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Queer mobilities and the work of messy survival

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Abstract

Within an emerging body of work on queer mobilities, a marked interest in sexuality and migration/asylum has left ample room to consider the complex experience of everyday mobility and displacement. In addition, despite its centrality to survival and its imbrication with mobility, work has been given little attention in queer migration and trans scholarship. Based on detailed narratives created over a number of years with two Central American trans women as they continue to move, the paper explores the ways in which material and social realities of work shape and are shaped by marginal queer(ed) mobility. It proposes the idea of messy survival to explore the complex navigation of marginal existence, and uses this to explore the intersections between work, mobility and trans subjectivity, arguing that this framework is a useful means of engaging with the gap between how trans, mobile lives are written, and how they are lived.

Key words: Queer, mobility, trans, marginality, work, Central America

Introduction

In August 2016, I get an anguished call from Daniela:[2] "Are you ok?" I ask her; "*Ay*, I'm here, all beaten up" she replies, "I don't know what to do anymore; I'm back in Mexico City again but I can't bear it any longer. I can't stand having to pay to work the streets, and that they just do whatever they want to me". Daniela's story – of how she got to be where she (still) is now since finding herself on the streets of San Pedro Sula at the age of 14, of the constant, exhausting labour of survival that continues to characterise her life – is a messy one. In one sense, hers is the story of a Honduran trans refugee in Mexico, but migration itself is not the focus here. For the displaced, the journey often does not end with physical arrival at the destination (if indeed such a place exists), and sometimes it does not end at all (BenEzer and Zetter, 2015). Moreover, many aspects of Daniela's personhood and experience would be "evened out" (Valentine, 2003) were her story to be told through a linear trans migration narrative.

Based on longitudinal "mobile" ethnographic research carried out since 2014, the paper explores the stories of two Central American trans women – Brenda and Daniela – as they moved away from the Mexico-Guatemala border where we first met, and asks: How have Brenda and Daniela had to navigate their lives to make a living and survive? And what can this tell us about (queered) trans mobilities more broadly? Through their stories, the paper seeks to explore the everyday labour of queered, marginal survival, and within this, the ways in which the material and social realities of work intersect with mobility and trans subjectivity. I argue that this intersection culminates in what I have termed "messy survival". This is a concept which aims to present an alternative to linear, sanitized

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queer migration narratives by engaging with the nuts and bolts of (queer, marginal) mobility *as* a kind of survival, and one which is inherently contradictory, disorderly and uncertain. Messy survival takes places where the affective, material, spatial and political intertwine and collide in the dynamic yet harmful margins. The following sections flesh out this idea before exploring the stories of Brenda and Daniela.

From queer migration to messy survival

The burgeoning field of queer migration studies continues to fuel rich debate over how to best represent and understand mobile trans lives. Building on important early work disrupting the heteronormativity of migration studies (e.g. Luibhéid, 2008; Cantú, 2009; Fortier, 2001; Gorman-Murray, 2007), the emerging (decolonial) scholarship from Latin America on the symbolic, corporal and biopolitical aspects of particularly trans migration (Lucero Rojas, 2020; Zarco Ortiz and Chacón Reynosa, 2020) challenges queer liberal scholarship. New political possibilities have been opened up here through critical engagement with the necropolitical lens in relation to queer mobility and political economy, for example exploring the interplay between mobility, trans bodies and circuits of capital (Aizura, 2014; Vartabedian, 2018). Yet, there is much scope to bring critiques pointing to the ways the abstraction of queer (trans) subjects "evacuat[e] the fleshy materiality of real life" (March, 2021: 461) to bear on queer mobilities scholarship. Namaste's (2000: 16) concern over trans subjects becoming "rhetorical figures" wherein "the voices, struggles and joys of real transgendered people in the everyday social world are noticeably absent" still resonates. First, then, the questions posed,the methods used, and the concept of "messy survival" developed here all stem from a desire to engage with the gap between how trans (mobile) lives are written, and how they are lived. This concern for the everyday also extends to how queer mobility itself is understood. A long-standing concern with the more abstract diasporic queer subject (e.g. Patton and Sánchez-Eppler, 2000), and widespread interest in the political dimensions of queer mobility (migration and asylum) (e.g. Josephson, 2015; Romero and Huerta, 2019), have left the complex experience of everyday queer mobility and displacement largely unexplored.

Furthermore, and relatedly, despite its importance for survival and its imbrication with mobility, work has been given surprisingly little attention in both queer migration and trans scholarship. Following emerging work on the queering of political economy (Lewis and Irving, 2017) and of sexual economies (Smith, 2015; Mai, 2018), the paper responds to a need for scholarship that centres trans work as *labour*, and that roots work (including sex work) in the context of everyday, marginal survival. In this sense, while there is important emerging critical scholarship on migrant trans sex workers (for example, Mai, 2018; Maldonado Macedo, 2020), the absence of research on trans work as labour in a broader sense means to an extent that the transsexualization of sex work (Prada et al., 2012) is reinforced, and that sex work is perpetuated as the analytical lens through which trans labour is viewed. Here I am interested in putting sex work into broader perspective within the context of trans working lives, and in turn to shed light on the material realities of making a "queer" living.

That messy survival is enacted in the margins is not incidental. On the contrary, if marginality is seen not as isolation or exclusion from the centre, but rather as the meeting of centre and periphery, then the margins are a productive zone of contact (indeed, might the structure of all things not be seen as most meaningful, and powerful, at their edges, in encounter with the other?). This contact, when imbued with power and scale, becomes a productive friction (see Tsing, 2005): dynamic, harmful, transformative. In this way, the margins may be seen as sites of negotiation and navigation, of engagement and resistance (hooks, 1981). Through a queer lens, such an understanding of the margins

brings to mind the "negotiations we make in seeking to fashion our existences" (Romesburg, 2012: 120), and it underpins the realities of messy survival.

This notion of navigation also informs how marginal mobilities are understood here, resonating strongly with Rogaly's (2015) observation that there is no hierarchy in experiences of spatial mobility: a short-distance move or a set of everyday mobilities might be as meaningful (and/or harmful) to an individual as an international journey. Moreover, from a critical mobilities perspective, migrant mobility may be framed as on-going, complex, inherently unjust, and as much to do with fixity and stasis as flows and movement (e.g. Hannam et al., 2006). In this sense, a less normative approach to mobility is useful in disrupting conventional migration and asylum narratives and framing mobility "as neither a privilege nor a predicament, but an engagement and entanglement with the lived environment that influences our outlooks and maneuverings" (Bjarnesen and Vigh, 2016:13). Vigh's (2006:14) concept of social navigation as "the tactical movement of agents within a moving element", as "motion within motion" speaks eloquently to the realities of marginal mobility at different scales. This not only evokes the idea of the constant flux of displacement, but also – echoing the discussion of marginality above – frames agency in a more nuanced way, as a kind of spatial-temporal assemblage. In this way, movement *as navigation* may be just as messy as the celebrated messiness of the subjects of queer theory (Love, 2016). An important part of this messiness is certainly temporal, in terms of acute uncertainty for those on the move, "that inspires action as much as it constrains it" (Bjarnesen, 2009: 131), and the unpredictability of migration governance (Griffiths, 2014). But beyond this, an explicitly queer, trans framing is needed here.

Useful in this regard is first, Romesburg's (2012) historical account of "the magnetic effects of innovative agency and immanent foreclosure" (p.119) in the life of comic and female impersonator Rae Bourbon's and the mobilities they pursued "to belong meaningfully in the world" (p.121). The account sheds light on "how trans moves us" in both spatial and affective ways, noting that "those striving to produce livable lives beyond the confines of heteronormative fusions of sex/gender/sexuality congruence need all the tools they can deploy" (p.120). Second, making the case for queer (migrant) lives to be read as "messy", Manalansan (2014: 99) finds that "mess provides a vibrant analytical frame and a visceral phenomenological grip on the exigencies of marginalized queers — especially those who do not occupy the valorized homonormative spaces of the contemporary West." Moving away from "necropolitical/necrophilic accounts" to focus on the "aliveness" of these [working class immigrant] queers" (*ibid*: 100), mess is seen not as limited to queer bodies, objects, and desires, but also – significantly – as related to processes, behaviours, and situations. In line with the understanding of margins outlined above, aliveness may also be read as radical survival: as resistance which ruptures necropolitical orders of death and violence, through practices of survival which allow hope for the future to also stay alive (Lucero Rojas, 2020). In turn, then, here the idea of *messy survival* speaks to the unexpected, contradictory, disorderly and uncertain ways of "living on" (Perl, 2019) in the face of profoundly harmful injustice. It echoes the ways in which, as Romesburg (2012: 120) notes, quality of life in part "gets achieved through demanding, by the practice of our own messy lives, something more", and specifically uses this framework to explore the intersections between work, mobility and trans subjectivity.

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The research context

The southern border of Mexico forms part of a complex and historic border and migration system (see Castillo and Toussaint, 2015), with local and regional dynamics inexorably bound up with broader processes of neoliberalisation and associated precarisation, and a long history of geopolitical struggles. In recent decades, some of the most significant social processes in the region comprising southern Mexico and northern Central America (El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras) have revolved around violence and mobility, first in relation to widespread displacement resulting from (US-backed) armed conflicts which profoundly affected the north of Central America in the 1980s and early 1990s, and subsequently relating to escalating post-conflict social violence, and deepening political and economic instability (see Sandoval, 2015; Coraza de los Santos and Arriola Vega, 2017). This complex panorama has been compounded by the heightened securitization of northwards migration in the last two decades, meaning that while people have a greater need than ever to move in order to survive, it is increasingly difficult for them to do so. This increase in forced displacement in the region has brought the issue of asylum to the fore, yet with its commission for refugees vastly underfunded, and under extreme pressure from the US to detain and deport migrants, the border and migration regime in Mexico is, strategically, extremely hostile.

In the midst of this continuing social upheaval, there has been increasing concern over an upsurge in forced displacement among gender and sexually diverse (GSD)[3] groups from Central America (and also, it should be said, from Mexico) (e.g. Lewis, 2012; Lucero Rojas, 2020; Romero and Huerta, 2019). This displacement is linked to a complicated navigation not only of the economic and social marginalisation, political instability, and rampant organised violence described, but of terrains shaped profoundly and violently by a deeply cisheteropatriarchal social order (see Lucero Rojas, 2020). A not widely commented, but nevertheless significant, aspect of the observed increase in GSD displacement in the region is related to a violent backlash against emerging political activism and growing social visibility of particularly trans women's groups, especially in El Salvador.[4] This collective organization is an important, radical and perilous claim to meaningful trans survival, and is tied up in complex ways with mobility.

Queer(ing) methods

Gaining insights into how queer mobility is lived over time and space raises interesting methodological questions and, I would argue, calls for some disruption. Here, that took the form first of travelling *with* (over time), through in-depth longitudinal work, something that is surprisingly rare in migration studies; with some notable exceptions (e.g. Nunn *et al*, 2017; Punch 2012; Ryan and D'Angelo, 2018), "snapshot" studies still dominate (Nunn *et al*, 2017). The second aspect of

[3] In this article, I use the term queer as a deconstructive practice (Hunt and Holmes, 2015), and not to describe those people whose narratives are presented. The term queer is not used by them or by activists in general in the region. While there is quite some variation in terms used in different countries in Latin America, the general collective terms used most often in Mexico and Central America are LGBTTTI, and "*diversidad sexual*" (sexual diversity), so I mirror the use of the latter and employ the non-essentialist term "Gender and Sexual Diversity/Gender and Sexually Diverse (GSD) here.

[4] It should be noted that Mexico recognises persecution for reasons of gender as grounds for the recognition of refugee status, which has been invoked to inform important decisions concerning GSD asylum applicants (UNHCR, 2014), most directly in the case of trans applicants, although a lack of clarity in this legislation make related decisions especially arbitrary (see Almendra and Quiñones, 2021).

disruption concerned what may be called the "scripts of self" that migrants – and especially queer migrants – must develop to constantly explain themselves in interviews with institutions, to stand a chance of becoming intelligible and credible (for example Parkinson, 2019; Shuman and Bohmer, 2014; McKinnon, 2009). Conscious of the weight of these scripts in shaping wider social interactions and obscuring the personhood of those who become migrants, I avoided explicitly broaching migration and gender/sexual identity in my own interactions, as a way of disrupting these scripts in some way, and inviting alternative, person-centred narratives to emerge. I suggest that this queering of encounters over time opens up space for new stories and relationships to be created.

The relationships which enabled this work began in Tapachula, a town on the Mexico-Guatemala border, and an important regional hub for migrants crossing into Mexico by land. Among the people I have met through many encounters in the "field" were eight Central American trans women with whom I would end up developing long-term research relationships, and two of whom are the focus here. I first met Daniela back in 2014 when she was staying at a migrant shelter in Tapachula, which I was visiting once a week. We saw each other regularly through the ups and downs of her time in Tapachula over the coming months, but it was not until she had moved away to Mexico City that we sat down, over the phone, to more intentionally piece together her story up to that point. We have kept in touch since then. I met Brenda in the summer of 2016, shortly after she arrived in Tapachula from El Salvador, through Yasmin, another long-term collaborator. I saw Brenda informally a few times before one afternoon in November of that year, when she invited me to come over to where she was staying to interview her. We spent many hours chatting, and were joined later on by her then-partner Carlos. We saw each other a few more times before she left Tapachula quite soon after that, and stayed in regular contact since then. Brenda has been particularly proactive in how she engages with the research, for example unexpectedly sending me films of herself to use in my presentations,[5] and putting me in touch with people she thinks may be of interest. In personal terms, I get the sense that she sees this process as a kind of testament to her journey, and has made it part of her future hope in terms of what she aims to be able to "report back" in the next installment.

This work is inseparable from these affective, intimate (research) relationships which could not be easily accommodated within conventional ethical frameworks. Long a central concern of feminist research practice, intimacy in the research encounter has remained an ethically thorny and complex goal, largely since it pushes against hegemonic ethical norms (of distance and objectivity), while these structures nonetheless remain intact. The queering of ethics opens up new possibilities in this regard: intimate listening, as the "compassionate queering of borders between self and other" (Heckert, 2010: 51), becomes method *through* a new queer ethics, no longer limiting the researcher's ability to embed themselves within the complex intimacies of human relations, but rather – after Gibson-Graham (1999, in Detamore, 2010, 173) – plotting out the path to a new "rich and prolific disarray" (see also Taylor, 2016).

Especially given their long-term nature, I struggle to describe these relationships of on-going attachments and obligations using conventional research vocabulary (respondent, participant), and find much resonance in Detamore's (2010:178) suggestion that what emerges is "something

[5] She set clear boundaries in terms of how that material may be used, not wishing it to be in the public domain given her pending asylum hearing, but expressly wanted her own telling to be heard ("*what better than for them to hear it from me*"). It forms part of the material presented here.

unnameable and uniquely special" that "looks much more like kinship." It is a complicated and shifting ethical and emotional assemblage of expectations, responsibilities, vulnerabilities, privileges, anxieties, that at once pushes past the distinction between researcher and researched (for example Heckert, 2010), while also grounding critical research praxis in the material and emotional nuts and bolts of the everyday. To reflect in a general sense on my position as a white, British, queer, cis-gender, female, academic resident in Mexico, would not resonate with this practice, since it would assume that these positions mapped evenly and steadily onto my research encounters. Thus, as Taylor (2016) posits, reflexivity becomes less introspectively focused on the self-positioning and experience of the researcher, and more something which is enacted though on-going practice, a kind of "politics of intimacy" (Detamore, 2010). In this way, the on-going, multiple ethical issues that emerge are continually interrogated through the research itself, often in open dialogue and reflection.

Queer lives and messy survival through Mexico

The material presented is a window onto numerous interactions over many years, taken from face-to-face and phone/skype conversations, and text and voice messages via Whatsapp or Facebook messenger.[6] The use of longer narratives aims to avoid obscuring the tellers' personhood by focusing on certain (trans/migrant/refugee) identities (Innes, 2016), and also to frame mobility and queerness not as exceptional in themselves, but rather as meaningful through their relation to past-present-future paths of survival. The stories are inevitably truncated, first in their original (uniquely produced) telling, and second, through the editing process required to produce a reasonably coherent, short text from a vast amount of material. This re-telling is thus inevitably lacking; it shows only a small part of the personhood the narrative method seeks to reveal, and is hampered by academic convention and limits to my own "linguistic dexterity" (Lutz 2017: 185).

Brenda

In conversation in November 2016 we talk about her early life and what brought her to Mexico. Born in San Salvador in 1984, Brenda lived through protracted family conflicts and abuse from a young age, linked to an unstable family environment and her sexuality and gender expression. When she was 12, she met a trans sex worker, and began to go out with her to work on the streets. Going to work as a woman, "was the first time that I looked in the mirror and saw *me"*. It was an important time for her, but it was also a precarious, violent life. In 2011 she was brutally attacked by four men posing as clients; stabbed five times, she was lucky to survive. She became withdrawn, leaving the partner she had set up home with, struggling with the trauma of the attack and drug dependency. She worked on the streets less and less, and decided to try and change her way life, cutting her hair and dressing as a man: "I tried to stop being trans, because back then in El Salvador, if you were trans, you were a hooker."

It was around this time that she met a woman who was an Evangelical Christian, who invited her to live with her family on condition she continued to live as a man. "You should have seen how I lived! I started to feel comfortable, because someone cared about me". She lived with them for three years,

[6] All conversations and communications were in Spanish, the translation to English is my own. I do not use any information that was not shared with me directly (for example facebook posts), and I regularly check in with them about personal communications forming part of their stories I share.

all the while trying to conform to their gender expectations. But she found it increasingly hard and in June 2016 she left to live on her own.

While living with that family she had made a living selling "*ofertas*" – little bags of school supplies – together with other church members, and she tried to continue as a vendor after leaving. But she was also transitioning back to living as a woman, and began to have problems with one of the other vendors whose abuse eventually culminated in him making threats on her life, and trying to hunt her down. She moved first to a different neighbourhood, and then to another municipality, but she did not feel any safer and so decided to flee to Mexico, following in the path of many of her friends:

> "I'd never dreamt of leaving my country, because in spite of being stabbed, and my mum being killed and everything, I used to say that one day, one day something good will happen to me, I don't know what, but I had that hope. But really, with how things are there now, I lost that hope… I told myself I'd be better looking somewhere else."

Arriving in Tapachula, she applies for asylum. Determined to get out of sex work, with support from UNHCR to pay her rent,[7] she is able to make a living as a street vendor. Starting with just one small box of chewing gum, she reinvests all that she can, saving enough to buy a small vending tray to sell a wider range of products. She is left with about 150 pesos a day (approximately 9 US dollars), enough to cover her basic living costs.

Charismatic and astute, she is adept at handling encounters with other vendors, with the police who occasionally harass her, and deflecting offers from the Central American gangs – who are increasingly trying to control the local sex trade on the Mexican side of the border – of reduced 'rent' to return to sex work. Overall, she feels good about how things are going:

> "Honestly, coming here has been pretty great, because here I broke free […]. Nobody knows me, I'm just another trans on the road, and I love that. […] It's an escape […] I mean, they even see me around here with a husband! [*laughs*] I started to move around freely, well you've seen that when I came here, almost straight away I went and bought my chewing gum, cigarettes, and started to sell."

Talking about all the times she had moved, I ask her what she thought about it all looking back:

> "Unstable, very unstable but I know that … will come to an end because really I've done it for my own safety. Because in El Salvador, if you stay still in one place there, they kill you […] I hope I find that little place where I can feel free, free in that sense. Economically, well if I have to sleep in a little room on a mat, I wouldn't care as long as I had that emotional stability."

Years later she would say that if it weren't for the increasing presence of Central American gangs in Tapachula she may have stayed: "Honestly, I felt accepted there."

[7] At that time, the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Tapachula was providing monthly support to asylum applicants considered to be from vulnerable groups – which commonly included families and GSD applicants – consisting of 500 pesos (approximately 29 US dollars) towards rent and 200 pesos of food vouchers (personal communication). Rent of a space in the most basic room would cost from around 1,000 pesos a month.

After weighing up the possibility of moving to another city in central or northern Mexico, in the end in December 2016, after talking to other friends who had done the same, she decides to head to the US to seek asylum, with Carlos, the partner she had met in Tapachula. However, when they get to the border "They said that they weren't offering asylum anymore, because of the change of President," so they jump the wall, are apprehended by border agents, and are sent to different detention centres. In March 2017, after three months in detention, she is released with an electronic tag on her ankle: "you should just see how horrible it is". She has talked on a few occasions and in some detail about the harrowing experience of being detained in the US: "I think that's been one of the most disturbing things that's ever happened to me."

She manages to get out with the support of a group of students who visit the detention centre to help get those at risk of deportation released. This period is hard for her; in May that year she says: "Honestly, things aren't what people think, everything's hard. Most of my friends have had to turn to sex work because of a lack of money. The thing is, everything is so expensive. If I have to go back to Mexico, I will." But things start to pick up; she is living with some of the students who had helped her, and by June she is working at a local taco stand and has found a lawyer to help with her asylum case. It is an optimistic time: "it's much better here. Not only do people respect my identity, but I've also got the opportunity to work. I really like it being here. I'm sure I'll grow old fine here. I'm doing well, I'm really happy." She has moved in with Carlos – who has already been granted asylum – in a city a couple of hours outside Los Angeles,[8] and has found steady work in a restaurant. Work in that city is easy to come by: "You just go to the employment agency with a dodgy work permit, and two or three days later they're hiring you, forty hours a week."

However, by February 2018, things have taken a turn for the worse. She has split up with Carlos, who then threatened to report her to the authorities for working without a permit, meaning she had to leave her job. She thought seriously about returning to Mexico:

> "Well the hard thing here is work, and seeing as I don't have a proper work permit… I was thinking about going back [to Mexico], it would have been a bit easier there, […] at least I could just grab my little tray of chewing gum and cigarettes, and start selling. Nobody bothered me, it was fine. […] But then I thought that the problem in Mexico is that there will always be crime and violence. And the good thing about here is that at least you can go where you want, no problem, without the risk of getting killed […] But I really did think about going back. I think partly because of my depression after I separated from Carlos, too. But no, it's better to face up to things here, I'm going to wait for my papers. My bad decisions are the problem, but I'm getting on with things now, moving forward, we'll see what I decide to do."

Soon after that, she has to move to a different city closer to Los Angeles in order to keep receiving legal support. When we catch up later that year, she has found it impossible to find work there, explaining:

> "I've got my work permit now, so it's not because of my papers; discrimination, even less so!! I wish they *would* discriminate against me so I could report them and maybe get something good in return! [*laughs*] No, the problem is that the area where I live is overrun with Latinos, lots of people working and so you can only get a few hours a week."

[8] Brenda is still now waiting for her asylum case to be heard, four years later.

Under pressure to cover living costs, "I had to go back to sex work."

Two years later in April 2020, she is still in the same situation. She thinks again about going back to Mexico:

> "at least there … I didn't have to do it [sex work]. [Now] every time I've wanted to get out of it, go and work in something else, something or other has got in the way. […] I'm going to see what I can do about it though, because although I don't really mind doing it, *oh* it does bore me! And it stresses me out, because of the police."

Later that year she gets work in a florist for a couple of months, but when we speak in November she is back to sex work. She is working as little as possible to try and avoid any more problems with the police: "I just work to make what I need, you see it's illegal here, I got arrested actually not long ago."

Despite now having a work permit, "if you don't have contacts, that permit isn't much good to you […] But I won't give up. I'm learning that I'm not a victim, but a survivor, and just as I survived all the times they have tried to kill me, I will survive this too." She hears about friends who have recently been granted asylum in Canada and Ireland, and thinks about trying for that herself, but in the end reflects: "I'm almost forty now, so with that problem of being charged with prostitution, instead of fleeing, I decided to stay and face up to reality, deal with any situation that comes my way." Being arrested may affect her asylum claim, but "it doesn't bother me, because after it happened I realised that if I hadn't been arrested, maybe I would never have thought about trying to change my lifestyle again. The truth is, I think I'd got used to it." Her situation with respect to sex work is now more an inertia that she would like to shake, than an imminent danger she is trying to escape. This fundamental security – echoing the emotional security she spoke of before leaving Mexico – shifts her perspective, and she now seems more relaxed about the future:

> "It's hard, but I mean, not everyone comes here to be a prostitute, a lot of people don't have a work permit, but there they are fighting, so it's going to be the same for me as it is for them, but I feel happy, really. Because I've been on the streets working for a couple of years now, and in El Salvador I wouldn't have lasted that long. So I'm not worrying, I'm going to give it my best, I'm going to get on, and I'm going to tell you my story of success!!"

Daniela

I met Daniela in 2014, a year after she had arrived in Tapachula. She had recently been granted asylum in Mexico, and was staying at a migrant shelter on the outskirts of the city. Of her early life in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, she told me how having been kicked out of home at the age of 14, she started to make a living through sex work: "On the street I met a gay guy who opened the doors of his house to me and told me: 'Look, I survive like this', and he taught me about prostitution." She kept up with school at the same time, hoping to get another job "I never stopped studying […] but in Honduras there is no decent work even for gays, much less for trans." Things became more complicated as she began to witness firsthand a shift in the relationship between the street gangs (or *maras*) and trans sex workers in that city: "Before, they left us alone; there was a rule that a *marero* couldn't go with a trans, both would be killed. But then they started to come after us. And the first trans they recruited, was me: "It was 'Yes' or 'Yes', there is no 'No'."

She was made leader of the sex workers in her area, and lived an extremely violent life, constantly targeted and risking her safety to protect the others, while getting increasingly drawn into the gang. Without warning, a car would arrive to take her to the gang leader, "He did anything he wanted to me, drugged me, beat me, fucked me, spat on me: he did whatever he wanted to me". That went on for three years, until she decided she had to get out. Once when she was with him he fell asleep, and seeing her chance, "all beaten up", she grabbed 3500 lempiras[9] from his wallet, and called "her girls" who helped her escape, "and I ran, ran away."

She went to Guatemala City, where she stayed for a couple of months, until the gang caught up with her ("They were right there in front of me! But they didn't recognize me with the wig on"), and she fled to Mexico. Planning at that point to go on to the US, she was detained in southern Mexico. After a complicated and at times violent series of formal and informal detentions, she sought and was granted asylum.

We meet at the migrant shelter she had been staying at. Soon after arriving there, she had been asked to go to the local university to sell the doughnuts they made in their bakery to raise funds. She turns out to be a natural, later recalling: "I ended up being the star vendor!! [*laughs*] I was selling three hundred and fifty doughnuts for them every day!" But when she finds out that she was meant to be getting one peso for each one she sold, she refuses to sell any more, and having also refused the (religious) shelter director's offer of a house for her to stay in if she agreed to cut her hair and dress as a man, she is asked to leave and finds herself suddenly on the street.

After helping her sort out emergency accommodation, I put her in touch with a local NGO. The director finds her somewhere makeshift to stay, she begins volunteering at the organisation, and receives basic living support from UNHCR. It is a promising time, and she begins seting up life in Tapachula. It means a lot to have her own space and social recognition: "I live really well here, I mean, it's just a store room, but I live so well here! […] And I get on really well with my neighbours, they give me food, they open the doors of their homes to me and everything." That continues for nine months, until a conflict with a coworker comes to a head and she has to leave. From there, she meets the owner of a bar in the red light district, and she goes to work for her: "That's when the problems started with the other trans. I wasn't working as a prostitute, I was waiting tables, but they didn't like seeing me there." One day, one of them stabs her with a broken bottle; UNHCR steps in, and proposes sending her to Mexico City: "They say 'don't worry, there's a support network there waiting for you.' Perfect! I'm happy, supposedly I was going to have all these opportunities to work and to study, they tell me that people are more open minded."

Things do not work out there as she hoped:

> "They offered me so, so many ridiculous things, they filled my head with so many stupid ideas. I got on the bus with so much hope. […] There never was that support network! There was never anything at all! They were going to take me to a better life? It was a sham! […] And so they come and tell me that I have to understand that I'm the first trans to have been transferred from Tapachula to Mexico City."

Unable to get a foothold, and without the institutional help she was promised, she has to return to sex work "in order to get by on my own:"

[9] Then about 175 US dollars.

> "But I don't want to have the same life as in Honduras – prostitution, drugs, *no no no*! I don't want that life for me. My goal was to work, to come and work with dignity, get on in society, be accepted. That was my goal. To bring my family […]. But they clip my wings, again and again and again. Look at me now, what good did it do me leaving my country?"

After a few months, she is able to get a job through UNHCR in a restaurant in a neighbouring city, but is made redundant after a few months and has to return to Mexico City. She then tries to get to the US border with one of her clients. In a voice message during that trip she says: "I'm still with this guy, *oh* but he's abusing me constantly, I don't know, but I guess that's the price for getting there, right?" In the end she decides the abuse isn't worth it and abandons the journey. Later that year, 2016, she tries to relocate to the northern city of Monterrey, but violent clashes with local sex workers make it impossible for her to work there.

She has been back in Mexico City since then, and is in sporadic contact for the next couple of years, particularly in moments of exasperation after incidents of violence or eviction. When the city locks down in May 2020 because of the COVID pandemic, she finds a place in a shelter that had opened for trans sex workers. She stays there for six months, and manages to finish her high school diploma, but has to leave once the support ends.

She now feels trapped in the city. At the end of 2020 she remarks: "I swear to you, I regret, I regret a thousand times having left Tapachula. Remember how there I never had to sell myself? I didn't even drink alcohol. Things were different."

She reflects on the pressures of her daily life:

> "Just to be able to work, I have to pay the weekly [extorsion]. For five years now I've been paying just to be able to stand on a corner. […] If I don't pay it, I can't go out to work. …. I have to put up with it, and see what I can do, how I can move forward from this […]. If I don't work, the next day I don't eat. Plus the payment for my room… I live day to day. […] I pay the [extorsion] from what I earn on Friday and Saturday, and from Sunday to Thursday, I pay everything else, food, room, and when I have to get make up, clothes for work."

Yet she also welcomes the relative stability she has managed to build: "where I live, nobody bothers me; I've got my stove, my fan, wardrobe, my little speakers and a dvd player. I'm getting there, bit by bit. I've not had it as bad as some of the other girls who left the shelter [after lockdown], one of them sleeps in a little park downtown now."

She applied for a GSD relocation scheme run by UNHCR, but was rejected: "supposedly because I've been [in Mexico] more than seven years. I asked them why? If [like them] I'm trans, and a permanent resident![10] I can't stand being here anymore! My friends who were also [refugees] here, are now in the US or Canada."

Often frustrated in the face of this persistent and arbitrary adversity, she remains resilient: "Well I decided to come here, and now I'm living with the consequences. But well, these are the situations and obstacles, they're the slip-ups that you need to know how to overcome, and there will be something I can learn from all this."

[10] The migration status given to refugees in Mexico, and a condition for qualifying for the relocation scheme.

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Making a living through messy survival

These stories can be read in different ways, but here I draw out some points from what they say about making a living, getting by, *living on* (the work of survival) in relation to three interrelated aspects of the messy survival: disruptive migration/mobility narratives, hyper-precarisation/transsexualisation, and temporality.

For both Brenda and Daniela, leaving their home countries was an almost unintentional culmination of complex, damaging circumstances they had spent long years navigating. While there was no material change in Daniela's situation in Honduras, her subjective experience shifted in such a way that her life become suddenly intolerable. Her sudden fleeing, initially to Guatemala, was not in response to a particular threat, but rather it was an opportunistic escape from a present – and likely short – future of hardship and violence. So while it came about suddenly, it was an action immersed in a long past, and rooted in a notional future: her "destination" at that time was symbolic, for a life, a chance, somewhere else. Brenda had consistently tried to find ways to deal with things in the hope she could defy the odds and make things work in El Salvador, that something better was around the corner. Making her living there involved constant tradeoffs: *I can stay in San Salvador if I can get less dangerous work, I can get that work as long as I present myself as a man; I can be trans and work as a vendor as long as I keep moving house*. Brenda's overriding response to adversity has been to stand her ground (a key part of her narrative is "facing up" to things), indeed she only left El Salvador when her life was directly threatened. The point here is that their migration is only relevant as another step in their complicated survival: certainly significant in opening up new possibilities, but raising new scenarios and challenges to navigate. Their mobility brings myriad material and emotional costs and paybacks.

Their mobility also took some unexpected turns. Tapachula is a liminal border space, 'southernised' as part of Mexico relative to the US and Canada to the north, and also at a national scale relative to the centre and north of Mexico. It is somewhere that is widely understood as a risky place for migrants in general, and GSD migrants in particular (recall UNHCR sending Daniela to the more "liberal" Mexico City for her "protection"). But as it turns out, for Brenda and Daniela it was somewhere that new possibilities unexpectedly came together. They both found it relatively easy to negotiate that small town's institutional landscape, they found freedom and safety in anonymity there, and some political capital and practical leverage in being trans. The informality of the space was at times dangerous, and possibilities for prospering were limited, but that same informality opened up new possibilities of a more *transformative* survival: a new social recognition and vindication as trans women making a living outside sex work. It was a fleeting sensation and possibility that they both still think about now, years later; a feeling – perhaps more than the place itself – they wish to go back to. In moving to their "liberal" norths since then, ironically they have both ended up having to rely again on sex work to survive. This upending of tidy, liberal queer migration narratives of a northward path to liberation, perhaps speaks to Wright's (2018: 106) hope that a transformational migration and queer politics can emerge, which "will necessitate a shift from a liberal politics of national inclusion to a dynamic theoretical-political framework capable of mapping the ever-increasing spatial sites at which borders are made and contested, and at which illegality and migrant precarity are challenged."

Although sex work has been central to their livelihoods over the years, Brenda and Daniela notably do not identify as sex workers, and both have a complicated and relationship with it (see also Kallock,

2018). Their stories are marked by what this work has cost them emotionally and physically, by an on-going struggle to manoeuvre their way out of dependence on it, and also by the kinds of survival it has allowed. Certainly, sex work for them was a way to make money on being expelled from the family home, to rearticulate their lives in many of the new spaces they came to inhabit and to take responsibility for their survival (Prada et al., 2012), and in some ways (sometimes) it was also a (trans) space where they felt recognized and validated (see also Howe et al., 2008). Yet the transsexualisation of sex work naturalizes their presence, feeding into the social imaginary *that this is all they are good for* (Prada et al., 2012), and makes it especially hard for them to carve out a different living. Their working lives can be seen as hyper-precarious, but not only in the sense of epitomising the instability, unpredictability and temporariness lived by the migrant worker (Anderson, 2010), but also more particularly in terms of the precarity of their short-lived, sporadic inroads into other, "decent" work. Their sense of self is deeply tied up with work, and they determinedly do not want sex work to define them, or to have to depend on it in the future.[11] So, getting by in the short-term wrangles in their narratives with a longer-term resistance, a deeper desire to be socially *seen* through their labour.

This leads to a final, related point, about the uncertain rhythms of the marginal (trans) lives: the fleeting opportunities, the interminable waiting, the daily grind, the sudden ruptures. Time has been an underlying theme from the outset (indeed, it was what prompted me to start working longitudinally in the first place). Temporality here is queer not only in the sense of being an *oppositional* queer time (Halberstam, 2005), but also in its messiness; it is not about past-present-future, but a staggered, irregular temporality. Uncertainty as an inspiration and constraint for action (Bjarnesen, 2009) resonates strongly, but predictability may also have the same effect. In the sense of social navigation (Vigh, 2006), the on-going struggle of perpetual marginal displacement – while acutely uncertain – is more about how the friction between uncertainty and all-too known constraints creates a kind of aliveness, of pushing the boundaries and testing the water.

Daniela has particularly struggled with institutional time: she arrived in Mexico too soon (when nothing was in place), and tried to leave too late (after unknowingly exceeding an arbitrary period of eligibility). Her day-to-day life, in the city she has tried many times to leave, is in many ways a precarious rhythm of hand-to-mouth survival. In this sense, mobility and lack thereof may be temporal as well as spatial, such that time may itself come to be harmful, a cycle of daily precarity stretching into the future: a kind of *temporal violence*. Yet both Brenda and Daniela not only constantly seek new ways to chip away at the barriers to their goals, but they also resist the routine distancing of hopes and desires that comes with marginal mobility, through making a point of assuming responsibility for their actions, and regaining control of their imagined futures. Survival is on-going, messy and – in the face of such profoundly harmful injustice – radical work, but in Brenda's words, "just as I survived all the times they have tried to kill me, I will survive this too."

Closing reflections

Daniela and Brenda's stories shed light on the work required to make a living in the margins, all the manoeuvres, negotiations and compromises needed to get and sustain work, and survive adversity. As Romesburg (2012: 120) notes, "simply to continue to live", transgender people in particular "have had to be especially adept" at the negotiations needed to fashion an existence. Central to these

[11] Rather than – following Derrida – understanding life as survival, is it more relevant to understand human existence as work? (see Deranty, 2008 for a useful analysis of the latter).

negotiations is movement, and specifically "how trans moves us" in both spatial and affective ways (ibid). It is instructive to note how this plays out over time and space: where they go, why, when and for how long they stay – these are actions shaped by the power-laden terrains they navigate as trans women, as Central Americans, Latinas, refugees/asylum seekers, as hyper-precarised workers, as they fight against their apparent condemnation to live in the margins, pushing back against constraints, but also bending with them (they have immediate needs and longer term goals), at other times exploiting them (a trans identity can sometimes be strategically useful). Work can be seen as the material culmination of queer mobility; and this work of queer survival as messy.

The questions posed and the methods used have sought to engage with the gap between how trans (mobile) lives are written, and how they are lived. I have proposed the idea of messy survival to describe and engage with the unexpected, contradictory, disorderly and uncertain ways in which the terrains of marginal existence are navigated, and used this to explore the intersections between work, mobility and trans subjectivity. Brenda and Daniela's survival has involved the detours, displacement, disorientation, and redrawn trajectories and tactics described by Vigh (2006), such that while moving between countries may shift some of the pieces on the board, it does not change the game. Yet seeing messy survival as coming to life through the negotiation of marginal encounters, themselves brought into being through dynamic, harmful, transformative frictions, means giving space to a new kind of embodied queer politics. Taking a closer look at queer mobility through the lens of messy survival may go some way towards creating the theoretical and political space for change, as *part of* the very landscape of messy encounters described.

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