UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

Resiste Gozando (Resist with Joy): Creative and Embodied Responses to Weaponized Waiting at the US-Mexico Border

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

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by

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The thesis of Leslie Meyer is approved, and is acceptable in quality and Form for publication on microfilm and electronically.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION

To ‘La Calocha,’ Merengue,’ ‘Afrobeats,’ and all the other unfathomably courageous asylum seekers who so generously taught me the art of resisting with joy

To the staff and volunteers at Casa de Esperanza,* for educating me and welcoming me into your beautiful community of activists

To Judith Cabrera de la Rocha: rebel, wordsmith, and creator of the hashtag #resistegozando

To the members of my all-female committee for modeling and training me in compassionate, feminist, community engaged scholarship

To my parents, for your unconditional love and support, and for encouraging me to use my education for social justice

To my dance teachers: Camila, Paula, and Luiza, for guiding me home to my body

To Paulina, my dear friend, hermana, and role model, without whom none of this would have been possible

This thesis es de todes

Then a woman said, Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow.
And he answered:
Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.
And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.
And how else can it be?
The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Kahlil Gibran
Excerpt from the poem, "On Joy and Sorrow"

Why would a Black woman
need a fish
to love? Why did she need a
flash of red, living, in the
corner of her eye? As if she could love nothing
up close, but had to step
away from it, come
back to drop a few seeds
& let it grab
on to her, as if it caught
her
on some hook that couldn't
hurt. Why did she need a fish
to write of, a red
thorn or, among the thorns, that
flower? What does her love have to do
with five hundred years of
sorrow, then joy coming up like a
small breath, a
bubble?

Toi Derricotte
"Joy is an act of resistance"

No one
can end
suffering
except
through
dance.

Alice Walker
"A Poem Traveled Down my Arm"

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Resiste Gozando (Resist with Joy): Creative and Embodied Responses to Weaponized Waiting at the US-Mexico Border

by

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This thesis explores how asylum seekers forced to wait at the US-Mexico border resist state violence through dance, theater, and other creative practices. By examining recent developments in anti-asylum policies, I identify waiting as one weapon – among many others – the state deploys to fortify its power and keep "undesired" bodies out. I find that the dominant framework for understanding waiting, which focuses on suffering, only partially captures the realities of life for asylum seekers who endure weaponized waiting at the border. Through their collective creation of art, asylum seekers reframe waiting, challenge state violence, endure suffering, and build new relations of care for themselves. I then consider how these creative practices are incorporated into *Resiste Gozando* (Resist with Joy), a small-scale political project emerging at a migrant shelter in Tijuana. In doing so, I hope to shed light on the affective complexity of waiting and the conditions of possibility for resistance, opening up new pathways for researching and supporting asylum seekers' well-being as they wait at the US-Mexico border and beyond.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

OVERVIEW AND SIGNIFICANCE: THE VIOLENCE OF WAITING

Since November 2018, tens of thousands of asylum seekers have arrived at the US-Mexico border, most of them fleeing gangs in Central America and Mexico but others from all over the world. Escaping the multi-sided violence of criminal organizations, the state, and intimate partner abuse in their countries of origin, more than 90% go on to endure state and/or cartel violence on the journey north (MMFRP & Al Otro Lado, 2021). Then, they get to the US-Mexico border and wait. This is where I met them – at my fieldwork site, Casa de Esperanza,* a shelter and community cultural center seeking to build spaces of care, creativity, and political mobilization for those who find themselves stranded in a border zone rife with both US and Mexican violence. This thesis asks: how do asylum seekers experience and resist the temporality and violence of waiting?

To answer this question, it's necessary to consider how the US government uses waiting – and the border itself – to (re)produce the subordination of racialized asylum seekers from the Global South. Examining the effects of recent anti-asylum policies, I identify waiting as one weapon, among many others, the US state deploys to fortify its power and keep "undesired" bodies out. I argue that while waiting, asylum seekers experience a degree of extreme physical and psychological violence that they would not have endured had they been admitted promptly for processing in the United States. I refer to this strategy of deterring and blocking asylum seekers from entering the US by making them wait in Mexico, as weaponized waiting.

However, my fieldwork has taught me that the framework for waiting that focuses on suffering only partially captures the realities of life for asylum seekers who visit Casa de Esperanza. Amid all the darkness, there are moments of light which enable them to survive, carry

on, and sometimes even thrive. The primary aim of this thesis is to identify and describe some of the conditions that create light in the darkness for asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting. I approach this aim by exploring the various creative practices which asylum seekers use to endure the torture of weaponized waiting, including making music, dancing and writing poetry. I also analyze the way in which activists at Casa de Esperanza attempt to convert these creative practices into a small-scale political project of resistance, which they call *Resiste Gozando*, and which I translate to Resist with Joy. Ultimately, I find that the private creation of art and the public performance of joy for a broader public, has important psychological and political implications which challenge logics of domination.

The point of this analysis is not to diminish the suffering produced by waiting. Rather, by framing asylum seekers' waiting at the US-Mexico border as a form of state violence, and by observing the complex ways in which asylum seekers simultaneously submit to and resist its power over their bodies and minds while "waiting for" and "waiting out," this thesis aims to shed light on the affective complexity and creatively generative possibilities of waiting, opening up new avenues for researching and supporting asylum seekers' strategies of well-being as they wait in Tijuana and beyond.

SOCIOPOLITICAL CONTEXT: ASYLUM IN THE U.S.

Who are the People Waiting at the US-Mexico Border? Deconstructing the Term, 'Asylum Seeker'

In this section I will explore some of the debates around, and the analytical and political implications of, different ways of categorizing and defining people as migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and related categories. This is important because the effects of the policies that have people waiting at the border – or weaponized waiting – are but one technique of violent coercion

that target racialized *asylum seekers* specifically. I situate these policies among what David FitzGerald calls the "architecture of repulsion" of asylum seekers (Fitgerald, 2019).

The criteria originally used to distinguish refugees from migrants is that the former are people who leave for political rather than economic reasons (Simpson, 1939). The 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, Article (A)(2), defines a refugee as a person who, "owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it" (UNHCR, 2011).

The criteria for defining refugees and asylees both derive from this same legal definition. The difference is that, to receive refugee status in the U.S., one must first be selected for a resettlement slot and vetted while still abroad, whereas asylum seekers make a claim that they are a refugee after arriving "uninvited" to the U.S. (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018, p. 381). If their claims are accepted, they are granted asylum.

One way to think of asylum seekers is that they are refugees-in waiting; they are waiting on the state to recognize their claims as legitimate. Waiting is therefore inherent to the condition of being an asylum seeker. As I argue in this thesis, their waiting has in recent years been deliberately prolonged and weaponized to keep them from accessing the possibility of rights and protection in the United States.

Why do some people apply for refugee status while others apply for asylum? Obtaining a refugee resettlement slot is exceedingly rare. For 99% of people seeking shelter from repression

or violence or deprivation, arriving "uninvited" is the only way to receive protection (FitzGerald, 2019, p. 7). But, it's not easy to reach U.S. territory. The U.S., like other countries in the Global North, severely limits spontaneous arrivals of asylum seekers by enforcing strict border controls that effectively "extend" the physical border into adjoining nations, thereby severely limiting spontaneous arrivals (Fitzgerald, 2019). Fitzgerald describes the current practices of wealthier nations designed to discourage and repel would-be asylum seekers from deciding to come to the border, such as limiting access to crossing the physical border consists of a variety of physical barriers (walls, razor wire) and non-physical barriers, such as passport, visa and travel restrictions such as preventing airlines from allowing passengers to board without proper identification and permission from the State (Fitzgerald 2019, pp. 7 - 9), which would otherwise be the easiest and safest option to apply for asylum. There are also publicity campaigns as part of the architecture of repulsion to keep potential asylum seekers home. For example, Kamala Harris, on her first foriegn trip as Vice President in June 2021, visited Guatemala and delivered this message bluntly. She said, "I want to be clear to folks in the region who are thinking about making that dangerous trek to the United States-Mexico border: Do not come. Do not come. If you come to our border, you will be turned back." Notably, in the BBC's (2021) coverage of this press conference, they misleadingly referred to Harris' message of deterrence as being directed at "illegal immigrants" rather than asylum seekers. (Nor did they mention that her statement runs contrary to the rights guaranteed by the *Immigration and Nationality Act* (INA), which allows individuals who have fled their home countries because of persecution on account of their race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion to apply for asylum or other humanitarian protections in the United States) (U.S. Congress, 1964). The asylum seekers who I met at Casa de Esperanza made the long journey by land to the US-Mexico

border despite such publicity campaigns and other forms of remote control, only to find themselves subjected to yet another, and novel, non-physical barrier in the architecture of repulsion: weaponized waiting.

In politics and the media, racialized people arriving at the US-Mexico border fleeing violence are treated differently than white "refugees" arriving from Ukraine. In a Google search with the words, "Ukrainians Tijuana" on April 22, 2022, the first 10 news articles that show up all describe Ukrainians in Tijuana as "refugees." It's as if in the public eye, Ukrainians don't have to wait to be considered legitimate refugees, whereas Central Americans and others do. In a Google search for "Hondurans Tijuana" on the same day, Hondurans are described as either "migrants" or "asylum seekers" as opposed to "refugees" in 9 out of 10 of the first news articles. More significantly, though I believe not incidentally, Ukrainians aren't being subjected to weaponized waiting. The discrepancy in the media's use of the term, "refugee" could be partly due to the fact the "classic refugee" was a (European) refugee. Despite the extreme chronic violence in Central American countries like Honduras, those countries are not considered to be at war. (This dichotomy, between war/peace, is not so clear cut, either.) It's also important to note that the Ethiopians and Cameroonians who are currently being subjected to weaponized waiting at the border are, like Ukrainians, fleeing brutal wars, yet relatively little media coverage in English has been dedicated to those wars, nor to describing their plight as "refugees."

The approach to classifying persons as refugees was shaped in part by post-World War II political thinking (FitzGerald and Arar, 2018). The focus in this definition is whether persons or groups suffered violations of political or civil rights. Adding violations of social rights, it has been asserted, would have undermined laissez-faire liberalism (Chimni, 2009; Karatani 2005, Long 2013; Skran & Daughtry, 2007). Karantani (2005) highlights the outsized influence of the

United States and the UK on shaping the current refugee regime complex, enabling both powers to “calculate their needs, both economically and politically” (p. 522) in selecting the refugees they allowed in. For example, Andrew Wolman (2005) writes that Japan has been reluctant to accept refugees from China for fear of offending Beijing. Another example is how during the Cold War, the US favored refugees from the Soviet Union in order to reinforce a message about the repressive brutality of communism. A similar bias lingered until recently with the "wet foot dry foot" policy that put Cuban refugees in a relatively advantageous position over other Latin American refugees. We can see political bias, and racism, play out in asylum policy today; as of this writing, the US-Mexico border is closed to asylum seekers from all countries of the world due to the public health order Title 42, with the exception of (white) Ukranians who are fleeing an invasion by the US’ geopolitical adversary, Russia. It’s politically expedient for the US government to allow some people access to the asylum system. But what to do with all those “unwanted” Black and Brown victims of violence and war who want protection? The effect of the policies that have tried to respond to that question, has been to make them wait in conditions so difficult that they might give up or be killed before they have the chance to build a successful asylum case.

Considering the complexity of the terms (im)migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, and the artificiality and inadequacy of the distinctions between them, it’s not surprising that the terms are often confused and conflated in public discourse. After all, their connotations vary depending on the location, context, and language being spoken. At times the conflation of terms can be deliberate and sinister, however, especially when they are described as “illegal immigrants,” obscuring the US government's blatant disregard for the legally enshrined rights of racialized asylum seekers.

In Chimni's view (2009), the blurring of boundaries between human rights law, refugee law, and humanitarian law has led to an erosion of rights for refugees, as the UNHCR has expanded its mandate and therefore moved away from its principle function of providing protection. Indeed, there are many instances where the blurring of categories (if not "regimes") is a strategy employed by the anti-immigrant right to demonize refugees and to evade international obligations to them. For example, The Department of Homeland Security (DHS), incorrectly implying that crossing the border to apply for asylum is a crime, claims on its website that the immigration system has been overwhelmed by a surge in "illegal and inadmissible aliens," and that the Migrant Protection Protocols, by sending asylum seekers back to Mexico, will help "discourage individuals from attempting illegal entry and making false claims to stay in the U.S." (DHS, 2019), in language that conflates asylum seekers and "illegal immigrants," echoing the BBC's coverage of Kamala Harris' speech to "illegal immigrants."

On the other hand, Holzer (2013) shows how in refugee camps, refugee activists themselves blur the lines between different legal regimes in order to achieve rights. Alienated from local and regional law, the "Concerned Women" activists appeal to their rights under international refugee law as well as other international human rights regimes, without making distinctions between them. I have observed a similar phenomenon in my fieldwork among self-organizing "*migrantes"* who appeal to international refugee law, US asylum law, and international human rights law, to establish solidarity, articulate their needs, and demand their real and perceived rights, a process I will describe in Chapter 1.

For people fleeing persecution and violence, applying for asylum and being recognized as a refugee may be their only chance at living in a country that will grant them the rights, security, and resources they need to live a dignified life. However, the refugee label, more so than other

categories, can be stigmatizing, as they are often framed as passive and traumatized victims by humanitarian organizations, the media, and the legal system. By reducing them to victims needing rescue, a critical examination of the political and social factors that led to their displacement is too easily overlooked. Regardless of which labels are applied, displaced people are more than just victims. In Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis, I explore how art and protest are used by asylum seekers to create nuanced self-representation of their migration experience, countering overly simplistic or false narratives in the media that tend to depict them as either helpless victims or potentially dangerous threats.

Politically and analytically, it may be prudent at times to distinguish between the categories in order to ensure that rights are upheld; however, researchers must always keep in mind that the classifications are artificial and should not be decontextualized from histories of colonization, violence, and globalization. From a sociological point of view, movement of people takes place on a continuum of compulsion and so the particular classification is not as important as the explanations of why people move and what goes into their decision-making. As long as extreme global inequality and neoliberal extrativisism remain the norm, and as climate change caused in large part by "developed nations" makes life increasingly unlivable in much of the "underdeveloped" world, people will continue to be displaced by a complex set of social, economic and environmental factors, thus rendering the distinctions between different categories of migrants even less useful. So, although I write in Chapter 1 of this thesis about how the policies that leave people waiting at the border target *asylum seekers* as part of a larger architecture or repulsion, it's important to acknowledge that these policies are part of a larger militarized project at the border to keep out poor and racialized migrants of all categories. Policies leading to asylum seekers' weaponized waiting have emerged simultaneously with a

huge array of other racist and restrictive immigration policies such as the Trump administration's termination of DACA[1], the Muslim Ban, the declaration of an national emergency in order to build a border wall in 2019, and capping refugee admissions to the US at 18,000, the lowest number in the history of the program and just a fraction of the 110,000 President Obama stated as the cap in 2016, among many other policies.

For analytical purposes, I will refer to my informants in this thesis as asylum seekers; however, they usually, though not always, self-define as migrants. While it's undeniable that not all people on the move require the same amount or urgency of protection, it's important to pay attention to how these categories are being used and why; and be wary of claims that the categories of asylum seekers, refugees, and migrants are fundamentally distinct.

The Policies that Created Weaponized Waiting

Migrant shelters like Casa de Esperanza were meant to be temporary spaces of refuge for asylum seekers in transit to the United States, providing somewhere to stay for a few days or weeks. But, many of the asylum seekers in my study have been living in migrant shelters or other temporary housing arrangements (such as makeshift encampments) at the border for months or years due to three recent policies:

1) Metering, or artificially restricting the number of people who could request asylum at US ports of entry each day. Immigration officers stationed at the border were instructed to inform asylum seekers that the ports of entry were full – regardless of whether they expressed credible fear. The Obama administration actually introduced the metering policy in 2016, in response to the arrival of thousands of Black Haitian asylum seekers at the border, but quickly repealed it

[1] The Supreme Court vacated the rescission on June 18, 2020, but USCIS (2022) has refused to accept new applications.

after it sparked controversy. The Trump administration reinstated it in 2018, and it went on to become a hallmark of that administration's anti-asylum legacy. Metering created a chaotic situation in which asylum seekers were camping outside the ports of entry on the Mexican side of the border, not knowing when they would be called to present themselves to immigration authorities. To manage the chaos, Mexican authorities, civil society groups, and asylum seekers created informal waitlists. In Tijuana, the waitlist was referred to as "the notebook" and was managed by Grupo Beta – Mexico's 'humanitarian' branch of its immigration policing apparatus – with support from volunteer asylum seekers. Although they were not given a specific appointment, people on the notebook in Tijuana could expect to wait 4.5-5 months before being allowed to make an asylum claim (UCSD, 2019), during which period many were living in makeshift encampments, shelters, and other precarious situations. Despite the closure of the border in March 2020, at which point CBP stopped processing asylum requests at points of entry, over 20,000 asylum seekers remained on waitlists in eight Mexican border cities as of August 2021.

2) Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) — a misnomer, is often referred to instead as the Remain in Mexico program and was implemented in 2019. Once asylum seekers finally made their way to the top of the metering waitlist, more than 70,000 of them were placed in MPP and turned back again to Mexico to wait for the duration of their US immigration proceedings. Children made up about 30 percent of asylum seekers placed in the program, based on data from records given to the Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) by US immigration courts (HRW, 2022). In addition to leaving asylum seekers in limbo for years while often homeless, jobless, and without protection in dangerous Mexican border cities, MPP made it far more difficult for asylum seekers to receive a fair and meaningful review of their claims, and

access to U.S. immigration lawyers was nearly impossible. The DHS, in the same January 2019 statement referenced above, declared that MPP would "provide a safer and more orderly process that will **discourage individuals from attempting illegal entry and making false claims to stay in the U.S**., and allow more resources to be dedicated to individuals who legitimately qualify for asylum." This claim highlights how MPP has been described by DHS as a policy of deterrence (or in their words, discouragement) of asylum seekers. It contradicts evidence that almost no asylum seekers who were allowed to remain in the US during the duration of their immigration proceedings became "fugitives." Furthermore, as Haas (2012) observed, as asylum seekers used to wait in the US for a decision from the Court (ultimately, in most cases, a denial of their asylum claim), they were not cleverly taking advantage of the system, but were rather enduring barriers such as lack of access to employment, and the psychological uncertainty, anxiety, and distress of protracted waiting – struggles that have been made even worse by making them wait in Mexico instead of the U.S. MPP did not eliminate limbo for "legitimate" asylum seekers but instead made the conditions of limbo for all racialized asylum seekers far more perilous. Recognizing the mounting evidence of MPP's harm, President Biden's administration officially terminated the policy in February 2021, however, it reinstated it at the end of 2021 due to a judicial mandate. While they claim to have their hands tied, they ironically decided to expand the program to include asylum seekers from the entire Western hemisphere, in a move that will negatively impact Haitian asylum seekers who were previously excluded from MPP due to their not being from a Spanish speaking country.

3) Title 42 was the last and most far-reaching policy contributing to weaponized waiting to be implemented in recent years. In March 2020, with the onset of the pandemic, the Trump administration closed the metering wait lists for asylum interviews, suspended all MPP asylum

hearings, and invoked Title 42, an obscure public health order that grants the "the right to refuse certain persons into the United States from countries where a quarantinable communicable disease exists" (CDC, 2020). This restricted all travel into the US from Mexico deemed non-essential, and granted US Customs and Border Patrol the authority to immediately expel asylum seekers who cross the U.S.-Mexico border without the hearing to which many of them would otherwise be entitled. The Biden administration has maintained this order in place, which means that since the Covid-19 pandemic began, there has been virtually no way to request asylum at the US-Mexico border, except in very rare cases that qualify under the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (approximately 0.3% of those expelled under Title 42) (UNHCR, 2021), or if you're Ukrainian. As of this writing, nearly every asylum seeker who was on the metering waitlist in March 2020, or who has arrived at the border since then, has therefore been forced to wait indefinitely in Mexico for Title 42 to be lifted, or in the case of non-Mexicans or Central Americans, risk being deported to their home country. The only exception has been for Ukrainian asylum seekers, who as of March 2022 have been formally granted relief from Title 42. In November 2021 the US government finally lifted restrictions on non-essential travel for Mexicans with tourist visas, thereby still excluding asylum seekers, a move which devastated the hopes of those asylum seekers who were still holding out hope for some relief under the Biden Administration, which had run a deceptively pro-asylum election campaign. Title 42 remained in full effect for well over a year after the Biden administration assumed office; only on April 1st, 2022, did the administration announce that it would begin phasing out the program over a period of 2 months.

These three policies have left asylum seekers in a torturous limbo in Mexico, and have failed to reduce the backlog in the U.S. Immigration Court system, which, by the end of December 2021 had reached 1,596,193 — the largest backlog in history (TRAC, 2022).

RESEARCH SETTING

Located in downtown Tijuana, a stone's throw from one of the busiest land border crossings in the world, lies Casa de Esperanza. It didn't begin as a shelter; it started in 2012 as a small volunteer effort by a group of young Mexican feminist activists who, wanting to support the migrant community in some way, decided to start teaching computer classes. In 2015, with the arrival of thousands of Haitian asylum seekers to the city, it expanded to be a cultural organization hosting art exhibits, concerts, and more by displaced Haitian and African artists. In 2019, responding to the high levels of homelessness and food insecurity among the families who were a part of the project, it finally became a shelter, providing beds and meals for up to 40 parents and children on the second floor of the building (making it a relatively small shetler, for Tijuana), while operating downstairs a cultural and community center that offers legal services, Spanish and English language classes, cultural festivals and more to the wider community. Now, the majority of staff members are asylum seekers (or former asylum seekers) themselves, who originally came to live or access services at Casa de Esperanza, before becoming active volunteers and eventually paid community organizers.

From outside, Casa de Esperanza is an unassuming, 2-story brown building made of concrete and protected by a black steel gate at the entrance. One November day, spirals of barbed wire, anomalously laced with orange *cempasuchiles,* or marigold flowers, protrude from the top of the gate overhead. The barbed wire isn't meant to be an additional security precaution –

although this is a street where I've been warned not to walk alone at night – but is part of an art installation called, "*Florecer"* (To Bloom), created by a local artist and volunteer, Inés Solano. *Florecer* was inaugurated on Day of the Dead, a day when Mexico explodes with music, dancing, color, and joy, to remember and celebrate deceased loved ones and ancestors. The vibrant color and scent of the marigolds, which are typically placed on altars and around graves, guide the spirits of the deceased to their families for the celebration, and then back to their graves once it's over.

Florecer is a tribute to the asylum seekers who have died at the militarized US-Mexico border. Its symbolism reflects the paradoxical nature of a holiday meant to celebrate life and death: barbed wire, a material used in prisons, concentration camps and at the militarized border as a form of social control – sometimes resulting in death – juxtaposed with life-affirming flowers. It's also a fitting allegory for Casa de Esperanza's approach to care, which prioritizes opportunities for joy for asylum seekers experiencing the violence of weaponized waiting.

Inside, Casa de Esperanza is painted with colorful murals. Artwork by asylum seekers lines the walls. One corner has been transformed into a play area for children. On this day, several children who live at the shelter are busy at play. A little boy, standing behind a fake red cash register, is pretending to be a store clerk, ringing up a petite customer's basket of plastic fruit. Around them, a toddler is swimming in a clown costume much too big for her; another, older girl is squeezed into a princess costume that's much too small. The princess signals for me to come over and put a yellow wig on my head. This causes a brief eruption of laughter before the children move on to a new and better distraction: hurling themselves onto big, cushy foam blocks. It strikes me that this pleasant scene could be occurring anywhere in the world. There's

nothing peculiar or somber about it, nothing that would hint at the very real and ongoing traumatic experiences these children have lived, but which don't define them.

In another corner are speakers, microphones, a guitar, drum sets, and other instruments piled together. No day is complete without at least one serenade, karaoke performance, band practice, dance circle, birthday party, or some other, usually spontaneous, burst of creativity by staff and residents. By creating art, and hosting a space of creation, Casa de Esperanza brings people closer together and lets them tell (or show) their own rich stories as humans. As they do, they begin to reframe waiting, challenge state violence, and build new relations of care and politics for themselves.

Standing outside Casa de Esperanza, to my left, a long line of Black refugees forms outside, waiting to enter the health clinic which shares a space with Casa de Esperanza, and where several of the people who live at the shelter are employed. To my right, two houseless Mexican men sit on the sidewalk under an arch awning, taking refuge from the intense Mexican sun. The aroma of fried chicken and plantains emanates from the Haitian restaurant next door; quickly dissipated by a light coastal breeze. The pleasant smell is replaced by the smoky exhaust fumes of a motorcycle roaring by, apparently unconcerned with the speed limit or the multiple cop cars parked outside the blue and white police station just across the street.

Looking up through the flowers and barbed wire, I see a woman I know, an undocumented asylum seeker from Honduras, standing outisde on the second floor of the building, where families live. She smiles and waves at me as she hangs her laundry on a clothesline to dry. Next to her, a large cloth banner sways in the wind, with the words, "Defend

Asylum" written in black paint, facing the police station across the street. Here is a place where resistance is quotidian, where mere existence is a crime.

Pamela, the director of Casa de Esperanza, once told me, "People ask me if we feel safer having the cops across the street. I tell them, no! On the contrary! We'd feel safer without them, especially because so many migrants have been harassed by the police." Pamela's distrust was further cemented when, one afternoon in March 2020, a stray police bullet, fired during a car chase, pierced through the window of Casa de Esperanza's offices. Fortunately no staff were in the otherwise bustling office that day because of the COVID-19 lockdown, which had just begun. But, it terrified the families living in the shelter upstairs. In video footage of the incident, children are playing jump rope inside the shelter. When they hear the screech of tires outside, they run to the window to see the commotion, then collapse to the floor at the sound of the gunshot and the bullet breaking through the window downstairs. Mothers drop to the floor too, crawling as fast as they can to cover their children's bodies with their own. For many, the incident triggered memories of gun violence back home. Pamela commented, "Many here fled violence. One woman couldn't stop shaking — she said it felt like home in Cameroon." In response, Casa de Esperanza filed a formal complaint against the police. Pamela noted that she thought they would never fire their guns so gratuitously in front of a school or daycare for Mexican children, and that in doing so they exhibited the police's general disregard for the lives of asylum seeking families and children. The stray bullet was a reminder that, even though Casa de Esperanza strives to be a refuge for asylum seekers, violence is all around, and has a way of seeping (or shattering) in. The staff view police violence as being interconnected with other forms of violence – of the militarized border, of the conditions asylum seekers are fleeing, of colonialism and the ongoing exploitation of the Global South. Operating in this context, Casa de

Esperanza attempts to resist the logics of domination by incentivizing public iterations of asylum seekers' everyday creative practices, through their project, *resiste gozando.* Casa de Esperanza is a space of celebration, but also (and via) resistance to violence.

METHODS OF DATA COLLECTION

My research draws on 30 months of patchwork ethnographic fieldwork at Casa de Esperanza in Tijuana, between November 2019 and April 2022, with asylum seekers and paid and volunteer community organizers and artists. Patchwork ethnography, like traditional fieldwork (Faubion 2009; Pigg 2013; Adams, Burke, & Whitmarsh 2014), requires long-term commitment, language proficiency, contextual knowledge, and slow thinking on behalf of the researcher (Günel, Varma, & Watanabe, 2020). However, it reinvisions fieldwork to encompass methodologies such as short-term trips to the field, remote research, and the collection of fragmentary yet rigorous data (ibid). My fieldwork took place in large part during the COVID-19 pandemic, and so was conducted partly in person and partly online (from March 2020 - June 2021), with the help of a variety of online tools for communication, such as Zoom, WhatsApp, and Facebook. Although there were physical constraints and temporal gaps in my data collection process, patchwork ethnography conceptualizes these "limitations" as openings for new insights (ibid) that are worthy of analysis. For example, the challenges I faced connecting over Zoom and WhatsApp with residents at the shelter, who had extremely poor internet connection and limited cell data, shed light on the impacts of internet inequality for access to education, entertainment, long-distance relationships, and other social aspects of life during the pandemic. On the other hand, the impossibility of meeting in person with asylum seekers and activists opened up new pathways for long-distance and cross-border relationships, mobilization, and research, such as

when asylum seekers stuck in various border cities came together over Zoom during the pandemic, to organize a binational public forum to demand an end to anti-asylum policies. (I describe this event in further detail in Chapter 2.)

I draw on long-term engagement, community organizing, and collaborative research through participant observation. I co-constructed knowledge with my interlocutors as I accompanied them in their daily routines at the shelter, as they planned and participated in protests and cultural events, in their online English classes which I taught, and in dance classes which I sometimes coordinated and other times participated in as a fellow dance student, and in Casa de Esperanza's pre-production and filming of a *telenovela,* or fictional, soap opera style drama based on the real life stories of migrant children and their families as they struggle to access education in Mexico.

I also personally carried out 25 in-depth, semi-structured ethnographic interviews with key participants, and analyzed public testimonials by asylum seekers and community organizers in virtual forums, webinars, radio interviews, and cultural events. I analyzed transcripts of an additional 20 interviews with asylum seekers conducted by fellow student-researchers in the University of California, San Diego's Mexican Migration Field Research Program (MMFRP) between January 2020 and March 2022, and 6 additional interviews by researchers from a team of immigration researchers from The Rights and Mobilities Network (ReDeM) in the summer of 2021, who were a part of the *telenovela* project. The majority of participants came from El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and Haiti. Others came from Ethiopia, Cameroon, Ghana, Venezuela, Colombia, Guatemala, and Cuba.

Hollan (1997) observes that contemporary ethnography is often focused on only one of three questions regarding subjective experience: (1) what people *say* about their subjective

experiences (2) what people *do* that reveals their subjective experience, or (3) how people *embody* their subjective experience (p.224). My combination of research methods attended to all three questions.

REFLECTION ON POSITIONALITY

I took 3 years to complete my master's degree – a full year longer than I had originally planned, before the pandemic altered my trajectory. Over that period I slowly built relationships, often in the form of close friendships, with the asylum seekers and advocates who participated in this study. I developed and revised theories about resistance in collaboration with them, and recorded my field notes and ideas about weaponized waiting over many hours spent waiting by myself in the long pedestrian lines at the U.S. port of entry, after my frequent trips to the field. In contrasting tempo, assaults on the asylum system over this period of 3 years were so common and happened so fast that I had to constantly revise the policy sections of this thesis. On the umpteenth revision, which I am currently typing out this Friday April 2, 2022, news has just broken that the Biden Administration will finally be winding down the expulsions of asylum seekers under Title 42. While this feels like the beginning of an end to a particularly violent era of US asylum policy, what remains of the asylum system, even without Title 42, is still more restrictive than ever before Trump took office in 2016.

Over the time spent writing my thesis, my positionality in relation to asylum seekers, volunteers, and staff at Casa de Esperanza has shifted significantly. In the beginning, as a white, American, middle class graduate student with the privilege to be able to legally cross the border, and who speaks Spanish as a second language, I was effectively a total outsider. It was not that rare, however, to see other white middle class American "outsiders" at the shelter. Doctors,

lawyers, students, journalists, and artists, and volunteers were sometimes around, as well as members of the San Diego community who would attend Casa de Esperanza's cultural events for fun. Sometimes I was perceived by asylum seekers as a lawyer or someone who could help them with their asylum case, and so they would frame their experiences using language they might for an immigration lawyer or judge, detailing the 'persecution' they had faced at home, and the "human right to asylum" they were being denied at the border. I tried to disavow them of this image of me by stressing that I was a student who wanted to learn from their expertise about how U.S. policies were affecting asylum seekers.

At that time, my only personal connection with the staff was with Pamela, the co-founder and director of the shelter, who was my colleague in the master's program. As I became more involved as a student researcher and volunteer, the close-knit staff and core volunteers at the shelter became almost like a family to me. This granted me easy access to interviews and facilitated countless informal conversations and opportunities for participant observation. It also meant that asylum seekers were more open and trusting with me, who they understood to be an advocate, although I shifted from being a "lawyer" to being a "psychologist" for some; (another role from which I tried to explicitly distance myself).

I assume that, because of my frequent presence as a volunteer, and my close friendship with the director, some asylum seekers may have ascribed an authority role to me, which might have made them more reluctant to say anything that could be perceived as negative about their experiences at the shelter, or about their relationships with staff. I could see this at play in my conversations and interviews with some asylum seekers when, after expressing how much they were suffering, they would quickly emphasize their gratitude for the shelter. This happened more frequently with the asylum seekers that I didn't know as well.

Among those who I knew better, I believe I was often perceived as an ally and confidant, though still an outsider. This meant that they would reveal certain things which they felt ashamed to tell the staff, who they saw every day. Other information they withheld from staff out of concern that it would make them seem like they were complaining or ungrateful. Examples of information that was confided in me, but withheld (at certain times) from staff, include when a mother was having troubles helping her children with Zoom school, and needed assistance; another was when a woman was sexually assaulted and wanted psycyhological help. I became, for these individuals, like a liaison, who they would ask to communicate with staff on their behalf; I therefore occupied somewhere in between insider and outsider territory.

A few other of my asylum seeker informants went on to get jobs in civil society as migrant rights advocates, which made them my colleagues. We worked together to plan cultural events, research projects, and protests. In our interviews, I believe they saw themselves as sharing their expertise with me, a student, about challenges they better understood due to their personal and professional experiences. (I think this is an accurate perspective.)

With a few informants, I developed deep friendships. We would say that we love each other, send each other poems and silly memes, and sing happy birthday to each other over WhatsApp audio messages (when we couldn't be together). With one individual, I spoke almost daily via WhatsApp or Zoom for the first 6 months of the pandemic, while she was stuck inside the shelter on lockdown. All this meant that the distinctinction between my role as researcher and friend was often blurred. I worried about what material was being shared with me in my capacity as a student researcher, versus as a friend or advocate. Initially, my emotional attachments (indeed, my love) for many of my informants, and the rage, frustration, and sadness I often felt towards the US government on their behalf, was a concern for me. I wondered: was I failing to

keep the necessary professional distance? Were my emotions getting in the way of my critical analysis? In Ghassan Hage's (2009) article, "Hating Israel in the Field: On Ethnography and Political Emotions," he explains the tension created by trying to balance the analytical, the emotional, and the political while doing participant observation: "In my fieldwork, I felt that the capacity to share certain emotional states with informants and then to repress such emotions for analytical purposes, at the same time, did not simply mean that sometimes I was emotional and sometimes I wasn't. Nor did it mean that sometimes I allowed myself to be emotional and sometimes I didn't – as if emotions can be controlled and mastered in such a rational manner. Rather, as I have argued, it meant that I was constantly negotiating between being both emotional and analytical. This was particularly difficult given that the aim was not to reduce emotions to analytical language but to 'capture them as emotions'" (Hage, 2009, p. 151).

Although at times I did experience intense negative emotions such as hatred, the issue I faced in the field was not, as in Hage's case, how to grapple with my hatred, so much as with my love. But, Hage provided a useful framework for understanding my emotions in the field as inevitable, political, and potentially intellectually fruitful, if I was mindful to negotiate between my emotions and my critical analysis. He also provided a useful framework for thinking about poetry, photography, dance, and photography, as instruments to share, learn from, and capture the emotional experiences of my informants and myself. I will return to Hage's definition of political emotions in Chapter 4 of this thesis, when discussing the political implications of asylum seekers' joy.

Anthropologist Jason de León, in an interview on the podcast AnthroPod, also discusses the role of emotions – specifically, love – in fieldwork. Drawing on the work of Phillipe Bourgois, León says, "As an anthropologist you can't write about people unless you love them.

At first that comment used to make me a little uncomfortable […] but then you know I've kind of come to realize that I have to be committed to those folks and in some ways I do have to love them" (Milkman, 2019). By acknowledging the important role of emotions in the field, León and Hage helped me develop a critical awareness of my own emotional experience, and to also value the emotions of my informants as experiential and embodied forms of knowledge.

Throughout the process of writing my thesis, my emotional and intellectual life were deeply intertwined, mutually informing each other. When the pandemic first started, I noticed that my friends in the United States were starting to talk about how the uncertainty of the moment was negatively impacting their mental health; these conversations were also echoed in the media. Indeed, I also felt anxious and disoriented by the uncertainty of the first lockdown and all the ensuing and interconnected social crises. Like many people during that time, even though I was privileged in innumerous ways, I felt anxious, isolated, and stuck in limbo, uncertain of what the future held and lacking agency over it. By that point I had already begun writing about asylum seekers' experiences of existential limbo; it was therefore interesting and enlightening to see these conversations happening on a broader scale, and folding out in my personal life.

While I want to stress that the severity of my circumstances was in no way comparable to what asylum seekers were facing, I was nevertheless able to adopt and apply some of their strategies of creative resistance in my own life, as I navigated various spheres of liminality. For example, I learned from asylum seekers the psychological benefits of community, solidarity, and grassroots resistance, so I increased my commitment to volunteering at the shelter, for which I was rewarded with a sense of connection and purpose during the first lockdown. Also, and very significantly for me, I learned to dance. I took dance classes from many teachers, including a few from a Haitian asylum seeker who was simultaneously teaching me about the Haitian revolution,

the role of dance in Haitian culture, and helping me develop an understanding of dance as a form of embodied resistance. Learning to dance has been healing for me, and has been at the heart of my theory and praxis. I am eternally grateful to him and to all the asylum seekers who inspired me to start furiously dancing during these hard times.[2]

ARGUMENT AND STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS

This thesis argues that weaponized waiting is used as part of the US-Mexico border apparatus to keep out racialized asylum seekers, which generates new forms of suffering, as well as new forms of resistance. The physical and psychological torture that asylum seekers at Casa de Esperanza face while waiting in limbo at the border, and their creative strategies for healing and mobilizing through the grassroots political project *resiste gozando*, are mutually constitutive. In other words, making art is one way for asylum seekers to endure, protest, and subvert the violent logic of weaponized waiting.

In Chapter 2, I conceptualize weaponized waiting as a violent strategy of deterrence. I attempt to demystify the state's euphemistic language surrounding anti-asylum policies, drawing attention to factual inaccuracies and lies, and describing how the policies actually play out in people's lives. I situate weaponized waiting in the literature that describes waiting as a lived experience of state power. I then show how the policies that have led to weaponized waiting can be understood through a comparison with Jason de Leon's (2015) analysis of Prevention Through Deterrence, which has funneled immigrants into the "hostile terrain" of the desert in an attempt to deter them from reaching the U.S. Finally, I share the stories of asylum seekers stuck waiting in the "hostile terrain" of Mexican border cities, to try and capture the intimate, everyday psychological and physical toll of weaponized waiting.

[2] See: Alice Walker's (2013) book of poems, *Hard Times Require Furious Dancing*

In Chapter 3, I explore how asylum seekers stuck at the Casa de Esperanza shelter in Tijuana engage in creative practices to endure weaponized waiting. I focus on asylum seekers' uses of music, poetry, and dance, and find that these practices can be an outlet to heal psychological wounds, build a sense of collective solidarity, feel 'at home' culturally and in their bodies, and narrate their stories in a way that helps them find meaning in their suffering. These practices give rise to complex emotions that counter the deleterious effects of state power.

Chapter 4 is concerned with understanding the transformation at Casa de Esperanza of asylum seekers' creative practices into a small-scale political project, *Resiste Gozando,* which attempts to publicly challenge the violence of of weaponized waiting by proclaiming and acting out "political joy." I try to capture the idea of *Resiste Gozando* analytically by exploring how activists speak about it, and by describing how it's performed for the broader public through protests, a photo exhibit, and a dance performance in downtown Tijuana.

CHAPTER 2. WHY BUILD A WALL IF YOU CAN MAKE PEOPLE WAIT?

INTRODUCTION: WEAPONIZED WAITING AT THE US-MEXICO BORDER

In recent years, most asylum seekers arriving at the US Mexico border are fleeing overlapping forms of violence, such as organized crime, gender violence, climate disaster, political persecution, and crushing poverty. The majority hail from the northern Central American countries of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador, as well as Mexico, Haiti, Colombia, Venezuela, Cuba, and the African countries of Cameroon, Ghana, and Eritrea, among other formerly colonized regions of the world, still battling postcolonial oppression. An increasing number arriving at the border are women and families with children.

Prior to 2019, asylum seekers with applications deemed credible by asylum officers, were typically allowed into the U.S. on parole while waiting an average of two years for an immigration hearing (National Immigration Forum, 2019), with the possibility that proceedings could drag on for several years after that. They were typically granted a work permit after 180 days (Meissner, Faye, & and T. Alexander, 2018), which afforded them a degree of temporary physical and financial security, although the majority would eventually have their cases denied and be deported. Bridget Haas (2012) documented the psychological suffering, which she described as the "existential limbo" experienced by asylum seekers in the U.S. as they anxiously awaited their probable deportation. The period of waiting for them was defined by protracted uncertainty, a sense of powerlessness, and profound fear, in which life felt 'frozen' or 'on hold' (Haas, 2012: 432). Although trauma is often talked about in terms of reliving past experiences, Haas observed that asylum seekers located the source of their suffering in the present, as they endured the protracted waiting of the asylum process.

In the years since Haas' 2012 study, the conditions under which asylum seekers are forced to wait have become more perilous, as The Obama, Trump, and Biden administrations have implemented a number of policies that, short of eliminating the asylum system entirely, have blocked asylum seekers from entering the country by making them wait in Mexico – in some of the most dangerous cities in the world – in many cases jobless, homeless, and without access to legal documents or representation. In this chapter I show how policies that force migrants to wait in Mexico have subjected them to extreme forms of violence which they would not have endured had they been admitted promptly for processing in the United States. I explore how this weaponized waiting fits into a larger architecture of increasingly violent technologies of deterrence and expulsion at the border. I argue that, although imposing protracted waiting on racialized migrants has long been an exercise in white supremacist state power, recent US policies have turned waiting into a weapon for torturing asylum seekers at the border, who are responding with creative forms of resistance.

CONCEPTUALIZING WEAPONIZED WAITING AS A VIOLENT STRATEGY OF DETERRENCE

As described in Chapter 1, there is no legal pathway for displaced people to apply for asylum in the US from their home countries. To access their right to apply for asylum – enshrined by domestic and international law – they must arrive on US soil, either at or beyond official ports of entry, and express to immigration authorities a credible fear of returning home. In 2008, according to federal data, fewer than 5,000 people apprehended by border agents at the US-Mexico border triggered the asylum process by expressing a credible fear of returning home. Ten years later, however, that number had risen to 97,000, a nearly 2,000 percent increase in

asylum seekers, arguably a reflection of increasing environmental devastation such as crop failures, hurricanes, and droughts, compounding gang activity, lack of economic opportunity and political volatility in sending countries.

The US Immigration Court has not been able to keep up with the increase in asylum applications. In August 2019, the U.S. Immigration Court's active backlog of cases surpassed the one million mark for the first time in history (TRAC, 2019), and asylum seekers could expect to wait an average of two years just for an immigration hearing (National Immigration Forum, 2019), with the possibility that proceedings could drag on for several years after that. Up to that point, asylum seekers with applications deemed by asylum officers as "credible," were typically allowed into the U.S. on parole while waiting. They were then usually granted a work permit after 180 days (Meissner, Faye, & and T. Alexander, 2018), which afforded them a degree of temporary physical and financial security, although the majority would eventually have their cases denied and be deported.

Asylum applications were not the only cases filling the US Immigration Court; in 2019, asylum applications only made up a third of all backlogged cases, indicating that there were other factors straining the Court. Both the Obama and Trump Administrations had issued millions of deportation orders, which swamped the system with a huge number of new legal cases. During that period, the federal government dedicated far more resources to carrying out apprehensions at the border, and detaining and deporting undocumented immigrants who were living inside the US, than it allocated to the Immigration Court. While funding for the Court has increased slightly in recent years, it has been substantially outpaced by spending on other areas of immigration enforcement.

The Reality on the Ground: Demystifying the Euphemistic Language of Anti-Asylum Policies

Instead of addressing systemic and budgetary issues plaguing the Immigration Court, the government responded to the backlog by implementing MPP. In their original justification for this move, they scapegoated asylum seeking families and children for the backlog, who they claimed were fraudulently applying for asylum in order to "go rogue," or to live temporarily in the United States during the limbo period in which their cases were being adjudicated. In the section that follows, I attempt to fact check and contextualize two excerpts of a January 2019 statement from the DHS which addresses the Immigration Court's backlog. Under the header, "Why is DHS implementing MPP?" the statement reads:

> Record increases in particular types of migrants, such as family units, traveling to the border who require significantly more resources to detain and remove (when our courts and laws even allow that), have overwhelmed the U.S. immigration system, leading to a 'system' that enables smugglers and traffickers to flourish and often leaves aliens in limbo for years. This has been a prime cause of our near-800,000 case backlog in immigration courts and delivers no consequences to aliens who have entered illegally.

The reality is that while US laws prevent children asylum seekers and their families from being detained indefinitely in prison-like facilities while their cases are adjudicated. It's disturbing and misleading to suggest that detaining them would be cheaper; on the contrary, detaining asylum seekers costs an average of $319 *per person* per day, in comparison with $36 *per family* in the Family Case Management Program, which, until it was canceled in 2017 by the Trump administration, was run by ICE as an alternative to detention for families seeking asylum.

The suggestion that it would be more economically prudent to remove asylum seekers from the country is legally problematic, as the principle of non-refoulement under international human rights law guarantees that "no one should be re- turned to a country where they would

face torture, cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and other irreparable harm." Furthermore, as I mentioned before, people arriving at the U.S. border have the right to request asylum without being criminalized, and the majority of cases in the Court's backlog are not asylum seekers at all. Judges and experts point to the increase in deportations of undocumented immigrants and insufficient resources as contributing factors to the backlog and subsequent limbo period, systemic problems which could be addressed without causing additional harm to asylum seeking families by turning them back to wait in limbo in Mexico. The DHS statement continues:

> The dramatic increase in illegal migration, including unprecedented number of families and fraudulent asylum claims is making it harder for the U.S. to devote appropriate resources to individuals who are legitimately fleeing persecution. In fact, approximately 9 out of 10 asylum claims from Northern Triangle countries are ultimately found non-meritorious by federal immigration judges. Because of the court backlog and the impact of outdated laws and misguided court decisions, many of these individuals have disappeared into the country before a judge denies their claim and simply become fugitives.

Conflating "illegal migration" and seeking asylum obscures the fact that there is no legal pathway for displaced people to apply for asylum in the US from their home countries. To access their right to apply for asylum – enshrined by domestic and international law – they must arrive on US soil, either at or beyond official ports of entry, and express to immigration authorities a credible fear of returning home. As outlined in the introduction to this thesis, asylum seekers thus inevitably and by design, arrive without papers to live in the United States. Furthermore, although the majority of asylum claims are eventually denied by federal immigration judges, this does not on its own constitute evidence of fraud. It should be noted that Central American asylum grant rates rose by 96% between 2010 and 2016 (Human Rights First, 2019). This upward trend was only reversed when the Trump Administration took power and began limiting

eligibility for asylum by encouraging immigration judges to exclude targeted gender and gang violence as criteria of "persecution." Furthermore, asylum grant rates varied dramatically depending on the region of the court and the immigration judge who was assigned to the case. With these facts in mind, I believe low asylum rates are more indicative of changing political priorities than of fraud. In any case, regardless of the validity of an asylum seekers' claims, if they have been determined by trained asylum officers to have credible fear, then they should legally be guaranteed the right to due process. Asylum seekers aren't responsible for how long it takes the judge to evaluate their case. Finally, the claim that many asylum seekers "have disappeared into the country before a judge denies their claim and simply become fugitives" is false. According to the government's own data, the aforementioned Family Case Management Program had a 99 percent effectiveness rate — meaning virtually everyone enrolled in the program showed up for all immigration appointments and court hearings (Epstein, 2018).

Out of the three policies that have led to weaponized waiting (metering, MPP, and Title 42), MPP is the only that the DHS justified in these specific terms, as an attempt to reduce the backlog and to deter "fraudulent" asylum seekers from reaching the U.S. The metering policy was implemented unofficially, without CBP first making a statement or justification to the public; Title 42 was implemented under the guise of being a public health measure to slow the spread of COVID-19, and officials repeatedly said that it was not an immigration policy. However, all three policies had the same effect: they produced weaponized waiting by keeping asylum seekers off of U.S. territory, stuck for prolonged periods in dangerous conditions in Mexico. My study participants did not always understand or distinguish between these policies. What all of them did understand, was that the border was unjustly "closed" to them. They

perceived the closed border as a form of cruelty and punishment, and a violation of their human rights.

Weaponized Waiting as an Experience of (Contested) State Power

Requiring racialized migrants from 'undesirable' countries to wait for prolonged periods has long been a tactic of white supremacist state power, and migrants' refusal to wait indefinitely with their heads down has an equally long tradition. We can see this dynamic at play in the application process for economic immigrants to the United States. The expected wait time to receive a green card varies drastically depending on the national origin (read: racial, ethnic, and class background) of the applicant. The disparity in wait times are a result of "country caps," which ensure that citizens of any one country can only be granted seven percent of all available employment-based and family-based green cards each year. Ironically, country caps were introduced in 1965, as part of JFK's comprehensive migration reforms that were ostensibly based on the principle of equality, replacing the former quota system (Ngai, 2010).

Historian Mae Ngai points out that "an immigration policy that treats all nations equally is substantively unequal: in a world of unequal conditions and relations of power, such a policy means that a small country in the industrialized west, like Belgium, will never use up its quota" whereas certain categories of migrants from large, developing countries like Mexico must wait several decades for a visa (Ngai, 2010, p. 7). The absurdly long waiting time required of Mexican immigrants exemplifies how waiting can be weaponized and used as a barrier to keep out people from poor countries. It hasn't been very successful at reducing Mexican migration overall, but it has contributed to there currently being an estimated 6 million undocumented Mexicans in the United States, compared with fewer than 600,000 undocumented immigrants from Europe, Canada, and Oceania combined (MPI, n.d.). Waiting time, like power, is stratified

(Schwartz, 1974; Auyero, 2012); Being subjected to protracted waiting – and finding ways to resist and subvert that imposition of state power – have long been central to the experiences of racialized immigrants from poor countries, whether fleeing poverty, persecution, or both.

Bourdieu (2000) argues that being forced to wait is an experience of the effect of power and part of domination. He writes that waiting "is one of the privileged ways of experiencing power" and one which "implies submission" (p. 228). The reverse of that would be the "all-powerful […] who does not wait but who makes others wait" (p. 228). When applied to the context of the US-Mexico border, the "all-powerful" US government excerpts its power over asylum seekers by forcing them to wait. For asylum seekers in Haas' study, "waiting – and the powerlessness that it signified and reproduced – evoked feelings of anxiety, fear, and distress" which entail "a lack of control to fully define his or her future and results in an experience of waiting as passive and anxiety-provoking" (Haas, 2012, p. 178). My study participants experienced similar effects, further intensified by the violence and precarity of being trapped in Mexico.

Javier Auyero (2012), in his seminal study of poor Argentine citizens' waiting in a welfare office for benefits from the state, also wrote about waiting as a form of domination. He found that by making people wait for prolonged periods, the state created subordinate subjects who did not raise their voice, who knew because they learned in practice that they had to be patient (p. 22). In documenting their experiences of uncertainty, confusion, and arbitrariness while waiting in the welfare office, he concludes that these waiting experiences "persuade the destitute of the need to be patient, thus conveying the implicit state re- quest to be compliant clients (...) not citizens but patients of the state" (Auyero, 2011, p. 6). Poor citizens in such a context are deprived of their agency to choose for how long they are willing to wait. Auyero argues that,

because they are dependent on the state to be able to meet their urgent needs, they are made to accept, no matter how illogical or absurd, the timelines imposed upon them.

To understand the subordination of citizens in Auyero's study, it's useful to consider Max Weber's (1968) definition of domination "as the probability that certain specific commands (or all commands) will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (p. 212). Weber notes that "every genuine form of domination implies a minimum of voluntary compliance, that is, an *interest* (based on ulterior motives or genuine acceptance) in obedience" (p. 212). We can understand the subordination of the participants in Auyero's study, in their willingness to wait on the state, as a consequence of them acting in their (perceived) interests; if any of the welfare recipients were to resist domination by refusing to wait, they wouldn't receive their needed benefits. The process of domination and subordination here is subtle, it operates not through brute force, but through the internalized discipline of the citizens who become patients of the state as they succumb to waiting.

Bourdieu, Auyero, and Haas provide useful frameworks for understanding waiting as an experience of the effect of power. However, the context of weaponized waiting at the US-Mexico border is distinct from the waiting in bureaucratic offices that Auyero describes, or even asylum seekers' waiting inside the US, which Haas describes. Rather than operating through voluntary compliance to execute its power over asylum seekers, weaponized waiting at the US-Mexcio border is a violent spectacle of state power, which asylum seekers experience as a form of torture. While being forced to wait in Mexican border cities they face extreme threats to their lives and psychological wellbeing, including homelessness, kidnapping, rape, and murder. (Participants in Haas' study also experience psychological torture and sometimes even homelessness, but not the same risks of physical violence.) Asylum seekers in my study didn't

submit to the state's power by agreeing to wait through internalized discipline, but through violence.

To appreciate the contrast between the internalized discipline of citizens waiting in Auyero's case, and the violence of weaponized waiting, it's helpful to consider Foucault's (1979) analysis of power relations in *Discipline and Punish.* He begins the book by contrasting regimes based on internalized discipline (as in Auyero's case) to a regime based on spectacles of torture and execution (as in weaponized waiting). An example of the latter, would be a king publicly torturing a prisoner for a confession. The outcome of this spectacle is way less controllable: the audience can end up on the prisoner's side, not the king's. And, because the prisoner has not internalized the king's power but is rather subjected to it by force, he might challenge the king's authority by refusing to confess. For the participants in my study, the severity of their conditions of waiting and the complete lack of a state response to their most urgent needs, led them to recognize their waiting as a form of state violence. As a result, like the insubordinate prisoner in the example above, they didn't internalize the logic of domination. They were neither subordinate, patient, nor afraid to raise their voices in response to what they understood as an abuse of state power. They often appealed to human rights law in rejecting the premise that they should have to wait to access their right to apply for asylum. They sometimes wrote letters or addressed their messages directly to the US presidents (Trump, and then Biden). They spoke with journalists, researchers like myself, and in public forums about the injustice and illegality (in our shared view) of policies that had them waiting. Through their activism, they challenged the "king's" authority and endeavored to get the public "audience" on their side.

Although the asylum seekers in this study attempted to immigrate to the United States in what they considered to be, "the right way" – by applying for legal asylum – , if they were

forced to wait too long, many lost faith in the legitimacy of the asylum system and resolved to try immigrating "illegally" instead. Bourdieu (2000) writes that "Making people wait...delaying without destroying hope...adjourning without totally disappointing" is crucial to domination (Bourdieu, 2000, p. 228 as cited in Auyero, 2012). John Torpey (1998), building on Weber's definition of state sovereignty as holding a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence, argues that an essential characteristic of the modern nation state is the monopoly it holds on the legitimate means of movement. In my study, many participants had their hopes in the US asylum process destroyed. In this chapter, I show how when asylum seekers recognize the state's use of violence through weaponized waiting as illegitimate, they protest waiting and may challenge the state's dominion over their movement. Unlike the subjects in Auyero's study (2012), who began to normalize waiting in a display of subordination and "everyday political domination" (p. 21), asylum seekers waiting at the US-Mexico border rejected, and were sometimes politically mobilized in reaction to, the disparity between the concern for human rights the United States projects to the world, and the violent reality of its policies towards asylum seekers.

And, unlike asylum seekers in Haas' study, who were largely isolated from each other, my study participants had close ties at Casa de Esperanza and other human rights organizations, and were mostly living in close corredors – either at the shelter or in crowded apartments – with other asylum seekers in the same predicament. They use the little agency, resources, and connections they had, to join forces and take matters into their own hands. In this way, they acted similarly to the asylum seekers in held in prolonged detention in Kreichauf's study (2020), who found that "people in detention often feel united by the sense of injustice in being detained and the uncertainty of what will happen to them and their cases," and developed relationships of solidarity that helped them to "resist and undermine detention in various ways," including

through sharing research, information, and resources that might help them get out of detention. Foucault (1978) writes that, “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power” (p.95). Fiske (2016) builds on this idea, proposing a cycle of action and reaction, of force and response, for asylum seekers waiting in detention: “The exertion of sovereign power is provoked by the action (power) of the asylum seeker and it in turn creates not submission, but resistance” (p. 51). This cycle of action and reaction through resistance seems to describe what happens when asylum seekers in my study become politicized, and/or decide to cross the border clandestinely, as a response to weaponized waiting, which they recognize as a form of unjust violence rather than internalizing its logic of domination.

Weaponized Waiting and the Hybrid Collectif: Waiting in the Hostile Terrain of Mexican Border Cities

The US asylum policies that force people to wait in Mexico subject them to gross violations of human rights, including extreme poverty, hunger, and homelessness, and repeated exposure to violent crime and physical and verbal abuse by authorities. As of February 19, 2021, there were at least 1,544 publicly reported cases of murder, rape, torture, kidnapping, and other violent assaults against asylum seekers and migrants forced to return to Mexico by the Trump administration under Migrant Protection Protocols alone. Among these reported attacks are 341 cases of children returned to Mexico who were kidnapped or nearly kidnapped.

In early 2021, the organization Al Otro Lado and students from the Mexican Migration Field Research Program at the University of California San Diego conducted a survey with asylum seekers waiting (an average of 18 months in that study) in Mexican border cities

including Tijuana. The study found that 86% of those interviewed had faced beatings, kidnapping, extortion, rape, and/or verbal abuse by cartels or state agents while waiting along the border. While in Tijuana specifically, of 99 people who answered: 60 reported discrimination, 43 reported verbal assaults, 36 threats or intimidation, 34 robbery, 27 unarmed assault, 19 armed assault, 12 fraud, 10 kidnapping or attempted kidnapping, 8 extortion, and three rape. Only 13 never experienced any of the above (MMFRP & Al Otro Lado 2021).

Jason De León (2015) exposes how a set of U.S. border policies called "prevention through deterrence" (PTD) have been part of a deliberate strategy to intentionally funnel undocumented immigrants into the "hostile terrain" of the Sonoran desert, where, in many cases, they die. He shows the agency that is responsible for these deaths is distributed throughout a complex "hybrid collectif" that includes human actants such as border patrol agents, bureaucrats, drug traffickers and human smugglers, but also non-human actants such as vultures, insects, rocky terrains, and the heat of the sun (p. 39-40). All of these actants are recruited to "work" as part of the border apparatus. He writes, "As the desert and all the actants it contains have become incorporated into the Prevention Through Deterrence hybrid collectif, the Border Patrol has attempted to separate its policy from the subsequent trauma that migrants experience as a result of being funneled toward this 'hostile' environment. Rather than being viewed as a key partner in the border enforcement strategy, the desert is framed as a ruthless beast that law enforcement cannot be responsible for" (p. 42-43).

I argue that the policies that force asylum seekers to wait in Mexico serve a similar purpose; the cities where asylum seekers wait have become incorporated into the hybrid collectif. Although the U.S. government doesn't claim responsibility for the harm that happens to asylum seekers on Mexican soil, actants there become implicated in the process of deterring and/or

preventing asylum seekers from reaching U.S. soil. The actants that take on the border patrol's dirty work of prevention and deterrence include human ones such as the criminal organizations and corrupt authorities that target vulnerable asylum seekers; as well as non-human ones, such as the Covid-19 virus; and structural ones such as poverty, racism, and homophobia. Together, in this hostile terrain, they expose asylum seekers to numerous and overlapping traumatic experiences that leave their score on the body/mind. Furthermore, because of the intensity of these threats, many asylum seekers give up on the asylum system and cross into the dangerous desert that De Leon describes. The waitlist, MPP, and Title 42 have effectively turned waiting into a weapon for torturing asylum seekers via various overlapping actants in border cities and the desert, and seem designed to wear asylum seekers down. Similar to how economic sanctions on foreign countries such as Russia have been described as a tool of modern warfare (Mulder, 2022), weaponized waiting is being used as a modern weapon to keep out asylum seekers.

Weaponized Waiting Funnels People into the Desert

As Denise,* a female asylum seeker who was on the waitlist but never in MPP because she is Mexican, and who has been waiting in Tijuana for 2 years, explained to me (I paraphrase, based on my written notes, as this interview was not recorded):

> At first I thought there was hope for me because of the new president, Biden. When he got rid of MPP, lots of people who lived at the shelter were able to cross into the US. But because of the pandemic the border stayed closed. Some people were given humanitarian parole and crossed that way. I applied for that and waited and waited, but I didn't get it. So then people said, well eventually the border will have to open up again. And now it's opening up, but still it's closed for me. And so I've been waiting all this time for no reason. It's been too long. I can't take it any longer.

In the week following the lifting of restrictions on tourism across the US-Mexico border, I heard this desperation echoed in many asylum seekers' voices. Denise, along with 8 other people I

know including three children, all of whom had been waiting in Tijuana for many months in shelters or on the street, attempted to cross the border clandestinely that week. Seven of them failed on their first attempt, which they did without a professional *coyote* (smuggler) because they couldn't afford one. Now they are planning their next attempt, but with a smuggler this time, which means they are waiting on their family members in the US to raise enough money to hire one. Denise told me (paraphrased, from my notes, again):

> It scares me to cross through the desert because I'm with my daughter, and I know it's dangerous. That's why I waited so long to try it. I have to keep her safe, and she's not safe here in Tijuana. I want her to have a normal life, to be able to go outside. Here, it's not safe for us to go outside, and she's depressed. I can't take the idea of staying here any longer, so we have to get a good smuggler.

Although Denise was aware of the serious danger of crossing through the desert with a young child, it seemed like a safer option than staying in Mexico, where her violent ex-husband lives, provided she could find "a good smuggler" (*un buen coyote*). This was a calculation that many of my study participants had to make: was it riskier to stay in Tijuana with the hope of applying for asylum, or give up on the asylum process and cross through the desert? Two of my informants who were able to hire a smuggler, were successful in crossing into the US. Echoing Denise, one of them explained to me that she knew it was time for them to go. She said they'd been waiting for too long: "We can't take it any longer." (*No aguantamos más.)* Unable to bear the prospect of waiting any longer for the asylum system to possibly be reinstated at some undefined point in the future, fearing for their lives in Tijuana and unable to return home due to persecution there, they made the difficult choice to hire a smuggler, risk their lives, and cross clandestinely. Now in the United States, even though they have legitimate claims to asylum, they aren't able to turn themselves into immigration authorities to apply for it, because they'd be expelled without due process under Title 42.

ALMA KNOWS WHY THE CAGED BIRD SINGS

In this section I present a composite account drawn from multiple interviews and conversations with Alma, a 35-year old female asylum seeker from El Salvador, and her daughter Nancy. All of the events and conversations in this composite account actually happened, as described to me by Alma. However, I have modified the order of events and exact wording of the conversations, for narrative purposes. León describes his use of this narrative technique of semifictionalized ethnography (Humprheys and Watson 2009, as cited in León, 2017) to combine "various, sometimes seemingly disparate data sets to paint a more nuanced picture" by drawing on specific details told to him by migrants and filtering those descriptions for readability and flow (León, p. 44). In an attempt to make the temporality, risks, and psychological toll of weaponized waiting more visceral for the reader, I tell a story that paints the everyday experience of waiting in the shelter from Alma's perspective, based on her descriptions to me of the events, thoughts, and feelings she experienced while stranded in Mexico, and while remembering her experience in a CBP holding cell. At the time that this story takes place, Alma and Nancy had been at the US-Mexico border for more than a year, fleeing violence in El Salvador. After crossing the Rio Grande clandestinely into the US to avoid being put on the metering waitlist, they turned themselves in to Customs and Border Patrol (CBP) in Texas and then San Diego, before being sent to Tijuana for 6 months before their first MPP hearing. (Alma didn't know MPP existed, as it was still very new. She later told me that if she had known about it, she never would have turned herself in, for fear of being sent back to Mexico.) After their first hearing, they were sent back again to Mexico to wait for a second hearing, which was subsequently rescheduled because of the pandemic. Since then, they'd been waiting inside the

shelter on lockdown. Their rescheduled hearing was supposed to happen the previous month, but was rescheduled yet again, for 3 months from out.

Following Alma's story, I will break down each section for the reader, highlighting the objective facts and explaining their significance to understanding the concept of weaponized waiting.

A Composite Narrative (Semi-fictionalized Ethnography) of Alma's Story

Alma wakes up just after sunrise, the morning light trickling into the large bedroom she shares with 30 other asylum seekers at Casa de Esperanza. Her 11 year old daughter, Nancy is snoring lightly above, on the top bunk, one of several members of the rhoncus chorus that morning. Their bunk bed is closed off with towels, forming a make-shift wall around them, to create a bit of privacy. It helps, but not that much. The towels are definitely not sound proof to the song of snores that surrounds them.

Alma feels a slight burning sensation on her neck but resists the urge to scratch. Maybe the sensation is just in her head this time. If the bed bugs were biting her again last night, she wouldn't feel the itching for at least a few more hours. She wonders to herself, "will the exterminator come today or tomorrow?" She can't remember what day it is – they're all blurring together now, each one the same as the last as the next as thelastasthenextasthelastasthenext. But when the exterminator comes it will be different. Everyone will have to clear out of the shelter that day, so she'll get to take a trip to a park with the other residents. She's been looking forward to that all week. The only things that bring her joy these days are her dance classes at the shelter, phone calls with a volunteer, and very occasional trips outside.

Imagining spending another 3 months in Tijuana without work, money, or a private space, without having any way to change her situation, fills her with a sense of dread. A familiar thought runs through her head: “I don’t want to be alive anymore.” She starts to cry and buries her face in her pillow. She knows she can’t seriously entertain that thought, for Nancy’s sake. “Stay strong,” she repeats silently to herself, like a mantra. “Stay strong.”

But, her mind is not always in her control. She’s transported to a memory that’s been playing over and over in her head a lot these days, like a movie: Alma and Nancy in a freezing cold CBP holding cell, huddled together on the concrete floor, surrounded by other women and children. Alma’s taken off most of her clothes to give to Nancy, who is shivering under a thin blanket. The cold aches in Alma’s bones. She feels feverish. Looking down, she realizes she’s started menstruating and her pants have bled through. The guards haven’t let her take a shower in days, but she hopes they’ll take pity on her now. She surveys her cell for a female guard, but there are none in sight. She tells Nancy to get up, and they start walking, towards a male guard, to explain the situation.

“Get back,” he orders firmly, hands outstretched. Stunned by his severity, she comes to a halt.

“It’s just that…I need to shower,” she explains quietly. “As you can see, I’m not well.” He looks her up and down, then nods and gestures for her to follow him. He opens the gate and they walk together, keeping a distance, towards another guard who is in charge of handing out sanitary products. Alma looks at the guard and is relieved to see she’s a woman, and much older. This time without shame, Alma begins to explain her situation again.

“That’s not my problem,” the woman snaps. “What, do you think you’re in your house and can just take a shower whenever you want?” she says sarcastically, and turns away.

Alma's face burns, and her eyes fill with tears. Nancy squeezes her hand, signaling her support. This is not the first time Alma's been mocked by a guard here in front of Nancy, but she hasn't gotten used to it. The male guard, watching her, says, "OK. Follow me," with no warmth in his voice. He takes her back to her cell. "Stay there, don't move." He orders sternly. A few minutes later he comes back with some pads and a pair of oversized pants. "You can take a shower in that bathroom," he gestures, "and change clothes. Then wait for me. Just do what I tell you." She nods, but she's sick of this guy bossing her around. "It's because of *migrantes* like me that this *pinche hombre* (worthless man) has a job in the first place," she thinks as she cleans herself up. She changes into her ridiculously oversized pants, then sits back down on the cool floor with Nancy, and waits.

But what are they even waiting for? She's been in this awful detention center for 8 days now. She's barely slept because of the cold, and because the lights and the TV are turned on 24 hours a day. She's been strip-searched, laughed at, barely given anything to eat. It seems like they're trying to torture her. She expected life to be hard in America – that she'd work long hours, that the language would be difficult to learn. But she thought she'd be treated with dignity, and that she could finally leave her fear behind. Instead, they're treating her like a dog. No – they'd probably never treat a dog this poorly. It terrifies her to think what else they might have in store for her.

Two hours later, the male guard comes back to the cell. "Follow me" he orders again, brusquely. "We're going to the bus station."

Confused, Alma asks, "Why? Where are you taking us now?" She's filled with dread. Are they going to fly her to another holding cell? They already made her fly from one in Texas to this one in California, for a reason she didn't understand. That had been her first time on an

airplane, and it had been traumatic. She was so humiliated by and afraid of the guards that she thought they might "disappear" her while flying over the mountains.

"Don't worry, we're going to send you back to your family," the guard smirks. He has a sick sense of humor. Then he says, "Actually, we're sending you to Tijuana."

Tijuana? In Mexico? She's never been there before, and she doesn't know anyone. She doesn't have any money. And she's heard from other asylum seekers about Tijuana – where migrant children are kidnapped; where migrant women are raped. Alma herself has already been kidnapped and raped in Mexico. How will she protect Nancy?

"Please don't send us there," she says, I'm afraid." But the guard pays her no attention. "Please, please don't send us there," she begs. The walls of the cell start to cave in. She drops to her knees, sobbing. She feels Nancy's small, soft arms wrap around her neck.

"Shh, mama, Nancy coos. "It'll be ok."

Back to the present: Alma stifling sobs into her pillow at Casa de Esperanza, so that Nancy won't hear. She inhales and then exhales deeply. "Stay strong," she tells herself again, and grabs her phone and earphones. Listening to Christian music, her heartbeat begins to slow. The lyrics remind her that God has a plan for her. Back in El Salvador she would go to church, but she hasn't been to a service since arriving in Tijuana. Removed from her network of support back in El Salvador, she can't afford to lose her mind here. Who would take care of Nancy?

Alma decides to get up and take a cold shower, which always helps when she's feeling "a little crazy." But, there's already a line forming outside the communal bathroom. There are only two showers, so it'll be a while. "*Buenos dias*," she greets the people standing in line. "*Buenos dias*," they reply, groggily. She sees her friend Leonor in line, her shoulders hunched. It looks like she's been crying, too. Leonor has only been at the shelter for a few weeks, with two small

kids, and she's spent most of that time curled up in a ball in bed, clearly upset. Just before coming to the shelter she was raped in Tijuana.

Alma pulls Leonor in for a hug, gently wiping her wet cheek with the cuff of her sleeve. "It's good you're up," Alma says. "The cold shower will help you. Let the water wash away your tears. And then after that, we can put on some music…dance, let it all out." Leonor nods.

Not in the mood to wait in line, Alma wanders outside to the patio, sits down and begins to play one of the "mind games" she's devised to keep herself sane. She stares up into the expansive blue sky, her eyes on the lookout for an airplane. After a few minutes, she sees one emerge from a cloud, painting the sky with its white contrails. It's headed in the direction of America. The plane disappears from sight, so she closes her eyes and follows it with her mind. She's onboard now, with a lightness in her chest as she floats through the clouds. A smiling *gringa* flight attendant asks if she needs anything.

"A Coca Cola please," she replies, "and another for my daughter."

"Where are you headed today?" the friendly flight attendant in her imagination asks.

"Chicago," Alma replies, a grin on her face, though she still doesn't really know what Chicago means. She feels free, like a bird released from a cage, soaring over the border wall below.

"Welcome to America!" The flight attendant replies warmly. "We're glad you're here."

Alma blinks open her eyes, a soft smile resting on her face. She's back in the confines of reality. But at least her tears have dried in the sun, for now. It's time to carry on with the day.

Situating the Composite Account of Alma's Story in the Context of Weaponized Waiting

Many aspects of Alma's story were common to other study participants waiting at Casa

de Esperanza. Like many asylum seekers, Alma couldn't afford to rent an apartment in Mexico, so she had to live with her daughter in the shelter. While stranded there, in addition to coping with traumatic memories from the past, she struggled to endure the monotony, lack of privacy, uncertainty and sense of powerlessness in the present. Even though Casa de Esperanza was considered a safe and relatively pleasant shelter, it was still a difficult place to live long-term. (Shelters are meant to be temporary accommodations, after all.) Because, prior to arriving at Casa de Esperanza, asylum seekers had often been living in crowded hotels, encampments, on the street, or in larger shelters, it was not uncommon for bed bugs and other infestations to occur.

At some shelters, people sleep in tents, on the floor. At Casa de Esperanza, everyone has their own bed. However, they all sleep in one room, and there's very little privacy. Living in such intimate quarters, means that friendships, romances, and relationships of solidarity emerge. People coordinate to keep the space clean, cook and eat together, share information and strategies for maintaining mental health, and more. There's a sense that they are all "in it together." But, it's also a transient space, in which people come and go. It takes a while for people to trust each other, and as a result they are often on guard. Unsurprisingly, living all the time with strangers, without any privacy, means that tensions and disagreements are also frequent.

I described Alma's flashback to her experience in the CBP holding cell partly because she and other study participants would tell me about how their experiences in the U.S., and other traumatic memories, still haunted them. Another reason I share it is because I believe that for asylum seekers in MPP, their mistreatment by U.S. immigration authorities while in holding cells and in the courts often colored their experience of weaponized waiting in Tijuana, reinforcing their view that waiting was an injustice and a form of violence. Their negative experiences in the U.S. contributed to them questioning the legitimacy of the asylum process, and made them doubt

if it was worth it to keep waiting. As one asylum seeker told me, reflecting on the long process of applying for asylum in the US and her family's decision to abandon their case

> I thought I'd have one day in court but I had seven. Seven hearings! Me, my mom, my sister, and my dad. And we never saw any progression in the process. The truth is that the whole thing is false. I feel that it's false because they give you hope where there isn't any.

And yet Alma, like many asylum seekers, continued to experience hope for the future, even if fleetingly, through fantasies, or what Alma refers to as "mind games." By imagining a future in which she would be welcomed to the U.S. and allowed to traverse borders freely, Alma was able to endure the present moment and experience moments of relief from what she describes as her "traumatic past."

"VOICES OF FORGOTTEN SURVIVORS IN SEARCH OF ASYLUM:" A PUBLIC FORUM ORGANIZED BY ASYLUM SEEKERS ABOUT THEIR EXPERIENCES OF WAITING

In this section, I share extracts of testimonies (transcribed and translated by me) of 5 asylum seekers speaking from the Mexican border cities of Tijuana, Nogales, Ciudad Juárez, and Montamoros, in an online public forum titled, "Voices of Forgotten Survivors in Search of Asylum," on March 6th 2021. This forum was self-organized by asylum seekers in collaboration with 9 human rights organizations on both sides of the border including Casa de Esperanza. All of the speakers, including the moderator, were asylum seekers. The forum was a platform to share their experiences of waiting, and to voice their demands for change. Each speaker highlighted a unique set of challenges posed by weaponized waiting: Ziad was confronted with anti-Black racism; Elena arrived after Title 42 was in place and never even got the chance to

lodge an asylum claim; Eduardo faced homophobia; Alexandra and Josefa were single mothers struggling to deal with the bureaucracy of MPP.

The format was such that each participant started by describing their experiences of waiting in Mexico. Then, the moderator would ask them to share their demands for political change. Because of the severity of the violence and suffering described by asylum seekers, and the abruptness between which they shift from sharing their testimonies to being asked to read their list of demands, this exchange may be startling to read on paper. However, perhaps because the moderator was an asylum seeker herself, and because the event was self-organized by asylum seekers, and/or because I've grown accustomed to hearing asylum seekers share shocking stories and then abruptly shift gears, the format didn't feel strange or surprising to me.

Some of my informants shared with me their thoughts about speaking at public events, such as this one. For some, to have the chance to speak and be heard felt empowering. It was also a way for them to combat isolation by connecting and mobilizing with other asylum seekers. Others were tired of telling their story over and over again, without seeing it resulting in any meaningful political change. Still others were too scared of persecution to share their story publically. People were often ambivalent, with some combination of these different feelings. For example, one asylum seeker told me once that she didn't want to participate in these events anymore because she didn't think it would help, and she was sick of repeating her story. But, soon after that, she wrote a letter to President Biden, to be shared at a separate public event. She also sent it to me, and seemed proud of what she'd written.

The public forum was interpreted into English, Haitian Creole and French, and streamed live on social media. After each testimony, I will analyze how the different threats – or actants –

overlap and compound to inflict unnecessary psychological and physical harm upon asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting in Mexican border cities.

Ziad's story. Actants: Anti-Black Racism; Housing Discrimination; Extortion, Harassment, and Humiliation by the Police

Ethiopian male, on the waitlist in Tijuana for over 1 year at time of the public forum.

Ziad: The experiences [of Black African asylum seekers] are diverse, but the most common things we experience are xenophobia and racism, especially racism. We can see examples of this in the way we are mistreated by the owners of the places we rent, how they intimidate and threaten us when we ask for basic services. For example, in a place where a number of us Africans were renting, they cut off our water in the middle of the pandemic for several days. Some of us decided to complain to the landlord, to ask for the water to be turned on, and instead they called the police on us. The police chained some of my African friends all together, in a humiliating way, and insulted them using racist language like, 'Black this…Black that…'

[...] Another bad experience I've had as an immigrant is extortion by the police [...] I speak Spanish and I have read the laws about my rights in this country and so I haven't been a victim of this as much as others, but even so, the police have charged me 500 pesos on 3 occasions, 1500 pesos in total. The first time they came up to me and asked to see my papers [...] So I gave them my papers and they realized that my permit had expired. They put me in a police car and I thought they were going to take me to a Deportation Center. That's not what happened. They drove me around the neighborhood, while asking me aggressively for money, especially a female cop who was demanding 1000 pesos. I told her that I didn't have the money. So they talked amongst themselves and then asked me for 500 pesos and my cell phone. I told them that I wouldn't give them my phone. They brought me to the place where I was living and I had to go in and ask my friends for money because that was the only way. That's what

happened to me 3 times. The fourth time I was more prepared. I had read the immigration laws of the country and I had to tell them that I was working for human rights organizations and that I was going to call my colleagues who were lawyers. They've left me alone since then, but they keep extorting others. There are some people who are forced to pay an extortion fee once a month, or once every two weeks.

Also, we rent an apartment where the landlord is psychologically unstable and every time there's an argument he takes out his gun. And those are just a few of the experiences. You can see how if this happens to me, someone who speaks Spanish, you can only imagine that lots of things happen to other people. There are lots of other things too. There's harassment, there are people who don't want to sit on the bus next to you, there's poor treatment in banks and in other services. I could spend all day telling you about these experiences, but here [in Tijuana] **we live in complete psychological torture** and harrassment.

Moderator: Thank you Ziad. Due to all these experiences you've had, what would be your requests or demands?

Ziad: My request is to please stop restricting access to something that is the most basic of Human Rights [the right to apply for asylum]. Stop putting these restrictions that leave us in places where, for the color of our skin and our nationality, we are mistreated. To make us wait here goes against our Human Rights. So remove these restrictions so that we can finally apply for asylum [...] which is a human right, in a safe place where we can be protected.

Ziad's experiences of anti-Black racism and mistreatment by Mexican citizens, his landlord, and the police, are common among Black asylum seekers forced to wait in Mexico. In Mexico, migrants of all races are vulnerable targets to harassment, extortion and other forms of abuse by authorities and criminal organizations in Mexican cities. However, preliminary data from a study done by students in the 2022 Mexican Migration Field Research Program

(MMFRP), in which I was involved as a graduate student researcher, suggest that Black asylum seekers are especially vulnerable to such discrimination.

My informants who were Black asylum seekers, often shared about being targeted not only by the police and criminal networks, but by ordinary citizens, for the color of their skin. For example, one Black university student told me that he had eggs thrown at him while standing outside his university, the day after he had appeared on the local news speaking out against anti-Black racism. Another woman told me that men on the streets often shout at her, "How much?" (*"Cuánto?*") insinuating that she was a prostitute.

In July 2021, I attended an event for 100 French speaking asylum seekers from Cameroon and Haiti at Casa de Esperanza, in which they heard a French-speaking immigration lawyer from the US speak about current asylum policies. During the Q&A that followed, one man, clearly upset by the information he'd just heard about the border remaining closed, stood up and began rallying the crowd. He shared his view that Black people were being treated even worse than other asylum seekers, and that they had to stand together as a united race, to which he received cheers. Then he started speaking in French, so I didn't understand much of what was said, but he held up an X-ray that showed a bullet wound he had suffered while waiting in Tijuana. A few months I found out that he had been murdered, in circumstances unknown to me.

Black and non-Black asylum seekers alike have been killed in Mexican border cities while experiencing weaponized waiting. I'm not aware of statistics that show a breakdown of murdered asylum seekers by race. What's indisputable is that having Black skin makes them stand out as migrants in a country where it's dangerous to be one, and where there's a long history of violent racism and erasure of Black Mexicans.

It's notable that in Ziad's view, knowing his legal rights, Speaking Spanish, and being affiliated with a human rights organization in Tijuana has offered him some – though not total – protection against police abuse. Nevertheless, his experience in Tijuana was still one of "psychological torture."

Joop De Jong (2002) of the Transcultural Psychosocial Organization, writes that even after severe traumatic events, the majority of people are able to cope effectively if provided with the opportunities and resources to rebuild their lives. However, if individuals are exposed to overwhelming and continuous levels of danger, fear, and stressful circumstances, this "may increasingly deplete resources, so that individuals and communities end up in a negative spiral of loss from which it is difficult to recover. When these experiences overwhelm coping capabilities, there may be permanent damage" (De Jong, p. 9). For asylum seekers who have already fled violence in their home countries, to be living in situations where they are exposed to pervasive racism, insecurity, humiliation, and mistreatment, takes a psychological toll with potentially damaging long-term effects.

Major systemic changes are needed – first and foremost the restoration of the right to apply for asylum – in order for Black asylum seekers to be protected from such harm. However, in the short-term, it's crucial that human rights organizations continue their outreach efforts to educate asylum seekers on their rights, teach Spanish lessons, and include them in their organizational leadership, for such skills and connections can serve as protective factors against some of these hostile actants operating in Mexican border cities, as Ziad's testimony exemplifies. Studies show that risk factors for long-term psychological damage, which include socioeconomic hardship, poverty, unemployment, problems of marginalization, discrimination, acculturation, language, and communication – all which Black asylum seekers from Haiti and Africa face in

Mexico – can be balanced by the protective factors of access to human rights organizations, and social support and self-help groups for empowerment and sharing, among other factors (De Jong, 2002, p. 7). Ziad's political activism, including his participation in the public forum, are positive indicators of his resilience, factors he shares in common with all of the speakers whose testimonies I highlight below.

Elena's story. Actants: Mexican Drug Cartels, Bureaucracy-induced Desperation, Anxiety, Uncertainty, Existential Limbo

Female asylum seeker from Guerrero, Mexico, stuck in Nogales, Sonora. Single mother of a 13 year old son.

Moderator: Elena, how has this time of uncertainty been for you, without having even your name on the waitlist?

Elena: It's been (a situation) of **complete desperation, anxiety, uncertainty, of being in limbo.** It's been very difficult. I came here with my son who is a preteen, and it's very difficult for a single woman with a child to stay here at the border, where there are drugs circulating, where there are kidnappings, where the law of the strongest prevail. It's been utterly difficult.

Moderator: Thank you very much. After everything you've experienced, what would be your demands or requests?

Elena: I arrived when the border was already closed. I didn't manage to get my name on a waitlist. There are a lot of people like me who find themselves waiting without a number in complete despair and we don't know…**we're like suspended in the air, not knowing what to do, where we'll end up. Days, weeks, months pass by…I've been here for a year already, waiting.** In my opinion, the waitlist is just a form of corruption. My request to the Director of the Department of Human Security, Mr. Alejandro Mayorkas, is to put an end to that waitlist. Because a wait like this shouldn't have existed,

considering that applying for asylum is a right that we have. We are seeking protection. Our lives are at risk and they make us wait in border towns where there's danger in every sense of the word.

In my conversations with asylum seekers who, like Elena, arrived after the border had been closed due to Title 42, I noticed that they felt especially vulnerable relative to other asylum seekers who at least had their names on a waitlist (even if the waitlist was no longer operating), or who were in MPP (even if that meant waiting in Mexico). For these asylum seekers, there was literally no action – even if just a symbolic, futile one– they could take to make them feel closer to their goal of applying for asylum in the United States. To be on a stagnant waitlist was torture enough for asylum seekers – to not even be able to write your name on that list was even more frustrating. It left them feeling powerless, "suspended in the air," and desperate to take any sort of action that might help them apply for asylum. In the summer of 2021, while I was staffing various community events organized by Casa de Esperanza, I was instructed not to take attendance at the entrance – as had previously been common practice – because even informal lists were being mistaken by distressed asylum seekers as *the* waitlist. In a situation in which there was literally nothing they could do to get asylum, people grasped at opportunities that they thought might hold promise, however far-fetched, which made them vulnerable to scams and disinformation. Unsurprisingly, given the desperate context, there were many cases of deception. There were people pretending to be lawyers, or to have some other sway in the asylum system, in order to charge a fee for their fraudulent services. Study participants also frequently asked me to verify fake news stories they had heard, about the border opening up, or exceptions being made for certain asylum seekers like them.

Interestingly, in Elena's testimony, she both expresses her dismay at not even being allowed to put her name on the waitlist, and appeals to the Director of DHS to put an end to the

waitlist all together, in recognition of it being an unjust barrier to applying for asylum "that shouldn't have existed."

Eduardo's story. Actants : Homophobia, Criminal Organizations

Male asylum seeker from Guatemala who is part of the LGBTQ+ community. He was put in MPP and returned to Mexico, where he was stuck for almost 19 months in Matamoros, Tamaulipas.

Moderator: Could you tell us what the security situation has been like for the migrant LGBTQ+ community in Matamoros under the MPP blockade against asylum seekers by the US government?

Eduardo: Since the implementation of MPP by the previous government of the United States and the expulsions of people to Mexico, well…we were sent back to some of the most dangerous cities in Mexico. Since I arrived, well, I've been a victim of the cartels who identified me as a migrant and required me to pay a weekly extortion fee so that they wouldn't harm me. They would stop by every week to ask for the fee, they'd enter my house to look through my belongings, and at one point they were looking through my cell phone and they discovered that I'm a part of the LGBT community and so they informed me that'd be even more expensive, that I would have to pay them even more. They told me that my choice was simple: I could let them kidnap me and they would collect the ransom fee, or they could recruit me to start working for them to kidnap others, or I would have to pay them a higher fee. So obviously it's never the ideal solution to have to pay them but that's what I had to do. I was paying that criminal organization for almost 19 months in Matamoros. That's what happened to me personally but there are many other stories of things happening to people under MPP in these cities. For example, a migrant whose family was kidnapped and since he couldn't afford the ransom fee, he was forced to work for the criminal organization, kidnapping other people, in order to save his family.

Moderator: Thank you for sharing your experience. Due to everything you've experienced, what are your demands?

Eduardo: Definitely that safe spaces be created for LGBTQ asylum seekers that guarantee us, well, our basic needs like shelter, safety, health, education. And above all, I ask that the principle of non-refoulement be respected. To say a little more about that principle…it's prohibited by international law for countries which receive refugees to return them to a country where they'll be at risk of persecution due to their religion, nationality, or a specific social group, which is exactly what's happening to us [members of the LGBTQ community) with MPP. The previous administration of the US government put us in this program where we face imminent danger, we even risk losing our lives.

Eduardo's testimony highlights how asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting can be easily exploited because they have no legal protections, which makes them vulnerable to becoming commodities. In her book, "Lives in Transit: Violence and Intimacy on the Migrant Journey," Anthropologist Wendy Vogt (2018) describes the political economy of the migrant journey through Mexico, as their bodies, labor, and lives become implicated in global and local economies that profit from their mobility as racialized and gendered others. Migrants (including asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting) commonly need to employ human smugglers to assist them in crossing through Mexico and into the U.S. Migrants thus become a commodity to be transported like any other goods, and are often treated as such: packed into the back of trucks, onto dangerous freight trains and boats, and abandoned or killed if they become a liability to the overall smuggling operation. Migrants are also sometimes sold into the sex industry, kidnapped and held for ransom, or forced to take part in drug smuggling or other criminal activities, as Eduardo's story illustrates. Many of the activities listed above are controlled by large criminal organizations, sometimes with ties to local authorities. As these organizations

profit off migrant commodification, they can continually expand their operations, which includes the smuggling of drugs into the U.S.

While Vogt's book focuses on migrants' journeys throughout Mexico, Eduardo's story – with many news stories corroborating – sheds light on how political economies have built up around asylum seekers who are experiencing weaponized waiting at the border. Asylum seekers trapped in Mexican border cities, with no legal protections and living in encampments and other precarious situations, are like sitting ducks for the industries that seek to commodify them. Eduardo's story shows how certain groups are especially vulnerable, including LGBTQ+ asylum seekers who are sometimes forced to pay higher fees to the cartels if their sexuality is discovered.

Alexandra's story. Actants: Gender/Sexual Violence, Police Violence

Female asylum seeker from El Salvador, mother of 3 children, 1 of whom has a disability. At the time of the public forum, Alexandra had been waiting in the city of Juarez, Sinaloa for 5 months in what she describes as the "cruel MPP program."

Moderator: What have been your experiences as a Salvadoran woman waiting in Sinaloa under MPP?

Alexandra: I left my country fleeing gang violence and here in Mexico I suffered sexual violence, like so many women migrants. In Juarez I have also been subject to harassment, extortion and mistreatment by the police. For example, on December 27, 2020, I was coming back from work and the police stopped me and asked me for my immigration documents. I gave him the documents, he took them in his hands, and told me, "Look lady, here's the situation: If you don't cooperate with us and give us the money you have, you'll be deported." I responded, "But why, if I have my legal documents?" And he told me that those weren't worth anything and he, well, he ripped up my documents at that moment. I started to film him with my phone and I told him what he was doing was illegal. He asked me what law, what

legal code, did I know that said that? And he told me, "No, here with me you don't have any rights, lady." I told him that I could report him for what he was doing to me and he asked me what proof I had, and that nobody would believe me if I reported him. Then he asked me for my phone. I didn't want to give it to him. Then the officer that was behind me, well he had seen me filming and so he took my phone and stepped on it and smashed it. He ended up breaking it. The police officer broke my phone! And so I don't have any proof of what they did, for people to believe me.

And well, about **MPP, for me it was a very cruel act by the former government of the United States to send me to a country that they know isn't safe, without any sort of program or any hope. It's not even clear when I'll be able to enter.** They don't guarantee or respect the rights of migrants that ask for asylum and protection in the United States. I've been here in Mexico for 5 months of uncertainty. I didn't have any issues registering with UNHCR, for that recent process with MPP, but other people did. Yes, other people had issues because they don't give correct and concrete information. For example, they told me that I was going to be able to enter the US, that this week they would call me and that I would be able to enter…and then yesterday I received an email telling me that no, I have to wait until a later date. And so this creates uncertainty. I don't know what's going to happen from one day to the next. I don't even know what to believe anymore.

Moderator: Thank you. And what is your demand?

Alexandra: That the police be monitored. That the police stop abusing immigrants because we are also human beings. And to the UNHCR, I ask that they stop giving out confusing information to all the people who are waiting under MPP, a program which should never have existed in the first place. I ask that they put themselves in our shoes, and put forth a process that is clear and transparent.

Alexandra is an example of someone who was put into MPP during the Trump administration. When Biden first took office, his administration briefly ended the program (though they reinstated and expanded it at the end of 2021), and began rolling out a process to let asylum

seekers stuck in Mexico under MPP finally enter the U.S. and continue their cases from there. However, as Alexandra's testimony shows, the process was far from swift and smooth. Part of the confusion stemmed from the fact that many people had their asylum cases closed while they were in MPP, often without even realizing it, for a variety of reasons. First, because the lack of legal representation made it nearly impossible for asylum seekers to win their cases. Secondly, the Customs and Border Protection's confusing paperwork and notice standards had left many confused about when and where exactly they were supposed to show up, made worse by the fact that they were often directed to ports of entry hundreds of miles from where they had been dropped off. Others suffered assaults, kidnappings, and other forms of violence that kept them from being able to show up in court, resulting in the termination of their cases. Until June of 2021, for the close to 31,000 asylum seekers in MPP who had their cases closed, there was no way for them to enter the United States, which caused great confusion (Border/Lines, 2021). Eventually, the government allowed reopening of MPP cases in absentia removal orders or termination, but in order to do so, asylum seekers would have to register through an online United Nations portal to receive an appointment to present themselves at a particular port of entry, at which point they would be paroled in and have the chance to restart an asylum case. Having been in behind-the-scenes conversations with advocates working for Casa de Esperanza and other human rights organizations during this time, I know the processing of MPP cases was confusing even for advocates, including myself. For asylum seekers living in desperate and precarious situations and often disconnected from human rights organizations, I can only imagine how unclear, frustrating, and anxiety-provoking it must have been.

Josefa's story. Actants: Family Separation, Poverty, Lack of Access to Education, Misogyny, Organized Crime, Isolation

Venezuelan mother of an 11 year old son. She arrived in Nogales, Sonora on December 17th and was put in the MPP program. She fled Venezuela due to political persecution.

Moderator: You were sent back to Mexico to await your asylum case and were separated from your family. How has that impacted you?

Josefa: Well, I had no choice but to leave Venezuela, a country that violates human rights, where there's no freedom of expression, anyone who opposes the government of Nicolas Maduro is considered a traitor, and simply because I had a government job and held opposing views, well, I was forced to leave my country. And when you arrive (at the border) with this trauma, having fled your country with a young child, seeking protection and asylum…and you arrive…I arrived to the border, I turned myself into immigration authorities on January 23, 2020 because I was desperate after spending so many days of fear in Nogales. I was staying in an apartment there, and there was an attempted break-in. This terrified me so I went straight to the port of entry and told them I wanted to apply for asylum. They detained me – I was in detention for 5 days, and I explained my situation. So then when they told me in my first interview that I would be put in MPP – well I didn't know that program existed. They returned me to Mexico and I begged the officer, "Please, don't send me back there, I'm afraid." I told him my case but he didn't accept it. And I explained that my husband had left Venezuela for the same reason and that he was already in the US, but they didn't accept it, they didn't accept my credible fear. So when I was sent back to Mexico I felt very alone, with my son who was 10 years old at that time. I was alone, lost, desperate, and then a Venezuelan woman held out her hand, helped me to get an apartment. But that apartment was very expensive, I couldn't afford the rent. So I started looking for other places to rent but the only places I could afford were very frightening. People were telling me that those apartments were in dangerous areas

for my son, areas controlled by the gangs. That made me very afraid for my son. And at that time all the shelters were full, they had no room, as there were many immigrants then in the same situation as me. So in the end I went back to my apartment and asked the landlord to please lower the rent for me just for a little while, because my court date had been scheduled for April. And I thought, ok, I'll just wait here until April, hoping this will pass quickly. But that transition was difficult because...what is one supposed to do with their child? You can't have them out of school for so long. I was feeling desperate. As a female migrant you're subjected to many things […] I started receiving indecent text messages on my phone, telling me to prostitute myself. I would get messages saying that Venezuelan migrant women are used in this way, and this made me very afraid. Being alone with my son, I had no idea what to do. I felt like I was in a tunnel without a way out. Sometimes I would think, would it be better to go back to my country? But how can I go back to my country, if in my country it's even worse? My country terrified me, my colleagues left for the same reason as me. I had other colleagues who were assassinated in their jail cells, and others who are still being detained even though they are innocent. Innocent people are being persecuted there. So I decided to stay. And then the pandemic started and that complicated things even more, made things even more desperate. Whenever there's a little bit of hope, it's followed by despair. The pandemic came and made things worse because now there are no more court dates. You have the hope of having your court date, and then it never arrives. And the time passes and you don't know what to do, you are stuck in a tunnel with no way out. There's nothing more terrible, that can torment a person more, than to be stuck in a hole, in a tunnel, with no way out, and nothing you can do. Then, you're in that moment and suddenly a light comes, in this case it came from Kino, the foundation that supports migrants, that has a campaign, "Save Asylum," and this allowed us (migrants) to speak out, that we as migrants were still waiting for a response to our requests for asylum. Thanks to this campaign we could organize some activities and feel like we were still humans, people who are a part of a program (MPP) that was unjust, that was inhumane. As you've heard from the other speakers tonight, this is not an invention. Everyone has their own story, this is a reality. It's an unjust program, it's inhumane, to be forced to return to a country that you don't even know. To a country where gangs rule, where children are

kidnapped. We, as mothers who are on our own, are terrified that something will happen to our children. This is why we are asking for asylum. We want to protect them, and to provide them a better future.

Josefa's testimony points to the unique implications of weaponized waiting for children: her child, like many others, was out of school for many months. He was also separated from his father during that time. Although it's not the focus of this thesis, it's important to consider the psychological and social consequences for children who are experiencing weaponized waiting. To be separated from their primary caregiver(s) for a prolonged and indefinite period, and/or to lose months or years of important academic and social learning at school, are terrible outcomes for children who have already experienced the violence of forced displacement. Keenly aware of the injustice and harm inflicted upon her son while waiting, Josefa demanded reparations from the government:

> Considering that this has been the most inhumane program, we want to know what reparations we can receive for the time we have lost? We have been separated from our families for years. How can one recover this lost time? How can the children recover the time that they've been without their fathers, without their mothers? How can the children recover the time that they've been without education?

All of the mothers I spoke with at Casa de Esperanza who were considering abandoning their asylum case and crossing instead through the desert, mentioned to me their concern for their children's education and psychological wellbeing. And that's even despite the fact that their children were enrolled in online school at Casa de Esperanza, thanks to efforts by the staff. For who aren't connected to organizations that support asylum seekers, especially if they didn't speak Spanish, often don't know that their children have the right to attend school in Mexico, or the steps to get them enrolled. One woman expressed to me her deep concern about her 9 year old daughter who still didn't know how to read. Poverty and violence at home, constant

instability while on the long journey north, and then being stuck at the border, had kept her out of school for years.

Josefa's concern that her son might be kidnapped by the gangs points recalls Eduardo's testimony about how LGBTQ+ asylum seekers are targeted by the cartels. Children are another group who are especially vulnerable to the commodification of asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting. Along similar lines, as a woman, Josefa received threatening messages to commodify her body through prostitution. Whereas the Cameroonian female asylum seeker complained to me about being asked "how much?" by men on the street, which she attributed to them making assumptions about her as a Black woman, the messages about prostitution that Josefa received were in reference to her being a (non-Black) Venezuelan woman.

It's also interesting to note the direct parallels between her testimony and Alma's, about their experiences in CBP holding cells. Neither of them were aware that they could be sent back to Mexico through MPP, and both of them pleaded not to be sent back out of fear, but to no avail. The conversation continued with more of Josefa's demands:

> Ok, the first demand is that…even though the new [Biden] administration of the United States has made some attempts, or some promises to resolve some of the problems facing immigrants, such as in the immigrants in MPP, so far we are all still stuck. We still still haven't seen changes…or rather, at least in the case of the camps that they said they'd resolve, they have resolved a few cases. But the process has not been transparent. We call on UNHCR, we call on the authorities, to resolve the irregularities that are happening with the MPP process. Because there are people, just like Alexandra just explained, there are people that still haven't been able to register in MPP. Other people are told that they're going to get a phone call on a certain date, and then they aren't called. There are others that are told they'll get just one phone call, but then they have to have two calls, and then a third call, and still nothing. For me, thank God, I already had my first call. But I don't know when the second call will be. They didn't give me a date. So you're living with this uncertainty, not knowing what to think, if they're really going to call you, maybe they'll call you when you're busy doing something and you're not able to answer the phone. It's different when they tell you a specific date that they're going to call you. Because then on that day you can be ready to receive a call. But if they don't tell you the date that they're going to call

> you…how long do you have to wait? Why does it take them so long to call, if they already have all of our information? Please, we ask that UNHCR and the United States government revise this process, to give people [in MPP] clear information, to give us at least a little bit of peace and hope in this process.

Josefa highlights the bureaucratic aspect of weaponized waiting creates confusion and anxiety; Like Josefa, I heard frustration expressed many times by asylum seekers who were waiting on phone calls or other forms of communication from the government about their immigration cases, without any idea when they would be contacted. This paralyzes them in their day-to-day actions and makes it extremely difficult to have any sort of routine (and routines are essential to mental health, especially when coping with trauma), as they are constantly on alert, waiting for a call. In denying asylum seekers – who had already been waiting for months or even years – clear dates and information about their cases, the government was once again signaling that their time and worth as humans was less valuable. Auyero, building on Schwartz (1974), writes that the message conveyed by state officials toward those told to wait is one of inferiority as opposed to respect, and that the "uncertainty and arbitrariness of the delays signal the state's total disregard for the waiting populace," signaling to them that as poor people, their time and worth is less valuable than the time and worth of others. At one point, Josefa appeals to the Director of DHS, Alejandro Mayorkas, to put an end to these policies, Josefa seeming to acknowledge his status as an "all-powerful" one "who does not wait but who makes others wait" (Bourdieu 2000, p. 228). She says:

> What do we want? We want the US Director of Homeland Security, Mr. Alejandro Mayorkas, to receive our letters, that he hold a meeting with all these migrants who are in limbo, who don't know what to do. We ask that he listen to us, that he put himself in our shoes, that he come up with a short-term plan for us, to put some peace in our hearts, in our families' hearts, to give us somehow a bit of peace. There is nothing more desperate for a human being than to be in a situation where we have no idea what to do. This causes us emotional harm, psychological harm. This can lead us to make a terrible decision, a terrible mistake, and we don't want anyone to have to make such a tragic decision [as suicide].

In Haas' (2012) study, despite suicidal ideation being common among her informants, none of them ended their life. In my study of weaponized waiting, my informants, like Alma, also frequently spoke openly about their desire for life to be over. Fortunately, none of them committed suicide, either. Asylum seekers who were mothers often cited their children as being their motivation to carry on. The fact that suicide was such a commonly contemplated option, however, sheds light on the depth of suffering and desperation they felt while experiencing weaponized waiting.

CONCLUSION

Haas (2012) writes that, for asylum seekers in her study who were waiting in the US, "suffering was understood as generated by the current political system in which they were embedded and which was perceived as both extending enduring suffering as well as generating new forms of suffering" (p. 204). These new forms of suffering, a result of protracted waiting, she describes as *existential limbo*. "It was the present, protracted situation that disallowed *anywhere* to be called home that generated suffering and a sense of partial existence" (p. 204). *Existential limbo* is a useful term to describe how asylum seekers waiting in Mexico experience weaponized waiting, as "existential uncertainty and a sense of powerlessness" (ibid, p. 173), or as Josefa from Venezuela said in her testimony, "There is nothing more desperate for a human being than to be in a situation where we have no idea what to do."

This chapter argued that weaponized waiting has been used by the U.S. government as a violent strategy of deterrence to keep asylum seekers from reaching the U.S, causing asylum seekers to experience the extreme effects of state power, with great harm to their physical and psychological well-being. In highlighting official statements by the DHS, I show how the

government justified implementing MPP — or making asylum seekers wait in Mexico — as a way to reduce "illegal immigration," which they conflated with with seeking asylum. Drawing on Jason De Leon's critique of Prevention through Deterrence — another set of policies to deter 'illegal immigrants' —I showed how MPP and other policies that led to weaponized waiting have recruited dangerous Mexican cities to "work" as part of the border apparatus. These policies seem designed to wear asylum seekers down, as they must endure overlapping human and non-human threats (or actants) such as criminal organizations, racist police, homophobia, and homelessness, which exacerbate the uncertainty and anxiety of prolonged and indefinite waiting.

However, in contrast to other studies of waiting in more benign conditions, which portray waiting as a process of submission to power, the testimonies I highlighted in this chapter showed that many asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting at the US-Mexico border reject, rather than internalize, the message that they should have to wait. They are not patiently waiting, but rather doing everything in their very limited power to access what they believe are their rights. Some direct their grievances directly to government officials, who they believe are in the wrong. Much like the "Concerned Women" refugee activists in Holzer's (2013) study of refugee camps, who appeal to their rights under international refugee law as well as other international human rights regimes, the asylum seekers whose testimonies I highlighted in this chapter made use of legal language and appeal to International Human Rights Law as well as domestic asylum policies – to claim their rights. Having access to a platform to speak out through their connections to human rights organizations is important for their ability to express resistance as opposed to submission to domination.

CHAPTER 3. CREATIVE HEALING STRATEGIES

Asylum Seekers' Creative Strategies for Enduring Weaponized Waiting

I am singing a song that can only be born after losing a country.
– Joy Harjo (Epigraph to Natalie Diaz's, "Postcolonial Love Poem")

INTRODUCTION

In the literature on the mental health of asylum seekers, there's a strong focus on suffering. That's unsurprising, considering the violence that causes them to leave their countries of origin, and which they confront along their migrant journeys and while embedded in the asylum process. In the previous chapter, I showed how being forced to wait for prolonged periods in Mexico causes asylum seekers to experience uncertainty and a sense of powerlessness described by Haas (2012) as *existential limbo,* which is further exacerbated by the additional and extreme daily threats to their physical and psychological well being, such as racial discrimination, kidnappings, and even murder.

However, despite all this, this chapter argues that asylum seekers have complex emotions and experiences which cannot be described *only* in negative terms. I explore the affective complexity of weaponized waiting, by examining how asylum seekers at Casa de Esperanza engage in a variety of creative practices while they endure waiting, such as singing, dancing, and writing poetry, which sometimes get described by activists at the shelter as expressions of *resistir gozando.* Ultimately, this chapter is concerned with understanding how these practices enable asylum seekers to access emotions and experiences beyond suffering.

HEALING WHILE EXPERIENCING WEAPONIZED WAITING

In Tijuana and (especially) other, less-resourced border cities, asylum seekers' access to mental health care services is extremely limited. Even though asylum seekers frequently express their desire to see a psychologist, migrant shelters are seldom equipped to offer expensive mental health care services like psychiatry and psychotherapy. Casa de Esperanza sometimes partners with Psychologists Without Borders, and refers vulnerable residents to mental health care professionals working at other organizations. These referrals can be helpful, especially when it comes to learning skills to deal with acute crises and other very specific problems. For example, Eileen, an asylum seeker from Cameroon, told me that the psychologist she was referred to was very helpful in teaching her how to explain to her young son, in age-appropriate words, why she'd had to leave him behind. Once she was able to explain this to him, their relationship was restored and he started talking to her again. However, she felt there was nothing the psychologist could do to help her cope with the pain of being separated from him, or her anxiety about being stuck in Mexico. For the former, she needed legal and economic support, which Casa de Esperanza could help with, to an extent. For the latter, structural changes were needed: the U.S. government would have to restore the right to apply for asylum. Kleinman, Das, and Locke (1997) use the term "social suffering" to locate the suffering of individuals within larger political and cultural processes. Social suffering describes "an assemblage of human problems that have their origins and consequences in the devastating injuries that social force can inflict on human experience. Social suffering results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems" (ix). For Eileen, the psychologist was able to support her in her relationship with her son, but could not ultimately resolve the rest of her social suffering. After repairing her

relationship with her son, Eileen decided to stop seeing the psychologist. “I’m my own psychologist now,” she told me.

Even in rare cases, like Eileen’s, when services are available, there may be cultural, linguistic, temporal, and other structural constraints to receiving adequate care. As I will show in this chapter, for some individuals, engaging in creative practices such as dance, poetry, and theater, can be deeply therapeutic. For others, the benefits of making art are less pronounced, but it does at the very least provide them moments of happiness and relief from a brutal context.

Music as a Healing Practice

Osmin* is an extroverted, energetic, remarkably cheerful man in his 30s. He was raised by his grandparents in Guatemala, as his mother had migrated to the US and was living there during most of his life. Osmin had to flee his country after a gang told him he had 72 hours to leave. At the time of my first interview with him, he’d been living and working “in limbo” in Tijuana for nearly 4 years, without legal status. He stood out as the only participant in my study who described himself as being really happy with his life. I asked him how he did it:

> *Las heridas emocionales...normalmente hay una especialista que son los psicólogos...las heridas físicas son los doctores. En mi caso no tenía ninguna herramienta de esos. No podía tenerlos. Uno porque...por la inseguridad de ser migrante. Este te limita al hecho de poderte acercar sin no sentir miedo de que les vaya a...te van a deportar cuando ya hablan con el doctor y te digan no, usted no tiene...aunque les pagues, puede ser que sea un privado (...) Pero hay auto mecanismos que uno va adquiriendo como sentarse y meditar, cantar ... .eso es un método para mí. Canto internamente, canto internamente. Empiezas a comprender la vida de otra manera.*
>
> (To heal) emotional wounds, normally there’s a specialist for that, a psychologist. For physical wounds it’s a doctor. In my case, I didn’t have either of those tools. I couldn’t have them. First, because of **the insecurity of being a migrant. This limits you from being able to talk to a doctor without being afraid that they’re going to deport you,** that they might say no…you don’t have (papers).

> Even if you pay them, even if it's a private doctor (...) **But there are auto-mechanisms that one learns, like to sit and meditate, or sing**…that's a method for me. I sing internally, internally. You start to understand the world in a different way.

Osmin, like many of my study participants, views seeing a psychologist as a valid way to deal with suffering. Although he's a Spanish speaker, even if he could scramble up the money to see a local psychologist, his lack of legal status makes him too afraid to interact with medical professionals. So, he views singing as an alternative way to cope with his pain. Almost every time I met with him during my field work, he would serenade me, and I observed him frequently singing to himself, or performing karaoke with other asylum seekers at the cultural center. After our first interview, we relaxed on the couches in the cultural center of Casa de Esperanza. While we chatted informally, he got out a ukulele and started playing it. While strumming it, he told me that although he finds it important to remember and tell his story, it reminds him that his wounds are still not fully healed. Playing music was a way for him to treat them (*"sanar las heridas"*) after our interview. On another occasion, he told me:

> *La música también es un medio de paz, de tranquilidad, de expresión. Hay veces que yo no necesito...este...tener esta conversación, si no que lo puedo haber hecho cantando (...) Me entienden? Entonces y así dependiendo como la gente lo puede estar cantando incluso está despertando sentimientos, están así...yo, por ejemplo cantando me pongo a llorar también que estaría triste. Osea expresa sentimientos la música.*
>
> Music is a medium for peace, tranquility, and expression. There are times when I didn't need to…like…have that conversation, but instead I could have sung it. Do you understand? So it depends on how people are singing…they can be awakening feelings. Me, for example, I start to cry when I'm sad…I mean, music expresses feelings.

For Osmin, through music he is able to feel and express whatever it is he's feeling, whether that be peace, tranquility, or sadness. There are things that he either doesn't want to or can't say, "to

have that conversation," but which he can express through song. Singing for Osmin could be described as a means of catharsis.

Writing Poetry as a Healing Practice

There are risks to highlighting asylum seekers' joy while experiencing weaponized waiting, particularly as a scholar in a position of privilege who is not experiencing this violence myself. Highlighting expressions of joy may seem to dilute the violence inflicted on asylum seekers through displacement and racist asylum policies. Perhaps even more dangerous is the risk of romanticizing their joyful expressions, contributing to a colonial legacy of exotifying the dark-skinned "other" as foolish or entertaining subjects in the white imagination. That's why it's so important to emphasize that the joy asylum seekers experience never replaces, but rather exists in juxtaposition with, and opposition to, the suffering imposed upon them. This approach reflects a growing body of work that challenges deficit-based approaches to understanding trauma which highlight only its negative impacts.

Poetry is a realm where paradox, provocation, and the disruption of binary logics thrive, and another tool used by some asylum seekers to endure and find meaning in the violence of weaponized waiting. Literary critic Cleanth Brooks (1947) argues that paradox is the language of poetry, indeed almost inseparable or indistinct from poetry itself. "All of the subtler states of emotion [...] demand metaphor for expression. The poet must work by analogies, but the metaphors do not lie in the same plane or fit neatly edge to edge. There is a continual tilting of the planes, necessary overlappings, discrepancies, contradictions" (Brooks, p. 32). Poet Tracy K. Smith contrasts poetry with everyday communication, where persuasion (the attempt at making one truth dominate another) and appeals to authority are common devices, as we try to solve

problems, or narrate our lives and histories. For Smith, perceiving the contradictions in a poem can help us get comfortable in acknowledging that in life, many views can simultaneously be right. In an interview with Ezra Klein (2020), Smith says: “We are trained to think one truth must replace another. One possibility must override another when in reality there are these different gradations that speak to one another, indict one another, and also maybe make space for a really creative composite view of history.” The poem, “Reservation Mathematics” by Spokane-Coeur d'Alene-Native American writer Sherman Alexie (1993) expresses the challenge of having to hold multiple, contradictory, truths:

> On the telephone, my friend from New York told me I drifted back into a reservation accent only when I talked about pain. How could I tell her
>
> that the reservation is more
>
> than pain?
>
> It’s double the happiness, too
>
> when I watch the fancydancers
>
> or
>
> the basketball players
>
> or
>
> the comic book collectors
>
> all dreaming
>
> Of a life larger than this one, constructed by walls everywhere.

The reservation is also a liminal space, a borderland, and where its residents are forced to endure the violent effects of state power and ongoing colonization. But, as Alexie reminds us, it’s much

more than that. For people to carry on dancing, playing sports, reading comics, and envisioning a different future in the face of colonial violence, is a remarkable demonstration of resistance with joy, or "double the happiness."

If paradox is the language of poetry, it's also the language of this ethnography. Deciding to focus my fieldwork on exploring 'joy as resistance' felt inevitable. It's impossible to create and work collaboratively with asylum seekers at the border without bearing witness to intense suffering and radical joy. In thinking of how to describe my fieldwork experience at the shelter Tijuana, in which I encountered so much suffering, I wondered how I would manage to capture both the immense suffering and the immense joy that exist there. So, how can I tell you, That *la frontera* is more

than pain?
It's double the happiness, too
When I watch the Haitian dancers
or
the soccer players
or
the feminist protesters
all dreaming
of a life larger than this one, constructed by walls everywhere.

This struggle to communicate the contradictions ingrained in the experience of dispossession, violent state power, and life at the margins, is also present for Ximena, an asylum seeker from El Salvador who writes poetry "*como una forma de terapia"* (as a form of therapy). Ximena fled

with her younger sister and parents from San Salvador, the capital of El Salvador, when she was 20 years old. Her family owned a small but successful shop, which allowed them to lead a relatively comfortable lifestyle. Before her family became the target of gang violence, Ximena had just graduated from high school, and was hoping to go to college and become a professional, although she worried that she wouldn't have many career options due to the pervasive economic and social instability in her country. Still, she never imagined that she would have to immigrate, and she even used to look down on those who did. Things took a downturn for Ximena's family when a local gang began extorting the family business, a common experience in San Salvador for merchants who can't afford their own security guards. Gang members regularly stopped by the shop to demand the *renta*, or protection money. The *renta* kept increasing to the point that Ximena's family could hardly keep the business open, but they had to keep paying it because to defy the gang would be a death sentence. Then, Ximena's sister revealed to her that she was being raped and had been impregnanted by one of the gang members. This led to pregnancy, a miscarriage, and serious hemorrhaging. When their mother found out about the abuse, the news hit her so hard that she suffered a stroke. Ximana's sister eventually confronted the gang member and told him about the miscarriage, but he showed no mercy. Fearing for their lives, the family fled in the middle of the night to Guatemala. Ximena left everything behind, including her journals full of the songs, poems, and stories she had written throughout her childhood and adolescence. The family's original idea when leaving El Salvador was to stay and live in Guatemala City, where they had a relative. However, there was a shootout at their apartment in Guatemala City after their landlady failed to pay the *renta* to the Guatemalan gang that was extorting her. This incident was retraumatizing for the family and prompted them to flee to Mexico. They were given humanitarian visas in Tapachula, at the border of Mexico and

Guatemala, which authorized them to travel to Mexico City where they applied for refugee status, began working, and furnished an apartment. The family was able to envision a future in Mexico City, but they were still haunted by the violence of their recent past. Due to stress, Ximena's blood pressure soared. Then, the same gang that had persecuted them in El Salvador began threatening them in Mexico City. Her family decided to abandon their application for refugee status in Mexico, and fled for the US-Mexico border, where they were placed in MPP and returned to Mexico, where they found shelter at Casa de Esperanza after first sleeping in the street. Ximena returned to her childhood strategy of writing to get in touch with and regulate her inner experience. Here, she describes how she grapples with the paradoxical nature of her story:

> *Creo que he crecido también porque aunque ha sido una situación dolorosa, también fue una lección de aprendizaje para mí ha sido aprendizaje 100% porque me he aprendido a conocer qué tan fuerte soy. Algo que yo no sabía. Porque he superado cosas que pues sí, son muy duras. Y qué tan unida está mi familia, aunque la verdad es que nunca fuimos súper unidos. Cada quien estaba en sus cosas pero en esa situación si lo estuvimos, porque necesitábamos el uno del otro.*

> I think I've grown too, because although it's been a painful situation, it was also a learning experience. For me it's been 100% a learning experience because I have learned how strong I am, something I didn't know before. Because I've overcome things that are, well yes, very hard. And [I learned] how united my family is. Because the truth is that we were never that unified. Everyone was doing their own thing. But in this situation, yes we were [united] because we needed each other.

For Ximena, her experience has been one of immense suffering, but it's taught her that she's stronger than she could have imagined, and it's brought her family closer together. She also told me, in a later conversation, that having slept on the street in Tijuana with her family during this period was one of the hardest experiences of her life, and it taught her to be much empathetic to others who are homeless or otherwise suffering. Having pertained to the middle class in El

Salvador, she had never before identified with those who slept on the street. The paradox arises in the fact that, through undergoing that terrible experience, she eventually found meaning in her suffering. This has improved her physical and mental health, and made her a more compassionate person. Psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Vicktor Frankl (2014 ed) writes that "one of the basic tenets of logotherapy (is) that man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning (p. 106). To reframe or add complexity to exceedingly difficult experiences, in order to change one's attitude toward them, can relieve some of the pain. It's a difficult task to bear alone, hence the role of the therapist in logotherapy. Ximena had the support of her family and the shelter to help her, and she also had poetry:

> *Cuando yo escribo siempre que voy sacando eso poco a poco, y me ayuda mucho a soltar…muchísima a soltar, al poder ser como creo que la mayor parte de lo que he logrado, superado, hasta cierto punto, porque ya gracias a Dios ya puedo dormir, ya muchas cosas que yo...porque yo soñaba, tenía pesadillas no podía dormir. Y todo eso lo iba sacando porque escribo. Me ha ayudado muchísimo y lo he estado haciendo últimamente porque pues sí aparte que me cura, me gusta mucho hacerlo siempre me ha gustado escribir.*
>
> **When I write, whenever I'm able to let it all out little by little**, it helps me a lot to let go. It helps me so much to let go, and to be able to be like…I think most of what I've been able to achieve and overcome. To an extent, because thank God I can finally sleep, and there are many things that I…because I would dream…**I would have nightmares and I wouldn't be able to sleep. And all of that I was able to let go of because I write.**

Ximena, like many of my informants, referred to her creative practice (in her case, poetry) as a form of therapy. Psychoanalysis and the forms of therapy that derive from it, are often described as a "talking cure," a treatment method that operates through linguistic action and interaction, to uncover traumatic memories that are buried in an unconscious, fragmented form. These memories have no sense of chronological order or even a connection among themselves, but can be activated by inputs from our senses in the present moment, causing us to intensely experience

reminders of something that happened to us in the past, or in dreams. Because the conscious mind represses traumatic experiences, it can be impossible to articulate coherently and chronologically what one has suffered. Applying this idea to Ximena's experience, it's unsurprising that repressed traumatic memories of violence stored in her unconscious mind would emerge in her nightmares. The belief in psychoanalysis is that, once the patient learns to "talk" (literally and/or figuratively) about those experiences, then worlds of meaning can emerge. Like logotherapy, psychoanalysis contends that meaning prompts healing. Ximema attributes being free of insomnia and nightmares, to the "cure" of writing poetry, which helps her to "let all of that out." Using a psychoanalytic lens, one could understand her poetry writing as an alternative take on the talking cure. It's an interesting tool to feel, access, and verbalize traumatic memories, because sometimes through its rhythm, sound, paradoxes, metaphors, and the

spaces

between

words,

poetry manages to express what cannot be said in a direct or literal way.

Dianna Kinny (2013) points out that Freud "described psychoanalysis as the art of interpretation and noted strong affinities between poetry and his own endeavors" (p. 62) and she cites various times where he wrote about this connection: "Everywhere I go I find that a poet has been there before me'; "Poets are masters of us ordinary men, in knowledge of the mind, because they drink at streams which we have not yet made accessible to science." (Freud, 1923, as cited by Kenny 2013 : 62).

T.S. Eliot (1975), also described the poet as being similar to the psychoanalyst in that they are ". . . occupied with frontiers of consciousness beyond which words fail though meanings still exist" (p. 111). Along similar lines, Tracy K. Smith (Klein, 2020) observes:

> Poetry is the language that sits really close to feelings that defy language. Poetry nudges some of our feelings of joy or confusion or desire toward feelings that we can recognize and describe. I take solace in the fact that it's poems that we turn to in big moments of change — like the loss of someone or a marriage or the birth of a child — because poems are resourceful for finding terms that remind us of what we live with but don't always bring into speech.

Unlike confession in the Catholic or psychoanalytic traditions, or testimonies given by asylum seekers are required to give in U.S. Immigration Courts, the prerogative of stories, songs, and poems is not necessarily to describe in literal terms an objective and chronological account of what occurred, but to verbalize feelings, paradoxes, fantasies, and indescribable, and sometimes unconscious, experiences. Like other forms of art, poetry lies at the edge of the realm of reality, a vector for translating sensations into words, while validating and often transforming the inner experience of the writer, like Ximena, in the process.

Dance as a Healing Practice

Casa de Esperanza has a practice of holding regular *círculos de palabra* (group meetings) with residents at the shelter, to hear their concerns and suggestions for making changes or implementing new initiatives at the shelter. These meetings are an effort to create a space for collaborative and non-hierarchical decision making regarding specific issues that affect the daily lives of asylum seekers, such as meal plans, the division of chores, and and the allocation of funding for educational, psychosocial, and cultural programming. It can be challenging to make decisions together, as there are a lot of people and they have different backgrounds, ages,

interests, and priorities. But, one thing they can often agree on is the desire to have parties and dance classes. Pamela, the director of the shelter, notes that dance is an important part of the Latin American, Caribbean and African cultures they come from. Their love of dance is one of the few things that most of them share in common. (Many also share a love of food, but having different tastes in foods can sometimes be a source of tension at the shelter, in a way that having different tastes in music is not. For example, some Caribbean asylum seekers I spoke with resent having to eat Mexican food every day.) As Eileen, an asylum seeker from Cameroon put it: "Everybody dance, baby dance, young dance, old woman dance. When the people starting to dance, we don't see the difference. Everybody's happy to dance." In other words, dance brings people together, despite their differences.

In November 2021, I collaborated with staff members (mostly asylum seekers themselves) to design a dance workshop for female asylum seekers. Because of COVID-19 social distancing measures, the workshop was limited to 15 participants, who ranged in age from 20-40. Participants were from Mexico, El Salvador, Haiti, Cameroon, Ghana, Chile (staff), Guatemala, Colombia, and the U.S. (me).

I arrived early to help set up the workshop. *Reggaeton* music was blasting from the speakers, and there was giddiness and excitement in the air. Twin asylum seekers from Haiti, employed as community organizers at Casa de Esperanza, were teasing each other and giggling as they rehearsed the Zumba dance choreography they had learned on YouTube, and which they were going to teach the group. As participants arrived, wearing workout clothes and tennis shoes, the mood in the room became more complex. Two women from Mexico arrived timidly, pulling up chairs to sit down and wait quietly for the event to start. Another, from Honduras, was in the corner, confiding in a hushed voice with a staff member, who listened intently while she wiped

away tears. A Colombian woman, and a Cameroonian, arrived with big smiles, laughter, and hugs for the staff, and immediately started to groove to the music. The women who were already friends were standing or sitting together, but the group as whole was dispersed.

Eventually, we called all of the women to the center of the room, to form a standing circle. A staff member/asylum seeker explained the ice breaker: because we'd be recording audio of parts of the workshop, and many of the women wished to remain anonymous, each person would assign themselves a pseudonym that corresponded to the name of an artist or genre of music they liked to dance to, such as 'salsa' or 'Shakira.' One person would speak at a time, introducing themselves with their pseudonym and the reason they chose it. Then, they'd say something about what dance meant to them, before passing the beanbag to the next person, who would have to repeat the pseudonyms of all those who went before them before introducing themselves.

I had the easiest role, as the first person to go. I introduced myself as "Samba." I explained that Brazilian samba is my favorite genre to dance to because even though it sounds really happy and celebratory, and the movements are playful, the lyrics are often sad. When I dance samba I feel I can transform my sadness into joy. Someone asked me to show them what samba looks like, so I danced a little for them, as they "oohed and aahed." By then everyone in the group was smiling, even Jazmín, and the mood had lightened again. I passed the beanbag to another person to share.

"Compa-Cumbia," a woman from Haiti, explained that when she dances compa, it reminds her of being back home in Haiti; cumbia is a separate dance, which she's learning in Mexico. When she's dancing cumbia with Mexicans, she feels like belongs here. Some of the

women teased “Compa-Cumbia” for choosing 2 styles of dance. Another jokingly lamented that the name “Cumbia” had been taken. In their own introductions, almost everyone echoed Compa-Cumbia’s words about music and dance as a way of accessing the feeling of being “at home.”

Victor Turner (1969) describes transitional phases between more recognizable stages in life as a liminal period, during which one feels "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between" (p. 95). Asylum seekers waiting at the shelter can be thought of as occupying a liminal space. The experience of the liminal – the person in this transitional space – is marked by uncertainty and disorientation. They are “betwixt and between” homes, having been displaced from their home and waiting to build a new one in America. The liminal phase leaves them feeling, as Josefa described in Chapter 2, ‘suspended in the air.’ Considering Haas’ (2012) description of existential limbo as being a protracted state that disallows “*anywhere* to be called home” which generates “suffering and a sense of partial existence” (p. 204), the fact that my informants described feeling *at home* through dance, even if fleetingly, suggests that dancing can provide a powerful counterpoint to the experience to existential limbo.

But what exactly does it mean to feel *at home*? I believe when Compa-Cumba described how dance makes her feel like she’s *at home*, she was referring to the sensory experience of being at home in one’s culture, whether in one’s house, city, or country. The external sensory information there is familiar: the smells, rhythms, sounds, landscapes, and tastes, create the sensation of being culturally *at home* and can trigger positive memories of the place and people one loves. Like eating comfort food, dancing familiar rhythms is another way of returning to one’s home culture. For Compa-cumbia, dancing to the drums of compa was a way for her to ‘return’ to Haiti. Many asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting are waiting to reunite

with family members in the US, with whom they might experience these familiar sensations. But, while living in a shelter, as many asylum seekers do, they don't have many opportunities to cook their own food, decorate their space, or do anything to the space that would make it feel more like home. Dancing is a way to tap into that sensation of belonging and familiarity.

The testimony of another asylum seeker, from El Salvador, who used to live at the shelter, introduced herself as Merengue. Describing the dance parties that were thrown at Casa de Esperanza, introduces us to another dimension of feeling *at home* through dance:

> *Cuando estuve en el albergue, porque yo viví acá 8 meses en Casa de Esperanza*, lo que yo sentía que me hacía sentir que era yo, era bailar. Era poder escuchar música, poder compartir con mis amigas que tenía en ese entonces acá. Y recuerdo muy bien que nos poníamos bonitas en eses días y nos preparábamos desde días antes para poder hacer un super pachangon, y nos aprovechábamos esa oportunidad como oro, no? Para mí, para mis amigas en ese momento, era la oportunidad de poder ser nosotras, de poder sentirnos que estabamos en lugar proprio, nuestro. Porque la música era nuestra. Que podríamos ser las dueñas de nuestros cuerpos.*
>
> When I was in the shelter, because I lived for 8 months at Casa de Esperanza, **what made me feel like I was myself, was to dance.** It was to be able to listen to music, to spend time with my friends that I had here at that time. And I remember really well how we used to make ourselves look pretty on those days and we would prepare for days so that we could throw a really good party. And we would take advantage of that opportunity like it was gold, you know? Because for me, and for my friends at that moment, **it was the opportunity to be ourselves, to feel like we were in our own place, our own. Because the music was ours. We could be the owners of our own bodies.**

Merengue's description of feeling *at home* seems to point to another dimension of what that can feel like: the emotional state of being calm and at ease in one's body. I asked Merengue, in a later and informal conversation, what she meant by feeling like *"la dueña de su cuerpo"* (the owner of her body) when she dances. She explained that, because there was no privacy at the shelter, she could never really relax. She was always on guard. But when she danced, she felt she could let go. She wasn't worried about acting in a certain way, or proving anything to anyone. She

could just be in her body. It's fitting that the genre of music she chose as her pseudonym originates from the Dominican Republic, not from her home country of El Salvador. Dance can return someone to the home of their body, without necessarily returning them to the home of their culture. In a separate interview, she elaborated on this feeling, and how it's healing:

> *El baile es un arte para curar el corazón, porque tú te sueltas, tú ríes, o sea, yo creo que no necesitas ser experto en bailar, sino tú dejas que el cuerpo fluya mediante la música y te ayude a liberarte. Al menos a mí, siento que me ha ayudado mucho a liberarme, porque es como me siento más...incluso hasta me siento más bonita cuando bailo, me siento más alegre. Hay algo en mí que vive.*
>
> Dance is an art to cure the heart, because you let go, you laugh, it's like, I don't think you have to be an expert in dancing, you can just let your body flow to the music and it helps you to free yourself. At least for me, I feel like it's helped me a lot to free myself, because it's like I feel…I even feel more beautiful when I dance, I feel happier. There's something in me that's alive.

Merengue's descriptions suggest that she's able to experience something while dancing that runs opposite to what she normally feels while waiting inside the shelter. She's able to let go, laugh, feel free, happy, beautiful, and alive.

The reason I highlight these two dimensions of at-homeness (the external sensory experience of being culturally *at home*, and the internal experience of being at ease in one's body), is not because they're mutually exclusive, nor do I think they fully encapsulate the feeling of being *at home*. But, I believe someone can feel at home in their house or city or country, without necessarily feeling at home in their body, and vice versa. These dimensions can influence each other, however, because culture is embodied. Indulging in a meal one's mother used to make, or in a dance one used to do with your friends, may very well contribute to a feeling of being both at home in one's culture and at home in one's body.

When I asked Eileen, from Cameroon, about dance, her description touched on both these dimensions of being *at home*, or as she puts it: “in [her] house:”

> *Leslie:* Did you have opportunities when you were living at the shelter to dance? Was that something you did very often while you lived here?
>
> *Eileen:* Mmhm. Before, when I live here, I teach the girls, the people, to dance. Mmhm. My roommates.
>
> Leslie: Can you tell me about that?
>
> *Eileen:* All my roommates like when I'm dance. They want to dance the African song. And also they so surprised how I know to dance the Bachata and....*como se llama...reggaetón.* They say, we need to learn the African dance. I teach many of them to dance like African music. The children started to sing my country's music, the African music, here. All the children. "*Ahh quiero escuchar esa música*." (“Ahh, I want to listen to that music.) **You can be everywhere in the world, like your house. Everywhere you be, you can create some energy positive, like you're all in your house.** Just to be like, well with the people, love the people. **I'm trying to learn and teach the people your reality, your country, your culture.**

Teaching other people at the shelter to dance African music made Eileen feel at home in her culture, as if she were back in Africa. And, according to Eileen, it made her Latin American friends happy that she danced with them to bachata and reggaeton, popular dances in their home cultures. But, the reason she loves dancing is not only because it reminds her of Cameroon. She also likes how it makes her feel in her body:

> *Eileen*: **When I'm starting to dance I be like a baby girl. I like to dance. I like to be happy.** I like to see the people happy. I like happiness. Just like that. Dance and the singing is like a therapy for me. I think it has helped me a lot when I'm crossing that situation [of living in the shelter].
>
> *Leslie*: And you said dance and singing is like therapy for you. Can you explain? Can you describe what you mean by that?
>
> *Eileen*: Yes. **It's not *like* therapy. It *is* my therapy.** Describe how is I feel when I'm hear the music or I'm dance? [...] I feel like I'm renewed. **I feel well, comfortable, like *libre*, like free. I'm free. I have a power.**

When dancing Eileen feels free, like a baby…I interpret that as feeling at home in one's body. (Who is more uninhibited and in-their-body than a baby?) Interestingly, Eileen associates this feeling with power, just as Merengue describes being 'in her body' as being the owner of it (*la dueña de su cuerpo*), suggesting a sense of power. The opposite, to have one's bodily agency denied, is characteristic of the experience of weaponized waiting – of being trapped in one's tracks when trying to move forward.

Back at the workshop, after the icebreaker, we transitioned to Zumba. Zumba is a dance fitness class set to upbeat Latin music. It has repetitive, highly choreographed aerobic movements that are meant to be fun, easy to follow, and that will make you work up a sweat. Unlike partner dances such as compa, cumbia, or merengue, which require a lot of mental work, in Zumba you don't have to remember any dance moves – you can just follow the instructor as you go. That, and its popularity with women in particular, made Zumba a good option for this one-time workshop, for women with different dance backgrounds and physical abilities. The aim, which I believe was achieved, was for participants to have fun and bond while exercising together, as opposed to learning a new style of dance or creating "art." However, there was a creative dimension to it, as women added freestyle dance moves and expressed themselves through unique ways of moving their bodies. During the light-hearted class, people laughed at themselves and with each other. There was a lot of teasing, an impromptu dance circle, and by the end, most women were sweaty and tired. Women were hugging, talking and generally interacting much more with each other and with the staff than at the start. Through dancing together, a feeling of comradery had been established.

After the Zumba class, we had water and snacks, and began a new activity: participants were invited to write and/or draw messages to other *mujeres migrantes* (women migrants), using

colored paper and markers. They could give advice, encouragement, or anything else they wanted to say. Afterwards, we would 'translate' these messages into dance. In other words, we would act out the messages with our bodies. The idea was to combine the 15 'danced' messages into one choreography, which would be filmed and sent to the Dance Conservatory of Mexico in Tijuana. Their ballerinas had agreed to make a professional choreography based on the footage we sent them, for an outdoor public performance in downtown Tijuana the following month.

We had planned for the women to take about 15 minutes to write or draw their messages. However, it took almost twice as long. I was surprised to see how serious they took the activity. The room, which shortly before had been filled with loud music, laughter, and talking, was now almost silent as they began carefully writing and coloring, sometimes consulting each other in whispered voices.

Once everyone had finished, we reunited again in a circle, this time sitting down, to share our messages. Several people cried as they showed and read them aloud. Although nobody was asked to share additional information, many people did so voluntarily. They talked about the family members they had left behind, and the struggles they'd faced on their journeys. Throughout, people hugged, held each other, and offered words of encouragement. Below are 4 of the 15 messages:

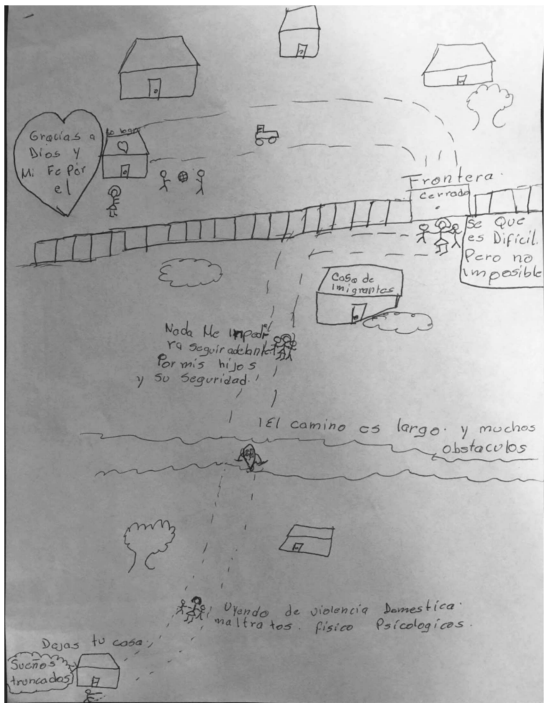


Image 1: At the bottom of the drawing, a house with its door open. A person appears to be leaving the house.

Caption 1 : Broken dreams

Image 2: 3 people, a woman and two children, walk along a road that connects the house in the south and the US-Mexico border in the north.

Caption 2: Fleeing domestic violence, physical and psychological abuse

Image 3: A river intersects the road. The family is in a boat, crossing the river.

Caption 3: The journey is long. There are many obstacles.

Image 4: The family has crossed the river and continues heading north along the road.

Caption 4: Nothing can keep me from moving forward, for my children and their safety.

Image 5: A shelter

Caption 5: Migrant shelter

Image 6 : The border

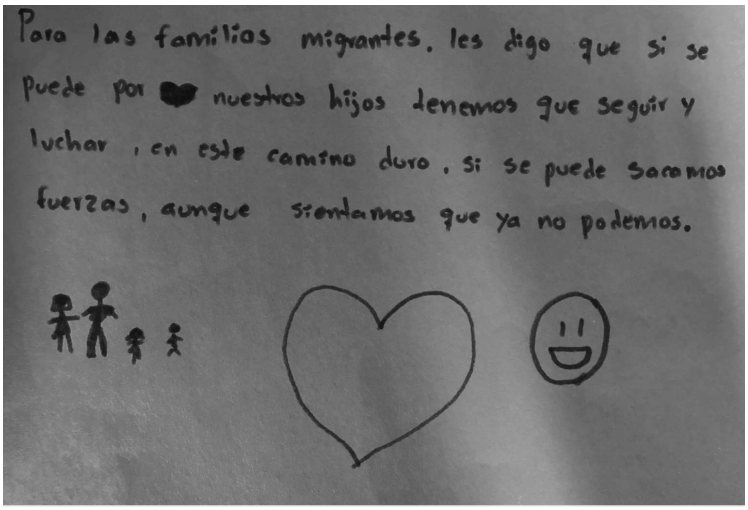
Caption 6: Closed border

Image 7: The family stands on the south side of the closed border.

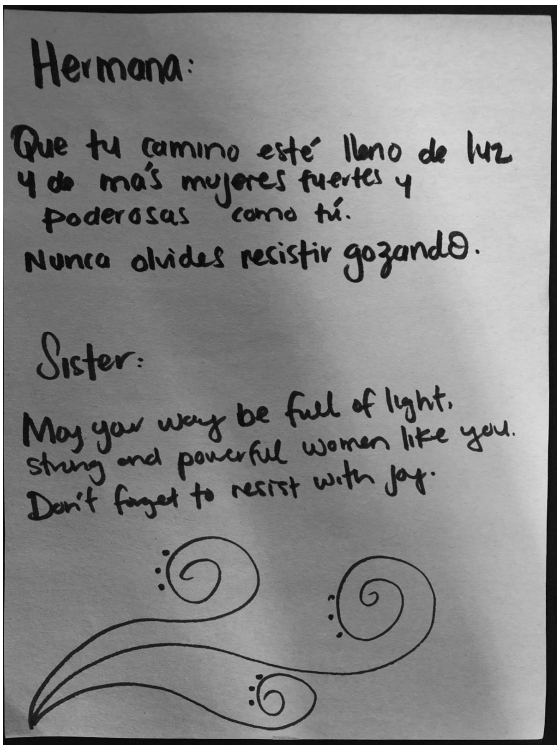
Caption 7: I know it's difficult, but it's not impossible.

Image 8: A house, with a heart, and children playing ball in the yard. A car driving on the road.

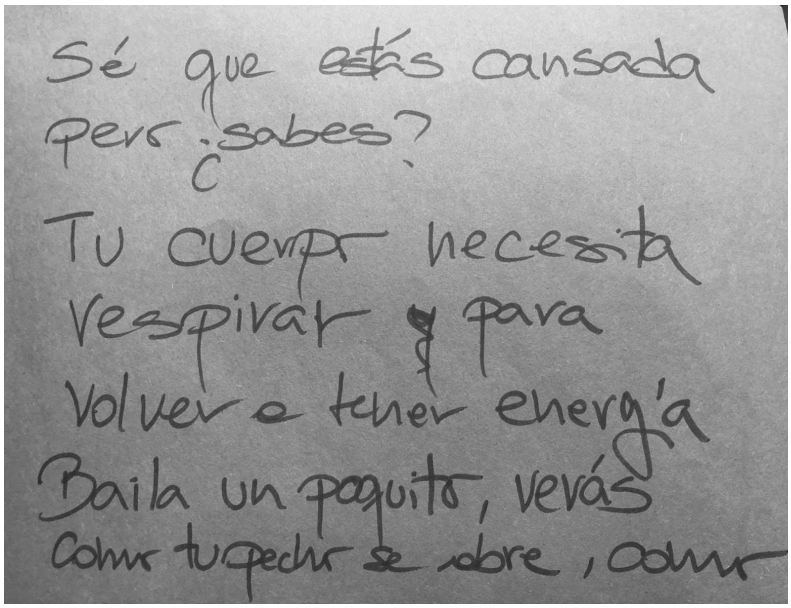
Caption 8: Home. I made it.



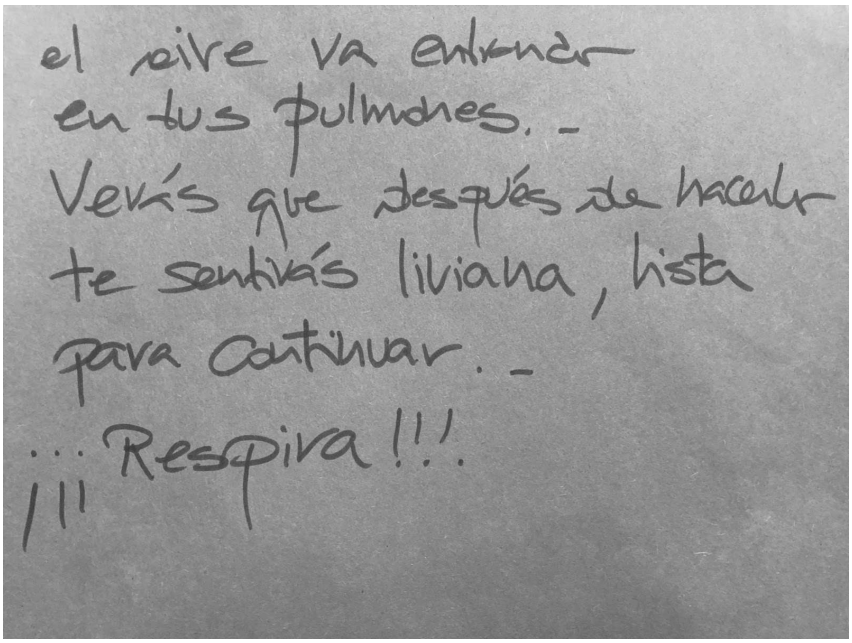
To migrant families, I say, yes we can. For our children we have to carry on and fight, on this difficult journey. Yes, we can still find our strength, even though we feel like we can't anymore.



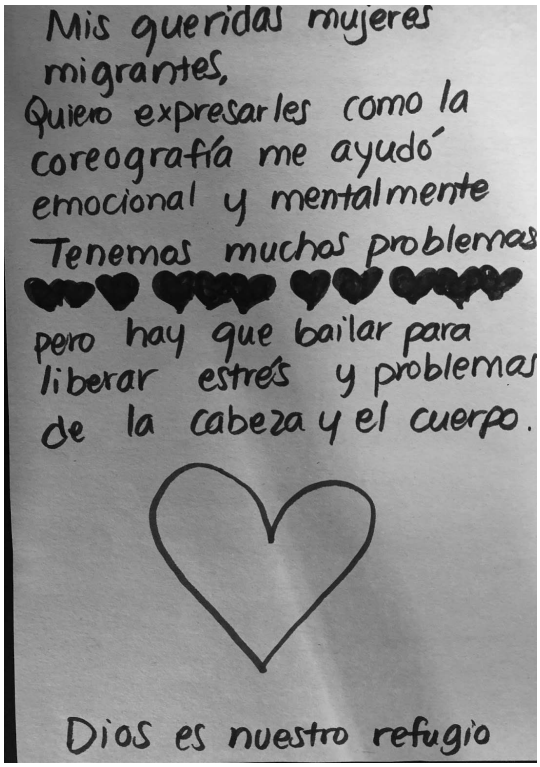
This message, written by a staff member who is also an asylum seekers, was the only one to include an explicit reference to the idea of "resistir gozando." The term had not been mentioned at the workshop prior to this message being shared.



I know you are tired, but you know what? Your body needs to breath. To get back to having energy again, dance a little. You'll see that your chest will open



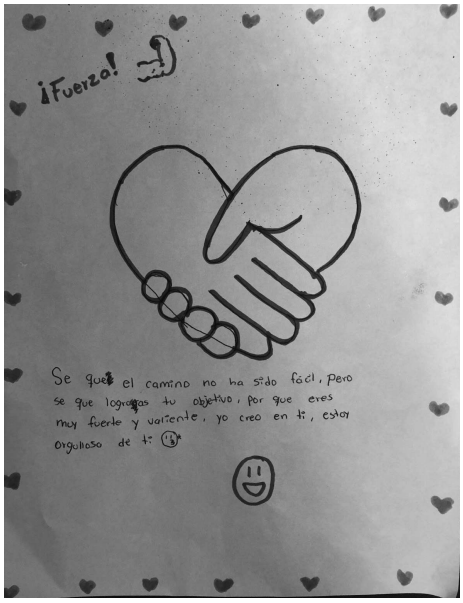
and the air will enter your lungs.
You'll see that after doing this, you'll feel lighter, and ready to go on.
Breathe!!!



My dear migrant women, I want to express how the choreography has helped me emotionally and mentally. We have a lot of problems, but we have to dance to release stress and the problems our minds and bodies. God is our refuge.

The main themes that arose during the sharing circle were: suffering, gender violence, finding the strength and courage to carry on, persistence in fighting for their children, knowing that they're not alone on this journey, trusting in God, and using dance as a way to relieve suffering. They spoke about the physical and psychological exhaustion and depletion they were experiencing while waiting in Tijuana, and how dancing made them feel something different in their bodies: stronger, lighter, more energetic, and ready to carry on. Creating and talking about the messages brought up difficult emotions, but being in a supportive group seemed to provide comfort, affirmation and solidarity.

After everyone was done sharing, there was a sense of intimacy in the room, but the mood had changed to be more somber. The women decided they no longer felt like acting out their messages through dance, which would require a different energy, but they were eager to help me do it. Merengue read each message aloud again for the group. As she did, the women advised me through their words or gestures how I might interpret each one. For example, at one point they instructed me to move my body as though I were in a cage. Then, by contracting and tensing my muscles, and then expanding them, I gained the strength to break out of it. But, I continued to move through the space as though I had a very heavy weight on my back. The group discussed the different ways I could demonstrate courage, beauty, and strength with my body. I tried out different poses, and they'd either approve, or suggest modifications.



I know that the journey hasn't been easy, but you'll reach your destination because you are very strong and brave. I believe in you, and I am proud of you.

To help me portray the message to the left, they gave me the instructions: *"Puede ser como caminar con una mochila? Como… uhhh…pesada? Así, difícil."* (Can it be like you're walking with a backpack? Like…uhhh…it's heavy. Yeah, like that. It's difficult.

My directions were: "Estás en una jaula, y luego, nos crecieron asas." (You're in a cage, and then our wings grew.") At the workshop, women talked about feeling trapped. The aspiration to grow wings and fly out of the cage was a common metaphor I heard in my field work, echoing Alma's story in Chapter 2.

Here I was receiving multiple instructions at once: "Hide your face." *"Has estado rechazada, humillada."* ("You've been rejected, humiliated.") *"Así…abajo y atrás al mismo tiempo."* ("Like this…down and backwards at the same time.")

When I performed the message I myself had written – in which I apologized on behalf of my country's government, told them they were welcome there, and that I loved them — they instructed me to bow down on the ground, cup my hands around my heart, and then extend my arms out to them. When doing this, I unwittingly locked eyes with one of the asylum seekers, a friend of mine. She had tears in her eyes, and nodded as though saying she had received my apology. It was the most visceral apology I have ever given. To dance an apology felt different, and somehow more profound, than to speak or write it in words.

About halfway through, one of the asylum seekers, Afrobeats* decided she wanted to try dancing the messages, and took over for me. She's a very theatrical and funny person, and her interpretations made people laugh.

This last part of the workshop, in which we danced the messages, was filmed, without showing anyone's faces, and sent to the Dance Conservatory of Mexico. In Chapter 4, I will describe the choreography and performance they made from the footage we sent them, entitled *"Orgullosa de Ti,"* ("Proud of You") as part of a protest and public art performance to advocate for migrants' rights.

The workshop came to a close after 3 hours – a full hour longer than we had planned, with hugging, laughter, expressions of gratitude, and reflections on the importance of coming together as women. Afrobeats, grinning and giddy from her performance, exclaimed, "That was the best day. Really, a perfect day." I asked her what she liked about it and she said, "It's not every day you get to dance with your friends, talk with your friends, be happy together. I'm really, really happy." It was an interesting way to describe the event – as being happy together – because there was so much sadness and emotion mixed in. But, I knew what she meant. I felt really happy too.

Ademir, who works at the shelter but was not at the event because he's a man, told me later that after the workshop, the women put on loud, festive music upstairs and kept dancing as they cooked dinner. According to Ademir, their joy infected the others, and some of the children started dancing too. I had been a little concerned that some of the intense emotions of sadness and grief that came up during the workshop would leave people feeling triggered or depressed afterwards. While it's possible that did occur without me realizing it, from what I could observe

and from what I was told, participants left the workshop feeling that it had been an overall positive experience that helped them to "*sacarle todo*" (get it all out).

CONCLUSION:

Migrant shelters like Casa de Esperanza in Mexican border cities operate in resource scarce conditions. Although many asylum seekers state the desire to receive psychological care, few have access to it. Even when psychological care is available, it can only go so far in relieving the pain of weaponized waiting, which has structural and systemic causes, and can be considered a form of social suffering. This chapter looked at the creative approaches asylum seekers employ to cope with their pain while waiting. For some asylum seekers, making music, dancing, and writing poetry could be understood as alternative takes on Freud's 'talking cure' — helping them to process, represent symbolically, and find meaning in memories which they themselves describe as traumatic, which provides them a sense of physical and psychological relief. Creating art can also be a way to tap into the sensation of being *at home*, which counters the usual groundlessness and homelessness integral to the experience of weaponized waiting, in which asylum seekers are caught 'betwixt and between' homes. The positive emotions brought about by creating art can be contagious, spreading to other asylum seekers in the shelter who may not even take part directly, exemplifying the way that these practices are collectively healing.

CHAPTER 4. RESISTING WITH JOY AS A POLITICAL PROJECT

Resistir Gozando (To Resist with Joy) in the Public Square: Converting Asylum Seekers' Healing Practices into a Grassroots Political Project

INTRODUCTION

In the previous chapter, I described some of the ways in which asylum seekers at Casa de Esperanza endure the psychological torture of weaponized waiting through dancing, writing poetry, and making music. In this chapter, I explore how the staff and volunteers (some of whom are asylum seekers themselves) attempt to convert those creative practices into *resiste gozando,* a small-scale political project which tries to challenge violent logics of oppression through the public performance of joyous resistance. In order to do so, I start by identifying 4 key attributes of *resiste gozando* as it's proclaimed and performed by activists at Casa de Esperanza, according to their descriptions of what the concept means to them. I put their descriptions into conversation with the work of scholars and members from other social movements who have previously intellectualized about the politics of art and joy. Finally, I describe how some of the performances of *resiste gozando* are carried out in the public square, including at a Black Lives Matter protest, photo exhibit, dance performance, and a community *telenovela* (soap opera). I find that labeling and performing artistic creation as *resiste gozando* have transformative political and psychological potential for asylum seekers and the broader community.

HISTORY OF THE TERM, *RESITIR/RESISTE* GOZANDO, OR (TO) RESIST WITH JOY

Casa de Esperanza started out as a cultural project. From the beginning, they've placed a strong focus on the arts, which makes it unique among Tijuana's migrant shelters. They organize music concerts, photo exhibitions, arts workshops, and more, to promote asylum seekers' art, and to make connections and raise awareness among members of the broader Tijuana and San Diego community.

When Judith Cabrera de la Rocha was hired as the Coordinator of Cultural Events and Collective Care at Casa de Esperanza in 2019, she would wear t-shirts with the hashtag #resistegozAndo, to protests organized by the shelter and to the concerts and cultural events she was helping to organize there. She also wore the shirt when she would perform in the band, *Resistencia Migrante* (Migrant Resistance), made up of a rotating group of asylum seekers and staff at the shelter. (The capital A in *gozAndo* is a reference to Anarchism. Judith was the only one at Casa de Esperanza who I observed inserting the capital A into the hashtag.)

The translation of *resiste gozando* to English is not straightforward: *resiste* is the imperative form of the verb, *resistir* (to resist); *gozando is* the progressive tense of the verb *gozar*, which can be translated to "to enjoy," "to take pleasure in," or "to have a good time." It implies a pleasurable sensation in the body, which may or may not be related to sexuality, although I never heard that aspect discussed or implied in its use at the shelter. As a hashtag or slogan, *#resistegozando* (or #resistegozAndo) instructs us to resist with joy.

In an unrecorded interview, Judith told me that the *#resitegozAndo* is rooted in Anarcha-feminist punk culture. Anarcha-feminists believe that the struggle against patriarchy is a crucial component of the anarchist struggle against the state and capitalism. Essentially, they

view anarchist struggle as a necessary component of feminist struggle, and vice versa. Before joining Casa de Esperanza, Judith, who was by that point a well-known feminist organizer in Tijuana, would meet regularly with a group of anarcha-feminists to "try to heal from the harm of patriarchy by talking." At one of these discussion meetings, a woman told the story of how the Tarantella folk dances emerged in a village in northern Italy. According to her telling, in that village, they had a tradition that if a tarantula bit you, the village would summon a band to play for 3 days, and everyone would dance. So, the women, who were oppressed and forced to work at home, would pretend that they had been bitten by a tarantula so that they could go out and dance. This became known as the tarantula (tarantella) dance.

After hearing this story, Judith's group of anarcha-feminists decided that, instead of using their meetings to talk, they would learn the tarantella dance. Judith told me that this was the first time she became really aware of the sensation of joy in her body, which she perceived as an expression of anarcha-feminist punk resistance to systems of their oppression. That's when she created her own t-shirt with the hashtag #resistegozAndo, which she would later wear to Casa de Esperanza's events.

The staff at Casa de Esperanza were quick to embrace the term, which spoke to what they were already doing there: incentivizing culture and art as a political and therapeutic tool. I observed this concept evolve over the years, as I was doing my fieldwork. It grew from being just a slogan that would appear at protests and concerts, to an entire framework for describing the shelter's efforts to challenge state violence through art. Even after Judith left Casa de Esperanza to work at another shelter, staff at Casa de Esperanza kept using the term.

After George Floyd's murder in 2020, the shelter became more explicitly committed to employing an anti-racist framework in their activities, thanks in part to the guidance and

influence of Black board members and volunteers (several of whom were BLM activists in San Diego and Tijuana). Through this process, I observed that the discourse surrounding *resiste gozando* at the shelter was becoming more infused with references to Black joy and Black scholarship on resistance.

Casa de Esperanza also referred to the term *resiste gozando* in successful grant applications, which has in turn allowed them to fund more opportunities for asylum seekers to engage in creative practices at the shelter.

Challenging Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs in Humanitarian Work

The idea of using joy as a strategy of resistance has a long tradition in social movements. In the context of Casa de Esperanza specifically, the term *resiste gozando* has been theorized collectively. The term reflects the emphasis the shelter has put on the arts as a form of activism as integral to its humanitarian work, since the organization's founding.

Casa de Esperanza's approach to caring for asylum seekers by prioritizing opportunities for arts, culture, and grassroots political activism, challenges the logic of Abraham Maslow's influential hierarchy of needs (1943), a motivational theory often present in humanitarian work, which contends that there are 5 hierarchical human needs; from the bottom of the hierarchy upwards, the needs are: physiological (food and clothing), safety (job security), love and belonging needs (friendship), esteem, and self-actualization. According to Maslow, needs lower down in the hierarchy must be satisfied before individuals can attend to needs higher up. Although Maslow's theory is helpful in that it highlights the important relationship between physiological and psychological well being, people's experiences and needs are more complex than the hierarchy suggests, and that this temporality isn't always helpful or healing. Saiba

Varma (2020, p. 178) notes “the temporality of emergency humanitarian care is usually structured in a linear manner – basic survival first, questions about rights and dignity second.” The history of Casa de Esperanza reverses and complicates this usual process: it began by attending to questions of (individual and collective) rights and dignity, and then realized the need to also, concurrently, respond to questions of basic survival.

Anthropologist Cynthia Wesley-Esquimaux points out that Maslow took the concept of a hierarchy of needs from the Blackfoot Nation, and individualized it. She argues that Maslow missed the mark when assuming that the first steps towards self-actualization could occur on one’s own. In an interview with Joyce Rivera González and Michelle Hak Hepburn (2022), she comments, “Indigenous peoples self-actualize together. If somebody’s suffering, we all suffer. (...) so the resiliency comes not from stepping on people to get to the top, but actually bringing them along with you.” For the Blackfoot, everyone is *born* actualized, arriving on this earth with everything they need. The goal is to continue to build, protect, and perpetuate their culture and community, not by stepping on others to get to the top, but by caring for and uplifting each other.

Wesley-Exquimaux’s observation that “indigenous people self-actualize together” echoes Vicktor Frankl’s assertion that self-actualization cannot be achieved by oneself, but through love and devotion to others. Rejecting the idea that an individual can discover meaning in their life “in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system,” Frankl (2014 ed) argues, “The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause or to serve another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself” (p. 115).

Evens, a 35 year old male asylum seeker from Haiti, was one of the first people to receive job and legal support from Casa de Esperanza, which helped him to survive in Tijuana, and in the

process he became one of their first volunteers. He would go there every day, first to help in the construction of the space, and later at cultural events and protests. He told me that he doesn't have a particular interest in the arts (he prefers sports), but that he volunteers at their cultural events because he wants to be of service to other immigrants in need:

> *Porque yo soy un inmigrante. A mi me gustaría ayudar a todos los inmigrantes, como puedo, en forma que puedo. Porque los centroamericanos cuando llegaron aquí, los mexicanos se molestaban muchísimo. No los querían ayudarles a ellos, nada, nada. (...)* ***Es mi sueño ayudar a los demás, a los que no tienen, en la forma que puedo. Por eso ayudaba tanto a Pamela (...)*** Si tiene algún evento o si busca alguien para traducir pues aquí estoy yo, no hay problema. Si no estoy trabajando o si no tengo algo para hacer, está bien, aquí estoy yo. Siempre estoy dispuesto para ayudar. Pero para ayudar, **no quiero nada de recompensa. Quiero ayudar.**
>
> (I volunteer) because I'm an immigrant. I like to help out other immigrants, however, I can. Because, when the Central Americans arrived here, the Mexicans bothered them a lot. They didn't want to help them at all, at all (...) **It's my dream to help others, those that are in need, in the way that I can.** That's why I helped Pamela so much (...) if she has an event or if she's looking for someone to translate, well here I am, there's no problem. If I'm not working or if I don't have something else I have to do, it's fine, here I am. **I'm always available to help.** But to help, **I don't want anything in return. I want to help.**

Asylum seekers like Evens who participate in Casa de Esperanza's cultural events and protests, often do so out of a sense of service to the organization and subsequently, to other asylum seekers. At the same time that Evens was receiving support from the organization with his basic needs, he was in turn helping them build a dignified cultural space for other asylum seekers to live, eat, create art, and protest. He would go there to interpret at cultural events, and also for know-your-rights activities. Through this volunteer work, he started to see himself as a part of the team. He told me proudly that, when he met asylum seekers sleeping in the streets of Tijuana, he would contact the director, Pamela, to ask if he could bring them to the shelter to sleep. Evens' testimony shows how attending to needs can overlap in productive ways, rather than

progressing chronologically from one step to the next. To give and receive, engaging in a relationship of reciprocity with the shelter, gives asylum seekers a sense of purpose and can be healing.

Joy as a Political Emotion

In the previous chapter, I explained that to translate "*gozando*" (a continuous form of the verb "to enjoy) to the noun, "joy" is imperfect, linguistically. The translation's inadequacy is underscored by the fact that "joy" fails to describe the complexity of experiences that asylum seekers have while engaging in creative practices, and while performing them for the broader public. Indeed, when activists at Casa de Esperanza speak of what it means to *resistir gozando*, they describe a range of emotions and bodily sensations, including but not limited to joy. I propose that a more nuanced way to describe the experience would be as a complex "political emotion."

Drawing on Ghassan Hage's (2010) definition of "political emotions," I posit that joy in the context of weaponized waiting is not only a personal but a political emotion because it challenges violent logics of domination. Furthermore, to experience joy through the creation of art can spread and infect others, undermining the isolating and alienating effects of weaponized waiting. That's why joy can be understood as an expression of psychological and political resistance, or perhaps more precisely, as political resistance through collective psychological resilience. When this form of resistance is cultivated intentionally through the arts, as Casa de Esperanza attempts to do with *resiste gozando*, we can conceive of political joy as more than an emotion, but a strategy.

Hage analyzes Spinoza's description of basic emotions, joy and sadness, as 'the affects' denoting changes in a person's capacity to act and think efficiently, or said differently, to affect change and exert power over their environment. Drawing on Spinoza as a starting point for understanding the political dimension in emotion, Hage writes, "political emotions are those emotions related to our sense of power over our selves and our environment as we pursue those goals, ideals and activities that give our life a meaning" (Hage, 2010, p. 144). Considering the argument I made in Chapter 2 – that weaponized waiting is used as a strategy to deter people from seeking asylum by torturing them psychologically and depriving them of agency over their lives – to experience political joy in such a context is a counterpoint to the logic of weaponized waiting, by restoring asylum seekers' sense of power in their lives.

Along similar lines, the Argentinian artist, Roberto Jacoby, argued that making music, singing, and dancing, is political. He described it as a "strategy of joy" and a political resistance to the "superabundance of fear" imposed by the dictatorship (Garrote, 2013). Once at a dance party at Casa de Esperanza, dancing to *reggaeton*, laughing, and chatting with the residents of the shelter, I overheard an asylum seeker, hugging a friend, say, "I feel so happy, like the sadness has been lifted off my chest." The emotion the woman felt while dancing might have been ephemeral, but it was spread among all of us in that moment. Similarly, in Chapter 3 I described how, after participating in the Zumba workshop for women at Casa de Esperanza, the women went on to "infect" the children and men at the shelter, who hadn't participated in the workshop, with their positive emotions. Perhaps the first step in fighting back against weaponized waiting is in having the sadness and feelings of powerlessness momentarily lifted from one's chest, and then to spread that to others.

DEFINING *RESISTE GOZANDO*: A PANEL DISCUSSION OF CASA DE ESPERANZA ACTIVISTS

Introduction

In this section, I analyze a panel discussion with Casa de Esperanza activists (one of whom was an asylum seeker) about *resiste gozando*. The panel discussion was held as part of their largest online annual cultural event, in November 2020. In doing so, I attempt to understand what leads them to label different types of creative acts as examples of *resiste gozando*. Synthesizing their descriptions, I identify 4 key characteristics of *resiste gozando*, in an effort to conceptualize it as a coherent, grassroots political project that represents a particular ideology about how to resist the effects of state power over racialized asylum seekers:

1) *Resiste gozando* is **radical** in the sense that Angela Davis (1989) defines it, as "grasping things at the root." *Resiste gozando* emerges amid oppressive conditions and subverts them.

2) *Resiste gozando* is **collective**. The experience is shared with others and is often politically mobilizing.

3) Resiste gozando is **embodied**. Through artistic expression, which may or may not include the use of written or spoken language, it produces physiological changes in the body, where trauma has left its score[7].

4) *Resiste gozando* contains **paradoxes**. As an experience it contains suffering and joy; oppression and resilience; impotence and power; inertia and dynamism.

***Resiste Gozando* is radical.**

Angela Davis (1989) defines "radical" as simply "grasping things at the root." At Casa de Esperanza, caring for migrant families in a manner that promotes joy is a part of the organization's political project to challenge the racist and sexist immigration and policing policies – some of the root causes of migrants suffering – while framing their struggles in historical context. Their joy is not divorced from histories of creative struggle and ongoing resistance. However, no single individual or organization is capable of resolving all the root causes of the problems affecting asylum seekers, for that would require a global reckoning with the ongoing consequences of colonial violence, and corresponding drastic social and economic reforms. Such reforms may start but certainly not end with the abolition of policies such as MPP that leave asylum seekers waiting at the northern border in Mexico.

In **Judith's** introduction to the panel discussion, I heard Jacoby's strategy of joy echoed through her description of joy as a direct response to such policies:

> We depart from the notion that **sustained structural violence by the state can rob a person of their joy, which is a fundamental step towards their domination, and an exercise of state power over this person.** With this perspective we wish to say that we do not view all this sociopolitical and psychosocial violence experienced by the migrant population as fortuitous. **Some tactics are explicitly aimed at deterring them from migrating by effectively sucking the joy out of them.** We can clearly see the effects on mental health in issues of anxiety, depression. **So our proposal is to use joy as a tool of political resistance. That's the meaning of the hashtag we've been using for a year: *resiste gozando.***

Here, Judith describes the obliteration of asylum seekers' joy as a deliberate strategy of state power. *Resiste gozando* is, in turn, a strategy of resistance to domination. Judith views their experiences of (political) joy, which they access through creating art, not an escape mechanism, but a way of standing up to and subverting the institutionalized racism of the State:

> **I would identify waiting as a tactic**, right? It's a tactic to discourage (migrants)..(...), in fact it is even documented, they are doing this **to discourage people from migrating**. They are doing this to frustrate people's attempts to get to the United States. **So you stand in front of that and instead of getting discouraged, you start singing. The very act of doing that connects you to a feeling that is not what they had in mind when they formulated their tactic,** right? They said, 'we're going to make them unhappy, we're going to depress them, we're going to send them back to their country. **Let them get tired, let them get fed up, let them leave.' And you say 'ok, I'll wait here and dance.'**

Judith is essentially, and concisely, expressing the main two arguments of this thesis: that (a), the state is making people wait in such trying conditions in Mexico in order to demoralize them to the extent that they ultimately give up on their plan to seek asylum in the US; and (b) for asylum seekers to respond to that tactic of demoralization (which I call weaponized waiting), by creating art and experiencing something besides suffering, is an expression of resistance to domination.

In response to Judith, **Cris** describes these creative acts of resistance as *"un acto de habla,"* – a 'speech act:'

> It's really nice what you're saying, Judith, because it really is a speech act, isn't it? *(porque en realidad es un acto de habla, no?*) The speech act *(el acto de habla*) can be through music, through poetry, through words, through theater, through any kind of art. They are speech acts that involve the body, sometimes like performance, like this, like this sensation of dancing, or that is also resisting, that is, **you are resisting with the body, with movement. It's a powerful speech act and it becomes more powerful when it is collective.** (...)

J. L. Austin's (1962), speech act theory proposes that along with the constantive statements that report, state, or describe phenomena as they are, there are also modes of speech that *do things,* that perform and make things happen or occur. These are known as speech acts or performatives. For example, Austin argues that the statement "I do" at a wedding ceremony is "not a description of the promise made but is the actual performance of the act of promising" (Bastian, 2012, p. 32). In other words, whereas an act of speech is any act of uttering words, a 'speech act' is a term of performance. For Jacques Derrida, speech act theory illuminates the relation between intention and conventions, providing a way to understand the possibilities of social change, (Derrida, 1988, p. 97, as cited in Bastian, p. 32). For an example of how this works, let us consider a declaration, or speech act, in a poem about the US-Mexico border that appears in the book "Borderlands/*La Frontera*" chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa (1987), which I read during the panel discussion, when I was asked to describe poetry as a way to *resistir gozando*:

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a *pueblo*, a culture
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja

This is my home
this thin edge of
barbwire.
But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at the borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his
arrogance,

Yemayá blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
  was Indian always
   and is.
And will be again.

Yo soy un puente tendido
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
lo pasado me estira pa"trás
y lo presente pa"delante,
Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide
Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado.

In this poem, Anzaldua is telling a specific version of the history of the border, which runs counter to U.S. national myths of westward expansion, with the political aim of undoing the border itself. If we accept the premise that the border, and the very nation itself is artificial – not objectively true or natural, but something we make real through our performance of it – then it can also be unperformed. The land – all of it – is, and can be, 'Indian' again. The poem is a guide for how borders of all kinds can and should be crossed: it unperforms the borders between English/Spanish, past/present/future, Mexican/American, vernacular/academic speech, and – as it appears in of a book of poetry/essay/biography – between literary genres. She declares in two languages, and punctuated by gaps, that she is split by the border. It's not only a statement, but a performative split, a speech act. Now let's analyze asylum seekers' displays of *resiste gozando* as speech acts, as Cris suggested: if the state's deliberate strategy of deterrence is to demoralize and isolate asylums seekers – to make their lives in waiting unbearable – then for them to declare, "I will not be demoralized. I will not be isolated. I will survive this," is already a form of resistance. But to actually experience joy, solidarity, and life force, through the act of performing those declarations through poetry, dance, music, and other types of art, is a speech act.

To experience and cultivate political joy through one's speech acts (performances), could be considered an act of "everyday resistance," a term that political scientist James Scott (1985) introduced through his research on peasant politics. According to Scott, powerless people rarely have the chance or the resources to collectively defy those with power over them, which is why massive protest movements and armed revolts are relatively rare occurrences. But that doesn't mean that oppressed people don't have other"low-profile techniques"(p. xvi) of everyday resistance. Some examples of everyday peasant resistance include "foot dragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth" (p. 29). Such acts are "everyday" because of their understated, ordinary nature. Although "everyday acts of resistance make no headlines" (p xvii), Scott argues that they still qualify as resistance, when they "deny or mitigate claims made by appropriating classes" (p. 302). Unlike more explicit or violent forms of resistance, these acts may go unnoticed, which helps protect the oppressed from violent repression by masking the subversive nature of their techniques.

An example of everyday resistance at Casa de Esperanza, would be when Pamela asked JD,* a Haitian asylum seeker now living in the United States, if he would be interested in speaking at a Black Lives Matter event in San Diego. He had already spoken at such an event in Tijuana, the year before. JD replied that he would consider performing a dance, but he didn't want to speak this time. He wanted to keep a low profile in the US, as he was afraid that his words would later be used against him in his US asylum case. If he danced, however, he could draw parallels between the enslavement of Haitians and the fight they continue to bear as asylum seekers. He could communicate his message to "the people who understand" the revolutionary origins of Haitian dance (which Black Haitians used to gain the physical and spiritual force

needed to defeat the French colonizers) while going unnoticed by the immigration authorities who he felt had power over him. Dancing was his act of everyday resistance.

***Resiste Gozando* is collective.**

Judith then turns to panelist Cris Cruz, a Tijuana artist and migrant rights activist, to ask how Cris understands and expresses joy as resistance:

> To resist, it can also be something very intense (*"muy muy fuerte")*, very difficult. I don't know, sometimes it can feel very heavy (*pesado*), to resist. So there is no doubt that these social issues [resulting from immigration policies] are going to have an impact on people's emotions, on their mental health, as Judith mentioned. This causes anxiety, depression, and neurosis. So, I think that the fact of being able to enjoy life is in itself an act of resistance. Despite all the obstacles people face in their lives, enjoying life is in itself an achievement, isn't it? [...] And there are different ways of [of resisting.] I mean, it can be individual, resisting in an individual way or resisting in a collective way, which is also having your community to support you. This is very important – weaving a social network – because what happens in this system…it isolates us, it isolates us. [...] The collective aspect is what has really helped me to resist.

Cris describes resistance as feeling intense (*fuerte*) and heavy (*pesado)* – something difficult to bear on one's own. This sentiment echoes a definition of resistance put forth by Andrea* an asylum seeker who lived at Casa de Esperanza for over a year while in MPP, in a testimony she gave for Casa de Esperanzas's 2022 International Women's Day social media campaign:

> *¿Qué significa resistir? Es algo muy duro. Siento que ningún humano se merece sufrir de esa manera. Es un daño que te marca siempre y tú quieres olvidar pero no se puede por que es algo que vives en carne propia y no le deseo eso a nadie. Bendigo a todos los inmigrantes y todas esas personas que los provocan ese dolor. Yo le Pido a Dios que me borre de mi corazón todo ese sufrimiento. Y para todos mis amigos inmigrantes resisten que sí se puede. Dios no hizo fronteras. Esas las inventó el hombre. Así que resistan que siempre hay una salida después del túnel.*

> What does it mean to resist? It's something very difficult. I feel that nobody deserves to suffer like that. **It's a type of harm that marks you forever, that you want to forget but you can't because it's something that lives in your flesh.** And I wouldn't wish that on anyone. Bless God and all immigrants and all the people who cause them that pain. And to my immigrant friends: resist how you can. God didn't make borders. Man invented those. So resist, because **there's always a light at the end of the tunnel.**

Like Cris, Andrea describes resistance as being very difficult. She is referring to resistance here as the period of waiting at the shelter, where she had to figure out how to carry on despite the lasting harm that waiting caused her, which still lives in her flesh even though she wants to forget it. As in Anzaldúa's poem, Andrea rejects the legitimacy of man-made borders. Finally, her description of waiting echoes Josefa's description of waiting in Chapter 2, as feeling like being stuck inside a tunnel. Echoing Cris's comments, she emphasizes the collective nature of resistance, which offers a light and a way out of the tunnel:

> *Cómo resistí? Yo resistí gracias a dos mujeres. Pamela Olvera Cañez me brindó un espacio digno y humano. Y gracias a Leslie Meyer no me volví loca. Ella me dio clases de inglés. Me enseñó a bailar. Fue mi psicóloga. Y me ayudó mucho haberla conocido. Son personas humanas con un corazón que vale oro. Jamás podré pagarles todo lo qué hicieron por mi hija y yo. Siento que sin ayuda de Dios y ellas jamás lo hubiera logrado. Soy muy afortunada a habermelas encontrado. Por eso la palabra resistir es muy fuerte para mí. Pero todo se puede en la vida. Más cuando Dios pone ángeles en tu camino. Como me puso a mí mis dos amigas hermosas.*
>
> How did I resist? I resisted thanks to two women. Pamela Olvera Cañez offered me a dignified and human space. And thanks to Leslie Meyer, I didn't go crazy. She gave me English classes. She taught me to dance. She was my psychologist. And it helped me a lot to have met her. They are humane people with golden hearts. I could never pay them back for what they did for my daughter and I. I feel that without God's help and theirs, I would never have managed. I'm very fortunate to have met them. For that reason the word *resist* is very heavy for me. But everything is possible in this life, especially when God puts angels in your path, like he put my two beautiful friends.

Through my fieldwork I observed that the quality of the relationships asylum seekers build during their time waiting in shelters can have a big impact on their mental health and their

material conditions. When they are connected with human rights organizations like Casa de Esperanza and build close relationships with staff and/or volunteers (as in Andrea's example above, where she refers to two migrant rights advocates – Pamela, the director of Casa de Esperanza, and myself), it can provide a buffer against the precarious nature of their legal and socioeconomic situations in Tijuana and beyond. In Andrea's case, I met her through my research and volunteer work at Casa de Esperanza, and we eventually became good friends and talked on the phone almost daily during the first 6 months of the pandemic. Often when she would call me, she would be crying, but by the end she'd be laughing and telling jokes. She has told me many times that these conversations helped to "keep her sane" during the lockdown. Once she was finally allowed into the United States to pursue her asylum claim, she would call me to ask me to translate documents for her, help her navigate the Chicago public school system, and talk through various issues she was facing as she adjusted to a new country. (Unlike with refugees, there is no government resettlement program for asylum seekers, who are left to fend for themselves, receiving virtually no support or guidance once they arrive in the US.)

The nature of my relationship with Andrea was not uncommon; I have observed other student researchers acting as advocates on behalf of asylum seekers in Tijuana and in the US, assisting with finding shelter, sharing information about health and legal services, translating documents, and more. When there is no government support for asylum seekers, civil society must step in, and that includes student researchers, who may be the first or only people with whom asylum seekers are able to discuss their situation. While student researchers must be mindful to avoid a savior complex, recognizing and clearly articulating the limits to their capacity to help their informants, research can be the catalyst for direct intervention and psychosocial support. Especially in contexts where access to information and social and psychological services are scarce, I believe relationships forged between researcher and informant can and should be of reciprocity, in opposition to intellectual extractivism.

Other examples of the importance of relationships forged by asylum seekers while waiting, are the 2 asylum seekers I spoke with who were detained – one by US immigration authorities and the other by the Mexican police – and threatened with deportation to their home countries of Cameroon and Honduras. In both cases, the asylum seekers had built a close relationship with staff at Casa de Esperanza, who advocated on their behalf and were able to get them released.

Another example is JD, the Haitian asylum seeker who wanted to dance, rather than speak, at the Black Lives Matter event in San Diego; back when he lived in Tijuana, he used to teach traditional Haitian dance classes at human rights organizations there. Through his connections with Casa de Esperanza, he and his wife were helped to receive university scholarships. Once he was allowed to enter the US on humanitarian parole, one of his students, a Mexican American he had met through the dance classes in Tijuana, agreed to serve as his

sponsor, providing him with an apartment in San Diego where could live with his family rent-free. This contact and support was crucial, as asylum seekers are required to have a sponsor in the US, and are denied a work permit for many months once they reach the United States, making it extremely difficult for them to support themselves financially during that period. The relationships that Emmanuel built in Tijuana were 'stepping stones' for his future in the United States.

In the case of Muhammad,* a male asylum seeker in his 30s from Ghana, building relationships via Casa de Esperanza has pragmatic as well as social and emotional implications. Standing tall at about 6'3; Muhammad is soft-spoken, with a huge smile and a peaceful, gentle presence. He's a devout Muslim and an idealist who believes in the goodness of people, despite the violence and discrimination that he's faced in his lifetime. Muhammad first became acquainted with the organization because he needed their support when he fell ill; now, he is an active volunteer, helping plan and carry out community organizing and cultural activities, including as the volunteer grip for their community *telenovela* (soap opera). He volunteers for the *telenovela* not because he is particularly interested in film production, but because he appreciates the sense of a community on set. During the filming of the *telenovela*, I sat down with him on set to discuss his motives for joining the project, and the benefits of participation. He told me:

> It makes you get to know people… getting to know people is a stepping stone. You don't know where the help will come from. So if you have a chance to participate in a program like this, it's something good. One is because you're going to know a lot of things. You're going to meet a lot of people on the team and you're going to communicate and if there is something that you would want to know, they could help you to tell you, they tell you this is where you can go. This is where you don't have to go.

Asylum seekers like Muhammad arrive in Tijuana largely cut off from networks of support, so developing relationships through human rights organizations connects them with opportunities for work, housing, legal advice, education, and more. Even though Muhammad has never lived at the shelter, he belongs to the community because of his volunteer work there. This is especially important for asylum seekers traveling on their own, like Muhammad; he has to be intentional about building community, to provide crucial information, opportunities, and resources. Furthermore, being in community makes Muhammad feel good:

> What I learned [volunteering for the *telenovela* project] is about how we unite, how people be humble, how people try to help each other, how we communicate with respect, with kindness, with harmony, with love. So that is something I always wanted...to meet new people with love, with kindness, with harmony.

As described in the previous chapter, asylum seekers, especially Black asylum seekers, suffer racism and other demeaning treatment in the places they live, in their jobs, in public spaces, and by the police and other authorities, while experiencing weaponized waiting in Tijuana. Spaces like Casa de Esperanza, which bring together asylum seekers and local people to collaborate on projects like the *telenovela*, serve as a counterpoint to such hierarchical and discriminatory relationships. Similar to Evens, the Haitian volunteer, even though Muhammad doesn't have a particular passion for community theater, he likes being in an environment where people treat each other with love, solidarity, and kindness. He sees that Casa de Esperanza is helping asylum seekers – as they've helped him in the past – and it makes him feel 'so so good' to be a part of that:

> **Leslie**: Why does it make you feel good (to volunteer)?

> **Muhammad**: Because I see a lot of people in need and Espacio has been so good to help, and I feel like I'm also part of it. I feel like at the end of the day, I also contribute in something, so I didn't waste (the day)..so it makes me feel so good.

Muhammad's quote returns us yet again to Victor Frankl's view of self-transcendence as being essential to self-actualization (and runs counter to the logic of Maslow's hierarchy of needs.) For Frankl, self-transcendence is characterized in part by (a) a shift in focus from the self to others, (b) a shift in values from extrinsic motivation, such as materialism, to intrinsic motivation (the activity itself is the reward), (c) an increase in concern for doing what is morally right (Wong, 2017). I don't know, but it's quite possible, that before experiencing weaponized waiting, Muhammad was already engaged in activities that allowed for self-transcendence. Based on his descriptions of volunteering for the telenovela in this interview, he certainly found a way to experience beyond the suffering produced by weaponized waiting, through his service to the project.

Ignacio Martín-Baró wrote about Salvadorans during the Civil War, it is "their uncompromising solidarity with the suffering, their ability to deliver and to sacrifice for the collective good, their tremendous faith in the human capacity to change the world" that allows them to survive and fight for a better future (Martín-Baró, ed. 1994). One female asylum seeker from Honduras revealed to me in an interview that she saves food from her meals at the shelter to sneak through the gates to homeless people. If she had her way, she would cook every day for the people who sleep outside on the streets. According to her, this is an example of what it means to have "*un corazón humanitario*" – "a humanitarian heart" – to share with others who are in need. She said she inherited her humanitarian heart from her mother in Honduras, and reinforced it during her time in the streets, where she learned that people have to take care of each other to survive. This is what makes her, despite having no power or money, "richer than President Biden." I've heard this sentiment expressed repeatedly by asylum seekers. They find a sense of

pride and meaning in drawing on their own experiences of pain to empathize with and helping other people. An essential part of the collective nature of *resiste gozando* as a political project, is that it provides spaces for asylum seekers to serve others; their suffering is reduced through self-transcendence.

During the panel discussion, **Judith**, responding to Cris' comment about the importance of community and collective resistance, adds:

> What you mentioned before about collective resistance, the importance of weaving together a community…this is something we are betting on with the idea of joy as resistance, isn't it? **Most of the activities we carry out [at Casa de Esperanza] are collective and require community and this helps to create social cohesion…to restore perhaps a sense of belonging.** Particularly with the migrant community, suffering the ravages of forced displacement, they suddenly find themselves far from their family, they no longer have their friends, they no longer have their communities. They are in a foreign place where their music is not known or is not listened to, where they are looked upon for having a certain accent…so **building these safe spaces where we can reclaim their music, protect and celebrate their identities, their food, for example…I think all this [sense of belonging] is achieved through community and definitely no one can experience that all by themselves. It has to be a collective endeavor.**

Judith's comment highlights the social upheaval and "homelessness" (literal and/or symbolic) caused by forced displacement, and the trauma of being separated from one's family, community, and customs. Healing from this experience is very difficult to do in isolation. Judith highlights how the relationships forged between asylum seekers while waiting by cooking together, learning about each other's foods and music, etc., (of creating a feeling of being *at home*), can combat isolation and alienation caused by weaponized waiting.

Victor Turner (1969) associated liminality with 'communitas,' which he described as a feeling of kinship with others that comes from shared experiences during the liminal phase, and which are reinforced through rituals performed on and by means of the body, thereby drawing our attention toward embodiment. The liminal is caught between time, but can be grounded in

the present through the sensations of the body, and connect with others on the basis of this shared awareness of aliveness. This is a useful framework for understanding the social relationships that emerge among asylum seekers in the shelter, despite differences in race, ethnicity, religion, language, sexual orientation, and class. While I wouldn't go so far as Turner in declaring that these socially constructed differences are subverted in the 'communitas,' at the shelter, I agree that the "moment in and out of time," of weaponized waiting "reveals, however fleetingly, some recognition (in symbol if not always in language) of a generalized social bond" (...) that can "enable participants to experiment with alternative social relations or to invent new ones" (Turner, 1969, pp. 95-96). This break from the rigidity of social structure and the capacity to envision new possibilities is what leads Turner to declare that "prophets and artists tend to be liminal and marginal people." At its best, liminality is a profoundly humanistic and creative state.

As asylum seekers navigate new social relations formed in comunitas, they make decisions about who to trust for legal and practical advice. They work with others to complete common goals, from creating the decorations for a birthday party, to persuading the shelter staff to modify certain policies, to planning an attempt to cross the border together clandestinely. Occasionally, the relationships they make while waiting open up new opportunities, to enroll in university, to find work, or to attain a US lawyer or legal status in Mexico, thereby shifting people's plans for their future. While it's important to note that most asylum seekers experiencing weaponized waiting are very limited in their capacity to control or shape their futures – for their fate is wrapped up in the illusive legal asylum process – their experiences of waiting, like the activities and relationships that fill their days, are often dynamic as opposed to static.

Among families living at Casa de Esperanza, tensions and conflicts are common. It's no surprise that many asylum seekers find it challenging to live with no privacy among strangers, all while trying to cope with the ongoing traumas of forced displacement and weaponized waiting. Yet it's also true that asylum seekers' relationships, based on a shared experience of displacement, grief, impotence, and violence, are often intimate and healing. Some of this bonding – or the creation of comunitas – occurs organically, through sharing domestic chores, cooking, eating, and sleeping in close quarters. But, comunitas at the shelter are also intentionally fostered through collective movement and dance activities, some which are spontaneous and others deliberately planned by shelter staff, such as bachata and Zumba classes, theater workshops, birthday parties, group art projects, political demonstrations (where chanting and dancing are common practice), and musical rehearsals and concerts. Van der Kolk (2015), notes that throughout history humans have used communal rituals to cope with overwhelming feelings. He writes, "ancient Greek theater, the oldest of which we have written records, seems to have grown out of religious rites that involved dancing, singing, and reenacting mythical stories" (p. 333). The collective nature of music and movement is whats' crucial because it creates "a larger context for our lives, a meaning beyond our individual fate."

The collective and creative activities in which asylum seekers engage could be viewed as communal rituals, which provide a safe outlet to cope with shared experiences of violence that may not be possible to express in words. Dancing, celebrating, cooking, writing poetry, making music and theater, are rituals that offer an avenue to reenter the body – to be able to access inner sensations. For Van der Kolk, this is a restoration of agency in that it "is the opposite of dissociation, of being 'out of body' and making yourself disappear" (p. 331).

***Resiste Gozando* is embodied.**

Another characteristic of the activities that express the spirit of the political project *resiste gozando*, is that they are embodied. In the previous chapter, I described testimonies of female asylum seekers who describe how dancing makes them feel at home in their bodies, comfortable, free, and powerful. To build on Hage's concept of 'political emotions,' what they feel while dancing could be considered 'political sensations,' or sensations with a political dimension, as they fill women who are experiencing the effects of state power, with their own sense of power. **Judith**, in the panel discussion, described joy as an communal and embodied form of resistance:

> Dancing, singing, hugging, eating well, living together, has physiological effects, it gives us endorphins, it gives us these neurotransmitters of happiness, it protects our identity. In particular for people who suffer the ravages of uprooting, whose cultures place a lot of emphasis on communal elements, the communal aspect is very important to their identity. So through the [joy of collective creation] we can experience all of these things. At this moment, **most of the migrant population is trapped, not mobile.** But even so, and with the pandemic, we can still experience the freedom to create. **Even where they want to keep us trapped, enclosed, oppressed, we make this space for creation. So when we talk about joy, it's not a passive joy.** It's resistance.

Van der Kolk (2015) contrasts the (sometimes) dissociative, depressive state of being on the couch, passively entertained by the TV, with the active, embodied experience of doing a creative ritual (p. 333). For Judith, *Resiste gozando* is about actively bringing about positive physiological changes inside the body, as opposed to being passively entertained. The therapeutic and political potential of art lies in this element of agency.

The forced displacement of Black, Indigenous, and people of color, like the anti-asylum policies that leave them waiting at the border, and indeed like the very border itself, are phenomena rooted in histories of colonialism, imperialism, and white supremacy. Subjugated peoples' creative and embodied efforts to reclaim agency have an equally long tradition. Countless thinkers have contemplated art as a form of political and psychological resistance to oppressive conditions; female writers in the African diaspora, and other women of color, have been prolific on this topic. Filmmaker Ebony Bailey, speaking in a public event at the University of California, San Diego, about why she chooses to portray Black joy in her 2017 documentary, "Life Between Borders: Black Migrants in Mexico," says:

> All these systems, white supremacy, capitalism, they want us to be pessimistic. They want us not to imagine a new world. And so I think optimism is definitely a form of resistance in that sense in that another world is possible and we can achieve another world. And so I think that in my film – and I kind of do this with my art in general – **I'm celebrating Blackness. I think a lot of times, especially in documentaries, there's a lot of documentation of Black and Brown communities all over the world but a lot of times it's with this revictimization lens,** which talks about the harsh realities. And I think it's important to also talk about the joy, the resistance that exists in joy (...) and the joy that exists in resistance.

For Ebony, it's important not to perpetuate a narrative of revictimization when portraying the Black community. On the panel discussion about *resiste gozando,* **Wendy Gabriela,** a Black Lives Matter Tijuana activist and volunteer at Casa de Esperanza, connects the physiological and psychological violence experienced by asylum seekers, with the violence affecting Black people throughout history:

> I really like this phrase, *resiste gozando,* because as we well know, Black people and native people have been struggling for centuries, hundreds of years against colonialism, slavery, racism, white imperialism, capitalism, and s**omehow we have become the emblem of the struggle, of suffering and pain. And it seems to me very necessary and important to remember that we are not only that, we are also joy, we are also music and poetry and dance.** And that's why I feel very strongly about *resiste gozando*… I want to always keep that idea at the forefront of our Black Lives Matter Tijuana collective…to always keep this in mind.

Wendy's comment highlights the affective complexity of the Black and native experience, insinuating that such complexity also exists for asylum seekers waiting at the border; a tension rooted in a long history of creative struggle against white supremacy.

Echoing this sentiment in the preface to her book of poems, "Hard Times Require Furious Dancing," Black American writer Alice Walker (2010: xvi), reflects on dance as resistance in the Black community:

> That Africans are always dancing (in their ceremonies and rituals) shows an awareness of this. It struck me one day, while dancing, that the marvelous moves African Americnas are famous for on the dance floor came about because the dancers, especially in the old days, were contorting away various knots of stress. Some of the lower-back movements handed down to us that have seemed merely sensual were no doubt created after a day's work bending over a plow or hoe on a slave driver's plantation. **Wishing to honor the role of dance in the healing of families, communities, and nations,** I (...) invited friends and family from near and far to come together, (...) **to dance our sorrows away**, or at least to integrate them more smoothly into our daily existence. The next generation of my family, mourning the recent death of a mother, my sister-in-law, created a spirited line dance that assured me that, **although we have all encountered our share of grief and troubles, we can still hold the line of beauty, form, and beat – no small accomplishment in a world as challenging as this one. Hard times require furious dancing.** Each of us is the proof.

As these quotes from Bailey and Walker suggest, for Black and other racialized people to experience collective joy can be read as a refusal to be demoralized and alientated in a white supremacist society. Walker implies that cultivating an aesthetic of beauty through dance is not a luxury, nor simple entertainment: it's a source of strength and wisdom, cultivated over centuries, and something to be celebrated. Van der Kolk notes that "collective movement and music create a larger context for our lives, a meaning beyond our individual fate," (p. 320) providing a relief from the isolation of trauma. For racialized asylum seekers, to begin to take back control over one's body and ones story, and to do so with beauty and as a collective, is a boldly political act that challenges the white supremacist status quo.

This leads us to the fourth and final characteristic of *resiste gozando*: it contains paradoxes. As an experience it contains suffering and joy; oppression and resilience; impotence and power; inertia and dynamism.

***Resiste Gozando* contains paradoxes.**

In the previous chapter, I introduced the idea that *resiste gozando* is paradoxical in nature, and implies the holding and expression of multiple truths. By theorizing asylum seekers' paradoxical, political joy, I resist the tendency in trauma literature to reduce asylum seekers' experiences to suffering, seeking instead to describe in more realistic, comprehensive, and nuanced terms the ways they experience and resist violence.

The encounter of seemingly oppositional expressions is a characteristic aesthetic in many forms of Black art. Brenda Dixon Gottschild (1996), in her book, *Digging the Africanist Presence in American Performance*, writes:

> Africanist art forms deal in paradox as a matter of course, with irony following close behind. Contrariety is expressed in African dilemma tales, in music or vocal work that sounds cacophonous or grating to the untrained ear, and in dance that seems unsophisticated to eyes schooled in a different aesthetic [...] These opposites would be difficult to pair and to leave unresolved in European academic aesthetics, but there is room for their encounter in Africanist aesthetics, 'academic' or otherwise" (p. 13).

In the space of the three hour Zumba workshop with asylum seekers described in the previous chapter, the women participated in silly icebreakers, practiced twerking, wrote messages of solidarity to other migrant women, shared personal testimonies of traumatic experiences, cried, comforted each other, danced to Afrobeats, learned a Zumba routine, teased each other, and more. Such contrariety is, according to Gottschild, "basic to the Africanist world view." It's fitting that '*resiste gozando*' , a concept that attempts to describe the essence of asylum seekers' responses to oppressive conditions, is defined in part by its paradoxical nature.

We see an example of prejudice against the Africanist aesthetic of contrariety in the white cultural criticism of the great artist Jean-Michel Basquiat. In bell hooks' 1993 essay, "Altars of Sacrifice, Remembering Basquiat," she deconstructs the dismissals of Basquiat's paintings as derivative or "primitive," offering an alternative interpretation of his work as depicting the sacrifices he had to make in order to insert himself into an overwhelmingly white canon. For hooks, Basquiat's work is subversive and provokes a sense of dread by juxtaposing "the paradigm of ritual sacrifice with that of ritual recovery and return" (p. 42). Hooks argues that white critics who looked at Basquiat's work from a eurocentric perspective failed to notice the nuance and dynamism with which he represented this sacrifice through the "convergence, contact and conflict of varied artistic traditions." In a line that beautifully captures the paradoxical, embodied, and radical qualities of *resiste gozando,* hooks declares: "Basquiat must go down in history as one of the wounded. Yet his art will stand as the testimony that declares with vengeance: we are more than our pain (p. 42)."

Binary or dichotomous thinking – the framing of issues in terms of binary oppositions such as good/evil, Heaven/hell, civilized/primitive, male/female, self/other– is a characteristic of colonial discourse. Describing the world in terms of binary oppositions was a way of establishing relations of dominance. For colonized and oppressed people to proclaim, 'We are more than our pain' is to reclaim and complicate the narrative that's been told about them, and to reject binary thinking that assumes that trauma and suffering have purely negative effects on peoples' lives. In other words, to hold two oppositional truths at once – that trauma can be destructive and generative; that waiting is painful and (sometimes) joyful – is a provocation and a disruption to binary logics of domination.

Ademir*, an asylum seeker from El Salvador and a staff member at Casa de Esperanza, was at the panel discussion to represent his music group, *"Resistencia Migrante"* (Migrant Resistance) which is made up of a rotating cast of shelter residents, staff, and migrants in the community. A professional cumbia singer back in El Salvador, Ademir is now the lead singer for *Resistencia Migrante*. The song that he chose to sing during his speech about how he conceives of *Resiste Gozando,* was, paradoxically, very sad. Below are the lyrics to *Casas de Carton*, which was banned during the civil war in El Salvador in the 1980s:

Qué triste
Se oye la lluvia
En los techos de cartón
Qué triste
Vive mi gente
En las casas de cartón

Viene bajando el obrero
Casi arrastrando sus pasos
Por el peso del sufrir
Mira que es mucho sufrir
Mira que pesa el sufrir
Arriba deja la mujer preñada
Abajo esta la ciudad
Y se pierde en su maraña
Hoy es lo mismo de ayer
Es un mundo sin mañana

Qué triste
Se oye la lluvia
En los techos de cartón
Qué triste
Vive mi gente
En las casas de cartón

Niños color de mi tierra
Con sus mismas cicatrices

Millonarios de lombrices
Y por eso
Que tristes viven los niños
En las casas de cartón

Qué triste
Se oye la lluvia
En los techos de cartón
Qué triste
Vive mi gente
En las casas de cartón

Usted no lo va a creer
Pero hay escuelas de perros
Y les dan educación
Pa' que no muerdan los diarios, pero el patrón
Hace años, muchos años
Que está mordiendo al obrero

Qué triste
Se oye la lluvia
En los techos de cartón
Qué lejos
Pasa una esperanza
En las casas de cartón

My translation:

How sad is the sound of rain
On the cardboard roofs.
How sadly my people live
In their cardboard houses.

The worker comes descending,
Dragging his feet
From the weight of suffering.
Look how heavy is his suffering
Look how much the suffering weighs

He leaves the pregnant woman above

The city is below,
And he loses himself in its tangle.
Today is the same as yesterday
It's a world without tomorrow.

How sad, the sound of the rain
On the cardboard roofs.
How sadly my people live
In their cardboard houses.

Children the color of my land,
With the same scars
And parasitic worms.
How sadly the children live
In their cardboard houses.

How sad, the sound of the rain
On the cardboard roofs.
How sadly my people live
In their cardboard houses.

You're not going to believe
But there are schools for dogs
And they give them an education
So they don't bite the newsboys
But the boss for years, many years
Has been biting the worker.

How sad, the sound of the rain
On the cardboard roofs.
How far away is hope.

Ademir finishes the song and continues:

> For singing this song, many people were killed (...) for fighting, for demanding their rights, for wanting a dignified life. Thank you to everyone who is here today (at the event), because this work is collective. *Resiste gozando* is for and by all of us.

In Ademir's performance, the lyrics of the song express criticism against social inequality in El Salvador, written at a time when it was prohibited to do so. I put in bold the phrase, "Today is the same as yesterday…It's a world without tomorrow," to draw a parallel between the oppressive conditions that the song condemns, and the experience of weaponized waiting, in which, every painful day seems to repeat itself, without any way to bring about change (a tomorrow). Reading the lyrics on paper does not evoke the same emotional response, however, as hearing them sung. The political message is delivered not just through the literal meaning of the words, but through pitch, rhythm, the beautiful quality of Ademir's voice, and other musical elements that make it emotionally impactful. For example, the melancholic melody is repetitive in a way that reinforces the message that "today is the same as yesterday." And although his tone, like the lyrics, are sad, there is a defiance in his singing voice, and in his statement afterwards, which lies in juxtaposition with the song's final line, "How far away is hope." This tension speaks to the reality that those who risked their lives to sing that song, though may have felt despair, weren't entirely consumed by it; otherwise why even bother protesting, if no change could possibly result from it? Furthermore, Ademir's performance was spontaneous and unexpected, introducing an aesthetic of contriety into the dynamic of the (spoken, not sung) panel discussion. It was a visceral way to show rather than just talk about what *resiste gozando* means.

In reflecting on how singing is a way to *resistir gozando,* Ademir notes that singing provides a distraction from pain, (perhaps a return to the 'home of the body' through experiencing a state of inner calm?), and he describes his singing voice as an instrument for others' dissent. As opposed to a passive form of distraction, singing is a way to assert agency over his embodied experience. In the next section, I look at the role of art in expressing dissent in protests put on by Casa de Esperanza.

RESISTE GOZANDO AT TIJUANA'S FIRST BLACK LIVES MATTER PROTEST

In June 2020, Casa de Esperanza together with local activists from the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Tijuana collective organized a group of about 50 young people to gather in the colorful Plaza Santa Cecilia, in Downtown Tijuana, making sidewalk chalk art and dancing to Afrobeats music. This was a celebration, not of easing lockdown restrictions but of Black lives, joy and resilience. It was also Tijuana's first BLM protest against the rampant racism towards, and police brutality against, Tijuana's Black migrant community, which culminated in the public beating and death of a Haitian migrant in Mexican police custody in January of that year.

The words *Asma, no puedo respirar* — "Asthma, I can't breathe" — were painted on a protester's sign in reference to the last words that the Haitian migrant called out before his death. His pleas were a chilling echo of those of African American men like George Floyd and Eric Garner, killed by police in the United States. Yet Mexican authorities never publicly released any information about the case, so there is no name to demand justice for. "Say Their Name" was not a reality for him.

Black activists and asylum seekers spoke at the protest, condemning police violence, calling for accountability, and sharing about their experiences of racism in Mexico. Protest organizers encouraged creative self-expression at the event; they used dance and chalk art to attract the attention of the media, who would amplify their demands. They also hoped that making the protest celebratory would keep its tone light, despite the heaviness of the subject at hand. They did this in order to keep the police police at bay, since some in the group were undocumented asylum seekers. Just like JD, the Haitian dancer who preferred to dance than to speak at the BLM protest in San Diego, the protestors' use of dance, chalk art, and music at the Tijuana protest was an act of low-profile, understated, "everyday resistance" that nevertheless

denied or mitigated "claims made by appropriating classes" (Scott 1985: 302) about the rights of Black asylum seekers.

While planning the protest, the collective was aware that the press would be there, and discussed what types of images they wanted to project. In an interview with **Pamela**, the director of Casa de Esperanza, she described how those conversations went:

> We have been talking about how **a lot of volunteers and activists take selfies when they're donating and they project communities as people that are very poor and that need help, that need a savior**. **And we were saying, like, we don't want that image.** And actually we sent out a press release to the media, and one of the newspapers that published our press release [...] chose a picture from their archives, I guess, from their files. And **they put a picture of a line of Black people, they look like they're in line for something, to get food or to get documents. And the look on their faces is so sad.** I imagine that it's a picture from 2016 when hundreds of people were arriving and they were dirty. Like the Haitians just after their journey. But **I was like, why do they project the Black community like that?** And also, how come they don't have any pictures that are more recent if they have been here since 2016? I feel like **art brings people closer together or it can make the media portray them as what they are, like humans, just like regular people that can also have other emotions, not just sad and desperate, like in the pictures. It is not that the protest was all happy. People looked angry, but also different things.** You know, not like they were being portrayed (in the media)."

According to Pamela, the portrayal of Black Haitians in the media is one that often perpetuates a narrative of revictimization – exactly the type of image which the activists Wendy Gabriela and Ebony Bailey spoke out against in the panel discussion on *Resiste Gozando.* (Both of them were also involved in conversations about what type of image they wanted to portray of the Haitian community at the first Black Lives Matter protest). Some international organizations such as UNICEF and Amnesty International also frequently depict asylum seekers in this way, presumably to provoke empathy in the viewer and thus motivate them to donate. This strategy for fundraising is referred to colloquially, by some critics, as "poverty porn," in that it

encourages voyeurism, reduces the fullness and complexity of asylum seekers' lived experiences, and avoids criticizing systems of structural inequality. Furthermore, there's a risk that the image of sad, dirty, people waiting in line may contribute to a subconscious and collective normalization of racialized asylum seekers having to wait in poor conditions. In contrast, Casa de Esperanza tries to go beyond desperation, to capture the complexity of "political joy" at their protests and events. By creating such art, and hosting a space of creation, they bring people closer together and let them tell (or show) their own rich stories as humans. As they do, they begin to reframe waiting, challenge state violence, and build new relations of care and politics for themselves.

'REGARDING THE PAIN OF OTHERS': VISUAL REPRESENTATIONS OF ASYLUM SEEKERS' SUFFERING

In a 2019 opinion piece for The Guardian, writer Sabrina Vourvoulias shares the infamous photo of Valeria Martínez, the two-year-old Salvadoran child, who drowned in the shallows of the Rio Grande with her father Óscar Alberto Martínez by her side. Vourvoulias argues that images like this one, of suffering or deceased migrant bodies, should shock the public into paying attention to the perils facing migrants. She points out that the widely shared 2015 photograph of Alan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian child whose little lifeless body lying face down on the beach in Greece, "moved European leaders to re-examine their policies toward migrants."

Slovic et al (2017) also argue that the photo of Aylan Kurdi woke the international community to the war in Syria. This prompted a temporary spike in donations to humanitarian organizations, and also prompted top level government officials to the imperative to take "aggressive action" against the Syrian regime. Here, the humanitarian response that the photo

provoked (and that was exploited by NGOs, for better or worse), was also tied to a military response. The authors of the article seem to take it for granted that "waking up to a humanitarian crisis" is always a good thing, no matter who is waking up or why, and how damaging their response may be. Sontag (2003) writes, “Photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses. A call for peace. A cry for revenge. Or simply the bemused awareness, continually restocked by photographic information, that terrible things happen” (p.13). Sontag cautions us to be skeptical about the humanitarian promise of war photography. “For a long time some people believed that if the horror could be made vivid enough, most people would finally take in the outrageousness, the insanity of war” (p. 14). Her words are a provocation: look just where it’s led us, all these years of trying to use photography to combat war and atrocity. Do we still believe in photography’s promise of social change?

Perhaps, as the above quote from Sontag suggests, this faith in photography as an agent of change is blind to history. And yet, media representation does matter; in my conversations with asylum seekers, I’ve learned that many are bothered by what they see as inaccurate and unjust portrayals of them in the media, and they want to have a say in correcting the record. As Saiba Varma (2020) points out in her description of India’s media coverage of the floods in Kashmir: “The discrepancy between what was being shown on television and what was happening on the ground produced a contradiction too painful to bear. ‘It can make your head explode,’ one person said” (p.180).

The cliche is that a picture is worth a thousand words. I sense the ratio is off; could even one photo balance out the infamous words with which Donald Trump kicked off his campaign: “When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. […] They’re sending people that have lots of problems […] They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists” ?

Trump's toxic words have since reverberated and been countered in endless debates that often end up presenting an overly simplistic dialectic: either they're good or bad; victims or criminals; seldom do we get to see them in their own terms, or as the complex people they are. Art, at its best, has a way of grappling with complexity. Perhaps this is where photography holds the most promise – not as an arbiter of truth (for, as Sontag warns us, even documentary photography represents the view of *someone),* but as a conveyor of complexity.

Another way of thinking about photography, and visual representation generally, as a form of resistance, is by returning to its potential as a speech act. With this framework we can understand the work of photographers like Jeff Valenzuela and Arlene Mejorado, who are artists and active volunteers at Casa de Esperanza, as a form of resistance due to the intentions of solidarity behind their work, and the loving and collaborative way they produce and share their images of and with asylum seekers. In other words, when it comes to defining resistance photography, or art in general, the process might be more important than the product. (I would say the same for the potential of research, including this thesis.) Likewise, In cases when asylum seekers are involved in creating the image, whether or not their self-representations are "true," or how the images are perceived; are not the most important questions. Rather, what's powerful about self-representation is the intention and experience behind it. Through the act of reclaiming the narrative and taking up public space, their performance declares and generates a sense of agency.

In the next section, I describe a joint, outdoor photo exhibit, dance performance, and protest held by Casa de Esperanza in Tijuana in December 2021, and analyze the significance of art and self-representation at that event.

PERFORMING *RESISTE GOZANDO*: A PHOTO EXHIBIT, PROTEST, AND DANCE SHOW TO CHALLENGE RACISM & PATRIARCHAL VIOLENCE

A year and half after the first Black Lives Matter protest, Casa de Esperanza inaugurated a public outdoor photo exhibition in Tijuana, featuring 20 images of people who had participated in the original BLM protest. The photos were taken by volunteer artists, Jeff Valenzuela, Arlene Mejorado, Manuel Ocaño, Aimee Melo. In each photograph, protestors are holding hand-drawn signs; below each is a caption with a quote from the asylum seeker or activist about the impacts of, and resistance to, racialized violence. I asked JD*, the Haitian dancer now living in the United States, and whose photo appears in the exhibit, what he wanted the caption below his photograph to say. He replied, "What message do I have for Haitians in Tijuana? That you have to keep fighting." For JD, the photographs were less about changing the minds of racist people in Mexico, and more about communicating a message to Haitian asylum seekers still in Tijuana. He wanted the photographs to remind Haitians that, "from the time of slavery, through the Haitian revolution, and up until now, the fight continues."

The photos were glued to a temporary construction wall on Avenida Revolución – the street named for the Mexican revolution – and the busiest and most iconic street in historic, downtown Tijuana. Avenida Revolución is lined with restaurants, thumping nightclubs, thrift shops, artisan vendors, taco stands, street musicians, and more. It's loud, crowded, and bustling at all hours of the day. Luckily for us, who were setting up the event, the street was closed off that day to cars, so only pedestrians were passing by.

As I was helping the volunteer curator install the photo exhibit, several people stopped and asked me what I was doing. I replied to a curious boy, who looked to be about 11, that the images were of *migrantes* and friends who were sharing experiences of racism in Mexico.

He smiled, pointed at his chest, and exclaimed, “I know about that! My parents are migrants from Guerrero (a state in Southern Mexico)!” As I continued to work, I noticed him slowly observing each image and reading their captions. A few others also stopped to look at the images, but most people walked on without paying much attention to the images, nor to the group of activists and dancers who were slowly gathering around me, setting up a table, laptop, microphone, and speakers.

Image 1. The public photo exhibit was installed on Avenida Revolución, the main street in downtown Tijuana.

Image 2. A passerby pauses to take in the photos.

Image 3. A protester with his fist raised holds a sign that reads, “Las Vidas Negras Importan” (“Black Lives Matter”). The caption reads, “For me, racism is as dangerous as the pandemic.”

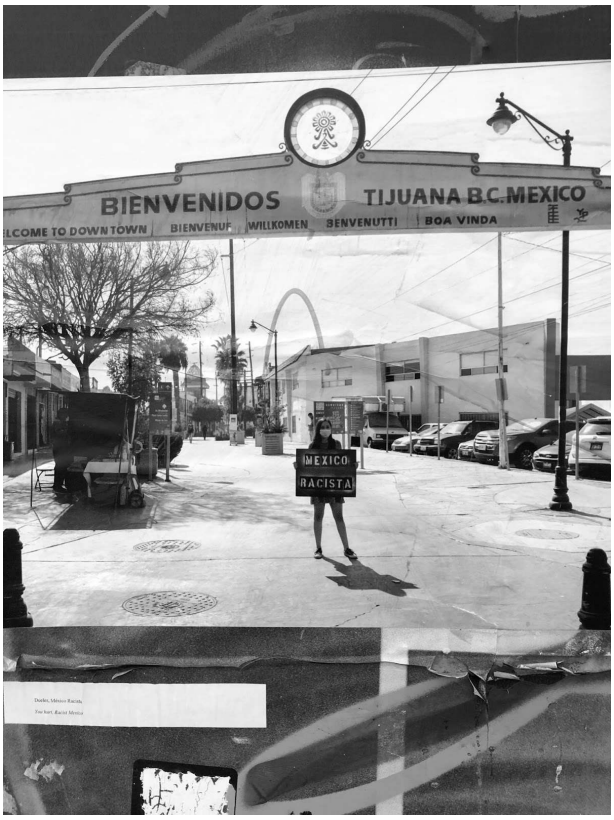


Image 4. A protestor stands under a sign that reads, “Welcome to Tijuana,” with the iconic Monumental Arch behind her. Her sign reads, “Racist Mexico.” The caption under the photograph says, “You hurt, Racist Mexico.”

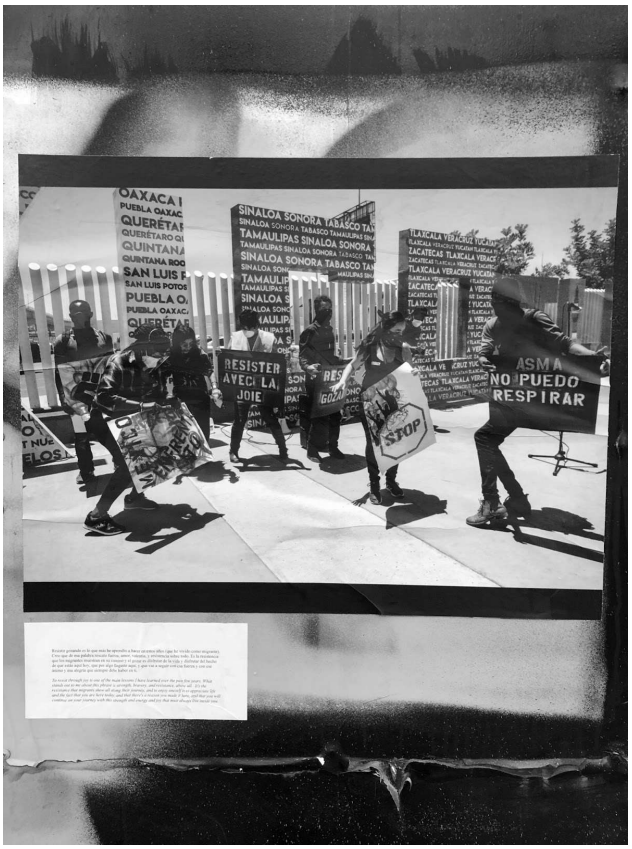


Image 5. Protestors dance to Afrobeat music, while holding signs that say, “Asthma, I can’t breathe,” and “*Resiste Gozando*” in various languages. The caption, which was written by an asylum seeker who is also a staff member at Casa de Esperanza, reads: To *resistir gozando* is one of the main lessons I have learned over the past few years. What stands out to me about this phrase is strength, bravery, and resistance, above all. It's the resistance that migrants show all along their journey, and to enjoy oneself is to appreciate life and the fact that you are here today, and that there's a reason you made it here, and that you will continue on your journey with this strength and energy and joy that must always live inside you.

Image 6. A protestor holds a sign that reads, “*Resiste Gozando.”* The caption reads: “The great poet, Victoria Santacruz says in one of my favorite poems:

I was just 7 years old
Just 7 years old
What seven years old!
I wasn't even 5!
When suddenly I heard voices in the street
Shouting at me: Black!
Black! Black! Black!
Black! Black! Black! Black!

I identify with that poem because the first time someone yelled at me that I was an ugly Black girl, a dirty Black girl, I was about that age. Not even 5 years old. “

A common complaint I heard from Black asylum seekers – and their Black Mexican allies – was that they felt that the problem of anti-Blackness went unnoticed by most Mexicans, contributing to their sense of feeling invisible, or erased, in the country. They were glad to see that many Mexicans were in solidarity with Black Lives Matter protestors in the U.S., in the wake of George Floyd's murder, but they were frustrated to see that many of those same people didn't seem to be aware of, or weren't publically denouncing, anti-Black racism in Mexico.

Of course, as Sontag reminds us, simply making the public aware of violence through photographs, doesn't mean it will provoke the reaction in the audience that the photographer desires. However, this complication may be somewhat mitigated by the fact that in all of the photos in Casa de Esperanza's exhibition, the subjects (and captions below) are not only raising awareness about racism, they are also instructing us on how to deal with that problem: through public protest, poetry, joy. These images are in stark contrast with the photograph that appeared in the newspaper alongside Casa de Esperanza's press release about the original Black Lives Matter protest – the image Pamela criticized – of "Black people (...) in line for something, to get food or to get documents. And the look on their faces is so sad." Rather than showing a mass of suffering Black people patiently waiting in line, Casa de Esperanza's exhibit displays individuals and small groups up close, in the act of fighting the effects of power: by standing tall with their fists in the air, dancing, calling out Mexico's racism. And although the focus of the protest and photo exhibit was anti-Black racism against asylum seekers, the photos show a diversity of faces – signaling, perhaps, that racism is not something that *only* Black people should be fighting against. Another crucial difference from the photo that appeared in the newspaper with the press release, is that everyone who appears in Casa de Esperanza's exhibition about anti-Black racism, did so voluntarily. So, they had a say in how they were being portrayed, and the message that

they wanted to convey, even if the photographer and curator (who were not asylum seekers) also played a role in crafting the message. For Eileen, the female asylum seeker from Cameroon whose photograph is in the exhibit, she told me that she was proud to have the spotlight on her, shedding light on the difficulties she and other Black migrants have faced and managed to endure. For that same reason, she was excited to appear in the *telenovela* project, representing a fictionalized version of herself – a woman who had fled violence, been separated from her children, been forced to wait in Tijuana, sleep on the streets, and ultimately, become a hero who helps other people. For her, being a part of making her story public was a source of pride:

> I'm just be proud. It's not shameness for me. It cannot be shameness … I'm proud because many of them can see that they don't know by why I'm stronger to be here. They cannot imagine. I can explain maybe, but **they cannot live, they cannot touch the reality I touching.** They cannot know, they cannot know. **You can't explain... they cannot know.**

For Eileen, creating public art about her story and the struggle she's overcome, not only fills her with pride, it's also a way for her to get closer to communicating what she can't explain in words. If images of asylum seekers are to ignite change, a viral photo of a suffering or dead body may not be enough. When I first saw the images of the corpses of Valeria Martínez, Óscar Alberto Martínez, and Alan Kurdi, I felt a certain numbness, and a desire to look away, not from compassion fatigue, I believe, but from learned stoicism. As Susan Sontag writes, "An ample reservoir of stoicism is needed to get through the great newspaper record each morning, given the likelihood of seeing photographs that could make you cry" (2003, p. 13). Somehow the body must be *embodied*, the stranger must be made known. Eileen's quote suggests that complex, positive, self-representation is a way to make 'the pain of others' known – to give them a 'touch of the reality she is touching.' The sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014) describes in

his book, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide,* how so much knowledge and social experience from the Global South is being wasted. He develops the concept of 'cognitive injustice,' or the failure to recognise and value the different ways of knowing by which people in the Global South live and provide meaning to their existence. Eileen and other asylum seekers use public performance to share their reality, and their knowledge of how to find meaning in/through their experiences of oppression. Their efforts to communicate to the broader public through *resiste gozando,* serve to counter cognitive injustice.

Back on Avenida Revolución, at about 4 in the afternoon, the inauguration of the photo exhibit began. Several activists from Casa de Esperanza, speaking into a microphone, started reading statements denouncing anti-Black racism. There was so much noise and commotion going on around us, that it was difficult to hear what they were saying. Nevertheless, a small group of curious people came to a pause around us. A *mestizo* father, with a small child perched on his shoulders, instructed her to raise her fist in the air and join in on the chant, *"Las Vidas Negras Importan!"* (Black Lives Matter!)

Then, the grand finale: a troupe of teenage female dancers from *Conservatorio de Danza México* (The Dance Conservatory of Mexico, in Tijuana), dressed in black, assumed their positions in the middle of the street. They had learned a 15 minute choreography, directed by Dulce Escobedo, which was based on the messages and videos Casa de Esperanza had sent them of me dancing at the dance workshop with women asylum seekers in November 2021, described in detail in Chapter 3. The choreography was titled, "Orgullosa de Ti," at the suggestion of the female asylum seekers who had participated in the original workshop, and was an account of their challenges and will to carry on:

Six dancers are spaced apart in the middle of the street, dressed in black leotards, pants, and face masks, their hair tied back in a bun, standing erect, their gaze softly stoic. Through the speakers, the gradual sound of a classical piano in crescendo, plays a monotonous, melancholic melody. The timber is thick, rounded, melodious; the tempo is slow and steady. The music, combined with the spectacle of the dancers occupying the street, has caught the attention of the crowd around us, which is growing in size; a relative calm and hush has fallen on the otherwise clamorous street.

Two dancers slowly curve to one side, low to the ground, arching their backs. Each has an arm outstretched, dangling towards the ground – like a single, broken wing – making waves in the air to the slow tempo of the piano. Their torsos, now parallel to the ground, are slowly guided by the swaying movement. Their other arm reaches out, too, before pulling both hands inward to the heart, then hovering over the face. (They are fragile, abused, and hurt.) With faces hidden, the dancers beginn spinning in circles; they look dizzy, overwhelmed. (It seems there's no way out of this situation.) Then suddenly, momentarily, they break free: flinging their arms into the sky, they leap upwards, and land softly. They started slowly walking, then skipping in a circle, the tempo increasing in speed. Their skips gain energy, becoming kicks in the air. (They're making moves to escape.) One of the dancers takes an imaginary blow to the chest; she arches backwards, chest outstretched, arms loose at her side, and bent over. (She's having an internal struggle, now.) Then, her arms – or wings – begin making waves again, this time faster and stronger than before. Both dancers stand erect again. The other four dancers, who have been standing to the side, take a step forward. (They're at a crossroads.) The music pauses; the dancers come to a standstill.

The dancers conjure the image of a house, by forming triangles with their arms, as if drawing a roof. Then, the houses dissolve – one arm falling violently; the other abruptly cupping over the mouth. They furiously pat their hands all over their bodies. They're bending forward in a grimace, seemingly in pain, their bodies writhing. (They're experiencing violence in the home.) Then, each one stands straight, before jumping to the side – out from wherever they've been stuck. The group expands, forms a circle, and then each dancer runs through, one at a time, leaping through the air, legs outstretched. They seem to be trying to move forward and break free of something, but they are continually pulled backwards, their mouths covered by their hands. Their bodies dance frantically between these states: advancing forward, then falling back again. (They're still trying to break free, from this situation, or from their own despair.) Then, the fight begins to slow, and the movements become more deliberate and graceful. The dancers form a single line – one rushes to the front of it. She leans backwards, sways, then kicks the air. The others follow, like dominoes. The line dissolves: the dancers scatter apart, their arms return to the triangle roofs, then their hands start tapping their bodies yet again. They look to be hurting again. They melt, and come to a pause. The music stops, and they walk to the edge of the street.

Suddenly, a new song loudly erupts through the speakers: this time it's an orchestra. The string instruments are vigorous and frenzied. Matching the urgency of the music, the dancers rush back into the middle of the street. Their gaze has changed now: it's intense, determined. (Nothing can stop them. They've decided to carry on.) They flail their arms through the air, then suddenly fall to the ground. As a single violin plays at a thrilling crescendo, the dancers appear to be pulled back up to standing by the force of their outstretched hands. They form a circle, facing forward, as one dancer breaks free, sprinting between them. She pauses, at the front of the

circle, and hollows: “Ahhhhhh!” The others join in. It’s not a scream of fear, but is rather more like a battle cry; it communicates rage and resoluteness.

The music is now faster than ever, as they run, jump, and whip their arms through the air, their limbs are tense but agile. The dancers still seem to be fighting an energy that’s pushing them backwards, but now they have the upper hand. Then, a certain calm returns. They are holding colorful scarves now, which soften the energy of their thrashing arms. (There’s a certain beauty and grace in their struggle.) They arch backwards, the scarves blowing in the wind behind them. They run together to form a line again, this time staggered, and the music comes to a sudden halt. Each dancer arches in a different direction, their hands hovering over the body of the dancer behind them. (Each is still hurting, but they’re united.) There’s a pause, and then the crowd cheers.

“Afrobeats,” a mother in her 30s who had fled domestic violence and a civil war in Cameroon, before getting stuck in limbo at the US-Mexico border for over two years– and who had participated in the original dance workshop at Casa de Esperanza– interpreted the first half of the live performance as follows :

> *Es la historia de la mujer. Cuando los problemas venga, toma muchas cicatrices. La golpea la vida. La golpea muy bien. No se si es una persona o es una situacion de la vida, o de la discriminacion , no se. Toma muchas cicatrices a su cuerpo, a su corazon, a su vida, a su cara. Y cuando ella toma esas cicatrices, este problema, ella quiere abandonar. Y cuando queria abandonar, podria ver. Toma la mano asi (she gestures, one hand grabs the other wrist), toma el cuerpo (gestures, heart over her hands, bent back), toma todo asi (she hunches over) camina asi, baila, camina como solo quiere abandonar. Por unas personas que no tiene hijo, ve a su papa o su mama, se pregunta, necesitamos morrer? Y que va a pensar mi papa o mi mama? Como va a ser su corazon? Por unas personas que tienes familia, nina, nino, se pregunta, Dios, devia quitar esta vida? Y como seria de mi mis hijos? (...) No puedo hacer eso.*

> It’s the story of woman …when the problems come, she gets many scars. **Life beats her up. It really beats her up. I don’t know if it’s a person, or a situation in life, or discrimination (who is beating her), I don’t know. Her**

> **body, her body, her heart, her life, her face, are scarred. And when she receives these scars, this problem, she wants to abandon (life).** She wants to abandon it, I could see. She takes her hand like this (she gestures, one hand grabs the other wrist), she takes her body (she gestures, heart over her hands, bent back) she takes everything like that (she hunches over), she walks like that, she dances and walks like she just wants to abandon everything. (...) And for some people who don't have children, they look to their mom or dad, and they ask, is it necessary to die? What will happen to their heart? For some people that have a family, daughter, a son, they ask, God, should I abandon this life? And what would happen to my children? I can't do that.

Afrobeats describes seeing in the dance the story of a woman who is being abused (by "either a person, a situation in life, or discrimation"), and who responds by wanting to abandon life, and commit suicide. But then she starts to think about what will happen to her children or her parents if she does this : "Cómo va a ser su corazón?" (What will it do to their heart?") Afrobeats first started narrating this story in the third person, but she shifts to the first person: "Y ahorita cuando pienso que no podría hacer eso, que no podría quitar todo, mi vida toda, solo por unas personas o una situación de vida que es tanto difícil." ("And now I think, I can't do that. I can't leave everything, my whole life, just because of some people or a situation in my life that is very difficult.") Afrobeats is talking about herself. When the music changes, she sees an accompanying shift in the plot:

> Cambia la parte como mujer tan frágil, tan sola. Y se toma una energía que viene de un lugar que ella no sabe de donde eso venga. Pero es la fuerza del amor. Se llama la fuerza del amor. Solo un amor puro, veritable, puede cambiar la visión, la vida, el sufrimiento, y tomar más fuerza a una persona. Miro, cuando la canción toma un ritmo más rápido, un otro ritmo, podría ver la cara de las chicas. Es una cara de determinación. Es una cara que sabe donde soy, donde me voy, que cosas que debía hacer. Es una cara decidida (...) Asi es – ver como muy fuerte bailan con decision asi. La ternura se perdió, pero la miro como un animal feroza. Si, que quiere hacer unas cosas con decisión.
>
> There's a change from the part where the woman is so fragile, so alone. And she gets a new energy that comes from a place that she doesn't even know where it comes from. But it's the strength of love. **It's called the strength of love. Only a love that is pure, and true, can change one's vision, one's life, one's suffering,**

> **and make someone stronger. I see that when the song takes a fast tempo, another tempo, I could see the dancers' faces. It's an expression of determination. It's an expression of, I know where I am, where I'm going, the things I need to do.** It's a determined expression. That's how it is. You can see how strongly they're dancing with that determination. The tenderness is gone, but I see her like a ferocious animal. Yes, she wants to do things, with determination.

Afrobeats perceives that the women in this story have made the decision to carry on. She draws this conclusion based on the change from slow to fast music; from the dancers' fragile and pained movements to wild kicks, sprints, and screams; from distant and stoic facial expressions, to their expressions of ferocious determination. Afrobeats describes how, even though the women wish to end their suffering by ending their lives, they find meaning in their harsh circumstances and a reason to carry on, through their love for their children and families. Her words echo Frankl's assertion that meaning comes from commitments that transcend personal interests, to reaching beyond the self, towards love. Afrobeats then shifts her narration of the performance again from the third person to the first person, and begins giving advice to others in this situation, in the form of a command:

> *Cuando nosotras debíamos tomar decisión (...) usted no debería poner esta cara tanto frágil te va a poner mas en piso. Por la cara de decisión, la cara stricta.*
>
> When we must make that decision, you shouldn't put on a fragile expression that will put you down even further. Put on a determined expression.

Seeing her own struggle reflected in the dance performance, Afrobeats views the dance as a way of sending a message to other asylum seeking women, to encourage them to keep going, not to abandon life. She reflects on how different this vision of life is, from when one is first trapped in a situation of violence. Then she acknowledges that maybe not everyone will interpret the performance the same way:

> *Así yo realizo, cual es la expresión, o la historia que yo lo hice. No se si es la misma historia que ella baila. Pero a mi, fue mi interpretación personal. Pienso que es una historia que tanto triste, y tanto al final es muy muy feliz, con mucho suceso. Así es mi visión.*
>
> At least that's how I see it, with the expression, or the story that was mine. I don't know if it's the same story that they're dancing. But for me, **that was my personal interpretation. I think it's a story that is so sad, but in the end it's also a really, really happy story with a lot of success. That's my vision.**

Here, Afrobeats grants that the image and story of suffering she sees in this dance performance, may not be perceived by other audience members. Each audience member's response to a dance performance, or to photography or any form of art, is personal and shaped by prior experience, worldview, and desires. Because Afrobeats had played a role in the creation of the performance, through her participation in the original dance workshop, she relates the experiences shared in that workshop to what she observes in the dancers.

She also touches on the paradoxical nature of what the performance evokes in her. It makes her sad, but also "very, very happy," like the message of Basquiat's work: "I am more than my pain." Afrobeats appears to be projecting a certain optimism into the performance, in reading it as "happy" despite there being no smiles, nor obvious displays of joy in the performance. But perhaps because she believes that happiness and success will be a reality in her "vision" of the future, she recognizes happiness in the movements of the dancers, with whom she identifies. In that way, the performance is a speech act, performing an intention, like Anzalúa's assertion that: "This land was Mexican once, was Indian always, and is. And will be again." The end of the performance, for Afromix, makes her feel happy in the present, because she interprets it as declaring that the future will be so. Accessing joy in the present, through envisioning the future, helps asylum seekers like Afrobeats to carry on when the present is exceedingly difficult

and they want to “abandon everything.” Of course, it’s this very ability to envision a happy future that weaponized waiting obstructs, by keeping people trapped in an eternal present. Public art can bring about a temporary relief from such feelings of hopelessness, by offering a space and time to collectively re envision the future.

CONCLUSION

Unlike at many other humanitarian organizations operating in crisis zones, which decided to prioritize “basic” needs like food and shelter over people’s needs for community and culture, I argued in this chapter that *resiste gozando* offers a temporality to care that is more holistic and healing, by providing asylum seekers with the opportunity to volunteer at cultural events and protests, find meaning through creative self-expression, and feel that they are receiving from and and giving to other asylum seekers, the organization, and the broader community in relationships of reciprocity.

I explored how *resiste gozando* was conceptualized by activists at the shelter, and performed in the public space, by analyzing public protests, a dance performance, and a photo exhibit held in downtown Tijuana. At the time of writing, the photos remain on display on Avenida Revolución. However, within a few weeks of the exhibit’s inauguration, all of the photos of Black protestors were destroyed; their faces torn off or vandalized. Only those photos had to be replaced; the photos of non-Black protestors were left alone, exemplifying the anti-Black racism that exists in the city, and indicating that images that humanize Black asylum seekers and their struggle are still provocative and not well received by some members of the public, a vivid reminder of Sontag’s warning that “photographs of an atrocity may give rise to opposing responses” (13). In the eyes of the activists who organized the exhibit, the exclusive

vandalism of photos of Black asylum seekers was painful, but reinforced for them the necessity of the photo exhibit.

The photographer can never control how their photos will be received, and their photos of violence alone will never be enough on their own to make all of racist society condemn such violence. But as Haitian dancer JD reminds us, showing these images is not just about changing the minds of the perpetrators of violence. It can be about offering a message of solidarity and encouragement, from one Black asylum seeker to another. For JD, he wanted to remind Black Haitians that the fight continues. Similarly, the female asylum seekers who participated in the dance workshop chose the name *"Orgullosa de Ti"* ("Proud of You") for the Dance Conservatory's performance, indicating that the point wasn't merely to raise awareness: it was to send a message to other asylum seeking women that they are strong, and should carry on with *"la cara de decisión,"* (a decided face, or an expression of determination). Asylum seekers who are able to carry on and say "yes to life" in spite of unimaginable pain, are changed through the experience. Subsequently, many have messages and lessons that they want to share with the world, when they are given the platform. In doing so, they communicate messages of encouragement to each other, find pride in self-expression, and contribute to correcting the cognitive injustice of a public discourse that is largely unaware of their suffering and resilience. Ultimately, this chapter found that *resiste gozando* is an effort to provide ways for asylum seekers to engage in understated, everyday resistance to the logics of domination, by healing in community, finding meaning through creative self-expression, communicating the complex and often paradoxical nature of their stories, and performing their 'political joy' and other experiences beyond suffering.

CONCLUSION

Franz Kafka's parable, *Before the Law* (1915), about the 'trial' of negotiating innumerable and interminable bureaucracy in modern society, begins:

> Before the law sits a gatekeeper. To this gatekeeper comes a man from the country who asks to gain entry into the law. But the gatekeeper says that he cannot grant him entry at the moment. The man thinks about it and then asks if he will be allowed to come in later on. "It is possible," says the gatekeeper, "but not now."

This thesis aimed to shed light on the experiences of Black, indigenous, and other racialized asylum seekers who have arrived at the US-Mexico border in recent years, seeking access to the right to apply for asylum as guaranteed by the law. When they arrive, they are told by the gatekeepers, dressed in Customs and Border Patrol uniforms, that the US cannot be granted entry at the moment, even as white Ukrainian asylum seekers are being (relatively) quickly ushered in. If these racialized asylum seekers wait, they are told, they might have a chance. Thousands have consequently been stranded in dangerous Mexican border cities for months or years, living in conditions of extreme precarity, with the hope that the gatekeepers might eventually let them in.

Participants in Melanie Griffith's (2013) study of waiting in immigrant detention centers, and in Haas' (2012) study of asylees waiting on parole in the U.S., experience waiting as a profoundly socially isolating experience. The sense of being stuck or suspended in time separated them from the forward-moving time of other people. Likewise, Kafka's *man from the country*'s subordination to the will of the gatekeeper is "created and re-created through innumerable acts of waiting" (Auyero, 2017: 24), that isolate him not only from the *Law* but also from all the others who also seek it. His eventual death is not just physical but social, as his inability to access legal rights takes a toll on his health and marginalizes him from society. But what if he had not been waiting alone on that stool the whole time, and had been given the

opportunity to *resistir gozando* (resist with joy) in community? If he had been surrounded by other people who shared his experience of protracted waiting, might they have found a bit of light in their collective suffering, through art, music, poetry, and protest?

In comparison with other *spaces of exception* in the borderlands– places where rights guaranteed by the law are suspended in the name of a political emergency (Agamben, 2005) – such as detention centers or makeshift encampments, the migrant shelter Casa de Esperanza is able to offer opportunities for collective creation and protest, which serve to mitigate to some extent the suffering of protracted waiting, and counter logics of state domination. This thesis aimed to explore and understand some of the conditions that allowed for asylum seekers to creatively express their 'everyday resistance' to the power of the state over their minds and bodies.

In Chapter 2, "Why Build a Wall if You Can Make People Wait?" I argued that making asylum seekers wait in Mexico, in such physically and psychologically and torturous conditions (which I call weaponized waiting) has been perceived by asylum seekers and activists as a deliberate strategy by the U.S. government to deter them from making an asylum claim. I showed how the border towns where migrants are stranded in Mexico – where they are subjected to racism, homelessness, kidnappings, and murder – are a hostile terrain that have served a similar purpose to the Sonoran Desert in Jason De Leon's (2015) *hybrid collectif*, with its deadly human and nonhuman actants carrying out the dirty work of the Border Patrol. Examining the testimonies of asylum seekers at a self-organized public forum, I showed how asylum seekers with connections to human rights organizations, expressed resistance to this coercive form of control over their bodies and minds. Contrary to more subtle forms of domination that function through the internalized discipline of subordinate subjects, I argued that

weaponized waiting has created subjects who are neither subordinate nor patient, and who have found ways to resist state power, either by giving up on the asylum process and immigrating "illegally," through their vocal condemnation of the abuse to their human rights.

In Chapter 3, I analyzed how asylum seekers at Casa de Esperanza engaged in a variety of creative practices, which they refer to as their "therapy," to endure the torture of weaponized waiting. I shared the story of an asylum seeker who made music to express the emotions he couldn't put into words, and to "*sanar las heridas,"* (heal his wounds). To show the collective healing of dance, I described a workshop for female asylum seekers in which they learned a Zumba routine, wrote messages to other female asylum seekers, and instructed me on how to translate their written messages into movement. I found that dancing was a way for women to feel "at home" culturally and in their bodies, countering common feelings of homelessness that accompany the experience of weaponized waiting. Finally, I looked at how one asylum seeker wrote poetry as an alternative take on the 'talking cure,' in which she found ways to verbalize and work through traumatic memories that were surfacing in her dreams, causing her insomnia and nightmares.

In Chapter 4, I analyzed the concept of *resiste gozando*, an effort by Casa de Esperanza activists to convert a variety of asylum seekers' creative practices into a small-scale political project that challenges logics of state power by promoting feelings, experiences, and representations beyond suffering. I argued that *resiste gozando* challenges Malsow's Hierarchy of Needs, which is commonly applied in humanitarian organizations. Rather than prioritizing some needs over others, I showed how Casa de Esperanza attempted to care for asylum seekers' rights, dignity, culture, and community, at the same time as they attended to their "basic" needs like food and shelter. In offering opportunities for participation in arts and culture, the shelter

encouraged self-transcendence in asylum seekers, who found meaning in their suffering through their empathy, "humanitarian hearts," and ability to help others in need. I described these complex and often positive feelings that asylum seekers experienced through their volunteerism and collective creation as "political emotions," which were cultivated by the shetler as a strategy to undermine the isolating and dehumanizing effects of weaponized waiting.

Analyzing a panel discussion with activists at Casa de Esperanza about *resiste gozando*, I identified four characteristics of the activities that define the political project: they are radical, collective, embodied, and contain paradoxes. Asylum seekers' creation of art in oppressive conditions, had the effect of subverting and expressing insubordination to the negative embodied effects of power. Furthermore, their creations complicated the often simplistic media portrayals of asylum seekers as suffering victims.

I then explored how asylum seekers created alternative and nuanced self-representations, through their participation in a public photo exhibit, protest, and dance performance. I showed how *resiste gozando* provided asylum seekers a platform to collectively process and condemn their experiences of violence, support each other, and share their knowledge about meaning-making and resilience in the face of extreme suffering. Ultimately, I argued that having the chance to represent the complexity of their own plight, was important not only for their own healing, but for all of ours.

My study took place at Casa de Esperanza shelter in Tijuana, from November 2019-April 2022. I started my field work during the height of President Trump's era of anti-asylum policies. I didn't expect that a year and a half into President Biden's presidency, the policies that led to weaponized waiting would still be in place. Although Title 42 is coming to a close, the Biden

administration has expanded MPP, meaning that racialized asylum seekers will continue to be subjected to physical and psychological torture at the border, where dangerous Mexican cities are being used as part of the U.S. government's border apparatus. The normalization of such catastrophic policies, across party lines, is deeply troublesome. Future studies will be necessary to continue to document the ongoing effects (and hopefully, eventually, the aftermath), and forms of everyday resistance to these policies. Research is especially needed in other, less-resourced border cities, where access to shelters and humanitarian organizations is even more limited. Shelters like Casa de Esperanza, can be grounds for important relationships, resources, platforms for self-expression, and life-saving support to asylum seekers who find themselves deep inside the depressive, dark tunnel of weaponized waiting. We should ask: what other creative strategies of 'everyday resistance' are asylum seekers using to endure weaponized waiting? What other forms and variations might there be, of *resiste gozando*? Although it's important to support more conventional forms of political expression, such as the public forum described in Chapter 2, due to the traumatic and oppressive circumstances of being an asylum seeker, not everyone is eager to express their political dissent in such a literal way. The creative practices encouraged by *Resiste Gozando* are relatively accessible and can be a way of expressing low-profile, everyday resistance. Furthermore, they have healing and transformative potential not only for the artists, but for the viewership as well. To different degrees, we are all experiencing hard times right now, and furious dancing (whether doing or watching it), is a joyously radical, time-tested remedy.

Casa de Esperanza, being a cultural organization in addition to a shelter, and with many artists serving as volunteers and on staff, is in a unique position to support and convert asylum seekers' creative practices into a political project of resistance. Other organizations that work with asylum seekers experiencing the effects of state power through waiting, can learn from this

example, by developing or expanding initiatives to encourage dance, music, poetry, and other forms of art, as a means for resistance, when possible. However, many such organizations do not have the resources to replicate *resiste gozando*. In those cases, they can still learn from Casa de Esperanza's model by being attentive to, providing a platform for, and mobilizing around, the unique strategies of everyday resistance and methods for accessing political joy which asylum seekers use to endure weaponized waiting.

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