Ir en Junta, Pedir Cola, Mulear

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Tania BONILLA MENA

Latin American Faculty of Social Sciences, Ecuador (FLACSO)
tlbonillafl@flacso.edu.ec

IR EN JUNTA, PEDIR COLA, MULEAR: *Three emic concepts drawn from Venezuelan migrant experience along the Andean–Southern Cone corridors. Ir en junta (going together) denotes the collective organisation of travel, particularly among women and families, as a situated practice of mutual care and protection against the violence of transit. Pedir cola (hitchhiking) names the gendered, embodied knowledge through which migrants negotiate transportation without resources, reading the codes of the road as political and survival strategies. Mulear (secretly hitching rides on cargo trucks) captures clandestine mobility sustained by shared migrant knowledge and solidarity. Together, these practices and strategies constitute a vernacular epistemology: forms of resistance and care that reclaim migrants as political subjects.*

Keywords: Venezuelan migration; migrant epistemologies; embodied knowledge; gendered care practices in transit; vernacular language; Latin America

This text situates itself within the struggles and knowledge produced by migrants, drawing on the narratives of sixty-six Venezuelans[1] who navigated the Andean–Southern Cone corridors. It articulates, in their own terms, their embodied experiences, affects, desires, suffering, networks of solidarity, and practices of care, revealing what it means to be in transit. Particular attention is given to how migrants make sense of and mobilise strategies to sustain life and care for one another, both while travelling and in spaces of waiting. Even as their transit is shaped by increasingly restrictive migration policies[2] and a continuum of violence, their mobility also actively challenges and disrupts borders.

[1] The data derive from my PhD research based on fieldwork conducted in the Ecuadorian border cities of Tulcán (northern border with Colombia) and Huaquillas (southern border with Peru) between October 2021 and August 2022. The study employed a multi-sited and multi-scalar ethnographic approach that included 66 in-depth interviews with undocumented Venezuelan migrants (40 women and 26 men); participant observation in shelters, public transportation, highways, and parks; and one mapping workshop with migrant women aimed at understanding embodied border experiences. More interviews were conducted with women due to the gendered conditions of the field. Shelters, the primary points of access, functioned as feminised spaces where trust could be established, shaped by my gendered positionality and self-care practices as a researcher. Interviews with men took place mainly at hydration points, communal dining rooms, and outside NGO offices, where long waiting lines for humanitarian assistance allowed for extended conversations.

[2] Migration policies shifted from open to restrictive and deterrent measures, including humanitarian visas, temporary regularisation, border closures, and militarisation. Ecuador introduced a humanitarian visa in August 2019, restricting access for migrants without documentation, following Chile (Democratic Responsibility Visa, 2018) and Peru (June 2019). These

The emic concepts *ir en junta* (going together), *pedir cola* (hitchhiking), and *mulear* (secretly hitching rides in cargo trucks) serve as analytical entry points into the memory of Venezuelan migration and its precarised mobilities. This text contributes by framing these practices and expressions as vernacular language, expanding the vocabulary of mobility and care, accounting for the human impact of migration-control policies in Latin America and the Caribbean, and recognising migrants as political subjects while centring knowledge from migrant *epistemes*.

The literature inspiring this text engages the autonomy of migration (Papadopoulos and Tsianos 2013; Casas-Cortés and Cobarrubias 2019) and feminist geopolitics of waiting and care (Conlon 2011; Hyndman 2012; Hyndman and Giles 2011). Combining these perspectives centres migrants' lived experiences and agency beyond border-control constraints. Feminist geopolitics emphasises the body as a site of knowledge, highlighting "embodied epistemologies" (Hyndman 2012). This approach reveals that care, waiting, and movement are not only social and spatial practices but also corporeal experiences, shaping how migrants inhabit, endure, and navigate mobility precarity, differentiated by gender.

These three emic concepts are intricately linked to Venezuelan mobilities, which intensified in 2017 and have resulted in nearly 7.9 million people leaving the country, either voluntarily or by force (UNHCR 2025). Over the last eight years, this migration has been characterised by trajectories marked by chaos, the absence of a fixed destination, and various forms of im/mobility—often accelerated, and at other times marked by waiting—across multiple cities and countries. These are multidirectional movements: leaving, returning, migrating again. Migration has therefore become a strategy of survival, where being on the move is no longer an exception but a way of life.

Ir en Junta

Ir en junta means to be accompanied and derives from the idea of getting together. But getting together with whom, for what, and why? In the context of Venezuela's economic, political, health, and security crises, fleeing has become a collective response. Lacking resources for individual migration, many leave in groups to share the journey. Women often organise themselves in their neighbourhoods to undertake the journey with their children—infants, youth, and teenagers—as well as the elderly, pregnant women, and their nuclear or extended families. *Juntas* are also formed among adolescents, neighbours, or friends.

conditions have pushed many migrants to cross irregular routes, known as *trochas*. In this context, Venezuelans face a regional framework of securitised migration policies that contributes to their criminalisation and dehumanisation.

However, these *juntas* are not only formed at departure but also arise during the social experience of transit, when migrants encounter others, including not only Venezuelans but also migrants from other countries, especially Colombians and Cubans, who are likewise on the move. Several migrant mothers describe how, while crossing Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, or Chile, they meet other women travelling with children and decide to join forces to care for and protect one another, share what little they have, and sustain life in transit. These practices exemplify what some authors have coined as "economies of care on the move" (Álvarez Velasco and Varela Huerta 2022).

Although *ir en junta* is not used exclusively by migrant women who are mothers, it takes on particular significance for them. It represents a situated care strategy: women who leave Venezuela with their children join forces with other women along the route to build networks of mutual protection. These *juntas* involve organising to remain vigilant against dangers along the route—assaults, robberies, and abuse—as well as managing physical exhaustion: taking turns sleeping on the street, keeping watch at night, and collectively sharing caregiving responsibilities. Similarly, *juntas* are formed between nuclear families and others encountered during the journey, a practice that can be understood as part of the process of familiarisation of migrations (Pedone and Varela-Huerta 2025).

Pedir Cola

One of the strategies practised by Venezuelan migrants on the move is *pedir cola*, referring to requesting transportation from private or cargo drivers as a means of advancing without economic resources. *Pedir cola* requires knowledge of the codes of the road: identifying strategic waiting points such as toll booths, gas stations, or traffic lights; knowing how to approach drivers, what to say, and how to behave; and understanding when to insist or when to let an opportunity pass. It is a gender-differentiated practice in that women and men enact distinct bodily performances, risk assessments, and communicative strategies when approaching drivers, shaped by socially produced expectations of vulnerability and trust. Consequently, *juntas* composed mainly of women and children tend to be more successful, while men more often resort to *mulear*. These distinctions are learned through embodied experience, collective intuition, and, often, protection from travelling *en junta*.

Mulear

When *pedir cola* fails, migrants may resort to *mulear*, secretly climbing onto a truck platform, referred to as a mule, without the driver noticing. It becomes an extreme, yet common, recourse, when there are insufficient economic resources to continue the journey.

Mulear, a practice predominantly carried out by men, relies on shared knowledge circulating among migrants along the route: knowing whether a *mula* is empty or already taken, identifying the right moment to climb aboard, and preparing for long journeys with uncertain destinations. When a *mula* is "won" or "full," those already occupying it prevent others from boarding—not only due to limited space but also out of concern about theft or confrontation.

Families and *juntas* engaging in *mulear* take extra precautions: bringing food, ropes, or sheets to hold onto, organising shifts to keep watch, and caring for one another. The *mula*'s platform is a space where both bodies and emotions are exposed to risk. Children play a central role, inventing low-movement games, singing, sharing experiences, and forming their own *juntas*. Valuable items such as backpacks, clothing, or toys are often lost in the rush to disembark, a loss that can be especially painful for children.

In closing, *ir en junta*, *pedir cola*, and *mulear* constitute individual and collective strategies that Venezuelan migrants employ to remain on the move. In migrants' own words, these practices reflect disobedience and resistance while articulating how care, protection, and solidarity are enacted and (re)created during transit.

Use of AI

The author declares limited use of generative artificial intelligence (AI) in the preparation of this manuscript. The tool was used exclusively to review the linguistic coherence of the English text after translation from Spanish to English by the author. The translation and all substantive content were produced by the author, who reviewed and validated the final manuscript and assumes full responsibility for its content.

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