

Bernardo Moreno Peniche

Tinker Field Research Grant Fieldwork Report

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In the current global context, heightened awareness of the nonhuman origins of epidemics has generated significant interest at the intersection of biomedical, political, environmental, and epidemiological control systems. The emergence of diseases transmitted from animals to humans (zoonoses) and through insects (vector-borne) in countries in the so-called Global North evokes anxieties about unchecked boundaries and unwelcome intimacies. My research focuses on Chagas disease, a vector-borne parasitical illness traditionally regarded as endemic to Latin America, and its occurrence in the United States. Chagas has garnered attention in the US as an imported, foreign illness found among the Latin American migrant population. Yet, a growing number of locally acquired cases in humans and dogs has challenged the foreignness of Chagas disease in the US. Since Chagas involves a whole ecology (triatomine insects, nonhuman animal hosts and reservoirs, humans, and biological and physical elements of the environment), this research explores the concept of landscape as the dynamic product of sociobiological interactions. I thus look at how scientists, policymakers, public health officials, the media, and people affected by Chagas disease deal with issues of endemicity, foreignness, domesticity, topicality, and nativism vis-à-vis the occurrence of Chagas disease in the US in terms of experiences and conceptions of a national landscape. Rooted in perceptions of climatic difference and determinism, the political discourse of tropicality provides an entryway for examining the foreignness of Chagas disease in the US. I hypothesize that topicality plays a pivotal role in how Chagas disease intersects with the US nation-building project and connects it to narratives of empire and exceptionalism. Tropicality and landscapes are thus concepts that need to be taken into account in an inquiry about the projected presence of Chagas in the US.

My fieldwork has up to now taken me to Northern Florida. I have carried out participant observation with biologists, entomologists, and ecologists who work with and collect the Chagas disease insect vector, as well as with physicians who conduct free Chagas

disease screenings at health fairs across the region. Throughout these interactions, I noticed that two positions, many times concurrent in the same person, were present. First, practitioners showed fascination and excitement with how “wild” the sub-tropical landscape was in its potential to harbor whole disease ecologies like that of Chagas. Second, particularly but not only among physicians, there was a concern or anxiety about the “lack of awareness” and “neglect” surrounding the presence of Chagas in the US. Practitioners anticipantly agreed that landscape transformations caused by climate change posed the danger of creating more adequate conditions for the insect vectors to thrive and, in consequence, of an increase in cases of Chagas disease in the US. The bivalence of sentiments, anxiety and excitement, with which practitioners approached the landscapes of Chagas, especially the fear of change due to global warming, made me direct my curiosity to those regions in which Chagas disease had always been considered a normal (in terms of ‘usual’) part of the landscape. I turned thus to Latin America to look at these landscapes that provided a source of inspiration for the anxiety about the transformation of US landscapes.

The Tinker Field Research Grant allowed me to carry out a counterpoint fieldwork of sorts. While my research is based in the US, my research questions deal with the relations with otherness that structure the project of the American national identity. In the case of Chagas disease, studying it as a political object requires looking at its occurrence in geographies that have served as an oppositional prop to the elaboration of the US as a distinct nation in the Americas. I spent most of my time in and around the city of Leticia in the Colombian Amazon, where I attended the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America Conference. My goal at this conference was twofold. First, I wanted to meet other social scientists working on issues of health, illness, and landscape within a region whose environmental characteristics served as a substrate for anxious evocations of otherness in the US. Second, this conference would not only be attended by a large number of Latin American scholars, but also by experts formed in non-academic intellectual traditions, like *sabedores*, healers, and community leaders. These two objectives were met and have added complexity to my approach to Chagas in the US. Once the conference ended, I joined a group of biologists who were doing field research in the forest in the surroundings of Leticia. While this was reminiscent of my fieldwork with the scientists in Northern Florida, it taught me a methodological lesson that I will apply in my own research in the US. In one of the

outings, we were guided by an indigenous young man through the forest. One of the biologists, another indigenous young man from the area, was quickly acquainted with the guide. Both walked ahead of everybody and chatted all the way through the two-day-long walk. A large part of their conversation dealt with hunting stories, about their own experiences or those of their families and friends. The most interesting part, however, was how the landscape and its different elements figured prominently in each story. Thus, for instance, the biologist would tell about that time he went fishing at a certain creek, the guide would signal he knew that creek, and the biologist would then tell more about the fish he caught, the ones that escaped, and both would then get wound up in more stories in this or other body of water. This practice of storytelling laid out a map that was at once personal and shared but also gendered. The landscape was imbued with a storied meaning, which marked it with a temporality that brought together the past and the present as they walked through the forest. But something else happened. The young biologist was also bringing his professional knowledge as a scientist into the stories by noting this or that ecological association or saying the scientific names of the animals and plants that participated in the stories they were telling each other. This was not a matter of the hybridization of knowledges but a storied mapping of the landscape that did not claim objectivity but put forward a shared but unequal subjectivity which depending on the case included a distinct array of popular, indigenous, and scientific traditions of knowledge. This mapping practice has made me think about the possibility of finding similar methods of learning or knowing the landscape among my interlocutors in the US; the possibility of attending to the stories that people tell to each other as a method to look into the sociality of landscapes from which Chagas diseases emerges. The question about what kinds of knowledge are brought together under the sign of Chagas helps draw a better picture of the political dimension of its landscape. Lastly, I left Leticia for Bucaramanga, where the 8th Chagas Disease and Leishmaniasis Colombian Conference was being held. This biomedical conference gathered clinicians and scientific experts from South America working on these two so-called 'neglected tropical diseases.' My goals, again, were twofold. First, I wanted to have a reference point for comparing the South American Chagas disease scientific community, which is numerous and dynamic, and the American one, which is rather small and siloed. Second, I wanted to observe how one of my main contacts, a US infectious disease doctor expert in Chagas disease treatment and the only American in the conference, delivered a talk about his work in the US and how it was received by

the audience. It stood out that, people in the audience were very impressed by his talk. Many of them had shown in their talks that Chagas had gained global relevance by exemplifying the large number of people from the region migrating to the US. They were surprised to learn from the doctor's talk that Chagas was not only a matter of migration but that the US had long had active Chagas disease reproductive cycles. This suggests that, well-formed and informed by the late modern tradition of tropical medicine, Latin American scientists have integrated tropicalism's discourse of climatic difference as an indicator of political otherness that justifies notions of the environmental exceptionalism of the US. Interestingly, from the conversations and talks in the conference, the same pattern was reproduced within Colombia. Speakers denounced an 'entrenched belief' among the larger medical profession that Chagas should only be suspected in poor rural populations living in the warmer areas of the country, and they called for its 'eradication.'

In sum, the work of dis-locating my research, by carrying out fieldwork in Colombia has helped me see the occurrence of Chagas disease in the US as a regional issue that follows certain political patterns like those highlighted by the discourse of tropicity. Indeed, if the distribution of Chagas crosses Latin American borders, so to some of the ways in which it is perceived as a social issue by scientists and clinicians. The young biologist and field guide's landscape storytelling method might set a relevant example of how to look at Chagas in the US as part of both the biological, social, and cultural landscapes of the country and the development of its nation-building project.