

Article

Those Who “Don’t Move” Dynamics of Mobility at Two Crossing Points on the Guatemala-Mexico Borderland, from the Experience of Workers Who Vitalize the Region

Carmen Fernández-Casanueva

CIESAS, Sureste, San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas CP 29247, Mexico; cfernandez@ciesas.edu.mx;
Tel.: +52-9671149487

Abstract: Drawing on qualitative research carried out in 2018 at two crossing points at the Guatemala-Mexico border, I focus my attention on individuals enabling movement and border crossing. These include money changers (*cambistas* or *cambiadores*), so-called tricyclists (*tricilceros*, people whose activity facilitates the transport of merchandise), motorcycle taxi drivers (locally called *tuk tuks*), rafters (*balseros* o *camareros*, in charge of the rafts that cross the border river), and, in general, people directly linked to movements in the region and across the border. Local actors like them, often overlooked, are the cogs that allow one side of the border to be connected to the other. Mobility and this specific space are affected by their imprint, their actions, and by the way they relate to their environment. Their aim is to be able to remain and protect their livelihood; in order to be able to not move, they allow movement across the border, shaping mobility, and also immobility, in the borderland. They are key actors in the construction of the border dynamic, mobility, and the space surrounding the line that divides both countries geopolitically. Although they play a role in the construction of (im)mobility of this space, they are subjects whose lives, destinies, and opportunities are intimately linked to the interactions and dynamics that take place there.



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Keywords: Guatemala-Mexico border; immobility; mobility; borderland crossing; borderland workers

1. Introduction

At international borders, actors, dynamics, and vested interests come together not only at the local level at the various formal and informal crossing points, but also at the national, regional, and global levels. In regions traversed by a politically established line, diverse actors move, handle, or transport goods across the border, or cross on their way to more distant destinations. There are also other individuals who, although they may not cross or cross only occasionally, are part of the dynamics of mobility in border areas, facilitating, regulating, shaping, and directing the flow of cross-border traffic and the actions that depend on it.

Drawing on qualitative research carried out in 2018 at two crossing points at the Guatemala-Mexico border, I focus my attention on individuals enabling movement and border crossing. Aside from migrants, asylum seekers, cross-border workers, authorities at different levels, traders, and, in general, inhabitants who are part of the borderland and give it life on a daily basis, we also find a group of individuals who, for the purposes of this analysis, I will call “mobility facilitators” or “mobility enablers.” These are actors whose livelihoods allow, facilitate, and shape while depending on people, goods, and money crossing the border and circulating in the surrounding region. This group of individuals is made up of money changers (*cambistas* o *cambiadores*) who exchange foreign currency (pesos to quetzals and quetzals to pesos) found near border crossings. There are also people whose activity allows and facilitates the transport and movement of merchandise (i.e., the so-called tricyclists, or *tricilceros*, motorcycle taxi drivers (locally called *tuk tuks*),

and rafters (in charge of the rafts, called *balseros* or *camareros*¹ that cross border river)), and, in general, people directly linked to movements in the region and across the borderland, such as porters or parking lot employees, for example.

These people tasked with movement usually appear in news stories and academic research on the Guatemala-Mexico border, where they are often part of the context for analysis, without further exploration of their work and the role they play in the border dynamic. That is why I find it necessary to focus on them not as part of the context, but as key actors in the construction of the border dynamic, mobility, and, therefore, the space surrounding the line that divides both countries geopolitically. I propose to examine their work and the role they play from their perspective.

Mobility and this specific space are affected by their imprint, their actions, and by the way they relate to their environment. Although they play a role in the construction of this borderland as a dynamic space, they are subjects whose lives, destinies, and opportunities are intimately linked to the interactions, arrangements, and activities that take place there. By their inclination to remain in the borderland, that is, by their immobility or their quasi mobility, they make movement across the border possible.

The qualitative research carried out in 2018 was based in Ciudad Hidalgo, in the municipality of Suchiate in Chiapas, Mexico, and in Tecún Umán, in the municipality of Ayutla in San Marcos, Guatemala. It was additionally based at the second crossing point, in the city of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc and the Las Champas neighborhood, part of the municipality of Frontera Comalapa, Chiapas, Mexico, and in the town of La Mesilla, in La Democracia municipality in the department of Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Forty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted, with 22 interviews at one of the study points and 22 at the other, on both the Mexican and Guatemalan sides of the border; 15 were at the Frontera Comalapa area and 7 at La Mesilla, and 14 were at Ciudad Hidalgo and 8 at Tecún Umán. In both sites, informants were approached through the help of gatekeepers, local leaders and authorities, and inhabitants from the borderland we had already known. At the same time, what I discuss here is an account of the in situ knowledge garnered during more than a decade during which I have undertaken research in the area. I draw on this experience and the interviews carried out in 2018 for the description and analysis throughout this article.

My central argument is that these actors are the cogs that allow one side of the border to be connected to the other, without whom local cross-border life, and actions and processes on a regional or global level that have to do with this border, would not be possible. This might seem obvious, but the important insight here is to realize that mobility and this specific space are affected by their imprint, their actions, and by the way they relate to their environment. At the border, one can observe at a local level that decisions and interactions are interlinked with upper levels. What one can observe in the borderland, and at the municipality levels, is interlinked to decisions and interactions at federal, regional, and international levels. As Johnson et al. p. 63 [1] sustain, “The strands of power that constitute (and are constitutive of) the borders make it increasingly difficult to think of certain borders as local and others as global.” Although these actors play a role in the construction of this borderland, they are subjects whose lives, destinies, and opportunities are intimately linked to the interactions and dynamics that take place there; they shape, but they are also being shaped. These actors, as most inhabitants here, shape this borderland by their informal crossing of people and goods.

In what follows, I present the conceptual framework based on the mobility paradigm, grounding it with a discussion regarding borders and borderlands while reviewing the ways these concepts help elucidate how lands divided by a geopolitical international line are shaped. I then discuss what the context is like on the wider regional level and at these two crossing points, identifying how economic and working life “make sense” based on specific border dynamics, which in turn shape mobility at these crossing points. Next,

¹ The term comes from the inner tube (*cámara*) used to build rafts (*balsas*). It is also used as a synonym of *balsa*; *camareros* or *balseros* are rafters.

I discuss how these actors, who are mobility facilitators, leave their mark on the context through their work, interactions, mobilities, and immobilities. Finally, I reflect on the way in which mobility, and therefore the space or land that comprises an international border such as this one, are organizing nodes charged with meaning.

2. Mobility and Borders as Nodes of Mobility

The notion of borders as nodes of mobility and immobility is key to understanding how these spaces are constructed in an evolving process of interactions driven by formal and also informal exchanges, agreements, and negotiations of people and groups with a variety of needs and interests. From this starting point, let us strip out now the main theoretical concepts behind it:

First, space, as well as mobility, is socially constructed. The notion that space is not just a neutral container in which life happens but rather is constructed, while also constructing social, political, and economic life, is a key analytical base that Lefebvre [2], and later theorists such as Soja [3] or Harvey [4], brought to the discussion table. Spatiality, as Doreen Massey explains in her book *For Space* [5], is a product of interrelationships and is continually under construction, so that it is created and recreated through collective interaction, shaping the barriers and opportunities that different actors in unequal positions possess. As Sheller suggests, this continuous construction, the result of interrelations, must be understood in a multiscale manner. In other words, scales or levels from the most immediate or micro (such as the body itself and interpersonal relationships), to the medium level (the urban, the immediate environment), to the macro (transnational relationships) and the global level (that is, flows of energy and resources), are interconnected and influence each other (p. 14, [6]).

This foundational work allowed authors such as Urry e.g., [7], Sheller e.g., [6,8], and Cresswell e.g., [9], among others, to continue to encourage studies on mobility, in what has been called the “mobility turn.” The central tenet of this concept is that if there is a construction of space as a process in constant evolution based on social interactions at different scales, it is undeniable that space is not static and, therefore, understanding mobility and immobility dynamics is crucial. Mobility, in this schema, is not simply movement but rather is socially constructed, involving decisions, discourses, and the power relations behind it. As Sheller explains, “Mobilities are never free but are in various ways always channeled, tracked, controlled, governed, under surveillance and unequal-striated by gender, race, ethnicity, class, cast, color, nationality, age, sexuality, disability, etc., which are all in fact experienced as effects of uneven mobilities” (p. 10 [6]).

This perspective makes clear the difference between mobility and movement. Mobility is full of meanings; it is not simply that something or someone moves from point A to point B, but rather involves everything that such movement (or non-movement) implies and signifies. In this sense, Cresswell [9] argues that the possibility of movement may have different meanings in different times and societies. He explains that in fact, in the contemporary world, it is not a general aspiration of all people; many people, like the actors we analyze in this paper, would rather like to have the possibility of not moving. To be able to move or to remain may be considered a privilege or an injustice, a situation that produces harm, as Winton suggested [10], depending on a set of conditions produced at different interconnected scales, which act in combination according to the connotation given to them.

Second, mobility cannot be explained without immobile material worlds, or “institutional anchors” or nodes, through which mobility is configured and organized [6–8,11]. These anchors, the scholars explain, are, for example, airports, harbors, stations, and roads through which mobility is channeled and organized. While various anchors, as well as structures at different levels and involving unequal power relationships, facilitate mobility in some cases, they prevent or hinder it in others and, in the case of human mobility, can even make it risky, as with irregular migration and people seeking refuge.

As Cunningham and Heyman [12] sustain, in order to revitalize studies of borders and borderlands, it is important to have a closer look at borders (that is, these devices or nodes) from a mobility and immobility (or enclosure, as the authors refer to it) point of view. The analysis of mobility and enclosure dynamics shows their complexity not only as exchange points but also as evolving territories of unequal power relations, fragmentations, and differences: “Enclosures and mobilities thus join at borders, in the multifarious processes of entering, avoiding, detecting, classifying, inspecting, interdicting, facilitating, and revaluing that are borders of everyday routine” (p. 295).

Third, borders, as Mezzadra points out (p. ix [13]), are not merely a mechanism to block global passages of people, money, or goods, but are also a central device to link such passages and movements that take place not only in a formal fashion but also informally. The combination of formality and informality of movements (and non-movements) at borders happens because decisions, needs, and resources to cross are at times lined up with formal regulations and agreements set up by hegemonic forces (international agreements, federal regulations, and so forth), but at other times take place regardless of such agreements in an informal or not officially regulated manner. Moreover, the concept of what is informal, formal, legal, or illegal varies from one context to the other.

On this, different empirical studies around the world show how a multiplicity of actors shapes the indistinct landscape of formality and informality, and legality and illegality at borders and in borderlands. For instance, in her work in an Argentinian border town, Jusionyte [14] shows that local actors—local journalists in her case study—have a specific point of view on what they consider a legitimate activity, explaining that, according to her analysis, in many cases “the letter of the law and local practices, as well as local social and moral regimes, often do not coincide” (p. 243). Similarly, Aguiar [15] and Shuster [16], in studies based on the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, show how regulatory ambiguity creates gaps that allow exchange across borders and the reproduction and survival of local economies.

At the same time, Endres [17], in her study about traders and markets in Vietnam, and Clot [18] and Galemba [19], in their studies on trade at the Guatemala-Mexico border, unveiled the complexity of so-called contraband. Galemba’s work in particular reveals that what is officially considered the extralegal crossing of, for instance, commodities, provides inhabitants of borderlands a livelihood (p. 5) and thus the means to survive and to remain without having to migrate elsewhere. She shows, as I show, that borderlands rely on those extralegal crossings and therefore they will continue regardless of the trend of the “externalization of borders,” in which, as Menjívar [20] explains, powerful receiving states like the United States (U.S.) outsource the control of its borders to transit and sending countries such as Mexico and Central American countries (see also [21]). In this trend, northbound migration is persecuted. These studies show how people engage in everyday strategies in order to avoid State regulations and how the crossing of goods and people across international borders is signified and perceived according to views, values, and needs of individuals and groups involved, transcending national and international conceptualizations and agreements.

Borders and borderlands are settings of a heterogeneous world of mobility and immobility where multileveled, unequal power relations and decisions take place regarding what and who crosses and how. These summarize the purpose of such a movement or stillness and whether those will be preserved as formal, informal, legal, or illegal; in doing so, borderlands are shaped. The combination of mobilities and immobilities, then, configures and builds these nodes or anchors, shaping experiences, discourses, and imaginaries around the lands linked to them.

3. The Context and the Dynamics of Mobility

Before discussing the main characteristics of the specific crossing points studied in this article, we ought to contextualize the region, emphasizing its relevance as a strategic geopolitical area. Importantly, the Guatemala-Mexico border constitutes a crucial territory

connecting Central and South America with North America in terms of (1) transnational trade and (2) human mobility. This historical circumstance, serving as a strategic node connecting global trade flows and shaping human mobility, was enhanced after NAFTA (North American Free Trade Agreement) was signed in 1994, and later on with the Puebla Panama Plan (PPP), now named the Mesoamerican Integration and Development Project (PM) (see [22–26]).

First, in the context of these agreements, this border, as Rojas [22] explains, has a dilapidated infrastructure and relies on local, low-wage workers who hold informal and insecure employment. However, as he explains, it is a border that not only engages in global trade but also shapes the dynamics and provisions at the local and regional commerce level. The dynamics of these crossing points have become the motor that sustains the circulation of global merchandise, not only formally but also, and very importantly, informally. Informal trade is crucial along this border; in fact, Rojas's ethnographic research over many years along this border led him to calculate (unofficially, not based on official figures) that revenue generated by informal trade could be around 50 million pesos daily (around USD 2,500,000)².

Second, in terms of international migration, since the 1990s, the Guatemala-Mexico border has been a necessary crossing point in the journey of many Central Americans headed north, when migration to the U.S. increased significantly. Since then, contradictions between allowing people to cross in order to work and trade locally while blocking international migration to the U.S. have shaped this border, provoking situations in which many migrants and asylum seekers find themselves stopped or stranded, with the impossibility of neither moving nor establishing themselves in any place (see [27,28]).

Currently, this border is crossed by people from around the world, moving northward for different reasons but mainly as a consequence of violence in their countries. This trend became evident between October 2018 and January 2019, when a caravan formed by thousands of people openly crossed the border and walked together towards the Mexico–U.S. border (see [29,30]). However, people escaping from violence began migrating long before the caravans. This increase of people fleeing Central America willing to enter the U.S., that is, this “threat” of miles of people at their door, provoked the reinforcement of U.S. border controls and their externalization of border policy. As a consequence, many people had to remain in Mexico and, alternatively, apply there for asylum; between 2013 and 2019, the governmental Mexican agency for refugees (COMAR—Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados) reported an increase of 5000% in asylum applications received³. However, the Mexican government is not willing to grant asylum to that number of people and, in line with the U.S., decided to reinforce detentions and deportations of people. This means that the Mexican government is involved in different ways of blocking people endeavoring to enter the U.S. Two ways involve increasing asylum applications at the Mexican southern border and reinforcing detention and deportation of undocumented migration.

The militarization of the border by the Guardia Nacional (National Guard, strongly relying on the Mexican Army) is the most recent attempt to strengthen federal control over this border, and it is in line with U.S. policies of externalizing its borders. Since 2019, the border area has had to cope with the presence of the Guardia Nacional. It was deployed along 13 strategic points in bordering municipalities in Chiapas [31]. The decision to bring members of the Guardia Nacional to these points is aligned with the U.S. policy of preventing northbound migration. Namely, the U.S. and Mexican governments are not interested in interfering in local, regional, or global trade dynamics; their interest is in blocking journeys up north of people needing to flee from violence and to request asylum (see [23,24]). Formal and informal trade exists and is tolerated, as are formal or informal local crossings, whereas irregular migration up north is persecuted (see [32,33]). Hence, it is a border apparently full of contradictions between formality and informality, lawfulness

² Personal communication with Hugo Rojas, 26 October 2020.

³ See <https://www.gob.mx/comar/articulos/la-comar-en-numeros>.

and lawlessness, but regardless, these contradictions serve needs and interests at different levels. In so doing, they shape its (im)mobility patterns, constructing in this way the border region as we know it.

3.1. *The Two Crossing Points: Overview of the Context*

The following paragraphs outline the dynamics of these particular crossing points that are not only shaped by these broader geopolitical concerns, but also frame how mobility is constructed. The purpose is to understand how mobility is constructed here. A previous version of the text that appears in this subsection was presented in June 2018 as a non-academic, internal publication, co-authored with Hugo Rojas and Ollinca Villanueva [34]).

The first border-crossing point is located on the coast of the Pacific Ocean, where the Suchiate River is the boundary dividing the two countries. The economic life of Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán generally takes place near the river and in the main central plaza areas of both cities, where the commercial exchange of food takes place; food for sale has crossed both through formal customs posts following established procedures and via informal border crossings and roads that are “off the beaten track”.

The “Dr. Rodolfo Robles” border bridge spans the river, connecting Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán, the land border crossing with the heaviest commercial activity [35]. This is where the Mexican Tax Administration Service (SAT) facilities are located and, approximately 300 m away, the Suchiate II bridge (the largest tax and commercial area of the Mexican federal government on the border with Guatemala). Along this same perimeter, also on the banks of the river, there are at least three informal crossing points called El Palenque, Los Rojos, and Los Limones, which correspond to landing piers of rafts made of truck tires and wooden beams that transport both people and goods in both directions. These mobilities enjoy the implicit tolerance of local government personnel and social support, naturalization, or both by the population that lives and works there.

Surrounding this dynamic, a diverse and stratified labor context has developed in which both Guatemalan and Mexican workers participate. They are a group of people, men and women of different ages, who carry out linked activities, from jobs that have a direct relationship with commerce, to public transport service providers such as tricyclists and money changers, to customs agents and municipal police who have an indirect influence by shaping and making these mobilities possible.

This porous border area, which is the main crossing between Guatemala and Mexico, abounds with contradictions, where the fine line between legality and illegality is diffuse. Under the bridge, migrants without the economic means to cross with travel documents (those deprived of the benefits of globalization) do so unofficially by taking advantage of the “pores” or “gaps” of existing structures. In other words, everyday life at this crossing is a clear example of the ways in which spaces are configured from the very “cracks” in the “regulatory” system, which historically have allowed the informal trade and transnational labor movement in this area that largely sustain the local economy.

The second point lies between the towns of Las Champas, municipality of Frontera Comalapa in Chiapas, Mexico, and La Mesilla, municipality of La Democracia in Huehuetenango, Guatemala. Starting in 2005, this crossing point grew in importance after Hurricane Stan passed through the Soconusco region of Chiapas, ruining the train tracks that originate in Ciudad Hidalgo [28] and leading to the site becoming a more utilized point of entry into Mexico. Between the two locations, there is a “welcome” sign that indicates the boundary between the two nations, depicted by white markers spaced along the borderline drawn over mountainous terrain.

With certain contrasts, some more visible than others, both the neighborhood of Las Champas and La Mesilla are commercial areas in which it is possible to find a diversity of shops whose items for sale include dishes, toys, blankets, clothes, and seasonal decorations. Similarly, in the former (on the Mexican side), grocery stores and automotive-parts stores are common, whereas across the border, the sale of goods includes bags and shoes, in addition to popular “American” clothing brought in enormous bales called *pacas*.

Some of the key actors who facilitate the dynamics of exchange between these two cities include the notorious money changers, mainly men, holding bags or wearing them on their waists, offering to exchange pesos for quetzals or vice versa. On market days, which have varied over recent years but are currently Tuesdays and Wednesdays, merchants of both nationalities offer products that are purchased by the visiting population to be taken to different municipalities, mainly in Chiapas. Although market days have the most mobility, the dynamics of the market are present throughout the week. The shops are concentrated mostly along the main street, which traverses most of the town, and two parallel streets.

Here and at the crossing point between Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán, actors and mobilities are intertwined in ways that go beyond orthodox concepts of the formal and informal (for a deeper examination of this matter, see [19]). The local economic dynamic is rightly associated with this flexible way of understanding both terms, given that the constant crossing of individuals (who live along the border and give it life) is structured around this local economy.

3.2. Differences and Similarities in Their Context and Mobility Dynamic

There are similarities in the areas surrounding these two crossing points. The informal crossing of people, goods, and money, on which the social, economic, and cultural life of the region depends, is one of the most striking. Shared characteristics at both crossings include the exchange of foreign currency and the transport of people and goods by more-or-less rudimentary means; the fact that work is organized through associations with locally organized leadership, which regulates and decides who can work in assigned posts; and the fact that these job positions are actually informal employment, since they lack social benefits but are tolerated and protected by local authorities.

Along with these similarities, differences exist in activities, decisions, relationships, and the mobility spanning both border points. I highlight the following: At the crossing point of Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Umán, both cities are municipal capitals and the river that separates them has its own dynamics, i.e., its own rules, its own groupings and negotiations, and certain autonomy compared to “on-land” activities. Instead of a formal administrative control of river-related activities by the bureaucracy of the municipality and city government on either side, there are de facto controls. In addition, the associations along the river and in Ciudad Hidalgo are independent of the formal local authorities. Groups of money changers and transporters belong to organizations or associations that are not registered or formal as such but wield de facto power to organize their activities, rates, the number of participants, and job openings. They are tolerated by formal authorities but not necessarily controlled by them. In Tecún Umán, however, the local government does exercise control.

The relationship between the two sides of the border is also different at this border crossing. Although it has evolved over time, today we can say that the border is something that can be felt and experienced. True, it is porous, but even so, border residents on each side perceive themselves as “distant neighbors,” and interesting differences are observable on one side and the other. Given the scarce presence of Guatemala’s national government, Tecún Umán is more self-managing, and thus the local government exerts substantial control, particularly since the arrival of Mayor Erik Súniga, who in 2018 had held office for 10 years (Erik Súniga was extradited to Texas following a request of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA), but he died on 18 April 2020 (article consulted on 24 August 2020, [36]). During fieldwork for the research presented here, Súniga was still the mayor). The mayor’s office controls the pedestrian border crossing, charges for its use, and regulates the activity of the different associations. From the perspective of many of its inhabitants, Súniga, also known as “El Pocho”, “came to put order” in the town, which made some residents perceive it as a safer city than before his arrival. Further, he invested in infrastructure improvements in the city. The mayor’s success in administrative affairs allowed him an unquestioned, de facto control of the city. As Rojas [22] explains, there is a clear contrast

between the power that the municipality of Ciudad Hidalgo and the mayor's office of Tecún Umán have in their respective jurisdictions because, in the former, the municipal president (or mayor) is elected for only three years, unlike the mayor on the Guatemalan side, who can be reelected indefinitely and whose team can be permanent.

In Ciudad Hidalgo, even though local agreements have been reached to allow cross-border commercial activity and the operation of associations such as money changers and tricyclists, there is much more border control exercised by the federal government, insofar as it is the most important crossing point on the border between Mexico and Central America. Municipal tax revenues are very scarce, except for the fees collected from commercial stalls and for tricycle and forklift traffic on overpasses. Ciudad Hidalgo does not reap much benefit from what is collected from the formal passage of goods, people, and transport vehicles.

However, other conditions prevail at the Las Champas–La Mesilla border area. The geography is different: There is no river, it is hilly (tuk-tuks, or small, three-wheeled vehicles, are used instead of tricycles), and crossing from one side to the other is *de facto* free and unrestricted for goods and people. The change of time zones when crossing the border is an ongoing but almost imperceptible fact that locals are used to. On the La Mesilla side, the surrounding area is private property (owners charge for crossing their property and drape a chain across roads), although there are crossing points where people can enter and exit without a problem. The area surrounding the city of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc and Las Champas neighborhood (which is the part of the city at the crossing point), however, is *ejido* land, which is communal land that cannot be divided or sold⁴.

The Mexican currency, the peso, is accepted in La Mesilla, unlike in Tecún. Here we see that what occurs in La Mesilla is copied in Las Champas (the market, the tuk tuks). In fact, Las Champas was founded because La Mesilla “could no longer cope,” that is, there was not enough space to expand and open up more commercial stalls. This speaks of cross-border cooperation. Further, commercial activity is much more intense along this crossing than at any other; in Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecún, the crossing is very dynamic, but the local sales are not as dynamic as they are here. That is clear when one observes the number of commercial stalls and people going to buy at La Mesilla–Las Champas, compared to the Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecún crossing point. Interestingly, mobility enablers are actors strongly facilitating local commerce, as markets in those bordering cities show; this is different from the other crossing point, where mobility facilitators allow trade not necessarily focused on the borderland itself, but rather on a wider, national, and international spectrum.

These two entities are not municipal seats. In Las Champas, an agrarian authority controls administrative aspects, including those normally handled by federal authorities. The *ejido* Committee of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc controls the right to own property, to set up stalls along the street market that operates on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, as well as the activity of motorcycle taxis and money changers. In La Mesilla, the COCODE (Community Development Council) assesses fees and controls all groups (money changers, tuk-tuks, market stalls). The right to work is controlled by families (through recommendations) who normally are relatives of COCODE members or the *ejido* Committee. There are no independent organizations like in Ciudad Hidalgo.

By comparing these two crossing points, we learn that mobility along these two border areas is shaped by differentiated landscapes; by the role of the official, or *de facto* local authorities, or both; and by specific differentiated needs. We learn that these needs are interrelated by how power relations and agreements at different interlinked scales (from local authorities, workers, and merchants, to global actors such as international traders, and back) on both sides of the border are determined according to the level of influence that global, regional, or national forces have at the local level. We also see that the level of

⁴ The *ejidos* born in 1915 with the *Ley Agraria*, as a communal land that cannot be divided or sold. Along the years, legislation regarding *ejidos* has suffered changes, but in many places such as Ciudad Cuauhtémoc it still exists and cannot be sold as private property. Each *ejido* has a rotating committee that makes decisions concerning that land.

influence and power can be different between one side of the border and the other, as in Ciudad Hidalgo and Tecún Uman, or similar, as in Las Champas and La Mesilla.

It is important to clarify that what I have presented here is focused on these specific crossing points of the border, set in cities where official crossing points are established. But there are many other informal crossing points along the border, which, as Galemba suggests, are “critical hubs in legal and extralegal commercial chains . . . [revealing] how legal and illegal flows intertwine in the daily business of international trade” (p. 21, [19]).

We also see that the dynamics of power and negotiation between authorities and other actors, between some groups and others, and between service providers and clients, in addition to the stratification and organization within the associations themselves, are influenced by power at upper levels (political interests at the federal, regional, and international level, global international commerce interests) but are negotiated and reinterpreted according to forces and needs at the local level (local authorities, local workers, and, in general terms, inhabitants of the borderland).

Based on observations and testimonies collected in the field, I reflect in the next section on how actors who facilitate movement play a major role in enabling and shaping mobility, and thus in constructing these border spaces.

4. Local Mobility Facilitators

The actors who make local border activity possible, these facilitators or enablers of mobility who do not necessarily intend to move to other spaces themselves but without whom activity on the border would be impossible, leave their mark in this borderland through their work, negotiations, and interactions. They shape mobility as they themselves are shaped by decisions of local and national authorities, international forces policies and regulations, and global commerce interests. What follows is an overview of who they are:

First of all, money changers (or *cambistas*) “move” money. Men and women (but mostly men) assume the task of exchanging currency, from pesos to quetzals or quetzals to pesos. They are usually sitting on small benches on sidewalks near the border and can be identified carrying visible bundles of bills. *Cambistas*, as Aguiar [15] has shown in her research on smuggling practices at the tri-border region of Argentina, Brazil, and Paraguay, have a crucial function in the financial environment of porous borders such as this one, where multiple informal transactions take place.

They approach potential customers offering their services; they compete among themselves by offering better rates. Since they are located on the street, due to insecurity concerns (possible robberies) they most often change small amounts of money. Some, however, change large amounts, usually going to their own homes to carry out the transaction. They usually have regular customers (merchants), in addition to the general public (tourists, migrants, cross-border workers). They are usually members of the local community and manage to get this job via local social ties (through friends or, particularly, through family). A *cambista* from Ciudad Hidalgo explained that he used to work at the only foreign money exchange house established there, that is, a formally constituted business dedicated to exchanging foreign money. However, this private local business was closed, and instead, the money-changers’ union was born. Since then, he and the rest of the changers from the union have been the ones in charge of money exchange in that city: “In other words the money-exchange house stopped working [and] closed and new money changers stayed,” he said.

This testimony describes aspects of the work of these “mobility enablers”; they are mostly local people who struggle to keep their jobs by grouping together and negotiating conditions that favor them, such as taking charge of foreign exchange rather than having an exchange house exercise this activity. I will further discuss these different workers’ groups in the following section.

Aside from money changers, there are also actors who move goods and people. Among these are the tricyclists or tuk-tuk drivers, who are mainly part of the local community and who usually enter the business through family ties. They adapt a bicycle or

motorcycle with a compartment to carry passengers. They usually enter this business after working in different transport activities locally, such as bus or taxi drivers, or in employment related to commerce or service, for example in a hotel. Sometimes they combine being tricyclists or tuk-tuk drivers with other economic activities that allow them to fulfill their income needs.

They transport people who cross the border with or without merchandise, in one direction or the other. In Las Champas–La Mesilla, they can go only as far as the border but are prohibited from crossing. At this particular crossing tuk-tuk taxis are used, not tricycles because it is a hilly terrain. The following testimony describes the hectic activity at this crossing point and confirms the important role these taxis have facilitating the movement of people and goods. They do not cross the border, but they facilitate people traveling and carrying merchandise from the terminal where they arrive, to the border:

Like I say, the fact that it is a small town has nothing to do with the amount of people who move about here daily; there is quite a lot of transportation given to people; the route is about 1 km, all of it paved from the terminal to the border itself, because we're only allowed to go that far. That's the route, about 1 km.

Likewise, at Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecún Umán, the tricycle drivers can only operate on their side of the border. They can cross the bridge but not further, nor can they pick up passengers on the other side; if clients cross the river, the drivers meet them at the raft pier. However, like at the other crossing point, even when they are not allowed to operate on the other side of the border, their service is crucial to bringing people and merchandise through the borderland and closer to the border itself; they ensure the continuation of movement by handing over the responsibility to tricyclists on the other side of the border. In this way, they guarantee the continuation of movement, reinforce collaboration across the line, and at the same time, secure their own possibility to remain by conserving their livelihood.

Tecún Uman and Ciudad Hidalgo have flat terrain, allowing access to non-motorized vehicles. The tricyclists' activity consists of long periods of waiting combined with moving people; the longer the trip, the better. Competition among them also plays a role. Here, one of the few women working in this activity shared that in order to get clients, she needs to offer the service before other taxi drivers, arriving earlier and finding pick-up spots that can get her clients in need of longer trips: "... Sometimes you don't get clients easily ... so I go to customs [early in the morning]. There we get longer trips, of clients coming from far away to obtain the migratory documents. They ask for a tricycle and we take them to the bridge." This is a useful example to show that mobility across and around the borderland and the possibility to keep jobs, to remain, depend not only on a combination of formal and informal agreements by local authorities and workers unions, but also on individual decisions and informal strategies and abilities to attract clients' attention and build trust with them.

At the Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecún Umán crossing point, it is possible to cross over the international bridge connecting both cities; this is a formal crossing where legal documentation is required. People arriving to the bridge on tricycles cross the bridge either on foot or also by tricycle. Once at the other side and having completed customs and migratory legal procedures, they hire another tricycle and continue moving.

If people or merchandise move across the border without going through official legal procedures (that is, informally), they have to use the river and hire the service of a rafter. Rafters are found at the crossing of the Suchiate River, between Tecún Uman and Ciudad Hidalgo. They perform the same job as tuk-tuk drivers or tricyclists in the sense of moving people or goods but can be distinguished from the former because they are organized in binational associations and have the river as an intermediate space of action between one country and the other. In a subsequent section, I explain how they are organized and how they divide spaces and shifts, on one side of the border and the other.

As in the case of tricyclists and tuk-tuk drivers, most of the rafters are men. It could be said that, in moving people and merchandise, they are the link at the middle of the movement chain carried out unofficially and informally; people and products arrive on

tricycles, then take a raft, and once on the other side, they hire another tricycle. Their activity is clearly informal and outside the law, so it is impossible for local authorities on either side of the border to openly and officially “regulate” them or their activity. This situation gives them a position of power, and they can negotiate with authorities since both localities depend on the numerous and diverse crossings of goods and people. Everything about crossing here is informal, but there is a separation between “licit” and illicit goods.

Within the rafters’ organization is a series of stratified activities since their work involves diverse tasks, ranging from handling the pole that moves the raft, to cleaning and generally taking charge of the piers. The following is the testimony of a rafter, interviewed during our fieldwork, describing a day’s work in which these stratified different positions come into play:

As the day begins, I leave at four in the morning to work, I fetch my *cámara* from that side because all the *cámaras* are rented; they are rented from a boy who only earns forty [pesos] a day, five for the pole, thirty-five for the *cámara*. The owner of the raft earns twenty because the boy there earns fifteen. He picks it up in the afternoon, and in the morning he throws them to you. When I get to the river, he already has them laid out; by then he has my pole by the raft, I just grab it and go. That’s why forty pesos are paid, but from there on we work equitably, whatever work we get.

Rafters, as other mobility facilitators, are organized in what are called *turnos*, that is, a kind of “permanent license” to be able to work as a rafter. It is common for the *turno* holders to rent their posts, subcontract people, or both. They could be Mexicans or Guatemalans, but they are mainly from Guatemala. If they are *turno* holders, that is, if they hold a position as a rafter, they are allowed to rent it out and one person may hold more than one position. People interested in renting posts used to be local residents from Tecún Umán or Ciudad Hidalgo, but recently individuals from other areas in Guatemala have also become interested, leading to increases in the renting rates.

In terms of other positions related to the *cámaras*, i.e., not *turno* holders, we find local and non-local individuals, typically men. They normally organize their working week by shifts, having days off every other day. During their working days their service is priced differently depending on what they move, ranging from 70 quetzals if the raft is fully loaded, to 5 quetzals to cross one person.

At the same time, there is another group directly linked to the movement of people, but especially goods, in the region and across the border. These are the porters and the employees of parking lots and warehouses. They are usually hired by traders or transporters who take goods to areas beyond the border region, so they are usually involved in helping move big loads of merchandise by moving them to waiting trucks or to storage warehouses.

Their activity is not backed by workers’ associations as in the other cases; rather, they are employees of warehouses, stores, or stalls and are not necessarily local people. It is possible to find migrants already working either on the Guatemalan or Mexican side or migrants willing to stay for a short period and earn extra cash in order to continue their journey.

In general terms, aside from those few temporary workers who are not locals, these actors do not negotiate or face barriers to their own mobility in order to perform as movement facilitators, unlike the case with migrants or asylum seekers at these border crossings. Even though they are aware of the informality and instability of their employments, they would rather not move to another space, preferring to survive in the region and have a livelihood there.

It is that livelihood, the links they develop, how they organize, and with whom and how they interact that make it possible for people, goods, and money to move in the way we observe. That is, their permanency allows the mobility of people and goods across the border. By identifying some key aspects of the dynamics linked to their activity, we can recognize the nature of their (im)mobility patterns, deeply immersed in a context where formality and informality, lawfulness and unlawfulness are intertwined. As Jusionyte

(p. 245 [14]) sustains, “Living on the margins of the state and the doorstep of alternative economic, political, and social regimes” provides local actors with a particular understanding of which activities are and are not legitimate. This understanding shapes their relationship with other actors and the environment where they are embedded, shaping in this way their (im)mobility. It is through this that they contribute to the construction of the borderlands.

Even when their services are linked more to one side of the border than to the other, they facilitate movement across the line and, in general, around the border region. Their activity and the service they provide “recast the meaning of free trade and processes of ‘integration’” (p. 25,16). They do it so efficiently not only because they know how to ride a tricycle, a tuk tuk, or a *cámara* or hold a *turno* as money changers, but also because they are local inhabitants whose lives and (im)mobility patterns are profoundly involved in a binational environment. Even if they do not cross regularly, they have the inside knowledge of the borderland, and a “cross-border vision⁵”.

5. A Look at Their (Im)Mobility

These people who facilitate, who materially allow movement in the region and therefore are an important cog that allows the economic and social life of the borderland, ironically are actors who themselves hardly move about. It is precisely this quasi-immobility that allows these spaces to be dynamic, to “function,” to have life. Their quasi-immobility can be recognized in different ways.

First, a key feature of their activity is waiting. Except for the rafters, whose activity is binational par excellence, the other actors do not cross the border to carry out their activity. They need to wait for clients, which often means that they must stay at specific points for long hours, without moving, enduring heat and boredom. How much they move varies according to their activity. The most stationary are the money changers, who sit along sidewalks near the boundary, waiting; at most, they walk around to approach potential customers:

Well, a normal day means being outside enduring the sun, carrying water and waiting for someone to arrive, that if I offer to change [currencies] and [the person] asks what the rate is, well, you start to talk to him, and if [the rate] favors [him], he changes with you. It’s about being there from morning until eight, at least some [of us], right? And as I say [this involves] waiting for them to come to change.

(Money changer at Tecún Umán)

Tricycle and tuk-tuk taxi drivers move people and goods to and from the border but do not cross; they also wait long hours for customers, a routine that varies a lot from day to day. There are shifts, so some days they simply have no activity. Rafters also have to wait many hours and their activity also varies significantly; the main difference lies in their place of action, which is in between both bordering cities.

In addition to waiting, a second aspect linked to not moving is the fact that these actors’ objective is to continue their activity in that space. Most of them are local people, particularly those who own the job posts (*turno* or *plaza*), so moving people is their livelihood and it is what allows them to avoid moving somewhere else; they facilitate movement and in this way are able to avoid having to move to work elsewhere. However, it is worth noting again that, as mentioned above, the employees working for the *turno* holders are not necessarily local people. Particularly along the river, migrants are often employed on a very temporary basis; in this case, their immobility, i.e., not having to move to work elsewhere, is not the objective, but working helps migrants to continue reproducing their mobility.

The third aspect regarding their (im)mobility and its role along the border is perhaps the most complex one. It concerns power relations and negotiations with different actors

⁵ These last three lines are inspired by insightful comments of one of the anonymous reviewers of my manuscript; I literally borrow the phrase “cross-border vision” from that review, since I do not want to change the idea behind it.

at different levels—local and national authorities, international agreements and policies, and global commerce interests. Being able to remain and to keep their livelihoods has to do directly with negotiations, interactions, and, hence, with power relations between individuals and groups. It has to do with negotiating and struggling for spaces, work shifts, and job posts.

There are negotiations with actors at the national or international level. Distinct groups of workers and even local authorities themselves also have to negotiate with these actors and with policies and agreements that have not been decided locally but whose intentions are to influence, regulate, and shape the international border where they work. There is a need for negotiation so that the activity of the various associations can continue in spite of interests that might hinder this from happening.

An example of this is how in recent times there has been a greater presence of federal authorities through the Guardia Nacional to control the flow of migrants to the United States. So, local authorities, groups of workers, and merchants have seen the necessity to negotiate in order to continue working. In that way, the livelihoods of many people who depend on cross-border exchange are not directly affected. Mobility facilitators have been able to remain and keep their economic activities, regardless of the increase in border control by the Guardia Nacional, because their interest to keep working is aligned with local authorities' interests and with traders' economic needs. They all benefit from cross-border exchange; as Endres (p. 361 [17]) has shown in her study at the Vietnam–China border, “cross-border economic ties” of small traders have developed a dependency among both sides of the border, enabling the possibility to make a living out of this constant exchange. By allowing movement the way it is, they all keep their work and are able to remain, and this is how (im)mobility is constructed at these “institutional anchors,” as Hannam and colleagues pointed out [11]. The (im)mobility dynamic constructed is also in line with regional and global commerce interests.

Additionally, border externalization policies are interested in blocking international migration, not international trade, whether it is formal or informal (for a deeper review of commerce across this border, see Galemba [19]; see also Rojas [22]). Indeed, local workers know that this blurred distinction between what is formal or informal, legal or illegal, benefits not only local social and economic life within the borderland. They are aware that this imprecise situation also benefits actors at higher levels (international traders, for instance), and this is an advantage when they negotiate their permanence. The tolerance of the activity along the Suchiate River makes this patently clear, as one of the most veteran rafters narrates:

...but in our minds we said, “if they close, that’s better for us,” because we disregarded the law at every turn . . . In many aspects [the authorities] have helped us; we no longer fear that they are going to grab us and take us away with everything, *cámara*, merchandise. No, no, the owner of the cargo is the one who is going to speak up for you [and] his merchandise. Now if they don’t want to cooperate . . . well, they know. If someone arrives and does not know how the work is done, we tell him how, so he doesn’t make mistakes.

The rafter goes on to explain how they themselves, with their own resources, make sure their services are needed by taking care to prevent the river from overflowing during the rainy season or by sustaining the river’s water level during the dry season: “Yes, thank God, we’ve improved in that... look at what we’ve done, we’ve done things, we take on machines, sacks, and we do that ourselves.”

The kind of actions mentioned by the rafter tells us two main things. First, for actors at higher levels, such as federal governments and global commerce brokers, the infrastructure at the border and preventing the informal and unlawful crossing of goods and people across the river is not the focus of their attention and interest. Second, what crosses the river informally, which is of interest both at the local level and higher, is controlled locally, i.e., by the owners of the rafts, who are mainly from the Guatemalan side of the border. As Aguiar shows, “Because of political or economic interests, the dynamics transgressing

the legal order are neglected or tolerated" ([15] p. 21), making possible this blurred situation of formality and informality at borders.

This testimony clearly shows how not only rafters' livelihoods but also the continuity of informal crossings depends on their permanency. Mobility depends on immobility, on keeping things the way they are. At the same time, without the energy that mobilizes these forces, the rafters' permanency, their possibility of remaining and not moving, could not be possible; therefore, mobility and immobility are intertwined.

In addition to the above-mentioned negotiations between actors at upper levels, at the borderland level, at both border-crossing points, leaders of each association and local authorities define the spaces of action for each group and the shifts they can work. They are organized within associations in charge of dividing time and place for each activity. At La Mesilla, the COCODE (Community Development Council) allowed the formation of two groups with around 40 members each. Both groups, together with the local authority (COCODE), agreed on dividing the shifts equally. In this way, each group knows that in order to remain and have the opportunity to operate, they will have to embark on negotiations and agreements; they cannot take their livelihood for granted. Energy moved to be able remain—(im)mobility as two sides of a coin.

There are other associations such as the rafters, where there are various groups and disputes over the demarcation of work territory for the various crossing points. Taxi drivers and money changers in Ciudad Hidalgo are also two groups that have had to negotiate for distribution of the city's various places, to determine where they can and cannot operate. Each association reaches agreements between the leaders and the official and de facto local authorities, about who can have job positions and who cannot. Usually these positions are not granted in an ongoing and regular way but rather are decided when each activity begins to have a boom or when they are inherited. Here I share two testimonies. The first one comes from a tuk-tuk taxi driver and the second from a money changer, both from Las Champas. Both confirm that their opportunity to have a permit or a job position was authorized by the *ejido*:

In that [*ejido*] assembly meeting, they granted an open invitation for whoever wanted to enter and that's where we accepted, and a certain date came for that; the open invitation lasted for about three years and some didn't want to enter. Now those who did not want to take up the offer want to be where we are, but, as I say, opportunities never knock twice.

(Tuk-tuk taxi driver, Las Champas, Ciudad Cuauhtémoc)

Look, here as money changers, there were some associates ho, just like them, started out like anyone else with the intention and the desire to work and get ahead; in my case they were changing and so I made a request to the *ejido* and was authorized. That's when I started to work; everything has been done through requests sent to the *ejido*. The one who is authorized is chosen, because if you don't request the authorities' approval, then they do not help you find a space to work.

(Money changer, Las Champas, Ciudad Cuauhtémoc)

At the Ciudad Hidalgo–Tecún Umán crossing point, groups have also been formed and have evolved over time, mainly through local agreements and negotiations. The following is an interesting testimony of a rafter on the Ciudad Hidalgo side, who relates how the way in which the groups work and organize themselves evolved, how they negotiate places, job positions, and shifts:

At first there was only one group, of ten people, even twenty, so in fact it was growing and another helper that I took and left there because he worked well and was trusted. [The group] grew, another *cámara*; that's how it was going, more *cámaras*. Then we discussed among ourselves, "Well, how many are we?" "We're 40 in total." "Let 20 work today and 20 tomorrow." [. . .] we had to divide one Mexican shift and one Guatemalan shift.

As the rafter describes, the number of rafts and people working at the river grew over time, which led to negotiations among themselves on how people could enter the association, how many members they would have, and how they would divide times and shifts between one side of the border and the other.

Many individuals who work as tricycle drivers, tuk-tuk drivers, rafters, in both border cities at the two crossing points, hire or, alternatively, rent the *turno* and a vehicle in order to carry out their activity. These decisions shape the way these activities are organized, leading to unequal power relationships between different individuals and groups. Power disparities that take place in relationships among groups are notoriously between these workers and the authorities. Negotiating with authorities about who has the right and the possibility of working and under what circumstances sometimes occurs in equal conditions of power, and at other times, one party is at a disadvantage. Negotiations center on what to cede and in return for what, and the level of power that the authority has over job seekers. For example, in Tecún, the mayor's office regulates and controls taxi drivers and money-changers; in Ciudad Hidalgo, the groups also negotiate with the municipality, but the municipality does not control their work.

Arrangements and negotiations, not only with local authorities but also among leaders of the groups, on how the space and shifts will be divided, who has the right to hold a *turno*, and to whom it could be rented or inherited, gives form to their activity and opens up the possibility to remain. These arrangements are shaped by an environment of tolerance, where the notion of what is formal and informal is blurred not only when it comes to cross-border exchange but also when it comes to employment: Here is where Aguiar pointed out what borderlands are: "perceived as the periphery of the nation, spaces of in-betweenness" (p. 21 [15]). In a way, negotiations are forms of action, of movement that allows the permanency of mobility facilitators, and in this way (im)mobility is shaped at the borderland.

The fourth element characterizing how their (im)mobility is shaped and shapes the borderland has to do with mobility facilitators' interaction with risks and dangers intrinsic to their activity and the context in which it is undertaken. Driving a tuk-tuk cab in the rugged landscape of La Mesilla, operating a tricycle between cars and trailers, and standing on a rickety raft made of boards and tires in seasons when the river is very high are activities that involve risk, and not everyone can do them. These actors' health and even lives are at risk when moving goods and people.

There is also a risk because of what is transported: customers moving goods in an irregular manner, migrants crossing and heading north. Moreover, mobility facilitators face the risk of getting involved with illegal issues and activities, or even of being abused or assaulted. Being the means to move goods or people or to exchange currencies puts them in a vulnerable and even dangerous situation. Consequently, rafters, tuk-tuk taxi drivers, and tricyclists will ponder at what point they participate, if they "turn a blind eye," or if they should stand aside.

It is clear that both local and higher-level interests allow the movement of people and merchandise across the border within a poorly defined context of formality and informality, and lawfulness and unlawfulness, regardless of officially mandated policies and agreements. This ambiguity allows groups and people behind these interests to trade many products without having to go through import–export rules and regulations, which means better profits moving around in a faster and easier manner. Economic integration and free circulation take another meaning in borderlands such as this, as Schuster also has shown in her study about cars' contraband at the Argentina–Brazil–Paraguay borderland [16].

Those interests profit from the existence of the mobility facilitators, i.e., local low-wage workers who hold informal and insecure employment. Ironically, in a way, the necessity for their existence and work gives them certain power to negotiate their permanency. Even though it is not openly and generally accepted in the interviews we conducted, I could say from the field experience that many facilitators are aware of the interests in sustaining a blurred context that allows unofficial movement across the border. They could

be aware of illegal, and even criminal, activity and crossings, but in dealing with unsafe situations, workers at the border aim to survive without risking their lives, and to maintain their livelihoods without compromising them, i.e., to remain at this location, which for the majority is home, without having to migrate elsewhere.

Mobility facilitators' core interests involve maintaining their livelihoods by facilitating the movement of people and goods. Their power is focused on negotiation either among different competing groups or with local authorities and de facto forces.

As mobility scholars such as Urry [7], Sheller [6,8] and Cresswell [9] have shown, space is a process in constant evolution based on social interactions at different scales. It is therefore constructed as a process where mobility and immobility dynamics take place, evolve, and are socially constructed. In this way, more than filtering, blocking, or regulating movement, these workers, organized in groups structured differently according to dissimilar conditions at one crossing or the other, on one side of the border or the other, have a role in shaping how mobility across this international border takes place. In this way, they have a role shaping these lands divided by a border and creating the nature of these borderlands.

6. Conclusions

Money changers, tricyclists, tuk-tuk drivers, and rafters remain working at these border-crossing points regardless of militarization and despite trends of externalizing borders, since these policies at the national and international level respond to the decision to block northbound migration and not block trade⁶. This context relies on the needs for trade interconnections. These humble local actors enable mobility across borders, serving interests and needs at different levels, from the global to the very local. Without local mobility facilitators, the blending of formal and informal trade would not be possible. They are aware of the necessity of their activity, which somehow provides them with the possibility to remain, to negotiate their presence so their livelihoods can survive. In addition, they are aware of the necessity of their low-wage and insecure employment; regardless, they prefer to stay since this is the option available to them if they want to stay to live and work in the borderlands.

In both border sites discussed here, the cross-border dynamics fulfill the basic need of moving people, goods, and money. There are people who need transportation to approach and ultimately cross the border. There are goods bought and sold that need to be moved from one side of the border to the other or moved to distant places. There are currencies that need to be changed, according to the needs of each person and activity. Yet, such activities are more than that, insofar as they construct spaces from interactions of a different order and nature, originating at different scales, creating this blend of informality and formality that characterizes this border. The result is an environment that allows connection and movement but remains the same as time goes by.

The point is that, as Sheller [6] indicates, mobilities are unequal, channeled, contested, and negotiated, as are the activities of those who make them possible. Moreover, movement cannot be explained without immobility [11]. The mobility of these actors is very localized, and they are committed to permanence because, despite the changes and fluctuations in politics and economics at the federal, binational, and global levels, over the years the dynamics of these borderlands continue to depend on these actors. There is movement across borders while people's hopes are placed on permanence, even when individually. This, however, does not mean that some wish or have wished to perform other activities or to live elsewhere; the individual element is always present.

So, by adapting to the geography of the terrain, the market, and the needs of the border-crossing point in which they find themselves, while making that context "work" for them in order to continue existing, these often less-noticed actors contribute to the construction of this borderland. Their localized activity and their desire and need to remain

⁶ Trade across this border would require a deeper examination. For an insightful analysis on the matter, see Galemba [19] and Rojas [22]. For an analysis of socio-political and economic macro-structures framing these border dynamics, see Villafuerte [24].

allow for the social and economic mobility of the region as we know it. This makes these actors a key element that shapes the ordering node, the enabler of multiscale mobility. In this sense, they are fundamental protagonists of the border.

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