

## A walk-through Tijuana: An ethnographic reflection on the daily life and the Migrants' caravans' impact in Tijuana, Baja California, México

### Un paseo por Tijuana: Una reflexión etnográfica sobre la cotidianidad y el impacto de las caravanas de migrantes en Tijuana, Baja California, México

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**Abstract:** The following article presents an ethnographic and urban reflection focused on the daily life and the main problems including: the impact of the Migrant Caravans, and the lifestyle observed in Zona Norte of Tijuana during the years 2018 – 2021. Furthermore, the article discusses other important issues such as: the COVID-19 pandemic impact, and the historical socio-cultural patterns developed to survive the economic inequality conditions in Tijuana. Methodologically, the article utilized a qualitative approach based on fieldwork experience including participant observation, and multiple interviews conducted with residents and workers during my visits to Tijuana, Baja California, México between 2018 – 2021. The conclusions of this article present a reflection to understand and to make visible the living conditions of the migrants, the efforts provided by one Migrant organization and the unique lifestyle and contemporary urban problems developed in the border city of Tijuana.

**Keywords:** Border studies, Ethnography, Tijuana.

**Resumen:** Se presenta una reflexión etnográfica y urbana centrada en la vida cotidiana y los principales problemas incluyendo el impacto de las caravanas de migrantes y la dinámica de vida observada en la Zona Norte de Tijuana durante los años 2018-2021. En adición, el artículo aborda otros temas importantes como el impacto de la pandemia de la COVID-19 y los patrones socioculturales históricos desarrollados para sobrevivir las condiciones de desigualdad económica en Tijuana. A nivel metodológico, en el artículo se utilizó un enfoque cualitativo-etnográfico basado en experiencias de trabajo de campo que incluyeron observación participante y múltiples entrevistas realizadas a residentes durante distintas visitas a Tijuana, Baja California, México, entre los años 2018-2021. Las conclusiones presentan una reflexión para entender y hacer visible las condiciones de vida de los migrantes, los esfuerzos brindados por una organización de migrantes y el estilo de vida único desarrollado en la ciudad fronteriza de Tijuana.

**Palabras clave:** Estudios fronterizos, Etnografía, Tijuana.

## INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this article is to present a brief ethnographic reflection on the daily life and the main problems observed in the vibrant city of Tijuana, Baja California, México. In regard to the methods utilized were semi structure interviews, participant observation and a fieldwork phase conducted during the years 2018-2021. It is very important to emphasize the article's analysis approach is strictly academic and there is not any kind of agenda or intention to put at risk or present a stigmatized view of the persons, informants and places described in the analysis. Like in my other ethnographic research conducted in other places, I pretend to make a critical thinking reflection and to make visible the cultural patterns and contemporary issues in this border city. Furthermore, the article discusses the following objectives:

A general description on the methods utilized in the fieldwork process.

A background on Migrant's caravans and Central America crisis.

Tijuana fieldwork experiences.

The impact of the Migrant's caravans.

Conclusions and final reflections.



PHOTO 1.  
The iconic Border Wall in Playas de Tijuana.

## MY INTEREST TO STUDY THE MIGRANTS' CARAVANS AND THE METHODS UTILIZED IN THE FIELDWORK PROCESS

In 2018, I had the opportunity to conduct a fieldwork experience in Cd. Juárez in order to understand the population that conformed the Migrant Caravans. To my surprise, I discovered the Caravan consisted of people from the following countries: from The Caribbean, Haiti and Cuba; from Central America, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Honduras; from the south of México, regions like the state of Chiapas and the city of Tapachula; from South America, Brazil, Venezuela, Colombia; and people from the Middle East, such as Arabs, and Asians. The initial portion of my research focused on the Cuban that had arrived at Cd. Juárez and established in this city as well. In an article published in 2021, "*Surviving 'la lucha' in Ciudad Juárez. An Anthropological reflection on the Cuban community in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico*".

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Through this article, I was able to understand all the circumstances that represent the journey across México with the American border as a destination. Something that drew my attention from the Cubans is the spirit and energy they possessed to overcome any sort of obstacle during said journey, including the instability of the political migratory reform during former president Trump's administration and the current president Biden's administration. However, this presented no issue to the Cubans as they became entrepreneurs and found employment in Juárez, especially in downtown Juárez: a historically forgotten area by the city's government, observed in the deterioration of the buildings, the negligent attempts from law enforcement to provide proper surveillance, and the abundance of drug addict population, prostitution and "narcomenudeo" activities in the streets (Campbell, 2021). Despite this inner-city context observed in downtown Juárez, the Cuban migrants displayed strength and confidence to venture into entrepreneurship, opening Cuban restaurants, and other businesses. This spirit fascinated me as a researcher and drove me to understand the energy and desire to make their dreams come true, to overcome the inequality conditions and the lack of opportunity in Cuba.

However, the caravans have been continuous in the past five years. In fact, the Mexican federal government has deployed operatives to address and suppress their movement inside México. Despite the efforts of the Mexican government, the flow of Migrant Caravans has continued their journey to the main border cities of México and the U.S., like; Nuevo Laredo, México and Laredo, Texas; Ciudad Juárez, México and El Paso, Texas; Tecate, México and Tecate, California; Tijuana, México and San Diego, California. In the case of Tijuana, the migrants have also changed the urban scenery of its downtown area. For example, in the middle of the San Ysidro port of entry, the migrants have made an improvised campsite, a place better known as the "Campamento de los Migrantes" for the locals. For this reason, I was fascinated to enhance the anthropological study of these migrants' caravans with the main objective to understand it and to explain to my students the background, complexities and impact of this unique phenomenon in the borderlands. The initial idea to pick Tijuana was to describe the impact of the migrant caravan in this city and compare it with Cd. Juárez. However, after my arrival in the summer 2018, I was impressed with the unique lifestyle observed in this city especially in Zona Norte. Therefore, I decided to expand the scope of this research with the intention to describe ethnographically, all my experiences lived and observed in this beautiful border city. In this sense, my journey to Tijuana begins in the summer of 2018 and the further summer, I was able to visit until 2022 in order to continue my observations and to gather the information for this article.

The main methods employed in the fieldwork process were semi-structured interviews with locals whom I had the opportunity to meet during my experiences in Tijuana. On the other hand, the utilization of a camp diary was another valuable instrument to document my observations as part of my participant observation phases in Tijuana. In fact, all the person's names who collaborated in the interviews were changed to pseudonymous in order to protect their integrity. Therefore, I would like to express my gratitude and respect to all the persons from Tijuana who collaborated in this study. Aware of the current context of the media sensationalism, and the criminalization of the migrants and individuals from the border cities, this study scope emphasized utilizing the ethnography ethics code and research values principles based on; do not harm, be open and honest, and informed consent (Vivanco Luis A. 2016).

## THE ORIGINS OF THE MIGRANT CARAVANS

The origin of the Migrant caravans is unclear regarding its organization and movement. But it is very evident that the main reason for these spontaneous movements of people is the historically unequal and poor situations that take place in Central American, South America and The Caribbean countries, including their economic and political conditions, as well as climatic events such as; Tropical Storms and Hurricanes. Despite the unclear origin, there is a national consensus that the first big movement that arrived at Mexico's border was in 2017. This event drew international attention by media publications, emphasizing the dangers

and multiple obstacles faced by the members of this caravan. Some of these obstacles include: the risk of being murdered by drug cartels, and the gangs who control the regions of southern México, being shot by Mexican law enforcement, in the case of women and children, falling victims to rape and human trafficking. Overcoming these obstacles, the migrant caravan was able to arrive at the northern Mexican border with the United States.

### WHY DO THEY LEAVE VENEZUELA AND COLOMBIA?

Venezuela has suffered a political and economic crisis since 1990s. After the death of former president Hugo Chávez in 2013, the country has not been able to achieve a political and economic consensus and to provide better options to improve the living conditions. The administration of Nicolás Maduro from 2013 to present, has been plagued of controversies and polemic political programs based on social justice with a high inflation, food shortage and devaluation of the local currency. This instability has created a huge mass migration of Venezuelans to Central America and South America. On the other hand, Colombia has a new president Gustavo Petro who is considered the first leftist president in charge. The hope of the working class is that this new administration is able to address the historical class disparities and lack of opportunities perpetuated by previous administrations.

### WHY DO THEY LEAVE CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN?

The area of Central America has been continuously forgotten by the U.S. and México, failing to help provide political stability to this region. Despite the enormous control of the borders including the utilization of the American base in Central America; in Honduras, for example, have not been able to create a proper plan to provide equal development, employments and security to all the citizens of the country. Furthermore, the local government of these countries has failed to provide social policies in favor of the population that would guarantee socio-economic stability. Therefore, the government's inconsistency and negligence has allowed for drug cartels, gangs and other criminal organizations to take hold in said nations. Now, we will discuss a brief overview on the most unequal countries of Central America with more presences in the caravans.

### WHAT HAPPENS IN NICARAGUA?

La República de Nicaragua, has been administered by President Daniel Ortega since 2007. The first years of President Ortega's term were a honeymoon phase in which the romanticism regarding social justice and prioritizing lower class populations in their agenda. However, in the following years, Ortega's government gradually transitioned into a sort of dictatorship, where democracy lacked and left no room for dissidence. In addition, the government has an absolute control of the nation's economic and socio-political activities, resulting in a socio-economic crisis with lacking opportunities, which has forced the migration of thousands of Nicaraguans searching for better opportunities. Moreover, the historical problems related to drug traffickers and criminal gangs, who have an enormous impact in this country, have taken the remaining working-class hostage, denying any kind of access to economic development (Ontiveros, 2018).

### WHAT HAPPENS IN EL SALVADOR?

La República de El Salvador, has been administered by a young and cyber-personality better known as Nayib Bukele since 2019. At the beginning, Bukele's administration brought hope for thousands of peasants and working-class individuals that have historically lived in poor conditions and segregated from society.

However, Bukele's initial approach, based on social justice and a progressive reform, his rhetoric has been changed dramatically in favor of big corporations and the political elite, which as a consequence, have been running the nation for the past year. Also, Bukele has become a social media phenomenon, even conducting live streams in his social networks in order to promote his image and his agenda, including a popular conversation with the popular Puerto Rican rapper, Residente, who is an open left activist. Nonetheless, Bukele's administration has been unable to improve the living conditions in El Salvador, his rhetoric and political reforms have instead disregarded and harmed both the working and impoverished classes. Furthermore, the historical problem of the violence and civil war produced by the Mara Salvatrucha criminal gang has had a weighing presence in Salvadorian society, resulting in a no-man's-land in the most rural regions of El Salvador. Therefore, this political context has led to a big exodus of Salvadorian migrants seeking a better quality of life and escaping the violence back home (Sherman, 2021).

### WHAT HAPPENS IN HONDURAS?

La República de Honduras, has been administered by Xiomara Castro since January 2022. She is the country's first female president and her political approach is left-wing liberal. Although, the main approach of president Castro is to change the historical oligarchy that has had political and economic control of this country across history. The country still continues in bad conditions with a big class disparity and lack of opportunities. In addition, there are huge issues related to corruption in part of the previous governmental administration, which has been accused of having connections to drug cartels in the area. Likewise, the immense impact of the hurricanes and storms during 2020, has forced the displacement of thousands of poor people who lost their homes and were only looking for better opportunities (Palmer and Semple, 2021).

### WHAT HAPPENS IN GUATEMALA?

La República de Guatemala, has been administered by Alejandro Eduardo Giammattei Falla, who assumed office in 2020. Guatemala has been one of the poorest and unequal countries in Central America. Like other countries in this region, the oligarchy and political elite that are in control of the nation, have been unable to properly address the historical issue of socio-economic inequality. Furthermore, the class disparity has been enhanced due to the instability of the country. Additionally, Guatemala has also suffered from the presence and influence of drug cartels and gangs, which have forced the mobilization of thousands of migrants searching for better opportunities (Abbott, 2021).

### WHAT HAPPENS IN THE SOUTH OF MÉXICO?

Since 2018, President Andres Manuel López Obrador began a new political approach that prioritized the forgotten and disenfranchised of México, including populations such as workers, peasants, and native Mexicans. Despite that the new political agenda is centered on the historically disregarded population, the south of Mexico has remained a severely impoverished region in comparison to the rest of the country. This context, including the displacement of rural workers, harassment and kidnappings by drug traffickers, and overall lacking opportunities, has created a considerable instability in southern México. Therefore, a huge Migrant movement has been occurring in the last ten years, as displaced peoples look for better employment and opportunities, and to improve their lives. Consequentially, indigenous peoples from southern México constitute a large percentage of the current Migrant Caravans arriving at the northern border of the country. The hope is that President López Obrador's administration will be able to manage a proper plan to improve the living conditions of the south, that have been historically forgotten by previous administrations.

## WHY DO THEY LEAVE THE CARIBBEAN? CUBA, DOMINICAN REPUBLIC AND HAITI

Additionally, the Migrant Caravan also has a big component of Caribbean citizens, primarily from Cuba, Haiti, and a small representation from the Dominican Republic. Unfortunately, the 21st century began with serious problems and new challenges in the Caribbean region. In Cuba's case, two events marked its current political context: the death of revolutionary leader Fidel Castro, and the new President in charge, Miguel Díaz Canel. On the one hand, the nation's politics have been seeking stability, but a vast portion of its population continues to live in poverty and a lack of opportunities to better their conditions. This has been a pushing factor in the mass exodus of Cubans heading toward Central America, eventually reaching México's borders. On the other hand, Haiti has a history of being a forgotten country in the Caribbean. For centuries, Haitian populations have been suffering political oppression and economic structural deficiencies which have made it the most impoverished nation in the Western Hemisphere. Political instability caused by the oligarchy's corruption has been an impediment for the working class to improve their living conditions. Furthermore, natural disasters, such as the 2010 earthquake, killed 250,000 Haitians and produced a huge displacement of Haitian citizens to other countries looking for better opportunities. Lastly, the political instability has also created a no-man's-land environment; for example, in the summer of 2021, the murder of President Jovenel Moïse furthered the political chaos and resulted in more hunger, violence, and lack of opportunities for the lower classes. Due to this, they have sought out the option of joining the Migrant Caravans in search of a better life.

Lastly, in addition to the political and economic instability caused by governmental mismanagement experiences, the impact of the oligarchy's corruption, and violence brought on by gangs and drug traffickers against the working class, these nations also faced the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has not only affected the economy of these countries, but has taken high death tolls, most deaths being amongst the working class as they are forced to continue working due to poor socio-economic conditions. Delays in promptly providing vaccines and making them accessible to the public, in particular to the lower, working classes, has additionally exposed this portion of the population. Likewise, global warming and the increase of natural disasters, such as hurricanes, floods, and tropical storms, have destabilized Central America's poorest countries in the past five years, which has forced the displacement of thousands of migrants.

## THE IMPACT OF THE GLOBALIZATION AND NEOLIBERAL POLICIES IN CENTRAL AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Another important factor to understand the perpetuation of eternal unequal conditions in Central America and The Caribbean is the impact of globalization and neoliberal policies implemented in the past twenty-five years in this region. During this time, a huge mobilization of U.S. and other foreign multinational corporations utilized and exploited the countries of Central America for profit, the main victims being their working classes. A great example has been the foreign agricultural multinational corporation, Dole Food Company, which has taken cede in Nicaragua in order to produce bananas, exploiting the local working class and exposing them to extremely harmful pesticides. In fact, there is a famous lawsuit from the workers against Dole company in order to demand compensation for their exposure and poor health conditions (Russell, 2011). This case has made evident how neoliberalism has reduced the government's power to intervene and to provide a healthy and dignified salary for each Nicaraguan worker. In that sense, the author, Steven Gregory (2014), in his book *The Devil Behind the Mirror* argues that neoliberalism has had a severe impact in both Caribbean and Central American societies.

According to this author, presents interesting examples of the impact of implementations of neoliberal politics in The Caribbean have produced a huge class disparity within the population. For instance, with

the mention of the construction of the Megapuerto (Megaport) on Boca Chica's shore, in the Dominican Republic, Gregory explains and shows just how the business of transnational investment and capital works. For this particular project, the United States' very own CSX World Terminals, which handles operations in numerous foreign countries, the U.S. is one of the main actors in forwarding and enforcing globalization and neoliberal policies abroad, allied with the Caucedo Development Corporation, a Dominican-owned construction company. Because this mega port, labeled as the Zona Franca Multi-Modal Caucedo (Caucedo Multimodal Free Trade Zone), would be an eye-sore for tourists attempting to enjoy the clear, sun-kissed horizon at Boca Chica's shore, the Tourism Development Association (TDA) began to protest its continuation once it was clear what toll it would take on tourism profits. Other actors involved are the role of multinational Bank Institutions. For example, the Scotiabank Group that brought in international investors into the development, and political leaders that both approved the project and then, mediated the debate of whether or not it should continue, were also constituted by either foreign power or one percentage of individuals in Dominican society. Despite being the most affected and harmed by the foreign business on their land, the people were not consulted, nor were they ever given a voice on issues that will further increment their day-to-day economic struggles and impoverish their communities. This development model would most certainly have a hefty socio-economic impact, yet the discussion was never taken to the public, one that has endured all the negative effects of international investment in their nation, including the expansion of the tourism industry.

Another interesting findings conducted by Steven Gregory (2014) is how the local population and local entrepreneurs have been affected by the implementation of neoliberal policies in the case of the Dominican Republic and Central America. According to the author, in a segment of an interview with the locals explains "a man that makes a living out of giving tourists tours of the city's historic colonial sites, the impact of the tourism industry's constant and greedy expansion was made evident. The man explained that he charged a mere US \$45 for a whole-day tour, "but with the rise of the all-inclusive resort hotels, these excursions were now arranged by the hotels with on-site tour operators who charged as much as US \$50 per head" (Steven Gregory, *The Devil Behind the Mirror*, 2014). The hotel industries have essentially eliminated the need for a service like that offered by this man, and stolen his main source of income, his livelihood. With stories such as this in abundance, not only in the Dominican Republic, but widespread in all of Latin America, the Caribbean being no exception and, in fact, getting the worst of it, this man makes an emphasis on the malice and evil that underlies neoliberalism and globalization processes. Pointing to a burger king mega advertisement, the man asserts that, "It does nothing for the country. It's only a mirror. And the devil is on the other side," a fitting term and metaphor used for the appeal of consumerism, and the insatiable nature of transnational corporations' greed and ambition for power and dominion, as the author remarks (Gregory, 2014).

By feeding off foreign natural and human resources, powerful entities like the U.S. and those pertaining to the European Union, E.U., have created and established a globalized economic empire. Though the rising 'productivity' of Dominican-owned industries or the establishment of foreign corporations in the Dominican Republic are supposed to favor the economic growth of the nation as a whole, creating employment, fanning the flame of consumerism among the able classes, and elevating the country to a globalized status, giving it a place in the international economy, they have done quite the opposite. Higher class individuals, large corporations, national and multi-national, and foreign investors have been among those who benefited, with rising services, profits, strategic alliances, and cheap labor. However, those that constitute the remaining majority of the nation, the people, have been exploited, their nation's resources sold off to European and American powers, and their livelihoods constantly threatened by the growth of industries that either enslave or exclude them. They are employed for hard labor with poor, insufficient salaries in factories and crop fields, taking advantage of the lacking employment opportunities, a context created by foreign investment and participation as well, or simply making their local businesses and services

obsolete, running their income, and therefore the holistic health of both individuals and society, to the ground.

Finally, according to the author, Steven Gregory (2014), the societal impact of neoliberalism has increased the class disparity among the historical social class structure established in The Caribbean and the Central American region. The conditions observed by Gregory in the Dominican Republic portray the reality in all Central American countries, in which, during the last 25 years, due to neoliberal policies, the government's role has dramatically shifted from centralized power to a small government authority. This has resulted in limited or lacking government action toward guaranteeing equal work conditions and salaries for the working class. Furthermore, this is a clear example of how government institutions have been affected by neoliberalism, creating poor socio-economic conditions in this region. Therefore, in order to address the historical inequality perpetuated in Central America, those countries need government institutions stronger than ever for them to provide social stability and guarantee a decent life for all social sectors. In this context, among other important situations, argued by Gregory, there is an increase in activities within the informal economy as a way of living. Historically, in Central America and the Caribbean, as well as México, participation in the informal economy has become traditional for overcoming the unequal economic conditions in this area. Some of the most interesting informal economic activities observed in the region are public vendors, re-selling cars, garage sales, "las segundas" markets, agricultural products, foods, drugs, and sex work.

In this sense, the ethnographic research conducted by author Kaifa Roland (2010) in Cuba explains the interesting way of informal economy developed there. For example, the trade of items, sexual work by both males and females, the women referred to as "Jineteras" by the locals, and other important ways of living. This is an interesting example of how the government must create social policies and a climax to economic development for all sectors. Conversely to Central America, in the case of Cuba, there is a huge governmental presence that has reduced opportunities for private enterprises. This is a good reference for understanding the current political tensions, including those in the U.S., regarding what the government's role will be within the globalization context. The democrats believe in big government with strong intervention in the private economic sector; on the other hand, republicans believe in small government with the slightest intervention in the private economy. According to our observations, in the Central American context, including that of the Caribbean and México, we suggest a government that can intervene in the private sector to guarantee decent work conditions and proper development models based on equality for all sectors. This, to leave behind the historical inequality perpetuated by neoliberalism in these countries. Mass migrations, evident in the studied caravans are an effect of the impact of neoliberal policies, social instability, and lacking, of inefficient government action to address these widespread issues.



PHOTOS 2 AND 3.

The popular Tijuana sign in Playas de Tijuana. On the right side, The Border wall in Playas de Tijuana has turned into a center of public expression on migrant tension.

## TIJUANA'S FIELDWORK: 2018-2021

In the summer of 2018, I took my first trip to the city of Tijuana and later I visited Tijuana every summer until 2021 in order to continue my fieldwork. Originally, my intention was to understand the impact of the migrants' caravans. However, when I realized the interesting lifestyle in this city, I decided to include in my



analysis a brief ethnographic analysis to describe it. In this sense, I would like to discuss short theoretical concepts present in Tijuana's society.

## ETHNOGRAPHIC DESCRIPTION APPROACH OBSERVED IN TIJUANA

The dynamics that Tijuana offered for any visitors are completely unique in comparison to other Borders cities. Therefore, for the purpose of this description, I will keep a cultural relativist perspective in order to avoid any kind of sectionalise or stigmatized perspective. In this sense, cultural relativism means, *the view that behavior in one culture should not be judged by the standards of another* (Kottak / Kozaitis, 2012). On the other hand, inner city street culture, is *a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols modes of interactions, values and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society* (Bourgois, 1998). This inner-city perspective is present in every corner of "Zona Norte de Tijuana". In fact, this atmosphere could be very shocking to any visitors who visit Tijuana for the first time. However, this dynamic observed in Tijuana is very similar to the dynamic observed in El Centro de Ciudad Juárez, described by Howard Campbell (2009,2021). *Where the underworld of the economy of drugs basically produces a normalization of the violence to the locals* (Campbell, 2021). Historically, anthropologists' fascination has been centered to describe the subcultures developed in marginalized contexts. Certainly, I have been seduced by this tradition and I had been able to conduct fieldwork in other marginalized places such as; La Perla, Old San Juan, Puerto Rico (Vázquez, 2018) El Centro de Ciudad Juárez (Vázquez, Morales, 2021). In fact, this is an interesting and respectable effort to make visible the interesting way of life developed in these particular places. In fact, the following ethnographic description, try to make an academic contribution to explain the contemporary problems and cultural patterns developed in the beautiful city of Tijuana. More ahead, other theoretical concepts will be discussed during the description.

## DESCRIPTION OF THE INDUSTRIAL IMPACT ON THE MULTICULTURAL POPULATION OF TIJUANA

According to the authors' Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo (2012) in their book, *Tijuana Dreaming*, "In recent years, Tijuana has been the subject of numerous battles over the definition. "This is Tijuana," and discourse over who is more 'Tijuanense', because of the increase of the total population due to the multiple job opportunities for both locals and migrants provided by the multinationals and factories. Therefore, Tijuana is a border city more cosmopolitan and diverse in comparison to Ciudad Juárez. According to Tijuana scholar, Umberto Felix Berumen, Tijuana is a city of multiple discourses and archetypes that only relatively and recently emerged as a narratable city, a city of legible narrative and comprehensible ideas. "Trendy and appealing for some, horrific and frightening for others, Tijuana has invariably been described, in both print and news media, as 'hybrid', 'not México,' 'the End of Latin America and the Beginning of the American Dream,' 'The happiest place on earth,' 'a laboratory of postmodernity,' 'a third space,' 'a porous border,' 'a Walled city,' a 'drug capital' on the U.S. travel advisory list" (Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 2012).

With this quote, Tijuana is probably one of the most diverse cities in the Latin American context. In fact, Tijuana offers multiple work environments and opportunities. Like Ciudad Juárez, there are many multinationals factories taking cede in the city as a result of the NAFTA agreement implemented in the '90s, which the locals call "maquiladoras" (Campbell, 2021). *Las maquiladoras*, a Mexican slang term for the factories, are a very attractive opportunity for Mexican workers from all regions of the country, particularly the south, the most impoverished part of México, with many moving to Tijuana in search of better salaries. Therefore, the maquilas have created a big impact economically and culturally on Tijuana's population and have created a multicultural city where the population is composed of locals and international workers

from rural sectors of México, including Central and South American migrants. Furthermore, Tijuana has experienced booming economic growth in the last two decades, including new construction of factories and residential areas, like the suburbs, for the new workers that have achieved economic stability. There are many economic activities in Tijuana. As part of the historical informal economy, drug trafficking, and sexual worker activities are two of the most relevant ones and will be addressed in this article. For this reason, Tijuana is a unique city in México that provides opportunities for many people searching for better employment, including migrants who change the American dream instead to establish in Tijuana.

## THE URBAN PORTRAIT OF TIJUANA

The first impression that you get when you arrive in Tijuana is the shocking view of the San Ysidro Port of Entry and the huge number of cars that await in line to cross over to the United States. This image is indicative of the large population of Tijuana, with approximately 2,157,853 people according to the 2021 census. Also, *Tijuana is the second largest city on North America's Pacific Coast (smaller than Los Angeles, bigger than Seattle and San Francisco)* Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo (2012). The urban density and conglomeration of residences in its "barrios" or neighborhoods, is very overt and capture the attention of any visitor; the diversity of its communities from all economic backgrounds is the most captivating. From private apartments with Miami-like structures and designs to rustic, humble cardboard homes in traditional style within the low-resource colonies of Mexico. On the other hand, Avenida de la Revolución in El Centro de Tijuana, where there is great economic growth due to tourist attractions, including shops, restaurants, bars, and convenience stores. Furthermore, you can observe a considerable presence of American tourists who cross the border daily in order to have fun, and to hang out in the red-light district better known as Zona Norte.

Tijuana's urban context has an interesting geopolitical organization with accessible roads that communicate the major attractions of Baja California like; Rosarito Beach, Ensenada, and Puerto Nuevo. Due to the numerous factories that operate in Tijuana, there is a population that commutes back and forth from other parts of Baja California in order to work in them. Likewise, there is a huge portion of the Tijuana population crosses the U.S. border to San Diego, California to work every day. Therefore, traffic is an immense issue in the daily life of Tijuana. On the other hand, Tijuana is an industrial city, according to Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, Tijuana was transformed from a ranch to an urban settlement due to the economic boom in southern California dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and is still present today. Another important factor has been the multiple U.S. military bases located in southern California, where their populations have been important customers of Tijuana's economy (Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 2012).

The development model implemented in Tijuana has been around the factories' production. This represents an important factor for understanding the large factory worker populations and the middle class in Tijuana. However, Tijuana appears to have an Americanized lifestyle and society. According to the scholar Kathryn Kopinak in her essay *Globalziation in Tijuana Maquiladoras in Tijuana Dreaming*, Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo (2012). What happens in Tijuana is part of the impact of globalization, the many factories' effects, and the closeness to California, all contributing to the Americanization of Tijuana's society. People in Tijuana tend to be very open and friendly. In comparison to other parts of México, the people of Tijuana speak a little English and are more exposed to cultural diversity than other Mexican border cities. The public transportation system in Tijuana offers varied forms of transport, such as camiones (buses), car transport via Uber, and private taxis. In fact, Uber has created an important source of employment and a substantial workforce in Tijuana's last five years. For example, our Uber driver, an informant for this fieldwork experience, explained how Uber works in México. *Private car owners rent their cars to Uber drivers in order to make a profit. Therefore, the city has a large number of Uber drivers having to pay the car rental to make a living* (Uber driver fragment interview 2021).

This is a very profitable activity that has been on the rise in Tijuana. Overall, the economic growth of Tijuana is more evident than in other parts of México including Ciudad Juárez. The flow of people who cross the border daily has created an enormous concentration of economic growth that guaranteed multiple opportunities to make profits, not only legally, but as well informal economy or the historical tourist and sexual industry that is very important in Tijuana. It has been probably the most popular activity where Tijuana has gained popularity worldwide.

## ZONA NORTE TIJUANA FIELDWORK EXPERIENCES

Without a doubt, an activity that strikes any visitor to Tijuana is the economic revenue generated by sex work and narco-trafficking or narcomenudeo that is observed in the famous Zona Norte. This is one of the most eye-catching sectors of Tijuana's urban center and that has been amply studied by both Mexican and American sociologists and anthropologists. As is the case with Michel Hemmingsen (2008) in *Zona Norte: The Post-Structural Body of Erotic Dancers and Sex Workers in Tijuana, San Diego, and Los Angeles: An Auto/ ethnography of Desire and Addiction*.

In this interesting research, the author discusses an enriching, ethnographic description based on his experiences and interviews conducted in the Zona Norte of Tijuana. In this research, the author presents a very original focus based on qualitative techniques and a very captivating narrative. His explanation could seem like a story or a guide for single men that aspire to go consume sex in the popular brothels of the Zona Norte, including San Diego and Los Angeles, California. In this sense, his research was very important in initiating my own field experiences in the famous Zona Norte. A sector that has been promoted by the sexual tourism of primarily high-income tourists from the United States and Europe.

Another interesting topic covered by Michel Hemmingsen (2008) is the discussion of the socio-cultural patterns developed of sexual work as an activity of economic remuneration and the acceptance of this into Mexican and particularly, Tijuana's society. The author remarks that México has a history with the popular culture of prostitution that is widely known within its society. The iconic phrase "*irse de putas*" in the Mexican context has turned out to be quite popular across distinct social classes and there is empirical evidence that proves the practice of prostitution since the years of the Mexican revolution, more particularly, at the northern border. Furthermore, the author mentions that the focus taken on literature produced by scholars in Tijuana on the topic of prostitution has always been feminist. This is a very important position to assume since the sexual work of the Zona Norte is primarily conducted by young women from 18 to 40 years of age. In addition to this, factors like human exploitation by the cartels, human trafficking, HIV risks, and others are also important are discussed by Hemmingsen. This research was fundamental to understand the general context of la Zona Norte.



PHOTO 4.

The popular Adelita Bar in Coahuila Street is a historical brothel in Tijuana.

## WHAT DO YOU SEE IN THE ZONA NORTE? WHY IS IT SO POPULAR?

The first impression of the Zona Norte is the idea that everything is about sex, alcohol, and drugs. Coahuila street is the main and most popular of this area where the two most famous brothels of Tijuana are found: Adelita Bar and Hong Kong. In fact, Adelita Bar is presumed to be one of the older brothels, operating since 1960. Based on my observations, these two brothels are the major attractions for adult international tourists and American tourists, mainly military personnel from the army and navy bases in San Diego, California. The atmospheres in these bars are very particular, you go to a bar where you could see women dressed very provocatively who are very friendly, they start up a conversation or brief interaction and eventually offer you, their services. These services fluctuate between 80-120 US dollars and every bar offers hotel rooms and security. Obviously, the economic activity that is generated is very impressive; you can see the female workers carrying small safety deposit boxes where they keep the large amounts of money that a single shift can generate. A local brothel worker, mentioned *that a good shift for a female sex worker can generate from 500 to 1,000 US dollars in a day. From this money, they have to pay the brothel a share and a smaller portion to those who ensure their safety.* This goes to show that the level of organization of this economic activity is astounding.

However, the Zona Norte offers sexual services for all types of tourists with varying economic backgrounds and tastes. For example, based on my observation, the posterior portion of Coahuila Street has the famous Primer Callejón Coahuila, or Coahuila Alley: a catwalk where a great number of female sex workers of all ages and tastes are exhibited. Young female college students to older adult women from all parts of México, South America, and Central America are available. This part of the Zona Norte is the most impressive since it practices a policy of tolerance, a concept used by the Mexican government to give freedoms and permission for the consumption of drugs controlled by the state and of course, the practice of prostitution. Therefore, the Callejón Coahuila is quite possibly the most liberal part of the Zona Norte. On my way through the alley, I could observe dealers of marihuana, among other drugs, and most of all sexual services at the most accessible price. According to my observations, a vast majority of the consumers in this alley were Tijuana locals, mainly taxi drivers, and maquiladora employees. Despite being the most liberal part of town, there is still a set social order and security provided by Mexican authorities. You can observe security cameras and constant vigilance by the Mexican police. Yet, this does not deter daily muggings or acts of violence perpetrated against sex workers by delinquents or drug addicts that frequent the alley. A curious fact is that there is an “OXXO” store along the Callejón Coahuila, which is a popular Mexican chain of convenience stores, where people stop to buy liquor, condoms, cigarettes, and food. In addition, there are local bars that offer services to the alley’s frequent customers. An important fact of the Zona Norte and the Callejón is that they operate the full 24 hours of the day; the activity does not stop so, consequently, there are labor shifts of 5 to 10 hours including both the cleaning staff as well as the brothel employees and sex workers.

The urban dynamics observed in the Zona Norte we can define as a way of “heterotopia”. For instance, this dynamic has been discussed by French philosopher Michel Foucault, *which describes certain cultural, institutional, and discursive spaces that are somehow ‘other’: disturbing, intense, incompatible, contradictory, or transforming. Heterotopias are worlds within worlds, mirroring and yet upsetting what is outside* (Anthony Faramelli, David Hancock, Robert G. White, 2018).

This heterotopy also reminds us of the theoretical concept of the Inner City previously mentioned and observed by Phillipe Bourgois (1998) in the community of Spanish Harlem, the Puerto Rican side of Harlem, in the 1980s of New York City and also the interesting ethnographic research’s conducted by Howard Campbell, “Drug War Zone” (2009) and “Downtown Juarez” (2021), which describes the concept of heterotopy as a sub-culture developed in the Avenida Juárez and mostly the sub-cultural environment of Mexican “narcos” and of devastation that generated the terrible and bloody narco war that took place in Ciudad Juárez from 2009 to 2014 (Campbell, 2009).

Doubtless, the environment observed in Zona Norte can be concluded to be a heterotopy or a sub-culture primarily developed by the sexual work economy, the brothels, and the tolerance zone that allows for special freedoms and foments this type of cultural patterns that are now very characteristic of Tijuana.



PHOTOS 5 AND 6.

Callejón Coahuila behind Adelita Bar where “Las Paraditas” gathered for work. On the right side, is Hong Kong Club, another popular brothel from Coahuila Street.

## SEXUAL WORK ECONOMY

Another important observation conducted in Zona Norte is the number of sex workers that are all over the city, in particular, the concept better known as “Paraditas”. This is a mexican slang that describes independent sex workers that work on their feet. There are all types of “Paraditas,” ranging from young university students to single-mother maquiladora employees that need a little more money to be able to cover their children’s expenses. This is yet another aspect that makes Tijuana unique and a cosmopolitan center within the mexican context since many women are attracted to the sizeable economic profits that sex work can offer in the Zona Norte of Tijuana. As a result, there are numerous foreign women that have fomented the development of cosmopolitan culture in the city of Tijuana, which makes it all the more captivating that Tijuana is the only multi-cultural and globalized border city with high economic consumption and a large number of consumers in all senses (Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 2012).

Zona Norte’s famous site is Callejón Coahuila. The most well-known site in the area, even having the opportunity of entering a few brothels and conducting participant observation, in which I was able to talk to sex workers who were extremely charismatic, kind, and courteous towards my research, sharing how this economic activity develops in Tijuana. Also, something to highlight is that sex work in some parts is controlled by big mafias that have domain over all drug trafficking operations in Tijuana. According to the local brothel worker, *In the last ten years, had been apparently calm in regard to drug trafficking violence, but in recent years it has seen a sharp increase in murders as part of a war for drug and human trafficking control between the big cartels that dominate Tijuana. These are the cartel of Tijuana, the Jalisco Nueva Generación Cartel, and the Sinaloa Cartel, among other organizations that dispute control of this region* (local brothel worker interview fragment, 2021).

On the other hand, Tijuana has been a target of this dispute because of its major economic profits and opportunities as a border city, like human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and illegal migrant trafficking to the United States which has been on the rise in the last years, mainly disembarking them in San Diego, California. Nonetheless, these crimes tend to occur in the outskirts of Tijuana, developing a stable enough touristic environment in the Zona Norte, receiving the densest flow of American tourists. The socio-cultural dynamic observed in this zone is amply influenced by the cultural patterns resulting from sexual work and prostitution that have historically developed within Mexico’s largest cities. Lastly, this cultural dynamic developed in Tijuana based on sexual work and the fun offered by the red district of the Zona Norte seems to be normal for Tijuana locals (Michel Hemmingsen, 2008).

Lastly, Tijuana in the last years has become a very diverse city with big leisure centers and restaurants for the locals. According to my observations conducted in El Centro de Tijuana, one that really drew my attention is the Gastro Park, a unique concept in the middle of the city where there are fast food trucks, like those seen in Brooklyn, New York, or Los Angeles, that offer a diversity of international and Mexican

dishes giving it a very urban and cosmopolitan air to Tijuana as a modern and globalized city. It has embraced modernity by giving diverse options to the locals, mostly to workers and professionals living in Tijuana that perceive the sexual work dynamic of the Zona Norte as normal. It is not our mission to condemn or judge those who engage in sexual work as an economic activity, but rather to shed light through this study on the distinct cultural patterns developed in Tijuana and to denounce those who use sexual work as a means or form of human trafficking and exploitation.

The socio-cultural dynamic observed in Zona Norte based on sexual tourism reminded me of my trips to the red district of Amsterdam in the Netherlands and the city of Cologne in Germany. Where both cities are popular for offering this sexual tourism as a popular touristic destinations in all of Europe and at a global scale. Likewise, Tijuana maintains this popularity as an international touristic destination. In the Zona Norte, you can observe tourists from all over the world: Americans, Mexicans, Arabs, even Europeans, such as some English tourists, among others. This is why Tijuana offers a more diverse social dynamic than other Mexican border cities.

### MIGRANTS CARAVANS IMPACT AND THE FORMER MIGRANTS CAMP AT SAN YSIDRO

The Migrants caravans arriving in the city of Tijuana have been another contributing factor to the greater diversity and population increase. Upon the arrival of the first caravan in 2017-2018, Tijuana has become a shelter city for the many migrants that conform to them. In a conversation with local informant, *“he noted that some of the migrants have been well accepted by Tijuana locals, especially those who have come to work and have chosen Tijuana as their new home. For the Tijuana local, the image of Haitians, Cubans, and Venezuelans, for the most part, is that they have come to work or are willing to integrate into the city”*. In fact, during our visit to the urban center of Tijuana, we observed that the streets are full of life and economic activity almost all the time, due to migrant presence. For example, there are shoemakers, food vendors, and people selling clothes, and electronics, among others, on the streets that are almost always migrants that have just recently arrived in Tijuana. On the other hand, the migrant overpopulation has generated a quite xenophobic discourse regarding and towards migrant communities of Central America, particularly those of Honduras and El Salvador. According to a local informant, *“most immigrants that have come to cause trouble or engage in delinquency are Central Americans, among them are those who decided to join and work for the drug cartels, an endeavor that does not usually end well. Ladies arriving with the caravans usually become maquiladora employees and other sex workers in the Zona Norte”* (Fragment interview with local informant, 2021).

Something quite striking to see when I was conducting my fieldwork phase in summer 2021 was the impressive former migrant camp settled on the parking lot of San Ysidro Port of Entry. This camp was born during the spring and summer of 2021, and was used to shelter an impressive number of stranded migrants awaiting a chance to cross or to regulate their migratory status in México. The total this population was estimated approximately three to five thousand migrants living in camping tents like a war refugee camp. In fact, in order to provide some aid, Tijuana’s government and some local non-profit organizations were able to provide some maintenance for this camp. Like the installment of latrines or public bathrooms and drinking water for the migrants’ consumption. However, the camp was considered a “no-man’s-land”, there were a lot of acts of violence, theft, and other crimes perpetrated amongst migrants. During my visit, I could observe the number of families, children, and elders, who used to live in this camp. The living conditions were deplorable, the camping tents were in poor condition as well, and some migrants used to sleep outdoors without protection from the rain or the cold of the winter. The stench of human excrement was overwhelming, and the cleaning provisions were few. The overpopulation of migrants also became a real and complex problem to address due to the lack of hygiene measures during the peak of the Covid 19 pandemic. In addition, this overpopulation of migrants also produced a rise of drug addicts openly consuming, and drunkards sleeping

on the street in the plain light of day, without any protections in the midst of a pandemic. In addition, the children of migrant families used to spend their days at the camp without any type of educational formation, exposed to the dangers within it. Lastly, the local government and law enforcement of Tijuana ordered in spring of 2022 to shut down the camp in order to provide safe conditions to the children and elder population. After the closure of the camp, the migrant crisis still continues and the shelters are not enough to provide housing for all the migrants.

Another valuable source was the interview conducted to Father Pat Murphy in summer of 2021, Father Pat Murphy is the director of la Casa del Migrante en Tijuana and is a charismatic person and activist who loves México, Latin America, and Tijuana. His passion drove him to Tijuana in 2013 in order to start working in la Casa del Migrante. According to him, *“in the last five years, the city of Tijuana has experienced a sharp increase in the arrival of Migrant caravans. Furthermore, la Casa del Migrante has been an important institution for supporting Migrant families, especially children, and reintegrating them into Mexican society. This by providing education, food, clothing, and language instruction (Spanish and English) to the most vulnerable populations”*. Furthermore, Father Pat Murphy pointed out, *the lack of resources and interest by the Mexican government have been two important obstacles for them to continue improving their services*. *“We live by donations mostly by good people of Tijuana, volunteers, and other non-profit organizations who are collaborating with us in order to improve our services. However, the challenge has been tough due to the high population of migrants that have arrived, particularly, in the last two years. We need more support from the Mexican government and by the new Mayor of Tijuana”*, (Father Pat Murphy interview fragment, 2021). Since the fall of 2021, the city of Tijuana has a new Mayor, Karla Ruiz MacFarland, that belongs to the MORENA party. Her victory is a great example of Tijuana’s high rates of working-class individuals amongst the populace, who support her and the MORENA party, seeking an improvement in their living conditions. In this sense, according to Father Pat Murphy, *“Overall, Tijuana voters tend to be more progressive than those in other parts of México therefore, she got huge support from the majority of Tijuana’s voters”*. Mayor Ruiz MacFarland’s new challenge is to enforce an agenda to obtain and improve the working class’ living conditions and their salaries, including that of the migrants that have arrived in Tijuana and will eventually be established in Tijuana.

Finally, the wish of Father Pat, and that of other members of non-profit organizations that tend to migrants in Tijuana, is one of a greater commitment on the authorities’ part and of offering help to better the services of these organizations, which for the most part, live on the solidarity of local citizens and the entities that provide resources for them. Like other border cities, Tijuana is seeking more international aid and more resources, especially from its neighboring city San Diego, to address the overpopulation of migrants that still continue arriving in Tijuana.

## CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTION

In conclusion, the authors Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, in the interesting book *Tijuana Dreaming* (2012), discuss a series of reflections on the urban daily life of Tijuana, including the produced impact of industries and their workers in the city. According to them, the urban context observed in Tijuana is a sort of hybrid mutation that combines low-resource living complexes and the latest urban development complexes. From a cultural perspective, the urban scene of Tijuana freezes a series of hybrid aspects including the informal economy, such as drug trafficking, industries, and social institutions of Tijuana, as they produce a stage for postmodernity. Tijuana is a post-modern city, a term coined by an Argentinian anthropologist established in México, Nestor García Canclini. This post-modernity status, in the Latin American context, refers to a city that has developed elements of the global market, like consumerism and a wealthy class that responds to the global market’s identity and to the United States, this including an urban planification that emulates that of this nation. Therefore, Tijuana is a post-modern, urban space that has developed a unique

lifestyle within Mexican society and additionally maintains a hybrid identity, characteristic of 21st-century cosmopolitan cities (Josh Kun and Fiamma Montezemolo, 2012).

It is our wish that new and upcoming political leaders of Tijuana can uphold a social agenda that allows for solutions that address the issues caused by the migrant caravans. Also, an agenda that permits a new strategy and direction toward combating drug trafficking and its consequential violence. Most of all, the human trafficking that emerged in Tijuana at the hand of cartels, which typically target migrants as victims. Despite Tijuana having created vanguard health policies regarding sex work and providing a safe workspace for this activity, ahead lies the challenge of improving a development model that better working conditions in Tijuana, mostly by part of the multinationals that control a great portion of the economic activity in this region and feed off the cheap labor force of Tijuana. Therefore, a model that can also counteract the impacts of neoliberal policies enforced at the border is needed. Without a doubt, Tijuana is a postmodern society that draws the attention of any visiting observer and generates a striking impression of a globally unique urban environment. This border lifestyle environment developed is a combination of historical border factors which include the survival of the local and global economy. Where sometimes the act of survival is either illegal or legal, but in the end, the main goal is to survive the challenges of the global market and the structural political inequalities of Mexico's society and Central America.

## FIELDWORK PHOTOS TIJUANA SUMMER 2021



THE MIGRANT CAMP IN SAN YSIDRO IS A MIGRANT'S SETTLEMENT NEAR TO THE US BORDER. MEXICAN AUTHORITIES ESTIMATED A POPULATION OF AROUND 1,200- 1,700, INCLUDING FAMILIES AND PEOPLE FROM MULTIPLE BACKGROUNDS AND NATIONALITIES MOSTLY FROM CENTRAL AMERICA. IN THE SPRING OF 2022, THE CAMP WAS SHUT DOWN BY LOCAL LAW ENFORCEMENT.



PHOTOS 9 AND 10.

the stunning Medical Plaza Building in Zona Urbana Rio Tijuana represents the exclusive area of modern Tijuana with multiple medical services including dentists and plastic surgery. It is part of the medical tourism services for the U.S. Citizens from San Diego, California. On the right side, the iconic Reloj Monumental in Avenida Revolución Zona Centro.

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## PHOTOS

Photos taken by Dr. Víctor Vázquez during fieldwork conducted in Tijuana during spring-summer 2021.

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