

# Languages to Transform Contexts of Mobility

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James Baldwin writes that “a language comes into existence by means of brutal necessity, and the rules of the language are dictated by what the language must convey.”<sup>1</sup> In the face of the violences of existing border regimes, this brutal necessity manifests in the grammars and vocabularies that challenge the language of criminalization, of illegality, or “migrant crisis.” Such terms place the weight of responsibility on individuals rather than on the structures that uproot them from their land, their family, and their community, and that deny them opportunities to live with dignity in the places where they arrive in search of life. Alternative words, concepts, and practices have been developed by migrants, by migrant-led organizations, and by groups working in solidarity with migrants as central elements of their resistance to existing discourses and narratives that reify hierarchies and dichotomies of us/them, migrant/citizen, and host/guest. Their language often also challenges proposals for change operating solely within political and legal frameworks of human rights or of integration into the very systems that have excluded and displaced them.<sup>2</sup>

Working across Mexico and the United States; across English, Spanish, and Spanglish; across spaces of government, law, media, and nonprofit organizations, as well as community groups, mutual aid groups, sanctuary coalitions, shelters, and deportee-returnee-led organizations, I note the use, the repetition, the translation, and the intentional absence or presence of certain words and concepts to define the contexts of displacement in the region and the necessary response to them. As decades go by and the situation remains the same or worsens, with more people forced to move as a result of poverty, climate change, violence, threats to life, lack of opportunity, and the entrenchment of border enforcement mechanisms,

the limits of existing frameworks of rights, integration, management, humanitarianism, and charity become more evident. At the same time, concepts such as mobility, mutuality, accompaniment, flourishing, repair, and translocality emerge, reemerge, shape, and reshape alternative practices that converge around the possibility of transforming the conditions that lead to forced displacement and to the exclusion of people in contexts of mobility from full participation in the communities where they live. I argue that the very use of such concepts is a transformative practice in the sense that it not only challenges existing frameworks but prefigures alternative horizons.

Referring to *people in contexts of mobility* or *of forced mobility* instead of “migrants” or “immigrants,” for example, has become more common among shelters and organizations working in Mexico. It is not a straightforward phrase, and every articulation of it, especially in situations of urgency, requires an effort and an intention that reminds the one speaking of the power that their choice of words can have. Speaking this phrase is an active refusal of the easy shortcut of “migrant,” the stereotypes built around this word, and the citizen/migrant binary. It is also a move toward addressing the structures that create conditions of precarity for people in contexts of forced displacement.

In the last ten years, changes in migration flows and in migration policies in the Central America–Mexico–US region have exposed more than ever the intersections of different processes and temporalities of migration and the conditions of structural violence that generate mobility to, from, through, within, and back to Mexico. Historically known as a territory of emigration, with a diaspora of more than thirty-eight million, and more recently as a country of transit, with thousands of people from Central America, South America, and the Caribbean—and increasingly from Africa, South Asia, and the Middle East—crossing through its territory, Mexico has also become a country of return, with more than two million people deported and forced to return from the United States in the last fifteen years. Since 2013, it has also seen a shift in its position as a country of immigration, asylum, and refuge, with a 9,000 percent increase in asylum applications, and it has become what some describe as a territory of entrapment, where migrants in transit and asylum seekers going north are forced to remain in Mexico under new US government rules and wait for months or years to find out if they will be allowed to cross into the United States.<sup>3</sup>

The term *people in contexts of mobility* pushes language to reflect that migration or mobility is part of the person’s experience but does not define the whole person. In Spanish, “personas en contextos de movilidad” is also used intentionally to make the term gender neutral, as opposed to the more common (masculine) phrase “los migrantes.” Referring to people in contexts of mobility also refuses the distinctions between migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, migrants in transit,

returned/deported migrants, and internally displaced persons—all of whom converge at migrant shelters in Mexico—and refuses the assumptions that come with each of these terms about their life trajectories or the rights or protections they each deserve. Processes of mobility are recognized as multidirectional, as a continuum,<sup>4</sup> and therefore as requiring responses that are attentive to all these dynamics and their intersections across borders and throughout the various temporalities of migration. These processes are also recognized as part of *contexts* of mobility, a phrase that emphasizes structures and systems that displace people and the conditions in which they do so. This contrasts with narratives of migration as “an invasion,” “a flood,” or “a threat,” or as the outcome only of individual and group decisions, and therefore justifying border enforcement regimes that must respond to these “crises” by closing borders, deploying police and military apparatus, and detaining and deporting people. In this narrative, family separation and death are presented as “unintended consequences” of policies of “prevention through deterrence” where individuals make a choice despite knowing the risks. Thus, in the government’s narrative, responsibility falls strictly on “the immigrant” rather than on the policies and infrastructures that create the conditions that force someone to move and to have to do so across dangerous terrain.

The language of *people in contexts of mobility* is more common among the people and groups working to change the discourse and narratives that shape legislation, but it is not used as much—at least not yet—among the people who are actually in a context of mobility. For some, expressing their identity as migrants, “soy migrante,” is a source of agency and pride, and many international and local organizations also use that phrase to build solidarity. Moreover, for many of these individuals and families, strategic knowledge about legal categories within migration regimes and how to define themselves within them may be essential for survival. And yet, within that sense of urgency, there is also clarity about the fact that if the existing system is what created the very conditions of precarity that they face, survival within these categories will not mean living with dignity; it will not prevent another displacement.

Baldwin says that “language, incontestably, reveals the speaker. Language, also, far more dubiously, is meant to define the other—and, in this case, the other is refusing to be defined by a language that has never been able to recognize him.”<sup>5</sup> Undocumented youth, sanctuary coalitions, and activists in the United States have moved away from fighting for temporary relief from deportation or for the right to citizenship, when it is clear that this will not protect them, just as it has not protected Black citizens killed at the hands of the police. They are fighting instead for structural transformation; for abolition; for defunding and divestment from the police, the Border Patrol, and ICE; and for investment in education, physical and mental health, and community programs.<sup>6</sup> Returned and

deported youth, among other activist groups in Mexico, reclaim terms such as *pocho* that have been used to discriminate against them or emphasize the term *illegalized* instead of *illegal*, while refusing the framework of (re)integration proposed by the government when the same conditions of violence and inequality that pushed their families to leave continue.<sup>7</sup> Beyond reforming the existing system and fighting for their recognition within it, which is seen just as a necessary and strategic part of the immediate struggle to access documentation and public services, their horizons are set on freedom of mobility, flourishing, dignity, and repair through practices of accompaniment, mutual support, liberation, and recognition, built by and for local and translocal communities, beyond the structures of the state.<sup>8</sup>

If there is hope for the transformation of the dismal reality of borders, it is in Baldwin's reminder that "we are not compelled to defend a morality that we know to be a lie."<sup>9</sup> This is echoed by sanctuary activists and other acts of civil disobedience that do not recognize laws that are immoral. In this struggle, new languages emerge "to confront life . . . to outwit death,"<sup>10</sup> to define, to imagine, and to practice what is possible within and beyond a system that neither citizens nor people in contexts of mobility can or should accept.

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#### Notes

1. Baldwin, "If Black English."
2. See Délano Alonso, "Difficulties of *Transformative Solidarity*."
3. See Délano Alonso, "Antes y después del incendio en Juárez."
4. Anderson, "Deportability Continuum."
5. Baldwin, "If Black English."

6. Examples of such concepts and frameworks can be found in the work of DRUM, BYP100, Mijente, BAJI, Centro Corona, the New Sanctuary Coalition, and La Morada Mutual Aid, among others.
7. As Maggie Loredó expresses in Anderson and Loredó, “Book That Became a Community,” 20.
8. Examples of such concepts and frameworks can be found in the work of La 72 Hogar-Refugio, Espacio Migrante, Otros Dreams en Acción, and Voces Mesoamericanas, among others.
9. Baldwin, “If Black English.”
10. Baldwin, “If Black English.”

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