4   From the Andes Southwards

Transit migration is an unpredictable and contingent type of human mobility (Collyer et al., 2014), made up of overlapping waiting and crossing times (Khosravi, 2021). By reconstructing fragments of these often-turbulent mobilities (Schapendonk, 2012), it is possible to unpack how the social organization of migration unfolds among hostility, control, and solidarity (Hess, 2012; Basok et al., 2016). Between 2008 and 2020, I met Mustafa, a 35-year-old Sudanese migrant; Kenneth, a 30-year-old Nigerian migrant; Claude, a 36-year-old Haitian migrant; Hugo, a 25-year-old Cuban migrant; Angela, the 27-year-old Dominican migrant I introduced at the beginning of the chapter, and Yasemar, a 29-year-old Venezuelan. The latter, whom I met in 2020, was the only one I met virtually via WhatsApp and Zoom, as digital ethnography enabled research during the year of the pandemic.

Yasemar had been in transit since she left Venezuela. In contrast, Mustafa, Kenneth, Claude, Hugo, and Angela had resided in Ecuador for some years and were about to transit to other countries when I met them. In the remainder of the chapter, I reconstruct fragments of their transits across the southern corridor. I focus first on the experiences of my five Caribbean and African interlocutors. I then explore, via Yasemar's case, the complexities of massive Venezuelan south-south mobilities.

3.4.1   *Caribbean and African Migrants on the Move*

Googling, "*Whatseapenado*" or "*Facebookeando*," Mustafa, Kenneth, Claude, Angela, and Hugo learned about Ecuador. This Andean country seemed to be "*el lugar soñado para migrar*" (the dream place to migrate), as Angela frequently said: no visa requirements on entry, dollarized economy, and purported pro-migrant policies. Escaping religious persecution in Sudan, Mustafa, his spouse, and their two children flew to Ecuador in 2015. Fleeing poverty and leaving her son in the

Dominican Republic, Angela arrived in Ecuador in 2014. Claude left Haiti in 2010, a few months after the earthquake hit, while Hugo moved from Cuba in 2014, pulled by the possibility of getting to know a new country and moving to a place that did not require visas for Cubans. These two Caribbean migrants and Kenneth, who escaped urban violence in Nigeria, were young single migrants moving on their own.

Kenneth was the only one who did not arrive in Ecuador by plane and who had had a previous transit experience within South America. He had first travelled from Nigeria to Brazil with the intention of migrating to the U.S.[6] While residing in Sao Paulo, he learned about Ecuador's dollarized economy and opted to traverse Brazil's Amazonian region to reach Peru on his way to Ecuador. Because Kenneth got to Ecuador at the end of 2009, before visas were imposed on Nigerians, he entered via regularized paths. "I thought it would be a matter of months to save money to go to the U.S. Planning is one thing, what we actually face is another," reflected Kenneth in January 2016, five years after he reached Ecuador and just a couple of weeks before recommencing his transit. His experience is a clear confirmation of the contingent nature of transit migration (Basok et al., 2016), something that defined the trajectories of my other interlocutors.

The enchantment of "*the dream place to migrate*" did not last long. Though no visa was requested on entrance, after 90 days they had to change their migratory status. Their regularization processes were not straightforward. The mandatory documentation—such as a certified criminal record and "proof of legal work", as stipulated in official regulations (Ministerio de Gobierno, 2020)—together with high visa fees that were unaffordable for migrants turned into legal locks (Menjívar, 2014) that hindered Claude's, Angela's, and León's regularizations.

Because Kenneth and Mustafa fled Nigeria and Sudan, countries in conflict, they applied for refuge. Though they did not face any legal locks, long waiting times and the denial of refuge confined them to legal limbo (Menjívar, 2006) and to undocumented status. The resolution of Mustafa's case take took almost a year and a half; Kenneth's case was denied after eight months. Their experiences should be added to thousands of others that are evidence of how, in Ecuador, effective recognition of refuge is decreasing while waiting times increase (Hurtado Caicedo et al., 2020).

The promise of a dollarized economy also proved disappointing. With a 38% poverty rate and nearly 50% of the population employed in the informal economy (INEC, 2020b), Ecuador is unable to absorb the migrant labour force in its fragile formal economy.[7] That was the experience of my five interlocutors, all of whom worked in the informal market: Angela was a hairdresser and street-food vendor; Hugo sold clothes and loaded boxes at a popular market; Mustafa plucked chickens

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[6] Brazil has maintained open migration policies being hence a gateway for global migrations. Scholarly and journalist research has proved that migrants arrive by plane or by transatlantic cargo ships and in some cases they transit to other destinations like Argentina, Ecuador or the U. S. (Espiro, 2019; *The Guardian*, 2018).

[7] This is a regional trend within highly unequal and impoverished Latin-American countries whose fragile economies are unable to guarantee decent jobs to migrant workers, accelerating their impoverishment and everyday precariousness (ILO, 2017).

in a poultry store; Kenneth worked as a waiter, a plumber, and sometimes as a bouncer at a disco; Claude sold juices and toilet paper, worked as a bricklayer, and looked after parked cars. Their monthly salaries fluctuated between $170 USD and $200 USD, not even half the basic salary in Ecuador. And, although Claude was an agricultural engineer and Hugo a nursing assistant, it was "the street" that employed them. This meant they did not practice their professions, experiencing an everyday deskilling, a complex situation in no way alien to the realities of the other countries that make up the southern corridor (ILO, 2017).

In addition, they dealt with systemic racism. In their narratives, the five underpinned how they confronted racial borders: "I have been insulted and beaten up, not because I am a migrant, but because I am black," said Claude, while Mustafa asserted, "on one occasion the landlord said there was no room for *blacks*." Systemic racism permeated raids, notifications, detentions, everyday policing, and deportations (Coalición para las Migraciones, 2015),[8] confirming how the Ecuadorean border has internalized growing social and state hostility.

In fact, between the time of their arrival and 2016, when I met them, Ecuador transformed from a welcoming gateway into a revolving door that expelled migrants, to echo Gioconda Herrera and Gabriela Cabezas (2019, p. 152). The legal representative of *Migrante Universal*, a migrant association in Quito, was clear about this: "Migrants are confined to a vicious cycle: *sin papeles* (without documents), exploited, poor, unable to afford visa fees, and it goes on like this until one day they are suddenly gone" (Legal Representative Asociación Migrante Universal, personal communication via WhatsApp, August 2020). Angela, Hugo, Claude, Kenneth, and Mustafa embodied that "vicious cycle," which finally expelled them from Ecuador.

I witnessed how they then organized their transits southwards and, in the cases of Angela and Mustafa, I was in touch with them after they left Ecuador. In the five cases, choosing where and how to transit was a collective decision. Again, "*Whatseapenado*" or "*Facebookeando*" mostly with compatriots abroad, they learned that Argentina, Chile, and Brazil, despite not being dollarized countries, were more promising destinations than Ecuador. "They say there are jobs for us," mentioned Angela in reference to Chile; while Hugo stated, "They say that we have to be patient in Lima, but that there are possibilities and from there it is possible to move to Chile where there is much more offered." As a promising rumour that spread among them, the five interlocutors would repeat these arguments to justify their departures.

As part of migrants' "imperceptible politics of mobile commons" (Papadopoulos & Tsianos, 2013, p. 191), they shared strategies to traverse borders via digital social networks. That was how they knew the time and logistics of the route: "three weeks from Quito to Santiago de Chile via Lima", said Angela; "less than a month to reach Buenos Aires by bus," reported Kenneth. "In two days, Hattians reach the border with Peru. But then they have to cross the jungle to get to Brazil, or if they go

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[8] See: Coalición para las Migraciones (2015).

southward, they have to cross the desert to get to Chile. Haitians walk and go by bus," said Claude.

Because Peru, Chile, and Argentina had imposed visas for these Caribbean and African migrants, they knew beforehand that they had to pay to cross borders. Claude mentioned: "My Haitian friends who are in Chile and Brazil told me that they paid 'guides' and the police to cross". Claude's arguments were consistent with scholarly research (Vásquez et al., 2015) that confirm that to traverse South American borders, *coyotes* charge between $50 USD and $150 USD per border; border police receive part of the money, as do the transporters and "guides". Press reports also demonstrate that migrants cross "*por trocha*" (through trails) or "*puntos ciegos*" (blind points), using artisanal rafts, or in groups either by bus or on foot from Ecuador to Peru via Nuevo Rocafuerte (Ortiz, 2016), Aguas Verdes or Huaquillas (Paredes, 2021); from Peru to Brazil via Madre de Dios (*France 24*, 2021), or from Peru to Chile and Argentina via Bolivian borderlands or the Chilean desert (Valenzuela, 2020). Press documentaries reveal how economic dynamics, involving *coyotes*, police, money changers, document forgers, transporters, hotel owners, and multiple local actors, fluctuating between legal and illegal activities and practices (Tapia, 2019), enable migrants' transits across the southern corridor.

They transited the southern corridor in groups. As Hugo noted, "we plan the journey and move in groups, in my case with Cubans, because that is the way we are cared for. They are our new family." Angela organized her departure with her Caribbean flatmates, who were joined by two Dominicans who worked with her at the same hair salon. Mustafa and Kenneth did the same at Omemma, the African restaurant in northern Quito where Kenneth worked and which functioned as a hub where African migrants gathered and shared migratory knowledge. There, Mustafa, for instance, learned that from Lima it was easier and cheaper to travel by plane to Central America, from where African migrants continue to the U.S. He and his wife were willing to take that route with their children. Kenneth, instead, gave up his dream of reaching the U.S. and opted to move to a Nigerian community in Argentina. At Omemma, he also met two other Nigerian migrants who ended up transiting with him.

In August 2016, Hugo and his two Cuban friends departed to Huaquillas with the intention of reaching Peru. The violent Cuban deportation hastened their decisions (Correa, 2019): "That was a Cuban hunt, and we don't want to be deported. *Nos vamos ya*! (we are leaving now)", he said to me the last time we met. He and his friends planned to pay whomever they needed to enter Peru. In his words: "We will pay a *coyote*, a bus driver, or even a police officer. At this stage we cannot go back."

Angela departed about the same time to Chile via Peru. Because I was in touch with her on WhatsApp, I knew she left Ecuador with her three Caribbean flatmates and two Dominican colleagues. Together, these six migrants paid a *coyote* who drove them in a van across the border to Tumbes, where another guide awaited them. Each paid $80 USD. From Tumbes they left for Lima, where they waited in a small hotel for a couple of days. That waiting time was not in the plan, yet they had no option. Their "guide" was sorting out the route but had already told them the next stop was Tacna, from where they would traverse the desert to reach Chile. In her last

message she told me they were preparing to traverse the desert soon. Scholarly and journalist investigations give account of the risks migrants face when crossing the desert, especially when they are abandoned en route, something that has taken the lives of migrants in transit southwards (Valenzuela, 2020; Tapia, 2019).

Mustafa and his family left that same year. A cousin of his living in the U.S. lent him the money he and his family needed. By bus, they reached Huaquillas, where they stayed for two days until Mustafa found a taxi driver who charged them $300 USD to take them to Tumbes, where they stayed overnight in a small hotel before continuing by bus to Lima. Mustafa had the phone number of a Peruvian *coyote* who was supposed to organize the route northward. Yet, until the last time we exchanged WhatsApp messages, a couple of weeks had passed and Mustafa and his family were still in Lima, waiting to figure out the route and even contemplating returning to Ecuador and from there moving to the U.S. by land.

While Kenneth departed for Argentina at the end of 2016, Claude could not make up his mind to leave. Though he was "fed up with his life in Quito," he did not know where to go. He dwelt within a Haitian community, he had witnessed not only how Haitians had transited to Peru, Brazil and Chile, but also how they had returned to Ecuador before moving elsewhere, particularly to the U.S. "Such a sacrifice to come back again!" he said. "I will wait with patience until I find the precise moment and place to go. If I leave Ecuador, I do not want to return".

Because their living conditions did not improve in the destination countries— and even deteriorated—returns from transits across the southern corridor have been documented by scholars, mostly in regard to Haitians (Vásquez et al., 2015; Ceja, 2015). Within different time frames, they have been moving back and forth through diverse circuits of (im)mobilities within South American countries or from there towards other destinations including Mexico and the U.S.A. (Miranda, 2021). It is not only Haitian migrants who embodied these mobility practices. While conduct- ing fieldwork, I was able to interview one of the parish priests at the Capuchin mis- sion in Nuevo Rocafuerte, a small town located near Ecuador's western border with Peru. He said:

> Our mission has a house near the Peruvian border where we receive African or Haitian travellers coming from Brazil who want to reach the U.S. or coming from Quito aiming to reach Brazil. They rest and organize themselves. What has caught my attention is that they all walk with cell phones and regardless of crossing the Amazon and its dangers, they come and go (Parish Priest of the Capuchin mission in Nuevo Rocafuerte, Personal communica- tion. Quito, August 2016).

This interview was conducted in 2016. Yet, the back and forth within prolonged transits of Haitian and African migrants across the southern corridor has continued. Recent events are further evidence: amid the pandemic, in early March 2021 a group of ~450 migrants, comprised mostly of Haitian migrants, recommenced their tran- sits from Brazil to Ecuador via Madre de Dios in Peru (*France 24*, 2021). Despite the militarization of the Peru–Brazil border and violent confrontations with the military, they continued en route and reached Nuevo Rocafuerte. Haitian, African, and Asian migrants interviewed in press reports mentioned that their impoverished conditions in Brazil was exacerbated during the pandemic and that they had learned

that the Biden administration was supposedly making more flexible U.S. anti-migrant laws, so they had decided to travel from Brazil to the U.S. via Peru and Ecuador (*El Universo*, 2021). These new mobilities confirm the unpredictability of transit migration, how multiple temporalities configure it, and how migrants do not cease to fight for their lives no matter how long or tough their journey is. Furthermore, these examples, together with Mustafa's own trajectory, are clear evidence of the existing connections and overlapping spatial dynamics between the southern corridor and the one connecting the Andean Region with Central American, Mexico and the United States (Álvarez Velasco, 2021; Miranda, 2021).

3.4.2 Venezuelan Caminantes and Trocheros

The unprecedented multiplication of Venezuelan transits has been decisive in shaping the southern corridor. The last massive migratory wave took shape about 2016 and was comprised mainly of impoverished working-class, and to a lesser extent professional, migrants (Gandini et al., 2019). In both cases migrating by land and by stretches: moving towards a first destination that may involve a subsequent outbound or return transit. Young Venezuelans, families, single mothers with their children, pregnant women, older men and women, and unaccompanied children and adolescents are hence moving back and forth through diverse circuits of (im)mobilities comprising the southern corridor in groups formed en route (Bolívar, 2021; Herrera et al., 2020).

Yasemar's case is illustrative. "Staying in Venezuela was no option. My plan is to get to Argentina to join my brother", she said. Though she departed alone, as for many Venezuelans, her transit experience has been collective: she joined an extended family in San Antonio del Táchira before crossing to Cucuta, Colombia. The majority of "*caminantes*" and "*trocheros*"—as Venezuelan migrants in transit are known—ensemble groups of migrants that later form spontaneous families in transit (Bolívar, 2021).

Yasemar said the members of the family she joined became her family en route: they shared food, they slept along the roads and in parks. By foot, by bus, and by "*pidiendo cola*," as hitchhiking is known among Venezuelans, they crossed the 3000 km separating Venezuela, Colombia, and Ecuador. They deployed survival strategies such as street vending and begging in the cities. They assembled and disassembled tents in parks or bus stations. "They cared about me. I felt protected and guided, because the route, jeez (*conchale*), is very tough," Yasemar reflected.

As various press reports have shown (Corredores Migratorios, 2021; Turkewitz & Herrera, 2020), spontaneous families give migrants needed protection against the hostile terrain they transit. Venezuelans traverse *por trocha* (by trail) and by foot, exposed to the violence of the road, accidents, local robbers, abuses of authority, and inclement weather. Yasemar remembered extreme weather on the stretch between Cucuta and Bucaramanga as well as predatory thugs on the Ecuador–Colombia border. "Because Venezuelans were stuck there, men surrounded us and

told us to pay them $50 USD to enter Ecuador or to give them our telephones in exchange. Those people try to profit from us and the police witness everything or benefit too."

Although paramilitary or cartel power formations do not have a widespread presence in the southern corridor as they do in the Andean Region-Central America-Mexico corridor (Álvarez Velasco, 2021), accounts of Venezuelan *trocheros* like Yasemar as well as press reports (Mella, 2018) confirm that they face abuses from authorities, assaults along the route, and confrontations with paramilitaries when entering Colombia. Amid waiting and crossing times, Venezuelan's transit in extreme conditions. Some cross the Paramo of Berlin in Colombia and others cross el Paramo de El Ángel in a difficult detour to reach Ecuador undetected by officials. Among those who continue to Peru, some cross the Amazonian jungle, and those who aim to reach Chile have no choice but to travel hostile stretches of the desert across Arica. Press reports (*Noticias Caracol*, 2018) and local voices confirm that Venezuelans have died on these irregularized paths.

In a Zoom interview, the leader of the Red Humanitaria, a network of eight private shelters operating across the Cucuta–Bucaramanga route, said, "When departing Pamplona to Bucaramanga, Venezuelans have to traverse the Paramo of Berlin. And on many occasions, they freeze, and bodies have been found." In fact, against the severity of the route and with the aim of providing aid to Venezuelan *caminantes*, the Red Humanitaria was created in 2018. In her words:

> By shelters, I mean private houses of caring poor families that opened their doors to provide food and a safe place. Venezuelans pack their life in a suitcase and carry it on their backs. That's all they have. For example, in Pamplona, Doña Maria receives on a daily basis 20 to 40 Venezuelans; she cares for and talks with them (Leader of the Red Humanitaria, personal communication, February, 2021).

Similarly, Doña Carmen has welcomed more than 12,000 Venezuelan *caminantes* to her modest house in El Juncal, a small town on the route to Tulcán-Ibarra-Quito in Ecuador, since 2018 (Corredores Migratorios, 2021). Yasemar knew about Doña Carmen: "Venezuelans, we tell each other what is happening on the route, the bad and especially the good. Through Facebook I knew about that and other places where people help us." In fact, despite the severity of the route, she remembered the solidarity of Venezuelans, of churches and of local people that provide shelter and care.

Outraged, the leader of the Red Humanitaria said: "It is unconceivable that the Colombian, Ecuadorean, Peruvian, and even the Chilean government cannot protect them and that international agencies provide only meals and tents on the road. There are migrant deaths on the roads. They need protection. We do what we can, but clearly it is not enough." Her critical reflection, together with testimonies like Yasemar's and those in the digital archives of Corredores Migratorios (2021) as well as recent reports of human rights organizations (Bolívar, 2021), confirm that in the face of Venezuelan transits through the corridor to the south, the lack of state protection prevails and humanitarian assistance, via IOM or UNHCR, is extremely insufficient. Beyond tents or food aid, as the local leader says, no other strategies have

been developed despite the millions of dollars of resources at stake (DW, 2020), and Venezuelans face increasing risks on the road, including risk of death. In fact, Venezuelans have also tried their luck transiting to the Caribbean, particularly to Trinidad and Tobago and Curaçao. Because these countries have imposed visa restrictions, Venezuelan mobilities from the southern corridor to Caribbean countries take place only via boat. The paramo and the desert take migrant lives, and so does the Caribbean Sea: press reports have also confirmed the sinking of small boats and drowning of Venezuelans (Otis, 2019).

It took Yasemar a month and a half to traverse Colombia, mostly by foot. *Por trocha* and paying $20 USD to a local guide in Tulcán, she entered Ecuador. After working a couple of months in Quito, when she reached Huaquillas in mid-March 2020, she learned that the border was closed. The pandemic had hit the continent and her transit inevitably change. Thus, she returned to Quito to wait. When she recalled her journey, she said she should have left Venezuela earlier: "My brother left in 2018. In three months, he arrived in Buenos Aires. Now everything is much more complicated and dangerous for us."

Effectively, things have gotten worse for Venezuelan *trocheros* and *caminantes* during the pandemic: borders have closed and militarized and the South American recession has left them virtually with no income. Just as Haitians and African migrants have decided to reverse the route from Brazil to Peru and Ecuador, Venezuelans have done the same, this time returning to Venezuela, traversing the already known route, dangers, and hostility. On arrival, some have decided to stay in Venezuela, others have recommenced their transits southwards (Turkewitz & Herrera, 2020), and still others have opted to transit from the Andean Region to the north to reach the U.S., something that once again confirms the existing links between migratory corridors in the Americas that I mentioned earlier (Rueda, 2021).

In the case of Yasemar, she waits in Quito until she can resume her transit southwards. Her waiting time is not easy: she is undocumented, with almost no income, surviving amid the pandemic; yet, she said: "we walk with hope; it's the only thing we have left. My hope is to reach Buenos Aires. Our life has been going back and forth, *searching for a place to live.*" Her case, as well as the other five fragments, give evidence of how prolonged and shortened waiting times (in different places) and crossing times (through different borders and places) configure the heterogeneous, uncertain and unpredictable experience of the migrant transits through South America.

The six fragments confirm that the confluence of dissatisfaction and emotional burdens, a sudden contextual change, unexpected changes in migration policies such as the re-imposition of visas, prolonged waiting times for a state's responses, or a sudden window of opportunity to migrate changes the rhythm of their transits accelerating or pausing them, or even changing their direction northwards or southwards – confirming one the one hand, how circuits of (im)mobilities comprise this migratory corridor provoking spatial interconnections between northbound and southbound migratory corridors across the Americas.

Those fragments also capture the complexity of undocumented transits across the southern corridor, showing the diversity of their causes, temporalities, and ways

of organization. They disclose that far from being passive subjects, "victims," or "helpless" people, migrants in transit do not cease to activate strategies to sustain their mobilities: they move with *coyotes*, in groups, in family, with families invented along the way. The rhythm of those mobilities is differentiated because it depends on the contingencies that they might face while en route, from confronting diverse forms of control to risk of death. As seen, military, police, humanitarian, and illegal practices derived from *coyoterismo* co-exist around their transits southwards, as well as the dangers on route when crossing the jungle, the paramo, the desert, or the sea. In fact, across the southern corridor, the production of migrant deaths (Stierl, 2016) is a direct, lethal consequence of the heterogenous South American border regime.

These fragments show that against the risk of death, the migrant struggle has redoubled. Their transit experiences are punctuated with practices of care and solidarity materialized in sharing housing, migratory knowledge, caring and protecting themselves when crossing borders, confronting corrupt police, dealing with the pandemic, or facing racism and xenophobia. Solidarity en route radically contrasts with state hostility and inaction to protect migrants in transit across the southern corridor. In fact, solidarity among migrants and with local populations is a nodal element of the politics of life to contest the necro politics of migration (Varela Huerta, 2017) also present across the southern corridor.

3.5   Conclusions

The tension between mobility—embodied in thousands of undocumented regional and extra-continental migrants in transit—and control is transforming the migrant geography across the Americas. This type of migration provokes spatial disputes and transforms places while articulating them, shaping the southern corridor. As seen through this multi-scalar analysis, this recent spatial formation takes part in a systemic form of global control of mobility where state, military, humanitarian, and para-state practices co-exist to govern the mobility of migrants and asylum seekers.

Over the last decade and regardless of whether South American governments have been right- or left-aligned or of their progressive regulatory frameworks, state control mechanisms have redoubled with the intention of governing the mobility of a global population of impoverished migrants and asylum seekers. The southern corridor is hence part of the "re-zoning of global space", as William Walters (2010) asserts: a direct effect of the lethal and hegemonic border regime targeting the mobility of certain populations on a global scale. South American countries thus enter the third decade of the twenty-first century spatially reconfigured by the mobility of a diverse global diaspora that has no signs of ceasing, but rather of increasing as a product of complex systemic contradictions, even more today in the light of the pandemic.

Capturing the complexities of migrants' mobilities and its spatial effects is not any easy research task. Much less when it takes place via irregularized conditions

and through increasingly hostile terrains. Turning to ethnography seems to provide an illumining path to capture those complexities. Anna Tsing asserts that "the point of ethnography is to learn how to think about a situation together with one's informants" (2015, p. 9). She insists that due to the heterogeneity of space and time, and the precarity and unpredictability of our current situation, we need to reopen our imaginations as part of a polyphonic assemblage (constituted by multiple and diverse subjects and objects) to become aware of the rhythms of lively movement that survive in the ruins of our present (2015, pp. 23–25). By placing our attention on the scale of the body, on the migrant experience and resistance, it is possible to underscore, as Tsing suggests, that landscapes and society are being transformed by subtle forms of solidarity and commonality that emerge in the ruins. The challenge for thinking throughout precarity is to understand the ways multiple assemblages are constantly created and transformed to sustain life (2015, pp. 41–42).

As seen throughout this chapter, the spatial formation of the southern corridor occurs whilst migrants wander between hostility and solidarity, waiting and crossing times, and an incessant struggle against a reinforced border regime in the search for a decent and safe place in which to dwell. Their mobile lives unfold through intolerable precariousness, a direct product of perverse contemporary neoliberalism. Their collective transits are the contested road to resist and preserve their lives, confirming that freedom of movement is a constant spatial struggle for living other possible lives; a struggle that today is reshaping South America, and the Americas as a whole.

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