

From Xenophobia to Solidarity: Border Ethnographies of the *Migrant Caravan***De la xenofobia a la solidaridad: etnografías fronterizas de la *caravana migrante***Rafael Alonso Hernández López¹ & Iván Francisco Porraz Gómez²

ABSTRACT

Since the outbreak in Mexico of the so-called migrant caravans in late 2018 and early 2019, there were signs of solidarity and rejection of this massive movement of population from Central America. This article seeks to account for these situations arising in the northern and southern border of Mexico, using ethnography as a tool for the analysis of social practices and their meanings. For this purpose, we offer an approach to the speeches generated by the local population and press around the massive flow of undocumented people from Central America, and during their time in Mexico. These speeches reflect the complexities of caravan transit, as well as expressions of xenophobia, racism, and solidarity towards migrants by the local population. In this way, the article gives an account of how diverse, and sometimes divergent, imaginary elements around migrants are in border areas.

Keywords: 1. Migrant caravans, 2. xenophobia, 3. solidarity, 4. northern border, 5. southern border.

RESUMEN

A partir de la irrupción en México de las denominadas “caravanas migrantes” a finales de 2018 y principios de 2019, en este país se generaron muestras de solidaridad y rechazo hacia este movimiento masivo de ciudadanos centroamericanos. Haciendo uso de la etnografía como herramienta para el análisis de las prácticas sociales y sus significados, el artículo busca dar cuenta de algunas situaciones suscitadas en las fronteras norte y sur de México. Se ofrece un acercamiento a los discursos generados por la población local y la prensa en torno al flujo masivo de personas indocumentadas desde Centroamérica y en su paso por México. Los discursos recogen las complejidades del tránsito en caravana, así como las expresiones de xenofobia, racismo y solidaridad por parte de un segmento de la población local para con los migrantes. De esta forma, este artículo reflexiona sobre cómo en espacios fronterizos se ponen en juego imaginarios diversos, y a veces divergentes, en torno a la persona migrante.

Palabras clave: 1. Caravanas migrantes, 2. xenofobia, 3. solidaridad, 4. frontera norte, 5. frontera sur.

Date received: June 25, 2019

Date accepted: January 13, 2020

Published online: November 30, 2020

¹ El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, Mexico, rahernandez@colef.mx, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1233-9242>

² El Colegio de la Frontera Sur, Mexico, iporraz@ecosur.mx, <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6424-5416>



INTRODUCTION

For us, the border doesn't exist: we are like the wind, like clouds, like smoke. We go from one place to another, from one country to another, with nothing to hold us back. We are made of the same substance as the air, and nobody can place walls or barbed wire on air. Our house is in the air: we don't walk, we float, we dance on tiptoe in the air. We are like music, like pollen, like these words...

Balam Rodrigo
Marabunta

Over the past two decades, Central American migration in transit through Mexico has become one of the most important phenomena of human mobility in the country, both because of its magnitude and the conditions in which it occurs. During that time, this type of migration has resulted in media, academic, and social coverage that has allowed to identify the causes, effects, or composition of flows and the risks and vulnerabilities of people who enter Mexico illegally. Throughout their journey, they become victims of different actors. Thus, *en masse* migration becomes relevant as a strategy to cope with the violence and impunity during the migration process. With the visibility of Central Americans' ordinary transit since 2010, after the massacre of 72 migrants in 2018, the so-called caravan or exodus became the epicenter of displays of welcome and rejection, of xenophobia and solidarity. Therefore, the present study presents ethnographic reflections and perspectives and the analysis of the context of reception of these population movements in the Mexican southern and northern border.

In the first section of the article, ethnography is used as a strategy that allows for detailed knowledge of the social actors' life and history after coexisting with them (Cáceres, 1998). We used observation and interviews to capture behaviors and thoughts, actions and norms, facts and words, wants and reality (Díaz, 2009, p.33) of migrants who arrived in the migrant caravan. We also observed and interviewed the social actors in the immediate surroundings of the migrants in southern Mexico, in the municipality of Suchiate and Tapachula, Chiapas, and in Northern Mexico, in Tijuana, Baja California.

Information published from October to November 2018 by some outlets was also surveyed to analyze these border areas' narratives and practices around the migrant caravans. The media outlets were from Honduras (*UNETV* [2018], *El Heraldo de Honduras* [2018]), from the city of Tapachula, Chiapas (*El Orbe* [2018] and *Diario del Sur* [2018]), from Tijuana, Baja California (*Diario de Tijuana* [2018], *El Imparcial* [2018], *Semanario ZETA* [2018]). We then built the closure of the analysis and drew some conclusions.

Leave in search of a life! From relevant local discourse to reality

Our era is marked by the visual, by images that determine the development of information and communications. It is a time that defines the world as an image, an image being a

deliberate production of the market and the media (Ahmed, Rogers, & Ernst, 2018). It is the time of virtuality and the efficient transfer of information. The spread of what became the detonator of the massive flow of people from Central America to the United States was done in this setting, primarily through social networks such as Facebook. We are referring to a pamphlet with the image of a lone migrant with a backpack over his shoulder, who invited visitors to the bus terminal in San Pedro Sula on October 12, 2018, at 8 a.m. The dissemination of this information grew, and it became the beginning of many stories about men, women, girls, and older adults who answered the call. Who initiated the caravan summons remains unknown, as uncertain as the hundreds of stories of each moving group.

The news about the caravan summons was replayed by Honduran national media, which stated that the caravan was a political plot by the Liberal Party in Honduras, orchestrated by Manuel Zelaya, and the journalist and activist Bartolo Fuentes (*El Heraldo de Honduras*, 2018). The latter accompanied the caravan to the Guatemalan-Honduran border, where he was detained. An analysis by the *UNETV* channel in Honduras (*UNETV*, 2018) indicated that the increase in basic living expenses and the escalation of violence were the underlying factors behind the migration movement.

For its part, academia gradually began to discern explanations, among which it was noted that the mobility of Central Americans was not a new matter at all, due to the long-standing transit along the southern border and through the Soconusco territory (Casillas, 2014; García, & Villafuerte, 2014). The novel aspect of the phenomenon was the unconcealed emigration of such a large group from Central America (Valenzuela, 2018). In other words, it carried a clear and blunt commitment with visibility, since traditionally migrants in an irregular situation resorted to strategies and routes that made them invisible (Casillas, 2008; Martínez, Cobo y Nárvaez, 2015), in a way that circumvented Mexican immigration containment strategies.

Although it is true that migratory flows known as caravans already existed in Mexico, it should be stated that, as we have said, this massive movement of people was unprecedented due to its composition and starting point. Mexican activists who organized caravans before the autumn of 2018 intended to create a mechanism to make violence visible, denounce the situation, and take a stand on the humanitarian crisis of the migration transit through Mexico (Vargas, 2018). These mobilizations were carried out by migrants, who were initially organized by accompanying activists associated with the Catholic Church who had shelters in the south of the country to represent the Way of Cross during Holy Week³. The Migrant *Via Crucis* was taken up by the binational organization (USA-Mexico) *Pueblos sin Fronteras* (Valenzuela, 2018), which would ultimately have a significant presence in the 2018 caravan.

³ According to the Christian religion, this performance represents the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Organizations and activists associated with the Catholic Church began to relate the migrants' situation in their transit through Mexico with the path of Jesus to Calvary, which is why they began to carry out the migrant *Via Crucis* during Holy Week.

Organized movements from before 2018 include the *Caravana de Madres de Migrantes Desaparecidos* [the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants], which groups relatives of Central American migrants who disappeared in Mexico. This caravan of mothers toured several Mexican states by bus to denounce, raise awareness, and search for their relatives (Pizano, Sánchez, & Pizano, 2017).

Contrary to the *Via Crucis* and migrant caravans made up of migrants in irregular migration situations, the Caravan of Mothers of Missing Migrants comprised people who had obtained a special permit to enter the country legally or were authorized by the migration authority.

As observed in the fieldwork, people who joined the autumn 2018 caravan were familiar with the *Via Crucis*, as described in the following testimony: “I was in the first one this year, around January, we left from here [Tapachula]; we learned many things from that one, for instance not to ask for asylum here in Mexico but until we got to the gringo [U.S.A.]” (Gibrán, personal communication, October 20, 2018, Suchiate, Chiapas). Having participated in previous caravans was an opportunity that favored learning experiences intended to be used in future caravans: “The caravan which took place in January this year was not very crowded, but we learned something, how to organize ourselves, and take better care of each other, so that way we could cross all of Mexico” (Wilmer, personal communication, October 20, 2018, Suchiate, Chiapas).

The stories told by migrants about the reasons behind their decision to join the caravan were diverse. In our fieldwork, we recorded young people, who constituted the majority, as confirmed by the survey conducted by El Colegio de la Frontera Norte in Tijuana; their ages ranging from 18 to 20 years (COLEF, 2018). Among this group of people, a cause for the mobilization was gang violence (“*las Maras*,” “*las pandillas*,” “*los muchachos*”), which constitute a broad sector of the youth.

To understand the *Maras* phenomenon, we must go back to the armed conflict in the Central American region during the 1980s and 1990s. In this region, civil wars led thousands of people to flee the violence and head for the United States. After 1992, the United States government began a mass deportation process returning the youths to their countries of origin; these youths had been members of cliques, gangs, or youth groups (Nateras, 2014).

Massive deportations to El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala favored the recruitment of youths in the *Barrio 18* and *Mara Salvatrucha* gangs (MS-13). This situation led to gang wars in these countries. The police responded with more violence, resulting in the criminalization of gang members and non-gang members that left thousands of people dead or displaced (Porraz, 2017). In countries such as El Salvador and Honduras, 40 percent of these people were between 18 and 30 years of age, and 20 percent were between 31 and 40 years of age (Kinosian, Albaladejo, & Haugaard, 2016). In this way, a vortex of violence was established in everyday life for Central Americans.

In the multiple testimonies collected during our fieldwork in southern Mexico, the narratives of migrants contained a common denominator: violence. Experiences were different: from being displaced by gang members, being harassed, having conflicts with the gangs, or having problems with the police and the military. Javier, a young migrant from San Pedro Sula, Honduras, told us the following:

Look, it's tough for those of us who are young because there are few opportunities there. First of all, if you live in a controlled [by gangs] community or quarter, you have to be careful, the gangsters are after you. I knew several youngsters that that's how they got hooked and are still there. There's no response from the government; on the contrary, more deaths; that's why I decided to come here. If you look, there're several youngsters with similar stories; it's because we want a quiet life (Personal communication, October 21, 2018, Suchiate, Chiapas).

For his part, Ricardo, a young Honduran who had previously migrated to the interior of his country, described the complicated social situation in his nation, which triggered his decision to join the caravan:

Yes, well, first of all, there's tremendous insecurity in my country; they mug you, I was mugged several times. They kill people just like that, many times you don't know why, they just go, and boom, boom, and they leave and good, thank you, as we say in Honduras. Well, my situation was that I was threatened with my children; first, a guy uh hit me in front of my kids. I reported him, so the fear was that, it was uh, that he'd find out that I had reported him. He found out that I reported him—perhaps because of the police, who are corrupt—. The situation was that he came to my house when he found out, he went to my house with a machete, and he wanted to kill me. Then, I locked myself in my house with my children; I only have my sister, we left that day. And unfortunately, in that place where I lived, they fear those people a lot. I never showed fear. That's the problem we had, then, we left that day, I mean, fleeing, fleeing, with my children, and my sister says, “you'd better leave here.” And one of my sons told me about this, and here we are, searching for a dignified and more peaceful life (Personal communication, October 21, 2018, Suchiate, Chiapas).

The reasons people joined the migrant caravan tend to be associated with having a conflict with a gang member, or not wanting to belong to a gang, and even because of account settling because they did not want to pay for security or pay the “*renta*”, as the extortions charged by these youth groups are known.

The caravan was a space to search for alternatives to the lack of social assistance in origin countries. There were people accompanied by a sick relative hoping that they were to be cared for elsewhere. In this broad group of people, we identified pregnant women or women

with newborns; children⁴ made up an important group. María, a Salvadoran woman who was accompanied by five minors, shared this testimony:

Look, one of the main reasons why most of us left our land is because of the gangs, which has greatly proliferated over the past eight or ten years, and it doesn't allow us to keep working, much less live together properly. It began mostly with extortions, which is what is mostly affecting our country right now; one day, we just accepted it, to be paying the extortion part, in order to be able to work and be unrestricted, but later it increased, more, and more, until it couldn't be given, it increased, and in the end it wasn't possible, I was going to give more for "rent" [extortion] to them, than what I earned: another thing was that my husband died, he was sick, and I stayed with these three children, and I brought the other two [children] of my sisters because we spoke about them having a good life; well, the most worthwhile one to have because one cannot live there anymore (Personal communication, October 21, 2018, Tapachula, Chiapas).

Their stories contain many violent and silenced experiences; emotions that the interviewees tried to hide or restrain are glimpsed. They also account for the facts that carry meaning to them such as crossing borders, transiting through a country other than their own, searching for a decent place for new generations of children to live, such as the one thought by Mario Castellanos, a 10-year-old Honduran boy (BBC News Mundo, 2018) whose story spread until it became one of the symbols of the caravan, since Mario traveled without relatives, hoping to find a place to live (BBC News Mundo, 2018). Additionally, we also recorded the experiences of people searching for their parents or who wanted to arrive in the United States for no other reason than wanting to be there. Some of them told us “we know we will find a difficult life” (Orlando, personal communication, October 22, 2018, Tapachula, Chiapas); “you’ve got to accept jobs with salaries and conditions that aren’t as expected, but I want to see my parents” (Wilmer, personal communication, October 2018, Tapachula, Chiapas).

The Central Americans are coming again! From relevant border discourse to solidarity

The 2018 caravan was a movement with narratives, experiences, and imaginaries both by the people who made up the caravan and those who astonishingly saw them in transit through Mexico. The caravan became a phenomenon that spurred empathy and hostility, rejection, or indifference, all of which we analyzed by examining the local media and the interviewees' discourses.

The first members of the studied caravan arrived at the Guatemalan-Mexican border on the afternoon of October 18, 2018, overlooking the Suchiate River bank, on the side of Tecún Uman. Their massive presence entailed tension and expectation among the local population

⁴ According to UNICEF data from October 19 to 22, 2018, approximately 2,300 migrant children arrived in Mexico in the migrant caravan (UNICEF, 2018).

in several Chiapas border municipalities such as Huixtla, Mazatán, Ciudad Hidalgo, and Tapachula, which suspended education and employment activities for two to three days.

The local media contributed extensively to the popularization of information around the migrant caravan as a possible and real fear. In many ways, the media was used strategically to popularize a collective imaginary that favored the generation of negative feelings towards Central American migrants, for example, fear (see image 1).

Image 1: Collage of newspaper headlines alluding to the arrival of the migrant caravan.



Source: Prepared by the authors based on the compilation of headlines of the newspapers *El Orbe* (2018a; 2018b), *El Diario del Sur* (2018) and *La Jornada* (2018).

This fear had to do with the generalization of an alleged link between Central American migrants and crime. This situation is similar to the ideology promoted by President Trump on Twitter concerning undocumented migrants, whom he calls criminals and terrorists. The discourse of local Chiapas inhabitants and Central American migrants repeatedly references fear since it alludes to the possibility that some of the latter group might belong to gangs or organized crime.

After all, fear, as Reguillo says, is an individually felt, socially constructed, and culturally shared experience (Reguillo, 2005, p. 55). Regarding this approach, we agree with Valenzuela when he acknowledges the centrality of fear in collective imaginaries in Latin America: with the imaginaries of fear and violence, social spaces become entrenched and saturated by security, surveillance, and military-police pervasiveness (Valenzuela, 2012, p.90). Additionally, the landscape of terror, as described by Castro (2012), and the economics of violence, as referred to by Ríos (2014), are present in the migrant's perception as dangerous.

Despite the Mexican federal government's reactions to contain the caravan and the racist and xenophobic reaction of some local businessmen and sectors of the local civil society, aid began to arrive, and expressions of solidarity grew more and more. The majority of migrants traveled along the Rodolfo Flores bridge, which connects Tecún Uman, Guatemala, and Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas. Others crossed in so-called rafts, or improvised means of transportation used in the area to cross the Suchiate River carrying people or merchandise. According to the first reports by civil protection in the municipality of Ciudad Hidalgo, the magnitude of the migrant caravan was between 6,000 and 8,000 people.

Despite the vicissitudes of crossing the Rodolfo Flores bridge, several migrants danced, some prayed, others rested. Aid came from some neighbors and religious groups, both Catholic and Evangelical (*Sin Embargo*, 2018). The central square in Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas, was crowded; the municipal marimba harmonized tensions; they played the song "*Sopa de Caracol*⁵." Catharsis was present since the caravan had crossed into Mexican territory. Juan, a citizen of Ciudad Hidalgo, told us about the process of local collective organization to address the migrants' needs:

I came with a focus group from a nearby community; we are giving out food, beans, tortillas, and coffee, whatever's possible. I've lived here for many years, and I've never seen so many people go by; you have to help them, they're human, and they came from nearby. Look, so many people fleeing those countries due to hunger (personal communication, October 21, 2018, Ciudad Hidalgo, Chiapas).

The caravan reorganized little by little in Ciudad Hidalgo, and within the caravan, people formed commissions on safety, health, and other things to survive along the way. The leaders stated that they were chosen voluntarily, and the mechanism to identify them was a green vest. Another symbol of the collective appeared: the flags of Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador; someone gave them the Mexican flag, and they also brought it with them. Days later, they would begin the trek to the interior of our country.

Metapa de Dominguez, Chiapas, an immigration checkpoint from the National Migration Institute, was the next town in the migratory movement. The situation became tense for a short period. The migration agents repeatedly offered people transportation to the Siglo XXI Immigration Station⁶ in Tapachula, but the migrants rejected the offer. Meanwhile, on the side of the road, signs of solidarity were present as the caravan passed; local people gave them tortillas, water, clothes, whatever they could.

The next city was Tapachula, one of the most important border cities in southern Mexico. In this place, a criminal narrative about Central Americans was woven, derived from

⁵A song by the Honduran band Banda Blanca.

⁶ Immigration stations are facilities belonging to the National Migration Institute, where people wait while their administrative migration procedure is resolved. They are, in fact, detention centers for immigrants awaiting deportation proceedings.

strategies to combat insecurity or crime. Local media in Tapachula played an essential role in generating fear and confusion due to the arrival of thousands of migrants. As a sign of that fear and rejection, many businesses near the Miguel Hidalgo Park closed, and at times, public transportation suspended operations. Simultaneously, different social groups and local people showed signs of solidarity by giving food, water, and diapers for their babies. Their arrival also brought national and international media to the city. A Honduran TV channel, *UNETV*, coordinated by reporter César Silva, aired live once a day via the social networks (*UNETV*, 2018).

Migrants settled temporarily in different public spaces, such as streets and parks in Tapachula. The caravan began to integrate more people; for example, Jorge, a refugee claimant living in Tapachula for a year, decided to join the exodus with some of his family.

Fear, uncertainty, and hope are often mentioned in conversations among Central American migrants and Tapachula's local population. For the latter, Central Americans, their practices and sensibilities break the spatial and temporal regularities of the city (Appadurai, 1996): "There is everything in Mexico, good and bad people," several of the Central American migrants repeatedly commented, adding to the uncertainty in an unprecedented event for them, "we don't know what awaits us, we are only beginning" (Porraz, 2019, p. 3).

In this sense, the experience of mobility becomes a territory imagined and lived before and during the stay. Central American migrants' experiences in the territory they temporarily inhabit translate into forms in which desires, hopes, fears, glory, failure, and even death take precedence. Such was the case of a young Honduran man who died after falling from a moving vehicle in Estación Huehuetán, a small Chiapanecan village on the way to the state of Oaxaca.

Some local people used the transit of migrants into southern Mexico to reproduce the Central American imaginary associated with crime and, consequently, fear. This perception was reinforced by the media and political discourse that legitimized the expulsion of people who were part of the caravan in some parts of southern Mexico. These demonstrations of rejection were replicated in Tijuana, on the northern border, by specific sectors of society, while solidarity was also gaining a presence in different parts of Mexico.

WELCOME TO TIJUANA! BETWEEN XENOPHOBIA, RACISM, AND HINTS OF SOLIDARITY

Tijuana, like Tapachula, is used to the dynamics of migration, constant flow and mobility, and public and private institutions that manage, care for, accompany, or sanction mobility (Alegria, 2015; Bustamante, 2000; Urbalejo Castorena, 2016). Tijuana is one of the most transited borders globally, and the relationship with the United States has marked its development (Pérez Talamantes, 2014). Geographically, it borders California, an American state with whom it maintains a historical relationship concerning the geographic, economic, and cultural fields. Specifically, after the prohibition of alcohol consumption in the United

States (1920-1933), Tijuana became a privileged space for the American population to unleash its trapped Dionysos (Zamora, 2012).

Tijuana is also a highly symbolic space, where the meaning of "national" redefines itself, taking on a variety of meanings in everyday life. Tijuana is a space of encounters and disagreements, boundaries and regional reconfigurations, openings and closures, proximity and separation, border and confluence, all of that at the same time. It is the city of migrants, but its people experience the arrival of more migrants with uncertainty and estrangement. Therefore, Tijuana is the city of complexities.

As has been studied for decades, Tijuana has acquired relevance as a city of migrants, uncontrolled urban growth, and segregation (Alegría, 1994). It is a space in which different individual and collective identities have developed, where countless people with different origins and histories coexist. It is a setting in which the migration issue and its implications are part of everyday life.

It would seem that the ordinary experience of the migratory phenomena would make its inhabitants, mostly migrants or descendants of migrants, support the development of a favorable position toward migration. We could expect local population to recognize through personal or family history or the historical social dynamics of the city, that population movements have multiple causes and effects, but as seen in the demonstrations by sectors of Tijuana's population during the arrival of the caravan, this is not always the case.

It is precisely the complexity of the migratory phenomenon that makes it possible to see that hypotheses and assumptions do not respond to common sense or logic. However, they respond to the context, the situation, and the contingency, as well as to people's cultural framework and the ideological concoction they assemble.

The arrival of migrant caravans to Tijuana at the end of 2018 led to the construction, reinforcement, and redefining of the imaginaries about what it is or what it means to be a Central American migrant in this border city. Imaginaries based on class, nationality, and social context arguments served to label caravan members as aggressive, violent, and abusive, as reasons to avoid their presence in certain parts of the city.

Italian sociologist Alessandro Dal Lago (1999) provides elements to understand how discrimination and criminalization are reproduced, in this case toward migrants, in a process known as the tautology of fear. Although the author's analysis is in a European context, his contributions are considered useful in understanding these processes of tension and the construction of negative imaginaries toward migrants in any context and situation (Vega, Hernández, Camus, & Morante, 2016).

A tautology has to do with an argument of a logical nature, which bases its truth on repetition. In other words, based on continuous reiterations of the same thought, even if expressed differently, we conclude that what is asserted is true. Concerning migration specifically, tautology would be the repetition of phrases or expressions based on images,

assumptions, rumors, or statements referring to actions that, for example, characterize migrants as criminals, gang members, hostile, or unruly, a vision shared by different society sectors in southern Mexico.

From this perspective, the reality referred to, after many repetitions, ends up becoming a truth. According to Dal Lago (1999), a social situation will be decided and defined by those involved or interested. A mechanism of tautology is the generation of a warning state or message that captures people's attention, generates uncertainty, and increases expectations about the phenomenon; in this way, fear (justified or not) will be generated about something that in appearance could be risky (Vega, Hernández, Camus, & Morante, 2016).

Dal Lago (1999) mentions that tautology begins with the generation of a symbolic resource by positioning a perception (positive or negative) about a problem that is assumed to be a reality. The process is followed by a subjective definition crafted by the involved actors, which is considered legitimate; it consists of having socially recognized characters (political figures, neighborhood leaders, etc.) to stand for or against the phenomenon. Simultaneously, the media's objective definition establishes a direct or indirect positioning that disseminates the legitimated actors' messages. After this, the symbolic resource is transformed into a dominant framework. The moments described above are combined to create a lens from which the phenomenon is viewed and judged so that those who see or hear it will question and pressure in order to face a complex situation.

Subsequently, there is the subjective confirmation of legitimated actors, in which socially recognized leaders express opinions or appraise the situation, seeking solutions and those responsible for carrying them out. Such intervention would propose solutions to those who have created and reproduced the symbolic resource around the impacts of migrant presence. Among the actions implemented to face social pressure, a possible legislative, political, or administrative measure confirming the dominant framework could be put in place to address the demand of widespread voices.

The following paragraphs present ethnographic data collected after the arrival of the migrant caravan to Tijuana to provide the content and use this explanatory framework around the tautology of fear. The tautology process does not operate linearly or automatically; instead, it is a set of repetitions reinforced by different media, spaces, and actors, making the discrimination and criminalization via xenophobia relevant in a specific context as with the migrant caravan.

The arrival of the migrant caravan to Tijuana took place in the first days of November 2018. The L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ was the first group of people to arrive in Tijuana in buses from Mexico City. The group moved to Playas de Tijuana, located around 15 km from Tijuana's city center; due to its separation from the urban center, it serves as a space that produces dynamics classified by urban studies as residential segregation (Alegría, 1994). It is a peculiar space within Tijuana's rugged urban composition, where the border wall separating Mexico from the United States meets the Mexican Pacific coast. Some have called it the last corner

of Latin America. In this demarcation, people from the L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ community rented a house using the *AirB&B* App.

Since its entry through the country's southern border, the caravan and its many contingents had extensive media coverage, and when they arrived in Tijuana, it was not the exception. Thus, the location of the house was made public while they began their requests for asylum in the United States. A few hours after settling in, the news of their arrival began to flow in messaging apps and neighborhood networks; demonstrations and mobilizations of rejection were urgently called for because of their arrival. Messages sent by mobile applications such as *WhatsApp* made evident the blatant rejection and the clear annoyance due to their presence. Expressions such as "neighbors we have to warn the authorities so that they watch them and not let them go outside or enter our parks," "we have to chase them out because they can be dangerous" (Field Journal Notes RAHL, 2018); local people showed up at the entrance of the house to claim that the residents of Playas de Tijuana were not asked for permission to rent that house and that they should leave because it is not a public shelter.

A procession of neighbors prowled the house and even stationed themselves outside the house to speak to the people in charge of the group. Meanwhile, the migrants retreated inside to avoid confrontations. In an interview with the media, residents of Playas de Tijuana publicly reiterated their request for the migrants to leave since that was a family community, a quiet space, and not the best option for them. Some of the neighbors even said that if the migrants were going to stay there, it would be necessary to increase security, and that when they left, they should be escorted to avoid putting the community at risk.

The afternoon of November the 13th, other contingents of the caravan arriving in the city during the day gathered at the Playas de Tijuana lighthouse, joined by the L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ community contingent. When they arrived, part of the caravan thought it would be possible to cross into the United States immediately. Local residents and business people watched in bewilderment and admiration the arrival of this group of approximately 300 people, there was a notable lack of organization and coordination on the part of the authorities. The federal police (PF), the municipal police (PM), the *Grupo Beta* (National Migration Institute), and some members of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) were present. After a couple of hours of the authorities' insistence to the people in the caravan not to remain there, some migrants were placed in civil society shelters. The migrants' fear of going to these shelters was evident; at various times, when they were in the buses, they decided to get off, fearing that they would be turned in to immigration⁷ or separated from their families. After negotiations, many went to the shelters, and around 60 people stayed to sleep at the

⁷ Being turned in to immigration is a colloquial expression widely used by migrants, activists, and even authorities to refer to the process of being reported to immigration authorities in order to resolve the administrative situation, which ordinarily ends with deportation to their places of origin.

lighthouse. At the same time, a group of five families was guarded by federal and municipal police.

The caravan, as an event with high media coverage by both conventional media and social networks, favored the dissemination of a large amount of information, which also contributed to the creation of neighborhood meetings explicitly dedicated to the topic.

One of the first summonses was on November 13th of the same year, at 8 p.m. on the esplanade of the Estrella del Mar church, located in one of the main avenues of Playas de Tijuana residential development. Approximately 60 residents, most of them elderly males, were in attendance. The discussion began around the uncertainty generated by the arrival of these contingents and how to deal with the situation.

The tone of the discussion among the inhabitants of Playas de Tijuana was of deep concern, in what they described as an "invasion" of people with unknown backgrounds, vices, and bad habits. The meeting included comments on prohibiting migrants from entering their communities, installing security fences, demanding continuous surveillance, and even the army's presence to "control the masses" (sic). Furthermore, even the need to contain them because they were considered "a source of infection, they're dirty, they arrive sick, and they can infect us" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 13, 2018).

Most of the commentaries' common denominator was that foreign migrants were considered not to have the same rights as Mexicans since they entered the country by force (RA Hernández, field journal, November 13, 2018). Discontent among those attending the meeting increased when a municipal police commander heard about the arrival of 13 buses at the dawn of November 14, which were to be received at the Benito Juárez sports center near the police station north of Tijuana.

As a result of the meeting, the neighbors of the Playas de Tijuana residential development organized a peaceful demonstration, which took place on November 14th; it left from the place where they were assembled (*Estrella del Mar* church) and arrived at the offices of the Municipal Delegation. This demonstration intended to demand the delegate to take the migrants away from the Playas de Tijuana residential development. After walking for about an hour, a group of approximately 150 neighbors, composed of 60 men and 90 women, most of them elderly adults, arrived at the delegate's offices. At that moment, the delegate was no longer at the facility, so the neighbors began to demand their presence, or at least someone to address their concerns. Later, the municipal police and the municipal social development director arrived.

The neighbors questioned whether the house rented to members of the L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ caravan had the conditions and permits to operate as a shelter; they requested the Mexican Navy's urgent intervention to remove the caravan migrants, which they said had invaded the country.

While awaiting the authorities' presence, protesters chanted slogans, scolded with their demands, and others had small group discussions, sharing the information they had. Interestingly, some of the conversations held by the participants referred to acts of terrorism committed by migrants when they entered Mexico; therefore, they sought to propose mechanisms to allow them to hand themselves over to the immigration authority.

With a more hostile discourse and tone, other neighbors asserted that it was not their duty to care for the migrants since that was the federal, state, and municipal governments' responsibility. Therefore, the people who had come with the caravan would have to leave their community. Some even questioned the fact that the government gave support to the migrants instead of the residents. The neighbors said that there is much need in Tijuana, and first of all, they would have to help out Mexicans. Some argued that foreigners are welcome as long as they behave themselves, and Central Americans "do not behave themselves; they climb up the border (wall), they smoke marijuana" (RA Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018).

These expressions were denounced by another sector of Tijuana's population, which considered that they contained burden of value judgments and stereotypes about migrants. However, participants in the demonstration stated that they were organizing themselves around an issue of security, not about discrimination: "We are not racist, it is not discrimination. The media changes the information. We are asking for our rights as neighbors. We don't want migrants to go to the beaches. Tijuana is very big. We lack the structure to help" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018).

The information conveyed in these conversations served as a mechanism to spread rumors about events referred to by third parties, namely: "They are tearing up metal sheets from the border wall—one lady told me—, if they don't go over the border, they are going to make war here. They should be sent back. That's what immigration laws are for; they're here illegally. Human rights are protecting them", "the gangs are organizing themselves; they say they're taking Tijuana" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018). This type of discourse fosters the propagation of an imaginary in which the migrant is seen as a delinquent, as a violent person. Undocumented entry was considered by neighbors to be a threat to national security and community security; plans to deal with the situation began to emerge: "If the authorities do nothing, we get them out of here. The problem must be addressed," "it is an invasion, the government will force violence," "we must impose a blockade, Playas de Tijuana must be defended. We've gotta take them out. Firstly, by preventing passage, and then by taking them out" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018).

It was mentioned that neighbors could not block a street because it would violate the law. In contrast, a foreign migrant could break the country's security, enter it violently, be in a place where they would be disturbing, and nothing would happen. In some conversations, the argument of safety and risk was taken to the extreme: "I would rather lose days of work than

lose my life and wait until my sons are killed, to have my daughters robbed and raped." "They will attack us with stones" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018). They demanded decisive actions: "They're illegal, they shouldn't be here. Load them on a plane and deport them (sic). They entered violently" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018).

The municipal social development director announced that the Benito Juárez sports center would be refurbished as a shelter for 810 migrants starting November 14, and that they had already spoken to the National Migration Institute (INM), and the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH) to offer this space to migrants. However, the residents of Playas de Tijuana were not satisfied with the director's response, they booed, and they said that they would take the migrants out, using expressions as: "Let the hunt for Hondurans begin," "they're very rebellious, they won't listen," "it's not about wanting to. It's that they (sic) gotta leave" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018).

On the night of November 14, 2018, a group of neighbors visited the Playas de Tijuana lighthouse to evict migrants who arrived a few hours prior and were planning to spend the night. There was a confrontation that increased in tone, verbal abuse, and attempts of violence. The municipal and federal police guarding the space had to intervene to dissolve the demonstration and calm things down. On November 15, the Benito Juárez sports center became the reception center for the different groups of migrants who arrived in the city in subsequent days and those scattered around the city.

The arguments to deny access to the city were based on issues related to national security, sovereignty, lack of infrastructure, and even the behavior of migrants concerning food: "They don't want sandwiches, they want soda and pizza" (R. A. Hernández, field journal, November 14, 2018).

The incidents mentioned above surprised both locals and foreigners due to the open demonstrations of rejection to the presence of migrants in a city eminently composed of immigrants. Solidarity and support were also shown in the city. The humanitarian sense that has historically characterized Tijuana came swiftly, first to counteract discourses of xenophobia, criminalization, and discrimination and later to take action on behalf of migrants.

Individually or linked, people, support groups, and civil society organizations began collecting food to assist migrants; some organizations opened the door to their shelters to care for the new arrivals, and activist groups accompanied the processes to request asylum in the United States.

Therefore, the caravan allowed local actors to express their negative perceptions of the Central American population publicly. Verbal expressions of opposition to the presence of migrants were filled with arguments based on imaginaries constructed from generalizations; these imaginaries were not created with the arrival of the caravan, they were built over time, and they were nurtured by the diffusion of information and broad discourse emanating from

the United States. In this regard, the American government has categorized migrants as criminals and potential terrorists for decades. This practice supports the construction of these imaginaries through an allusion to the context of widespread violence in Central America.

By not analyzing the information received, the local population is likely to engage in these discourses. Together with images such as the massive entry of the caravan into Mexico, in which they appear breaking the security gate, strengthen these ideas, leaving no room to understand that many of the people who make up the caravans migrate because they are victims of violent environments. That form of mobilization represents the possibility of accessing different life conditions.

FROM HISTORICAL HARASSMENT TO THE CARAVANS: CONCLUSIONS

Under the expulsion category⁸, Sassen (2015) refers to planetary conditions; in Global South countries, expulsion occurs in a setting of recurrent internal wars that transcend every sovereign principle of nation-state and citizenship and reflect the destruction of peripheral states and societies (Sassen, 2015, p. 88). Paradoxically, as indicated by Mercado (2005), local states legitimize and encourage technocratic power to achieve global competitiveness and imperatively delegate significant portions of sovereignty to supranational organizations, including national security, contributing to the violation of the human and fundamental rights of the population.

The restoration of the reason of state, as proposed by Maresca (2005), is to regulate market excesses and to control the form of globalization taking place in southern countries, affecting its population, mostly young people and children, whose life experience is a struggle between forced flight and living in extreme scarcity due to lack of land and employment. These historical harassments have given life to the migrant caravans, which generated diverse reactions throughout the country, among which the migrant imaginaries gained relevance. The caravans' transit revealed different ways for the NGOs, churches, and parts of Mexican society to accompany and help the migrants.

Their presence had the least amount of rejection in the south of Mexico. Various interviewed migrants reported that help and treatment had been better and more consistent in the south in their transit to the country's center. While transiting from the center of the country to the north, the migrants found more displays of hostility, especially in Tijuana. In both cases, there were different manifestations of xenophobia and hospitality; however, probably due to the different contexts and social conditions in either border, migrants had different perceptions around these expressions.

⁸ The author refers to "systemic dynamics" that relegate particular groups of people from the economy and society. In the Global South, the economic expression of expulsion is "neoextractivism," the depredation of global environmental goods (land, water, and air) and their increasing commodification.

For instance, when the caravan had barely advanced in the south of Mexico, the Mexican authorities' response was marked by the deployment of the Federal Police and agents of INM. In the north, the first note was given by residents of Playas de Tijuana, who, based on arguments supported by fear, generated media coverage reflecting their rejection of these groups, which was in line with the statements made repeatedly by the American president.

In the analyzed border cities, diverse and sometimes diverging imaginaries were generated around the Central American migrant. In the south, people used to say "*We are like pupusas, validas, and quesadillas,*"⁹ we have something in common; however, they also knew that vulnerability is present in both the south and the north: in southern Mexico, due to all the visible vulnerabilities and the damage inflicted, they stem from the devaluation of them as people with the right to develop dignified and high-quality lives; in northern Mexico, because globalization, in the image of the North American State, has eroded every ethical principle of the so-called international community, and imposed the paradigm of national security as the principle of any international relationship, whose extreme expression is the practical and real deployment of the old concepts of "enemy" and "war", visible today in law, and the normalized states of exception of the northern powers (García & Villafuerte, 2014).

Tapachula and Tijuana, as cities in border municipalities, have a substantial migrant population and a criminal narrative centered on Central American youth and based on their bodily construction and identity, intricately linked with narratives concerning crime or insecurity.

It is significant that, in the 21st century, a time of globalization and liberal democracy as the predominant system of government on a global scale, we have an urgent need to return to the insights and lessons set forth by thinkers who lived, as Arendt (2008) states, in dark times.

These dark times return with a devastating force that leads to confusion, chaos, and the loss of the very significance of criticism. They obliterate the sense of change rooted in the restoration of human dignity acclaimed by Arendt (2008) and the virtue of hope from the point of view of Ernst Bloch (2000). Migrant subjects are at the center of this storm: young people, adolescents, children, who spent their time alone or accompanied in the caravan, increasing the number of asylum seekers in Mexico and the United States.

Translator: Miguel Ángel Ríos Flores.

⁹ The most representative dishes from Salvadoran, Honduran, and Mexican cuisine.

REFERENCES

- Ahmed, A., Rogers, K., & Ernst, J. (October 26, 2018). El camino de la caravana migrante: de disputa en Honduras a escándalo internacional. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/es/2018/10/26/espanol/caravana-origenes-honduras-trump.html>
- Alegría, T. (1994). Segregación socioespacial urbana. El ejemplo de Tijuana. *Estudios demográficos y urbanos*, 9(2), 411-428.
- Alegría, T. (2015). *Metrópolis transfronteriza: revisión de la hipótesis y evidencias de Tijuana, México y San Diego, Estados Unidos*. Mexico: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Arendt, H. (2008). *Hombres en tiempos de oscuridad*. Spain: Gedisa.
- BBC News Mundo. (October 20, 2018). Caravana de migrantes: Mario Castellanos, el niño que viaja solo a Estados Unidos. *BBC News Mundo*. Retrieved from <https://www.bbc.com/mundo/noticias-america-latina-45924622>
- Bloch, E. (2000). *El principio esperanza*. Madrid: Trotta.
- Brooks, D. (October 27, 2018). Avala EU envío de más tropas a la frontera; no usarán armas, “por ahora”. *La Jornada*. Retrieved from <https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/politica/2018/10/27/avala-eu-envio-de-mas-tropas-a-la-frontera-no-usaran-armas-por-ahora-1189.html>
- Bustamante, J. A. (2000). Migración irregular de México a Estados Unidos: diez años de investigación del proyecto Cañón Zapata. *Frontera Norte*, 12(23), 7-49.
- Cáceres, J. (1998). *Técnicas de la investigación en sociedad, cultura y comunicación*. Mexico: Addison Wesley Longman.
- Casillas, R. (2008). Las rutas de los centroamericanos por México, un ejercicio de caracterización, actores principales y complejidades. *Migración y Desarrollo*, (10), 157-174.
- Casillas, R. (2014). *La frontera sur, donde no pasa, ¿nada?*. Mexico: UNAM.
- Castro, Y. (2012). *Racismo y subjetividad. Efectos del rechazo y el desprecio en el trabajo y en la identidad de los migrantes en Estados Unidos y México*. Mexico: Conaculta.
- El Colegio de la Frontera Norte. (2018). La caravana de migrantes centroamericanos en Tijuana 2018 (Primera etapa) (Documento de Coyuntura). Tijuana: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte.
- Dal Lago, A. (1999). La tautología della paura. *Rassegna Italiana di Sociologia*, 30(1), 5-42.

- Diario del Sur. (October 18, 2018). Arriban a Tapachula la policía federal para salvaguardar la frontera sur. *Diario del Sur*.
- Diario de Tijuana. (November 29, 2018). Revisa Grupo de Coordinación situación en torno a la caravana migrante. *Diario de Tijuana*. Retrieved from <https://diariotijuana.info/revisa-grupo-de-coordinacion-situacion-en-torno-a-la-caravana-migrante>
- Díaz, H. (2009). *La lógica de la investigación etnográfica, un modelo de trabajo para etnógrafos de escuela*. Madrid: Trotta.
- El Heraldo de Honduras. (October 17, 2018). Gobierno señala a Bartolo Fuentes de incitar caravana de migrantes y pide al Ministerio Público actuar. *El Heraldo de Honduras*. Retrieved from <https://www.elheraldo.hn/pais/1226076-466/gobierno-se%C3%B1ala-a-bartolo-fuentes-de-incitar-caravana-de-migrantes-y-pide>
- El Imparcial. (November 15, 2018). Residentes de Tijuana se manifiestan contra Caravana Migrante. *El Imparcial*. Retrieved from <https://www.elimparcial.com/sonora/hermosillo/Residentes-de-Tijuana-se-manifiestan-contr-Caravana-Migrante-20181114-0013.html>
- El Orbe. (October 18, 2018a). Se Enfrentan Policías y Migrantes en Suchiate; Hondureños se Agrupan Para Cruzar Hacia México. *El Orbe*. Retrieved from <https://elorbe.com/portada/2018/10/19/se-enfrentan-policias-y-migrantes-en-suchiate-hondurenos-se-agrupan-para-cruzar-hacia-mexico.html>
- El Orbe. (October 19, 2018b). Refuerzan seguridad en la Frontera Sur ante multitudinario flujo de migrantes. *El Orbe*. Retrieved from <https://elorbe.com/portada/2018/10/16/refuerzan-seguridad-en-la-frontera-sur-ante-multitudinario-flujo-de-migrantes.html>
- Fondo de Naciones Unidas para la Infancia (UNICEF). (2018). *En México los niños que viajan con la caravana migrante siguen necesitando ayuda*. Mexico: UNICEF.
- García, M. & Villafuerte, D. (2014). *Migración, derechos humanos y desarrollo, aproximaciones desde el sur de México y Centroamérica*. Mexico: UNICACH/Juan Pablos.
- Kinosian, S., Albaladejo, A., & Haugaard, L. (2016). *La violencia en El Salvador: no hay una solución sencilla*. El Salvador: Center For International Policy Latin America Working Group Education Found.
- Maresca, M. (2005). Antes de Leviatán. Las formas políticas y la vida social, en la crisis del imperio de la ley. En G. Portilla (Coordinador), *Mutaciones de Leviatán. Legitimación de los nuevos modelos penales*, (pp. 75-112). Spain: Universidad Internacional de Andalucía/AKAL.

- Martínez, G., Cobo, S. & Nárvaez, J. (2015). Trazando rutas de la migración de tránsito irregular o no documentada por México. *Perfiles Latinoamericanos*, 23(45), 127-155.
- Mercado, R. (2005). *El proceso de globalización, el Estado y el Derecho*. Madrid: Universidad Internacional/AKAL.
- Nateras, A. (2014). *Vivo por mi madre y muero por mi barrio. Significados de la violencia y la muerte en el Barrio 18 y la Mara Salvatrucha*. Mexico: Sedesol/Imjuve/UAM.
- Pérez Talamantes, M. D. (2014). Migración y derechos humanos: repatriados y deportados en Tijuana. *Rúbricas*, (Special Issue, Autumn), 52-57.
- Pizano, A., Sánchez, J., & Pizano, M. (2017). La lucha por sus hij@s: madres centroamericanas en búsqueda de migrantes desaparecidos en México. *Anais do XX Encontro Nacional de Estudos Populacionais*. Retrieved from <http://www.abep.org.br/publicacoes/index.php/anais/article/view/2680>.
- Porraz, I. (2017). *En los márgenes de la securitización. Ser joven migrante en el sur en el siglo XXI*. Buenos Aires: Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales
- Porraz, I. (July 11, 2019). ¡Salir a buscarse la vida! La experiencia de algunos jóvenes centroamericanos en Tapachula, Chiapas. *Chiapas Paralelo*. Recuperado de <https://www.chiapasparalelo.com/opinion/2019/07/salir-a-buscarse-la-vida-la-experiencia-de-jovenes-centroamericanos-en-tapachula-chiapas/>
- Reguillo, R. (2005). La Mara: contingencia y afiliación al exceso. *Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, (200). Noviembre-diciembre. 70-84. Retrieved from <https://nuso.org/articulo/contingencia-y-afiliacion-con-el-exceso/>
- Ríos, A. (2014). *En mis pasos las huellas de la violencia: cartografía de la violencia en la migración en tránsito indocumentada en México*. México: Universidad Iberoamericana.
- Sassen, S. (2015). *Expulsions*. USA: Harvard University Press.
- Sin Embargo. (23 de October 23, 2018). Pueblos de Chiapas reciben con mano de obra a los migrantes: donan ropa, comida, medicinas. *Sin Embargo*. Retrieved from <https://www.sinembargo.mx/23-10-2018/3488101>
- UNETV (October 23, 2018). Canal de televisión digital. Tegucigalpa, Honduras.
- Urbalejo Castorena, O. L. (2016). Ciudad de migrantes, ciudad para quedarse. Prácticas culturales y relaciones institucionales de los grupos indígenas en Tijuana, México. *Culturales*, 4(2), 21-41.
- Valenzuela, J. M. (2012). *Sed de mal. Femicidios, jóvenes y exclusión social*. Mexico: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León.
- Valenzuela, J. M. (2019). Las caravanas de migrantes centroamericanos: el éxodo de la miseria. In J. M. Valenzuela, (Coord.), *Caminos del éxodo humano. Las Caravana de migrantes centroamericanos*, (pp. 13-54). Mexico: Gedisa.

- Vargas, F. (2018). El vía crucis del migrante: demandas y membresía. *Trace*, (73), 117-133.
- Vega, H., Hernández, R. A., Camus, M., & Morante, M. (2016). *El desafío de transitar-vivir en la ciudad para las personas migrantes en Guadalajara*. Guadalajara, Jalisco: Prometeo.
- Zamora, E. (2012). Mundos de frontera. La frontera norte de México y la frontera Colombo-Venezolana. Una mirada. *Clio. Revista de Pesquisa histórica*. 30(1), 1-27.
- Zeta (November 25, 2018). Por disturbios y riñas, detienen a 39 integrantes de la Caravana Migrante. *Semanario Zeta*. Retrieved from <https://zetatijuana.com/2018/11/por-disturbios-y-rinas-detienen-a-39-integrantes-de-la-caravana-migrante/>