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Ethnographic Perspectives on the
Vicissitudes of Contemporary Migration

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**TRANSBORDERING TRADE FROM BELOW:
MIGRANT CREATIVITY IN THE CHILEAN NORTH**

Walter Imilán and Paola Jirón

TRANSBORDERING

Jorge¹ from Peru sells a refreshing beverage with medicinal properties in Alto Hospicio in Chile. The seeds and herbs that make up Jorge's beverages known as emollients² come from Lima; and every couple of months he makes the journey to his home country in search of raw materials. The distance between Alto Hospicio in Chile and Lima in Peru is 1,500 kilometers. Jorge sells a trans-border product that requires a strategic mobility that he manages well.

Border studies in Chile have examined the movement of people and objects through national borders mainly from a state centered approach. Mostly based on movement across the Chilean-Peruvian-Bolivian borders, these studies place emphasis on the importance of state control (Tapia and Gonzalez 2014), the production of otherness based on national origin (Guizardi et al. 2017) or the construction of circulation routes that connect both sides of the border (Garcés H, Moraga R, and Maureira C 2016). A more recent conception of borders sees them as dynamic, constantly shifting and changing. This involves understanding the way they are currently being constructed and the implications of living, crossing and experiencing borders (Jirón 2018). This involves observing the experience of individuals and their mobility practices across borders. These mobilities involve more than the simple change of place or the connection between two points. Mobility is a set of practices that produce spatialities (Urry 2007) and special attention is given to what happens in and through mobility, including experiences, meanings and affects, and particularly the way these practices are embodied in/through mobility (Jirón, Imilán, and Iturra 2016).

Jorge's trans-border emollient concoction is based on his personal skills and knowledge, given that it is a handcrafted product, both in its production and commercialization. Jorge's experience illuminates other ways of understanding the transbordering dynamics, the complex relation among states, affects, know-hows and migrations, that go further than higher circuits of global trade or the daily presence of state frontiers. Jorge's story is based on a collective ethnographic endeavor³ (Jirón and Imilán 2016; 2018) carried out in Alto Hospicio during 2016 and 2017, to understand current ways of dwelling in intermediate cities through different mobility practices. We first met Jorge selling emollients in Alto Hospicio square and traced his transbordering practice through an extended shadowing of his mobility practice during the summer of 2017. The following story exemplifies how mobility practices across borders involve long, variegated, stretched-out spatialities and embody practices that go well beyond the actual border being crossed.

JORGE'S ENTREPRENEURIAL INITIATIVE

Jorge is almost 34 years old; he was born in Huánuco, a small town at the entrance to the Peruvian Amazon jungle, and is married to a Peruvian woman from Tacna (Peru) – a city bordering Arica, Chile. They have two daughters and live in a small house they rent in Alto Hospicio. Jorge has been a restless soul since he was very young, always seeking new adventures and learning multiple trades such as mechanic, builder, and welder. An old man in Lima who sold emollients hired him as his assistant. That is how he learned about the preparation techniques, although he already knew many of the herbs used in the preparation, from his childhood in his hometown of Huánuco. After seven years in Chile, and having moved around many cities and trades, he decided to settle in Alto Hospicio and sell emollients.

Alto Hospicio is the fastest growing city in the history of Chile. With less than a thousand inhabitants in 1990, it currently has a population of 190 thousand inhabitants. The mining boom in the Tarapacá Region during the 1990s generated a housing pressure that was resolved by massive social housing construction in Alto Hospicio. Most of Alto Hospicio's residents are migrants. They mainly come from Peru, Bolivia and the south of Chile, but also from more distant countries like Colombia and Ecuador. The majority of them sell something in one of the numerous markets in the city. Jorge was the first to sell emollients in the city. With another salesman, he purchased a street-food truck and obtained a municipal permit. He went to Lima, specifically to the Gamarra Market, where he acquired the ingredients to make emollients to sell in Alto Hospicio's main city square. Import of raw materials for his emollients in Chile is often restricted, as it has to go through tough agrarian custom control. Jorge relies on complex strategies to obtain the ingredients for his emollient business.

JORGE'S JOURNEY

Accompanied by his wife and two daughters, he leaves Alto Hospicio to Arica by bus at 6 PM. Once there, they quickly take a taxi with Peruvian plates to Tacna. Close to 8 PM Jorge heads towards Tacna bus terminal. His wife and daughters stay at the house the family owns in Tacna, and will wait there until Jorge returns. The farewell is quick; his wife and daughters will spend the time visiting with friends and family.

Tacna bus terminal is extremely busy. He pays 5 Soles (US\$ 1.5) to an "assistant" who gets him tickets on the "the most convenient bus" to Lima. After a few minutes, the assistant comes back alerting him that the last bus to Lima is about to leave. A few minutes past 8 PM he is sitting on a small seat with faded fabric; Jorge doesn't mind being uncomfortable. Outside it's already dark, he chats with the person sitting next to him for five hours. Jorge goes over his travels and trades; he appears as a veteran adventurer. Once on the bus, he decides to extend the trip and go to Huánuco from Lima. He has not told his wife and daughters about going to his hometown. The last time he went there was four years ago. He wants to see "his people", but he also plans to obtain for his emollients an herb preparation that his aunt makes. Jorge falls asleep despite the cold wind that sweeps through the bus from the windows. Up and down, as the bus crosses over the mountains, the engine makes heavy noises on each slope. When he wakes up, he's in Chala, and a large

group of miners wearing thermal clothes and helmets get off. The coastline appears and extensive olive plantations can be seen. Two women hop on the bus to sell olives; he buys some to ease the morning hunger. He has no breakfast and the bus will not stop until noon, close to Nazca. The bus stops at a gas station and Jorge eats breakfast/lunch. The bus continues while the landscape alternates from desert brown to oasis green, valleys and rivers.

It's already dark when he arrives in Lima and he immediately buys his ticket to Huánuco. Two hours later, he's on a modern bus on his way to his hometown. Tired from the trip so far he falls into a deep sleep. He wakes up in the morning, a few kilometers away from his destination due to a flat tire. After half an hour the passengers start getting off the bus; some start picking herbs from the side of the road; others decide to ask for rides from cars waiting on the road. Jorge does the same, paying a few *soles* to the driver of a pickup truck to get him to his town as fast as possible.

The landscape is beautiful: jungle green and blue sky. Jorge's house is old and big, made out of bricks; one of his sisters and her family live in it. His parents and brothers have come to meet him at the station and take him home to a lavish feast. He soon becomes involved in a complex family problem regarding his sister: abandoned children, domestic violence, alcoholic husband, mother having to work in a nearby city. For three days, the joys of sharing with the family are accompanied by discussions, some of which are quite aggressive. Jorge meets his friends at bars; he parties and watches football matches. He is excited about being home after four years of absence. He spends three very intense days in Huánuco.

He returns to Lima, heading directly to the Gamarra market. He is only in Lima for six hours, enough time to wander through the most important fruit, vegetable and groceries market in the city. Jorge goes through the aisles, inspects prices and bargains. He buys a total of 12 two-liter bottles each filled with different color liquids. They are recycled Coca Cola or other soft drink bottles, filled with herb preparations, the raw material for his emollients.

He barely has time to eat and he gets on a modern bus that will take him back to Tacna. The first few hours on the bus are fun; he talks to a Colombian man and then a Venezuelan migrant couple heading to Chile for the first time. Once in Tacna, he goes directly to the bus terminal to take the bus back to the border crossing to Arica. Jorge has coordinated with his wife and daughters to meet him there. After hugs with his daughters, Jorge starts distributing the load, each one will cross the border with two two-liter bottles of herb preparation, the maximum allowed by customs. At that moment, Jorge tours around the terminal that at this time is full of merchants taking goods from Tacna's markets into Chile. A few minutes later he comes back with a woman and her 15-year-old son; both will take the four remaining bottles, and he will take two mountain jackets and four pairs of running shoes that belong to the woman. Without knowing each other, they all carry their load and head towards customs border control. They each take a different queue, ignoring each other while waiting for their turn. The officer inspects Jorge's luggage and asks about the bottles. Jorge immediately tells him they are soft drinks; without looking at him, he waves him through. Jorge's wife and children have all passed customs control without problems. When they get to Arica, they wait for the woman and her son for almost an hour to make the exchange. Joking about selling the jackets in case the woman does not make it, they wait for her, until she arrives with the bottles. The exchange is made in silence; they

thank each other and go their own way. They still have to get to Alto Hospicio a few hours away. At 1 AM, they get off at the Alto Hospicio terminal. Jorge takes all his goods and with his daughters and wife walks home.

GLOBALIZATION FROM BELOW: HANDMADE TEXTURES

Jorge's transbordering experience involves a certain knowledge that allows for the production and sale of his emollients in Alto Hospicio. In everyday life, this transbordering experience does not distinguish between the familial and the commercial; Jorge's transbordering is a continuum that transcends state and geographic frontiers. Unveiling these experiences of people provide a deeper understanding of the dynamics of contemporary migration geographies. These are not just about what is left behind, how the frontier is crossed or what is reached at the end, but about how this transbordering experience takes place as a constant, continuous experience that lingers in those transbordering moments and the objects they transborder with.

Alto Hospicio's economy is based on "transbordering trade from below" carried out by migrants who, through small businesses, develop their own migratory projects. The territory dwelt in by Jorge and many of the inhabitants of Alto Hospicio becomes a transnational space whose existence is strengthened, despite adverse conditions including the city's precariousness and stigmatization, by highly sophisticated and creative everyday practices in order to link up diverse spaces beyond their national borders.

In Jorge's story, we see a personal globalization where locals not only move pre-fabricated goods but produce the goods themselves through their mobility practices: the networked relations and knowledge that emerge and are consolidated through this mobility. This is crucial in understanding borders from a different point of view than state-based border studies. The mobile border presented here provides not only an extended and expanded border, but also one that has its own rhythms.

ENDNOTES

¹Jorge's real name has been omitted in order to maintain his anonymity.

² Emollients are a very popular beverage in Peru and are made from grains and seeds including barley and flaxseed and herbs such as aloe vera, cat's claw, horse's tail and many other well-known Peruvian traditional herbs. However, its sale in Chile is rare. While Peruvian migrants in Chile have successfully developed Peruvian gastronomy as economic strategy (Imilán 2015), emollients have not entered the market, apparently due to the difficult access to the Peruvian ingredients required to make them and their restricted entry to Chile.

³ For further detail on Intermediate Dwelling Research Project: www.habitar-intermedio.cl. Special thanks to Benjamin Cortez for his collaboration on fieldwork.

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