

AUTOBIOGRAPHIES, ETHNOGRAPHIES, AND OTHER STORIES: MIGRATIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN THE AMAZON <https://doi.org/10.63330/aurumpub.013-007>**Josué Carlos Souza dos Santos¹****ABSTRACT**

This work derives from my Doctoral thesis in Education at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, a research project conducted with the support of the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel – Brazil (CAPES). In 2016, the number of Venezuelans entering Brazil through the border with Venezuela, in the state of Roraima, intensified. This movement, perceived as a forced migratory displacement, led the country to create Operação Acolhida (Operation Welcome), a governmental and interagency humanitarian response that includes the establishment of institutional shelters to accommodate these individuals, as well as practices for local integration. Continuing to this day, the operation still welcomes Venezuelans of different ages and backgrounds, many of whom remain in the process of social and economic adaptation and integration in Brazil. Based on this context, this work presents considerations and preliminary results of the study whose research problem was guided by the following question: What does it mean for Venezuelans to be a migrant and/or refugee in Brazil? The general objective, therefore, is to understand what it means for Venezuelans to be a migrant and/or refugee in Brazil while living in one of the humanitarian shelters in Roraima. The hypothesis I present is twofold: The migration of Venezuelans to Brazil is situated in an in-between space (*entre-lugar*) (Bhabha, 1998), a non-physical space-time of cultural hybridization; and Migration does not end upon arrival in Brazil but continues in various ways: in the comings and goings between Venezuela and Brazil, in life within the shelter and outside it, in access to public policies, among others. The theoretical framework is based on the studies of Paul Ricoeur (1994, 2004), specifically the hermeneutic triple mimesis (*prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration*), which consists of a process of self-constitution mediated by time and narrative (Ricoeur, 1994). I also draw on studies on/with narratives following the paths traced by Ricoeur (1994), Oliveira (2011), and Benjamin (1987), and employ Ethnography as a theoretical-methodological approach based on Malinowski (1976). As methodological procedures, in addition to ethnographic writing in a field diary, I adapted the methodology of the Reflective Group based on Passeggi (2011, 2023) and Gabriel (2011) for socialization with participants and collection of their narratives. For data analysis, I rely on the development of investigative axes based on Nóvoa (1988), as well as Szymanski (2004), with the identification of axes. Gabriel (2011) assists me in triangulating these data, a process always mediated by Ricoeur's hermeneutics (1994). The results of this investigation are interdisciplinary contributions to the field of Human Sciences, particularly in Education, and, in the academic sphere, a more specific understanding of discussions about/with migrants and refugees in Brazil, specifically Venezuelans in the Amazon. For the migrant and refugee community, it offers a deeper discussion about being a migrant and/or refugee in Brazil and its social, educational, and humanitarian implications.

Keywords: Migration; Narratives; Ethnography; Education; Interdisciplinarity.

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INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian Amazon possesses a rich cultural, linguistic, and regional diversity that fosters the development of multiple communities, such as riverine communities (peoples who inhabit the rivers), Indigenous communities from different ethnic groups, groups of refugees and migrants from various parts of the world—especially from neighboring countries (Colombia, Venezuela, Guyana)—among other contexts that position this epicenter of the world as multicultural, plural, diverse, and symbolic.

Being from the Amazon, drinking from its rivers, dressing in the warmth of the North, and resting in the shade of ancient trees while listening to ancestral stories, I have directed my studies toward the peoples of the Amazon, seeking to understand how they are constituted and how they help shape the particularities and peculiarities of Amazonian daily life. Thus, I have developed works such as “Refuge, Narratives and Stories: Migrations and Experiences in the Amazon” (Santos; Gabriel, 2019), “Venezuelan Migrants in the Amazon: Listening to Stories” (Santos, 2025), “The Lifeworld of Amazonian Children and Their Childhoods” (Santos, 2025), among others.

My objective as a researcher of/in the Amazon is to give visibility to the cultural context of this region, to its peoples and their stories, to the way their daily lives are constituted, their specific issues of belonging, their relationship with politics, and how life in society unfolds—a constant alternation between life in rural areas (in the countryside and the Amazon rainforest) and in urban areas (in the city).

Considering that Venezuela is one of the nations bordering Brazil in the Amazon region, and also the significant migratory flow of Venezuelans to Brazil since 2016 due to the socio-economic and political context in their country, within the scope of my doctoral work, I asked myself: What does it mean for Venezuelans to be a migrant and/or refugee in Brazil? What meanings do they attribute to their migratory processes? What dialogues and interactions do they establish when faced with the multiple identities present in Roraima?

Through these complex questions, I sought to understand the understanding of Venezuelan migrants and refugees in Brazil regarding themselves, their migration and displacement processes that resulted in leaving their country of origin and arriving in Brazil, coming to live in a large humanitarian shelter in the city of Boa Vista, in Roraima, in the northern region of the Brazilian Amazon.

The considerations in this work derive from my Doctoral thesis in Education at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences and Letters of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo, and are also part of the heated discussions within the Educational, Autobiographical, Interdisciplinary and Intercultural Research Group of Roraima (GEPAIIRR) and the Amazonian School of Philosophy, both certified by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq) of Brazil.

The migratory movement of Venezuelans worldwide, especially to Brazil—now conceptualized as what I propose to call Forced Migratory Displacement (FMD)—began in 2016, with a migratory wave of

Indigenous ethnic groups Warao and Pemón to the state of Roraima, on the Brazil-Venezuela border, gaining even more strength in the following years, particularly in 2018, when more than 800 people were entering the country daily, overcrowding public spaces and demanding social, emergency, and humanitarian assistance from governments, organizations, and society as a whole (CERCA DE 800, 2018). The reasons for such FMD, according to media and other sources, are diverse and stem from the final years of former President Hugo Chávez's administration and the transition to his successor, Nicolás Maduro, evidenced in events such as the overpricing of goods/food that resulted in exorbitant inflation (Ortiz, 2015; MORRE AOS 58, 2013), the poor quality of education in Venezuela, when it existed (Singer, 2021), the increase in violence (Moura, 2021; CICV, 2018), among others.

These social, historical, and especially political events led Venezuelans to migrate to other nations, including Brazil, in search of better socio-economic living conditions, income, and (sub)existence. In Brazil, upon arrival, they began to occupy streets and public spaces until the Federal Government created Operação Acolhida (Operation Welcome), a governmental and interagency response responsible for providing humanitarian aid to these individuals. Living in shelters, migrants and refugees began to re-signify their existence through projects for local integration, livelihoods, and adaptation in the host nation. It is precisely these fundamental processes of self-constitution and reconstitution that this research addresses, aiming to understand who these people are now, in the face of a new context and life configuration.

The research is identified as phenomenological, qualitative, exploratory, and descriptive. The theoretical framework relies on two fundamental concepts: autobiographical narratives and ethnography, both also serving as methodological procedures. Furthermore, the theoretical foundation is based on Paul Ricoeur's philosophy of language (1994; 2004), the French philosopher known for his significant contributions to the fields of Phenomenology and Philosophy of Language, which theoretically underpins this work with the theory of the hermeneutic triple mimesis: the understanding and interpretation of language, action, and human experience.

Field research took place in January 2025 in the state of Roraima, in the Amazon, specifically in one of the urban humanitarian shelters of Operação Acolhida, Rondon 1. Its central elements included the methodology adapted from the Reflective Group (Passeggi, 2011, 2023) and the ethnography of visits to the shelter, recorded in the researcher's field diary, based on Malinowski (1976) and Geertz (1978)².

² This research was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) for studies involving human subjects at the Faculty of Philosophy, Sciences, and Letters of Ribeirão Preto, University of São Paulo (FFCLRP/USP) on December 8, 2024, under opinion no. 7,275,352 and CAAE no. 82766724.9.0000.5407. The authorizations and other technical procedures carried out for field research involving human participants are based on Resolution no. 510/2016 of the National Health Council (BRAZIL, 2016).



CONTEXTUALIZING THE RESEARCH

The nation of Venezuela possesses many cultural and geographical riches, as well as a history marked by oppression and ongoing tension. According to Coggiola (2017), around 1522, the Spanish Empire established colonies with the enslavement of local native peoples and the use of African labor, aiming to produce cocoa, coffee, and other spices for Europe. It was Simón Bolívar who led its independence in 1811, with an economy essentially based on agriculture for subsistence—a system that persisted until the First World War, during the period of 1914–1918.

After these years and events, its economy shifted to the extraction, refining, and export of oil. From the appointment of the first head of state, former President Cristóbal Mendoza (who governed Venezuela from 1811–1812), to the most recent, Nicolás Maduro (2013 until the time of writing this work, in 2026), Venezuela has experienced many extreme contexts: it was once considered the richest country in Latin America, in the mid-1980s, and more recently faces one of its greatest economic crises (Lander, 2017).

Venezuelan authors have dedicated themselves to researching the political, social, and economic context of Venezuela during the Chávez and Maduro periods, such as Urbaneja (2007), Lander (2017), Páez (2015), Llorens (2018), and López Maya (2023). These authors offer perspectives that capture cultural, social, and political nuances with an insider's view, understanding the particularities of the historical context and the complexities of the problems faced by Venezuelan society from their own experiences. According to López Maya (2023), for example, the political polarization of the Chávez era and the crisis under Maduro's government have cultural and historical roots that are best understood when analyzed from within, by those who experience the impacts of these regimes daily.

The Chavista political project had its controversies, as, while promoting public policies in favor of the poor, it also implemented communist/socialist practices of power centralization and militarization (Jácome, 2006), and economic mismanagement mainly related to international oil trade, considering its fluctuations in the global market. This led Venezuela, at the peak of its economic history in previous years, to occupy the position of the 12th largest oil producer in the world (Resende; Leão, 2018), despite having the largest proven oil reserves globally (IBP, n.d.). These factors culminated in a series of socio-economic issues that were possibly responsible, in the years following that period, for the forced migratory displacement of Venezuelans to other nations and to Brazil, as I pointed out in my master's dissertation (Santos, 2022). Among these possible causes, I highlight: the overpricing of goods/food that resulted in exorbitant inflation (Ortiz, 2015; MORRE AOS 58, 2013), the poor quality of education in Venezuela, when it existed (Singer, 2021), the increase in violence (Moura, 2021; CICV, 2018), among others that directly impacted the lives of Venezuelans.



Before the emergence of shelters in the city of Boa Vista, the capital of the state of Roraima, in northern Brazil, in early 2016, there was an observed increase in the flow of Venezuelans entering Brazil through the border located between the cities of Santa Elena de Uairén, in Bolívar, Venezuela, and Pacaraima, in Roraima, Brazil; they were Indigenous people from various ethnic groups, predominantly the Warao, as noted by Mattos (2018) and UNHCR (2020).

Between 2017 and 2018, the migratory flow of Venezuelans to Brazil increased even more, reaching a record of 800 people entering the border daily (CERCA DE 800, 2018). Over time, some organizations began to provide an emergency humanitarian response to this situation, such as the United Nations (UN) with several of its agencies, funds, and departments, as well as the Federal Government, through the direct involvement of the Brazilian Army in operational logistics, security, and food distribution.

In 2018, the Federal Government systematized the work of these actors in the field, assigning specific mandates: the Ministry of Defense, now with its three branches—Navy, Army, and Air Force—would continue operating in the areas already under development regarding shelters, that is, logistics/infrastructure, security, and food, while UNHCR would be responsible for the management and coordination of shelters, together with its institutional partners, non-governmental organizations, and in joint coordination with the Ministry of Citizenship (currently restructured as the Ministry of Social Development and Assistance, Family and Fight Against Hunger). Thus, Operação Acolhida (Operation Welcome) emerged as a humanitarian, social, budgetary, governmental, and interagency response to the forced migratory displacement of Venezuelans in Brazil.

UNHCR (2021) states the objectives of OA as follows:

Operation Welcome is structured around three pillars: border management; sheltering; and interiorization, which consists of voluntary relocation to other Brazilian states (UNHCR, 2021, p. 13).

Border management, the first objective, consists of:

(1) having greater control of the situation in loco (“on-site”), whether regarding national security—since this border, in addition to Venezuelan migration, faces other challenges (Indigenous issues, conflicts related to illegal gold and diamond mining, and other Amazonian resources, etc.); (2) statistical control of the number of entries and exits, not only of Venezuelans and Brazilians but of all nationalities passing through; and (3) strategic organization related to the temporary documentation of individuals for entry into the country.

Sheltering, the second objective, consists of providing a place for people who would not have the financial means to rent a house or obtain other forms of housing upon arrival, also on a temporary and



voluntary basis, subject to availability in these locations. Interiorization, the third objective, consists of transferring Venezuelans to other states in Brazil, through flights operated by the Brazilian Air Force (FAB) or negotiations for seats on private airline flights. Often these transfers, also voluntary, included guaranteed employment and accommodation at the destination for a set period, depending on the modality of interiorization chosen by the person. This was done to provide Venezuelans with other opportunities for socialization and professionalization, considering that in Brazil's major capitals there are numerous possibilities for employment, housing, and income.

In Brazil, institutional shelters for reception are part of public policies generally linked to state and/or municipal departments working with social assistance. These shelters aim to accommodate people in situations of social vulnerability, such as homeless individuals, unaccompanied children and adolescents, orphans, minors under protective measures, the elderly, women victims of gender-based violence, among others. They are small to medium-sized shelters, with immediate action, aiming for reintegration into society under better conditions, from the moment of screening and reception to the post-shelter period, when individuals are prepared for reintegration into life outside these environments.

The shelters in Boa Vista, between 2016 and 2017, did not have this configuration. They faced various structural problems, such as overcrowding, sanitation and hygiene issues, internal and surrounding violence, among others (Costa et al., 2018). This was because they were provided by the competent authorities on an emergency basis and based on the resources available at that time and context. Meanwhile, other public sectors, such as health, labor, and education, which were already struggling with weaknesses in public resource management and other structural problems, saw an increase in demand for services (Arruda-Barbosa et al., 2020), making it evident that a complete reform of public policy systems was necessary—not only to address these new challenges related to increased demand for services but also to tackle the structural problems that already existed prior to this situation.

In this context, and up to the present moment of writing this work, many people did not enter shelters, occupying streets, public squares, and the surroundings of the International Bus Terminal of Boa Vista, the arrival point for buses from Venezuela. This occurred either due to lack of space in shelters or fears of facing other situations associated with sheltering. These places quickly became crowded with people of various ages and vulnerabilities, including children, the elderly, individuals with chronic illnesses, and other conditions.

THEORETICAL MARKER: THE TRIPLE MIMESIS

The reflective moments and guiding questions that are fundamental in the development of the Reflective Group, as well as in my own ethnographic writing in the field diary, are based on Ricoeur's hermeneutics (1994; 2004), which considers *mimesis* as an interpretative process of comprehension and

self-recognition. Drawing on Aristotle's Poetics, in which Ricoeur analyzes the mediation that occurs between time and narrative, it is possible to observe that, in the interpretative process of these experiences, difficulties emerge in which narrative, reader, and text are in constant interaction. Within Ricoeurian reflections, Melo (2010) highlights that, "To understand a text means, therefore, not only to make explicit its meaning as a whole (its structure), but also to unveil its references, that is, the project of the world that unfolds within it" (Melo, 2010, p. 06).

According to Ricoeur (1994), the theory of triple mimesis can be defined as follows:

(...) It is by constructing the relationship among the three mimetic modes that I establish the mediation between time and narrative. It is this very mediation that unfolds across the three phases of mimesis. (...) To resolve the problem of the relation between time and narrative, I must establish the mediating role of the weaving of intrigue between a stage of practical experience that precedes it and a stage that succeeds it. (...) *We therefore follow the destiny of a prefigured time into a refigured time, through the mediation of a configured time* (Ricoeur, p. 87).

Thus, in "Mimesis I" there occurs an initial description of the process of human experience, where narrative "imitates" human action through the recreation of events and experiences in narrative form. It is a phase of prefiguration, that is, the one in which language acts as an unfolding of narrative, the evocative act of narrating oneself. "Mimesis II" is an intermediate phase, a mediation between the preceding and succeeding stages of mimesis: a configuration. This configuration, in turn, is inserted in a process that the author calls the "operation of configuration" (Ricoeur, 1994, p. 102), where there occurs "(...) a broader mediation between pre-understanding and, if I may say so, post-understanding, of the order of action and its temporal traces" (Ibidem, p. 103). It is constituted in the relation between narrative and time, providing a structure that enables subjects to understand and interpret events.

"Mimesis III" is constituted as a reflection between the pre-narrative world and the narrative world. Furthermore, it "(...) marks the intersection between the world of the text and the world of the listener or reader" (Ibidem, p. 110). It also involves the synthesis of elements from the empirical world and the narrative world through the analysis of a narrative already produced which, in the exercise of configuring this narrative (Mimesis II), was organized and systematized. Now, in "*Mimesis III*," the narrative acquires possibilities, among them the possibility of attributing new meanings to the world and to our experience within it—a re-signification, since now "(...) the narrative has its full meaning when it is restored to the time of acting and suffering in *Mimesis III*" (Ibidem, p. 110).

As the research advanced, it was possible to perceive how mimesis unfolds in the biography written and inscribed in Venezuelan bodies and lives. In reflecting upon their lives, certain markers became evident, such as time (before and after in Venezuela, with the transition of governments as a catalytic event for their exodus, as well as the future, now in Brazil) and geography (life in Venezuela, life in Brazil). The reflection on oneself, now converted into narrative—the act of projecting these life



experiences into the world—enabled a movement back and forth across past, present, and future, a recognition of symbols and signs of belonging and reference, and also the envisioning of possibilities in *what is to come*, that is, the future. According to Ricoeur (1994):

The complete event is not merely that someone speaks and addresses an interlocutor, but also that one aspires to bring into language and share with another a new experience. And this experience, in turn, has the world as its horizon (Ibidem, p. 119–120).

Moreover, not only the act of speaking about oneself, narrating oneself, but reflecting through the spoken and written word enabled the narrator to understand the meanings that are part of their life trajectory and other elements that permeate their universe—now seen as an experience of having the world, their own world and that of others who dialogue with them, as horizon, that is, as possibilities, as breadth, as contemplation. In this sense, the triple mimesis, allied with autobiographical narratives, became an indispensable tool in the educational and narrative work with these participants.

Autobiographical narratives, as a theoretical and methodological research resource, initially received the designation “life stories” under the perspective of biographical studies. As Guérios (2011) shows us, the initial focus of these studies was twofold: “(...) social changes related to migratory processes” (Ibidem, p. 10), when autobiographical accounts began to be used as a research resource, and also “(...) the careers of individuals considered deviant or delinquent” (Ibidem, p. 10), which took into account that the social belonging of a given individual should not be the primary element to be considered in relation to their own constitution of self.

Years later, “life stories” (and later unfolding into “life trajectories”), as well as biographical and autobiographical studies, acquired depth and refinement in their use as theoretical and methodological resources in research in the Social Sciences and also in the Humanities. According to Galvão (2005), narrative possesses three elements that complement one another:

[1] Story – encompasses the characters involved in certain events, within a given space and time, and allows for a first interpretation of what is narrated; [2] Discourse – the specific form in which any story is presented; [3] Signification – a second-level interpretation that the listener/reader/viewer obtains from the interrelationship of the story and the respective discourse (Galvão, 2005, p. 328).

Now, it is in the articulation of these elements—story, discourse, and signification—that we encounter narrative. It is in narrating oneself, critically reflecting, and mimetically interpreting this self-narrative that we encounter autobiographical narratives. In the exercise of narrating myself, I first remember the situations, the moments. I “excavate” (in the sense of someone delving more deeply) in my memory and bring that event alive again through the lens of the present. Next, I reflect upon it (the situations, the moments), which brings me more details about what occurred, as well as a better

understanding. Finally, I systematize this reflection in my narrative, thus telling my story. According to Gabriel (2011), “To work with life stories, with narrativity, is to afford ourselves as historical subjects the articulation of lived times” (Gabriel, 2011, p. 44). In this way, I move back and forth in time, in memories, in lived experience.

‘*COMO EN VENEZUELA Y EN BRASIL*’: ITINERANT ETHNOGRAPHIES AND NARRATIVES

Entering the shelter again brings back many memories: of the first faces that stepped off the bus and walked through those gates when the shelter first opened, of the many people welcomed over the years, of the colleagues I made who now hold other positions, professions, and roles. Choosing to venture down these paths once more meant revisiting a place that was the same, yet also different—the shelter, and myself.

Before setting foot in the shelter, I asked myself a few questions: What will it be like to return to the field after so many years? What has changed since I left? Will the faces I see now be the same as those from back then? What challenges do the teams face today, and how has the operation adapted to different governments, mandates, and policies it has traversed? With these questions in mind, I packed my backpack, my notes, and my ideas, and set off for the specific field site: the Rondon 1 shelter.

The Rondon 1 shelter covers a total area of 65,779.8 m², with various physical structures built from scratch. These include: bathroom containers, offices and storage units, water fountains, light poles, floodlights, and overlays, in addition to temporary housing units known as Refugee Housing Units (RHUs) and Transitional Shelter Units (TSUs), as shown below. The total number of RHUs in the shelter is 153 units, and the total number of TSUs is 211.

Figure 1: RHUs



Source: Personal archive (2025).

Figure 2: TSUs



Source: Personal archive (2025).

The RHUs (first photo) were the first to be installed in the shelter. Being emergency housing units, they have structural, physical, and sustainability limitations that deteriorate over time due to usage, local conditions (such as intense heat or heavy rainy seasons), and other factors affecting their durability. The shelter was inaugurated in July 2018 (Folha Web, 2018), completing seven uninterrupted years of operation in 2025. At the time of the field research, in January 2025, the shelter was at full capacity, housing 2,300 people.

Carpa, translated from Spanish into Brazilian Portuguese as “tent,” is the popular term used by both the residents and other actors in the shelter (such as the AVSI team, security staff at the gate, military personnel, etc.) to refer to the housing units inside the shelter, whether RHUs or TSUs (when using *carpa*, no distinction is made between the housing models). I noticed that both Spanish terms are used by Brazilians working in the shelter and Portuguese terms by Venezuelans, resulting in a new hybrid language: *Portuñol*.

Portuñol is a language born of confrontation. It emerges at the threshold between institutional and informal borders, physical and non-physical, geographic-spatial boundaries, and the semantic and symbolic edges that intersect them. The blending of Brazilian Portuguese and Venezuelan Spanish words is a form of adaptation, continuous learning, and fusion. It is a survival strategy.

The teams working in the shelter are threefold: the military component, represented by army personnel responsible for structural and security issues; and the civilian component, composed of the gate security team (outsourced private staff) and AVSI Brasil, responsible for shelter management. Both components—military and civilian—interact with Venezuelans, giving life and meaning to the shelter.



Issues related to overall management are generally referred to AVSI, which seeks solutions. The AVSI team operates in the following areas: management, protection, registration, distribution, and community participation.

The entrance through which people come and go is located at the center of a space flanked by military offices on the left and humanitarian offices on the right. These offices are temporary containers, and each team works in its designated space. On the humanitarian side, one container houses shelter management, another the registration team (responsible for updating records), another the protection team (which handles cases of extreme vulnerability requiring additional care), and another for general activities, where a poster reading “La voz de los refugiados” informs me that a kind of community radio also operates there.

ENCOUNTERS AND REENCOUNTERS WITH THE REFLECTIVE GROUP: PHASES

The visits to the shelter had as their general objective to allow me to be inserted into the lives of Venezuelans in order to foster closeness—a concern I have carried since my master’s research, oscillating between being a stranger and being recognized by the community:

(...) Who am I in this humanitarian universe? A passerby among specific cultural realities? A *Baudelairean flâneur* who is neither them nor the “me” from before, but a new self that emerges from contact with these realities? I still do not know. But what I do know is that sometimes I am a stranger in the community, and at other times I am a *pana* (“friend” in the Warao language). This happens because the community is always changing, and new faces soon take the place of others who have migrated further into Brazil. Thus, for the newcomers, I am a stranger, and for the old ones, I am part of the house (Santos, 2022, p. 66).

This concern is not mine alone; it can also be seen in Geertz (1989), who feared not being seen and/or recognized by the researched community—and consequently having his insertion hindered. Based on this general objective of the visits to the shelter, the specific objectives consisted of: 1) visits for participant observation, and 2) meetings with the reflective group.

Other *ad hoc* visits (“specific”) occurred in parallel to these objectives, such as when I was invited to attend the meeting of the *carpa verde* (green tent), that is, one of the shelter committees, and another when the Community-Based Participation (CBP) assistants invited me to walk through the shelter, introducing me to different spaces and telling their stories.

I took as a reference the reflective group developed by Passeggi (2011; 2023) as a pedagogical practice in the field of education within the context of “autobiographical writing workshops” (Passeggi, 2023, p. 150). In this group, self-writing is a dialectical process of re-signifying oneself and one’s experiences, mediated by a researcher. It is through “autobiographical reflection” (Passeggi, 2011, p. 150) that the group achieves its purpose. According to Passeggi (2023):

The reflective group is formed by people who share with other participants their sense of belonging to the group and their engagement in a common project: to share and re-signify lived experience in order to understand oneself and be reborn with the other and as another (Passeggi, 2023, p. 04).

Based on Passeggi (2011, 2023) and Gabriel (2011), and adapting to the context of my work, I developed and organized the following table with the reflective moments proposed to mediate group discussions:

Table 1 – Guiding and Complementary Questions

Moment	Guiding Question	Complementary Questions
First	“What experiences marked my life in Venezuela and in Brazil?”	What was my life like in Venezuela? What were the significant moments of my life trajectory? What led me to live in a shelter in Brazil?
Second	“What did these experiences do to me?”	How do these experiences manifest in me now, in Brazil? What is my life like in the shelter? What is my life like in Brazil?
Third	“What do I do now with what this has done to me?”	What do I think about my future? Does writing about myself help me reflect on my story?

Source: Author’s elaboration based on Passeggi (2011, 2023) and Gabriel (2011).

These guiding questions were central to the meetings, which were not limited to them but also included icebreaker activities and other methodologies.

The **first meeting** was unexpected. I had spoken with the AVSI team that I would go to the shelter initially to introduce myself, meet the humanitarian staff, and take a first walk through the shelter to gather initial impressions. As I mentioned earlier, this would not be my first visit to the shelter, since, in addition to having worked during its inauguration in July 2018, I made several visits due to my role at UNHCR, which coordinated the shelters in macro (in the context of the national and international humanitarian response) and *in loco*, frequently visiting the field in Roraima (including Rondon 1). However, considering that the shelter undergoes daily changes in human and material resources—among other shifts over the years—revisiting it was a movement of new discoveries, re-signification of impressions, and the emergence of new possibilities.



When writing the project and deciding to venture down these paths again, I asked myself: What will it be like to return to the field after so many years? What has changed since I left? Will the faces I see now be the same as those from back then? What challenges do the teams face, and how has Operation Welcome adapted to different governments, mandates, and policies?

That is why I use the term (re)know—written separately yet together. The narrative-ethnographic research would allow me to know the shelter again, in terms of its new challenges, new subjects, and other perspectives (another shelter?) (Field Diary, 2025).

All these questions indeed materialized: I met the humanitarian staff, the military personnel, the gate security team, and some Venezuelans; I walked through the shelter, saw people moving about in their daily lives, and so on. However, in addition, the AVSI team had gathered all the selected participants—10 people identifying as men and 10 as women—in a room for what they believed would be the first meeting with me, the first reflective group session. This happened because the person who communicated between me and the shelter team—an AVSI staff member working in an external office—had told them this would be the purpose of my first visit, which was a miscommunication.

This initial visit was not intended for a group session but only for my introduction to the AVSI team and some time in the shelter for participant observation and initial notes. Initially, I had planned the first meeting to occur (at the appropriate time, duly scheduled) with the following structure: first, presentation of the researcher and the research (context, objectives, justification, and other elements); second, collection of consent through the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF), the Participant Profile Form, and the Consent for Use of Image, Name, and/or Voice; third, an icebreaker activity to transition from the formal moment to a more relaxed one, where participants would express themselves based on guiding questions I had prepared.

Prigol and Ramasco (2018) provide a brief literature review on applying group dynamics in research contexts. According to the authors, Kurt Lewin, in 1944, developed the field theory of group dynamics, stating that participants establish behaviors based on what is or is not comfortable to their cognitions. Later, Bion (1975) argued that interpreting these behaviors allows researchers to read between the lines of group phenomena, thus understanding them better. In the Brazilian context, Weil (1967) stated that one of the main objectives of implementing this methodology was to identify and address obstacles to communication and the causes of conflict (Weil, 1967 *apud* Prigol; Ramasco, 2018).

In this sense, group dynamics are a fundamental element aimed at breaking (or at least minimizing) the non-physical distance between researcher and participants—that is, strangeness, uncertainties, shyness, and even discomfort. As Murthy (2017) points out: Strong social connections are characterized by meaningful shared experiences and mutually beneficial relationships (Murthy, 2017, p. 27). By working on these communication barriers between researcher and participants, it becomes possible to create informal, relaxed, and welcoming spaces, constituting a key strategy for building rapport and even facilitating data collection.



Due to the internal miscommunication that disrupted my schedule, I had not brought the documents nor prepared the icebreaker activity, since, as I mentioned, my initial visit was only for introductions and rediscoveries of the shelter. I was then led to the room where the participants were waiting. I introduced myself and the research objectives, and at the end of this brief moment, we agreed to meet again in three days for the official first session—which now became the second. The total number of participants was 10 adult men and 10 adult women.

Although unexpected, this first meeting allowed me to reflect on some issues. I noticed that people were quite serious, reserved, and especially showed signs of strangeness toward participating in the research. I explained the importance of having their stories and trajectories discussed in academia and in their own voices and perspectives, especially in other Brazilian states, for broader visibility of their discursive, formative, and performative opinions on how they construct their worlds and histories. Even though they agreed that everything was clear and well explained, their body language told me otherwise. Thus, I reaffirmed the importance of conducting an icebreaker activity in the next sessions.

The **second meeting** began with reintroducing myself and the research. I collected signatures—and their respective consents—on the administrative documents and proceeded to the icebreaker activity, which consisted of the free association technique rooted in the theory of social representations and based on Freud (2001):

Say everything that comes to mind. Behave as you would, for example, as a passenger sitting on a train by the window, describing to your fellow traveler how the landscape changes before your eyes (Freud, 2001, p. 136, our translation).

Thus, as an icebreaker, I placed a flipchart between us and, as I said certain words, they freely expressed the first word that came to mind upon hearing terms like “Venezuela,” “Brazil,” “Politics,” and others. The varied responses—such as “Arepa” (a typical Venezuelan food) when hearing “Venezuela,” “Corruption” when hearing “Politics,” and “Thank you” when hearing “Brazil”—revealed the unfolding of their migration: dissatisfaction with the Venezuelan government, gratitude for Brazilian hospitality, cultural symbols referenced in their voices, and other markers of belonging and identity.

After the activity and establishing rapport, I explained the guiding question for that session and the corresponding writing prompts: “What experiences marked my life in Venezuela and in Brazil?” At the end, participants asked to write at home, calmly and attentively, and bring their narratives to the next meeting, which I agreed to.

The **third meeting** involved receiving the written narratives requested earlier. In this session, we worked with the guiding question: “What did these experiences do to me?” I noticed that conversations revolved around cross-cutting themes such as education and economic and labor factors.



The **fourth meeting** included another icebreaker activity, complementing data collection and varying the session dynamics. This time, I asked participants to create an artistic piece on a blank sheet representing life (previously) in Venezuela, life (currently) in Brazil, or both. Participants produced poems, drawings, song lyrics, and spontaneous narratives about the ruptures, gains, and losses of being a migrant in Brazil.

After this activity, I collected the narratives requested in the previous session and continued discussions under the final guiding question: “What do I do now with what this has done to me?” I observed that various themes intertwined, shaping their voices, narratives, experiences, and lives: family, urban life, geography (sometimes speaking of life in Venezuela, sometimes in Brazil), and temporalities (past, present, and future). Thus, the narrative did not follow a chronological linearity but made detours, seeking its mimetic apex in memory, reflection, and action.

The **fifth and final meeting** involved collecting the last narratives and closing the sessions together. The participants who “survived until now” were fully engaged: they arrived on time, enthusiastically delivered their narratives, and actively participated when asked—or even spontaneously—always voluntarily. In this last meeting, we shared a snack and celebrated the conclusion of the sessions.

MIGRANT BIOGRAPHIES: THE AXES OF SELF-CONSTITUTION

As I systematically read and reread the narratives of the Venezuelans, I developed thematic axes based on what they recounted about life, facts, and history. I draw on the axes of formation proposed by Nóvoa (1988) in his methodological description of a teacher-training project in education (called the Prosalus Project), which was successful and focused on educational biography based on group self-training dynamics and retroactive understanding—that is, participants’ awareness of their own trajectories. When describing the methodological procedures adopted, the author provides recommendations for applying this dynamic in other contexts, including the use of “investigative axes.” According to him:

The division into groups should be made according to certain “investigative axes,” which guide the elaboration of educational biographies and later facilitate content analysis (Nóvoa, 1988, p. 162).

From this point, I took a different path from Nóvoa, as the axes did not guide the constitution of the reflective group nor its discussions (as we saw, that role belonged to the guiding questions). In other words, the axes did not emerge before the group or narrative collection but after a careful reading of the texts. Following Nóvoa’s (1988) recommendations and the axes present in educational biographies, I present the axes I extracted from the migrant biographies of the Venezuelans in this study.

Table 2: Triangulation of Axes

Axes of Investigation			
Axes of Training (Nóvoa, 1988)	Description	Axes of Self-Constitution	Description
Structure and Cycles	Wholeness in a life course: stages, significant moments, transitional phases, etc.	From abundance to scarcity.	From life before the political and social changes in Venezuela to the present moment (or to the time when they left their homeland), focusing on the transition between these periods, Venezuelans narrate moments and experiences that culminated in their departure from the nation.
		We, migrants	Based on their autobiographical narrative, Venezuelans recount how they perceive themselves and how they see themselves in the world.
		I move forward	In finding traces of memories and recognitions, the narrators point out expectations regarding life, that is, the future.
Map of Relationships	Influence of “others” in the constitution of the self, that is, the people who were/are part of their life trajectory in Venezuela and in Brazil. Belonging groups (religious, school, family, and others) that become references in the constitution of the self.	All axes of constitution and training. The map of relationships is constructed from the individual to the collective.	
Spaces and Social Media	Influence of physical and non-physical spaces (such as social networks) that affect the individual's life.	Migration, Trajectories, Journeys	The movements of leaving their homes, cities, and nation until arriving in Brazil and experiencing life in shelters.
School Pathway and Non-formal Education	Learning processes experienced by the subject, whether formal or informal, including family education, schools and/or universities attended, technical and vocational courses, and access to the labor market.	Learning and Experiences	Life in shelters and in Brazil, the interferences and experiences developed in relation to various types of learning and knowledge gained—educational, school-based, professional, cultural, etc.
Continuing Education and Social Origin	Other formative experiences and also the role of culture in this lifelong formative process.	Being a Migrant and a single mom in Brazil	Gender marker that emerged in various narratives of women, allowing the problematization of other issues.
		Being a man, worker, and provider.	Gender marker that emerged in various narratives of men, which also allows the problematization of other issues.

Source: Author's elaboration (2025) based on Nóvoa (1988).

In the first axis, ‘From abundance to scarcity,’ I noticed the idiosyncrasies of life before the political and social changes in Venezuela compared to the current moment (or the moment they left), focusing on the transition between these periods, the Venezuelans narrated moments and experiences that culminated in their departure from their homeland.

In the second axis, ‘Migration, Trajectories, Journeys,’ I observed—or rather, was made to observe through the narratives—the movements of leaving their homes, cities, and country until arriving in Brazil

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and living in the shelter. One narrative that struck me and led me to perceive these layers as an investigative axis was the following statement:

The experience that marked me in Venezuela, my beloved land, was leaving my country, my family, friends, and embarking on a journey into the unknown, into the uncertainty of not knowing if I will return to Venezuela and how long I will have to wait to see my family again, since Venezuela is going through difficult times (Marta, 2025).

I move through Marta's words, one of the reflective group participants and now also an author-narrator. In this movement, I understand the many places of her migration—or rather, the in-between spaces of her textual world. Her departure from Venezuela, in her words, was both an experience and a journey into the unknown.

In the third axis, 'Learning and Experiences,' it is possible to understand life in the shelter and in Brazil through the lens of what they are learning and the experiences they have lived—the inferences and practices developed in relation to various types of learning and experiences: educational, school-related, professional, cultural, etc.—all constitutive of being a migrant. In the fourth axis, 'Being a migrant and a single mother in Brazil,' a gender marker emerges, intersecting the migratory movements of Venezuelan women and highlighting vulnerabilities and issues specific to their condition as women, such as family relations, economic (dis)organization, and other difficulties perceived in practice, including: greater exposure to gender-based violence (such as harassment, exploitation, and abuse), labor exploitation and limited work opportunities, inequality in the job market, language and cultural barriers, stigmatization and xenophobia, stereotyping, and survival sex work (prostitution), among others.

In the fifth axis, 'Being a man, a worker, with a profession,' the gender issue, within the male perspective, appears in the words of Venezuelan men, as evidenced in the excerpt: "(...) since I had the responsibility of bringing bread to my family" (Fernando, 2025), among others, where "being a man" carries pressures and responsibilities of being the provider, strong, unshakable—yet confronted with a moment of powerlessness. In practice, in their daily lives, this manifests in the following ways: pressure regarding the provider role (including stigma, self-esteem issues, frustrations, and demands), targets of racism and xenophobia, labor exploitation and informality, and affective and social isolation.

In the sixth axis, 'We, Migrants,' it is possible to perceive how Venezuelans see themselves in the process—as migrants, in motion, as individuals who make not only physical transits, moving from one place to another, but also non-physical, symbolic ones, tied to their condition as Venezuelans in Brazil, originating from a process of forced migratory displacement. In the seventh axis, 'I Move Forward,' Venezuelans express expectations regarding the *devenir*—that is, the future—which emerges from the traces of remembrance and recognition.



The eighth axis, ‘Narrators,’ emerged after conceiving the others, during the writing of this thesis, as a separate analysis. It stands out in form and aesthetics because not only do Venezuelan migrants see themselves as narrators, but so does the researcher of this thesis—the product of mutual recognition developed throughout this endeavor. Unlike the others, this axis is not limited to the lines of the collected autobiographies but, in addition to this methodological instrument, also incorporates voices expressed in the reflective group (and other interaction moments), as well as the ethnographic writings in the field diary.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS: TRIANGULATING AUTOBIOGRAPHIES AND ETHNOGRAPHIES

The investigation into Venezuelan migration is still in the data analysis phase, based on Ricoeur (1994) with hermeneutic (interpretative) processes aimed at understanding, Szymanski (2004) with the identification of thematic axes, and Gabriel (2011) with the triangulation of the corpus (that is, the collected data). Although still in progress, it is possible to outline some final considerations to conclude this text, as I will point out below.

How can one produce a text that articulates the main analytical products of this investigation: the oral narratives (in the context of the reflective group and in other field moments) and the written narratives (the production of autobiographical narratives) of the Venezuelans, and the ethnography I produced by writing in a diary? What emerges from the convergence between these two approaches and methodologies? What is the common ground between my ethnography and their autobiographies? Can autobiographical narratives and ethnographies walk together?

In the previous section, I showed which investigative axes I developed from the written autobiographical narratives of the Venezuelans, which allow us to visualize how they constitute themselves—that is, how they identify, form, and understand themselves. It was also possible to notice, at times, that the idealization of one axis incorporated elements of another, so that they relate to each other. Their accounts show that they constitute themselves as migrants in different space-times of socialization and experiences, and that this is not a finished task but one in constant motion, varying according to their expectations, dreams, and goals, pointing toward a “*becoming*.”

In other words, when highlighting an axis, such as Axis 2 – “Migration, Trajectories, Journeys,” one can also perceive references to experiences left behind or acquired (Axis 3 – “Learning and Experiences”), life before in Venezuela (Axis 1 – “From abundance to scarcity”), among others. In this dialogue, permeated by many similar elements where the axis is, in fact, a junction of place, context, and contact with other people and/or experiences, it is possible to see that the axes, as well as the authors who helped conceive them, are dialogical (they establish dialogue with others) and polyphonic (composed of

many voices). They do not exist or constitute themselves alone, in isolation, but with others. Thus, the axes, although holders of their own categories and carrying a world of meanings, are also interconnected, linked to the narrative network that constitutes being Venezuelan and a migrant in Brazil.

As I entered the life-world of the Venezuelans, narratives were—and continue to be—produced, in the mimetic and hermeneutic exercise of becoming a narrator. I observed, above all, in many passages of the Venezuelans about telling their story—in the writing that unfolded line after line, in the words politely suggested or abruptly blurted out but spoken—that led me to the following thought: we are all narrators.

In this short span of time I had with Venezuelans, I narrated ethnographically what the shelter is, life in the shelter, life outside the shelter, life in Brazil. I narrated the meetings, my difficulties, my impulses and drives as a researcher, thus transforming narrative into description. Later, when writing the considerations of this work, I (de)scribed about and under my writings—a new writing, a new analysis, a new point of view, complementary to the previous one. I became an ethnographic narrator.

In a similar movement (that of narrating), the Venezuelans spoke orally about life and about things—their things—in various field moments, in interactions inside or outside groups, committees, meetings, and walks. In the context of the reflective group, their words were directed, imbued with an intentionality to discover the phenomenon of “being a refugee in Brazil,” which later transformed into “being a migrant in Brazil” as I discovered that this is how they saw themselves. Here, “discover” takes on the sense of knowing something that was still under suspicion, an investigation where what is revealed unfolds and is no longer a mystery—the veil of questionable certainties now uncovered.

At the threshold between speech and interaction came the production of autobiographical narratives—the intentional writing guided by the proposed questions. In each text, I noticed an evolution in how details were told, in the selection of which details to include, in the possibility of seeing that their life story, though difficult and marked by suffering, also had positive points worth highlighting: the strength, resilience, and gratitude of people for being welcomed and protected by a State.

Thus, it is possible to see how we all became subject-participant-authors. I, as someone who enables a space for intentional narrative socialization and moves among voices—sometimes establishing dialogues, sometimes observing them—who ultimately has the mission of interpreting these movements and converting them into analysis, that is, a new dialogue, a new narrative. They, as producers of knowledge, history, and culture, who incorporate autonomy in the act of projecting their voice into the world through different means: a gesture, a look, spoken words, written narratives. All these signs, in the context of research, become academic, in the sense of enabling epistemological contributions where knowledge is, above all, a walking metamorphosis. Thus, our narratives have no end, for in the context of producing this new writing, other writings are possible. In the context of this reading, other readings are possible. An endless narrative.

The researched and the researcher share common points that arise from this clash, from the tension and novelty of being “together with” the other. When we consider seeing ourselves as narrators, we are also signaling that we are bearers of stories that deserve to be told and retold, in the exercise of living them and writing them in continuum (“continuity”). This telling, when redone in the form of retelling, incorporates Ricoeur’s mimesis, for now the narrative reaches its full evocative potential of being—that is, the more thoughtful, edited, rewritten text, pointing to the weavings of virtue, the plots of the present, and the possibilities of the *devenir*—the three mimetic processes compiled and condensed, the transformative narrative.

In this narrative-ethnographic investigation, with its unique characteristics, a coalition is formed between different worlds guided by the narrative the subject tells about themselves—that is, autobiography—and the ethnography told by the other, the one who comes from outside and makes a sensitive description of places, people, and things. In this approach, narrative and time walk together, allowing us to see that individual stories, social relations (which constitute collective stories), and elements of belonging and reference shape the historical setting (life before) and the everyday setting (the present), where many subjects live their stories and produce their narrative worlds, their worlds of text, their life-worlds. The future, in the incidence of these settings, appears as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* (“tremendous and fascinating mystery”) (Otto, 2007), clouded, shrouded in fears, anxieties, dreams, and expectations. An imminent “becoming”.

The life-world of migrants, narrated by themselves in Rondon 1, reveals individualities amid collectivities. In constituting their life-world—which, impacted and influenced by cultural works, becomes the world of the text—their provocative migrant lives acquire mutual recognition (Ricoeur, 2004). Mutual recognition, in Ricoeur’s perspective, occurs through the dialectic between reflexivity and alterity, which, in turn, implies other terms, namely reciprocity and mutuality, representing, in a sense, spaces of collective manifestations.

They are migrants who write their names in the history of the nation that hosts them—in this case, Brazil—on the margins, through quantitative records in infographics, migration glossaries, and so on. Their existences are crossed by social, economic, ethnic, and racial issues that mark their roles as protagonists not only of their autobiographical narratives but of the history of the nations they belong to—Venezuela and Brazil—a history unfolding in the present moment. A history that not only recalls the past but is a simultaneous event to the writing of this thesis, everyday, composing a game of power, struggles, memories, and mechanisms of displacement.

Their autobiographies show that their crossings—from Venezuela to Brazil (and from Brazil to Venezuela, considering the constant comings and goings of certain individuals and groups), from life inside the shelter to life outside, from life before in Venezuela, when times were good, to life in Venezuela



when times became hard—have turned into trajectories that are now told and retold. In projecting their narratives onto paper, writing stories and excavating memories, other narrative possibilities unfold for those who read them, revealing new narratives—an endless exercise.

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Note. All participant names are pseudonyms used to protect their identities.