

CLAS Tinker Field Research Grant Report

Abstract:

The México-Guatemala border has gathered increased national and international attention after 2019 when then U.S. President Donald J. Trump threatened the Mexican government with increased trade tariffs if the López Obrador administration did not restrict the flow of Global South migrants. Henceforth, Mexico's southern border with Central America has become yet another contentious crossing from the Global South into the Global North within our contemporary Global Apartheid¹ interstate system—as illustrated by our global migrant/refugee crisis. I investigate the flows of people arriving at the México-Guatemala border *en route* to the United States.

Summary Report:

Frontera Sur I: *Tapachula La Tijuana del Sur*

“In Western politics, bare life has the peculiar privilege of being that whose exclusion founds the city of men.”²

Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*

Están haciendo de Tapachula una olla de presión que está a punto de reventar. Tapachula se convirtió en el muro migratorio de Norteamérica. Los muros ya no son de concreto ni de acero, el muro es una ciudad que se llama Tapachula.³

Pascual Necochea

In more than one way my initial footsteps in Tapachula de Córdoba y Ordóñez at the end of my latest boreal summer had its origins years earlier, northwest of here, four city blocks away from the U.S.-México international border, a geopolitical accident, most definitely! *Aquí estoy*, once again running away from the specter of you, *luna gitana*, a few kilometers closer, yet *Tijuana y el norte no son los mismo que Chiapas y el sur...*

¹ Critical thinkers from the Global North, among them geographer Joseph Nevins, have theorized “the coupling of power and difference (racism: Hall/Ruth Wilson Gilmore)—fatal in the sense that it shapes one’s life (and death) circumstances—or Global Apartheid. It is one in which the relatively rich and largely white of the world are generally free to travel and live wherever they would like and to access the resources they “need.” Meanwhile, the relatively poor and largely non-white are typically forced to subsist in places where there are not enough resources to provide sufficient livelihood or, in order to overcome their deprivation and insecurity, to risk their lives trying to overcome ever-stronger boundary controls put in place by rich countries that reject them.” (Nevins: 2008)

² Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998)

³ Marcos Romero, “La frontera entre México y Guatemala, el “nuevo muro” de Estados Unidos contra la inmigración,” *El Clarín* (Buenos Aires, Argentina), August, 8 2021.

I paused *Dune*, looked through the window—as we were making our final descend upon the city—I remember, *olas mudas* breaking upon the shoreline, salty foam, to think of infinite movements, *vuestros ojos jade*, García Lorca and the green jungle beneath our horizon:

*Verde que te quiero verde.
Verde viento. Verdes ramas.
El Barco sobre la Mar
y el caballo en la montaña...*⁴

*La selva se abrió a mis pies*⁵—as the tarmac emerged from within the greenery—a forgotten moment from childhood: the logo of a Mayan warrior imprinted on the tail of an abandoned Boeing 737-201 of the now defunct Mexican carrier Aviacsa, now wrapped around ivy, another footprint from the past. Upon deplaning, I felt the humid breath of the jungle upon me... what the hell was I doing here? As I exited the airport, I felt excited but quite out of place by the difference imprinted upon me by Chiapas, as Tapachula is definitely not Tijuana... What was a northern border cowboy doing in the southern jungles? Yes, I have a green-colored Mexican passport and yes, Tapachula is now part of the Mexican nation-state. Although that was not always the case, as this present-day transborder city region was at one time contested by both the Guatemalan and Mexican governments during the episteme-changing nineteenth century. It was not only until 1888 when the boundary line was officially established by both Mexican and Guatemalan authorities.

As the story goes what we now know as the city of Tapachula, located 28 kilometers away from the México-Guatemala international border (the Suchiate River and the jungle double as a geopolitical boundary) is situated within the greater Soconusco region in southeastern Chiapas itself partially located within the Sierra Madre de Chiapas all the way to the Pacific Ocean and Guatemala to the southeast. In Náhuatl Tapachula means a land or space between the waters. According to

⁴ Federico García Lorca, *Romances gitanos* (España), 1928.

⁵ Gustavo Cerati, Tabú, Bocanada, Sony Music (Argentina): 1999.

anthropologists the city region has been inhabited by Mam Mayan (the original settlers), the Olmecs, then the Toltecs, which lay the foundations for the city as far back as 1486 as a tributary for the Aztec empire.

I exchanged goodbyes with a couple of fellow travelers of the road from Japan amid tobacco smoke and well-wishes for the adventures ahead.⁶ They promptly departed on a cab to the Guatemala-México border (the geopolitical line crosses the Mexican states of Campeche, Chiapas, and Tabasco and the departments of El Peten, El Quiche, Huehuetenango, and San Marcos within Guatemala; approximately 871 Kilometers in length on both sides of the divide), as I slowly made my way to the main road just outside the airport. Already drenched in sweat, it smelled of rain and tobacco, unknown birds to me chirping in the distance, low blue-cotton skies... I contemplated a return to a borderless world, a world without passports, as I boarded a *combi* from Tapachula's International Airport to the city's *centro histórico*.

I also thought of Marxist historian Benedict Anderson's contention that all human communities are to a certain degree invented or imagined socio-political constructions—as most members of any given nation will never meet each other, yet there is a horizontal sense of national belonging among many of them⁷—as I checked for my Mexican passport as I had been previously warned by the attendant at the airport's store to be mindful of Mexican Immigration authorities as the recent influx of migrants from the Global South—Colombians, Chinese, Cubans, Haitians, Hondurans, Nicaraguans, Salvadorians, Venezuelans, and other people from various parts of the African continent—had them on red alert...

⁶ The Soconusco region has historically been a magnet for transnational capital and labor: Germans founded large coffee estates in the nearby Sierra Madre de Chiapas, while Chinese workers provided their labor. Since the nineteenth century the region has become a key economic site for Chiapas vis-à-vis the nation and Central America.

⁷ Anderson, Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (Revised Edition). New York: Verso, 2006.