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Learning to Live in Limbo:

The Effects of the *Remain in Mexico Program* on Central American Migrants

In Homer's epic poem, the *Odyssey*, Ulysses must make a treacherous journey to reclaim his throne in Ithaca. Ulysses's journey and the difficulties he endured throughout inspired psychiatrists to name a now too common migrant experience after him: the Ulysses Syndrome. Coined by Spanish psychiatrist Joséba Achotegui, the Ulysses Syndrome is an extreme form of migratory mourning,[1] encompassing both the fatigue of a migrant's journey, as well as their effort to integrate into a new country.[2]

Starting in 2018, Central American migrants attempting to enter the United States have encountered a series of obstacles which have forced them to consider a longer stay in Tijuana, a circumstance which presents new and unanticipated challenges. These challenges could increase the prevalence of the Ulysses Syndrome among this growing migrant population, further impinging on the already overwhelmed Mexican immigration system and threatening the health of thousands of affected migrants.

This essay explores the new realities faced by Central American migrants, whose journeys were expected to end in the United States, but who have instead had their own odyssey truncated and paused indefinitely in Tijuana, Mexico. Unless otherwise stated, the source for these findings is the author's own research, carried out during June and July of 2019 in Tijuana, as part of a larger body of research from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, entitled *Finance in Displacement*. It is important to note the author is not a clinical psychologist and all observations are made from an ethnographic perspective.

1 According to Dr. Joséba Achotegui, migratory mourning is a natural psychological process experienced by migrants when they face separation from their loved ones, language, culture, land, and social status or situation; lose contact with their ethnic group; and risk their physical security.

2 Raffaella Bianucci et al., "The 'Ulysses Syndrome': An Eponym Identifies a Psychosomatic Disorder in Modern Migrants," *European Journal of Internal Medicine* 41 (2017): 30–32.

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The San Ysidro Port of entry, located between Tijuana and San Diego, is the busiest border crossing in the Western Hemisphere. Every day, it processes about 70,000 northbound vehicles and 20,000 northbound pedestrians.[3] Over the last three years, the San Diego port (officially known as the San Ysidro Land Port of Entry) has experienced an increased flow of foot traffic with thousands of Haitian, African, and Central American migrants seeking asylum in the United States. Due to restrictive immigration policies and a narrowing understanding of asylum in the United States, this large wave of migrants has been forced to remain in Mexico indefinitely, hoping to eventually cross the border.

In 2018 alone, more than 6,000 Central American migrants arrived in Tijuana.[4] Concurrently, the United States devised a plan named the 'Migration Protection Protocols' to ensure this group of migrants, and those to follow, would be unable to enter and remain in the country with an asylum claim. Instead, they would be sent back to Mexico for the duration of their U.S. immigration proceedings.[5] Nicknamed the 'Remain in Mexico' program, this plan was first announced in December of 2018 and implemented on January 25, 2019. Stranded, migrants sought protection from the Mexican government and during the first few weeks of 2019, submitted 12,600 asylum requests, most of which came from Central American migrants.[6]

Tijuana is accustomed to migration. More than 80 percent of current residents come from migrant families or are migrants themselves.[7] Additionally, the city has long served as a trampoline to the United States, as migrants stay a few days before departing to their final destination. Nevertheless, Tijuana was ill-prepared to host such a massive, sudden influx of migrants, and much less to assume the role of indefinite holding center for migrants traveling to the United States.

In an effort to respond to the inevitable crisis that would ensue, as thousands of Central American migrants crowded the streets of Tijuana at the end of 2018, the local government set up a temporary shelter made up of camping tents in an outdoor sports complex called Benito Juarez. Within weeks, it was clear the ad hoc shelter lacked the sanitary conditions and space to provide refuge for the 5,800 migrants that required it.[8] Rainfall turned the dry earth into mud and the sewers quickly swelled, flooding all the tents in the facility and exposing the temporary residents to the bitter Tijuana winter.

The attention of the media, civil society, and non-profit organizations pressured authorities to close down Benito Juarez and move the migrants to a new shelter. A former night club located further away from the border was chosen as the optimum facility. El Barretal, as it was known, faced the same fate as its predecessor and was closed within a couple of months.

It became clear to civil society and religious organizations that the government would not be able to provide Central American migrants with decent shelter and that they would have to step up. A series of shelters began to pop-up throughout the city in response, offering migrants a place to sleep, food, and clothing.

Meanwhile, the uproar of Tijuanenses grew stronger. Tijuana natives, and even some migrants who had adopted Tijuana as their home, had already made up their mind about the new residents. Both the Mexican and American media had taken issue with the so-called 'migrant caravan,' as it made its way to the Mexican-Guatemalan border, depicting the travelers as dirty, uneducated, gang members who would threaten the peace and order of every country they crossed. Local authorities in Tijuana aided in spreading this narrative, with the mayor

3 "San Ysidro Land Port of Entry," Government, U.S. General Services Administration, accessed November 10, 2019, https://www.gsa.gov/about-us/regions/welcome-to-the-pacific-rim-region-9/land-ports-of-entry/san-ysidro-land-port-of-entry.

4 Bautista, Nidia, "The Migrant Caravan Is Straining Tijuana's Resources, and Patience," *CityLab,* December 5, 2018, https://www.citylab.com/equity/2018/12/tijuana-migrant-caravan-asylum-border-trump/577396/.

5 "Migrant Protection Protocols," Government, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, January 24, 2019, https://www.dhs.gov/news/2019/01/24/migrant-protection-protocols.

6 Anna Giaritelli, "Mexico Halts Program for Temporary Asylum Requests after Another Caravan Forms," *Washington Examiner,* January 31, 2019, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/mexico-halts-program-for-temporary-asylum-requests-after-another-caravan-forms.

7 Nidia Bautista, "The Migrant Caravan Is Straining Tijuana's Resources, and Patience."

8 Leyla Santiago, Miguel Marquez, and Catherine E. Shoichet, "A Sports Complex Is Housing Thousands of Migrants in Tijuana. It's at Least 3 Times above Its Capacity," News, CNN, November 28, 2018, https://www.cnn.com/2018/11/27/americas/san-ysidro-border-migrants-police-clash/index.html.

'confirming' there were gang members infiltrating the caravan.[9] Locals wanted nothing to do with the caravan-ers and proceeded to protest in the streets, on social media, and in their everyday lives, making it abundantly clear that Central Americans were not welcome in Tijuana.

The Remain in Mexico program clearly stated these migrants had to await their court hearings and asylum resolutions in Mexico, or they would forgo their right to an asylum claim in the United States. Moreover, returning home would be a death sentence, as most Central American migrants were fleeing chronic food insecurity at best and gang violence at worst. After the harrowing journey from El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala, men, women, and children now have to face living where they know they are unwanted for as long as the United States' court system dictates. They have to learn to live in limbo.

Flor, a Honduran woman in her 40's, arrived in Tijuana in January 2019. Her days seem like an exact replica of one another: wake up, have breakfast, look over her 14 and 9-year-old sons as they play before lunch, have lunch, take a nap, do laundry, look over her sons again, have dinner, and go to sleep. She is one of hundreds residing in a religious shelter by the name of Embajadores de Jesus (Ambassadors of Jesus).

The shelter is a large, dark room with few windows, where camping tents huddled together make up the homes of families desperately awaiting their turn to sit before an American judge and defend their asylum case. Embajadores de Jesus sits on a hill were wild pigs roam free and the stench of rotting waste and manure fill the air. Far removed from downtown Tijuana and the flourishing factories in the outskirts, there are no jobs Flor can access without spending a substantial amount of her salary on transportation. Even if there was a job she could get to, who would care for her two boys? The shelter is unable to offer childcare and leaving children unattended is not allowed.

The other option would be enrolling her kids in school, but this seems unreasonable, considering that 'any day now' her number will be up, and she will have to attend court in San Diego. What is the point of having the boys go to school for a few days or a few weeks? Rumors of kidnappers also prohibit her from separating from her children. Unknown men have offered other mothers in the shelter money to rent their kids and claim them as their own at the U.S. border.

Flor is also battling guilt for leaving her three adult daughters back in Honduras. They are all married; one of them was recently attacked by her husband with a machete, cutting her arm and face. Flor knew she had to escape Honduras with her two young sons because gang members were accusing her of filing a police report, after she inadvertently witnessed a murder. Nevertheless, if she is denied asylum in the U.S. she would rather be deported back to Honduras and risk being killed than stay in Mexico. In her words, "I don't know what I'll do there, but I don't want to stay here [...] It will be on them if something happens to me."

Due to poor infrastructure and failing political will within the government of Tijuana, religious organizations such as Embajadores de Jesus have emerged to fill the gap. Unfortunately, though well-meaning, these ad hoc shelters contribute to migrants feeling isolated and desperate, as the shelters are unable to offer integration strategies or aid migrants' ailing mental health.

Conversely, shelters with a long-standing history are better equipped to support the needs of these immigrants in waiting. Such is the case of Casa del Migrante (House of the Migrant) which helped Pablo get back on his feet after his deportation.

Pablo is a 55-year-old man, originally from Guatemala, who has lived most of his life as an undocumented migrant in California. After being detained for a DUI (Driving Under the Influence traffic offense), Pablo managed to convince authorities to deport him to Mexico, where he was taken in by Casa del Migrante. Pablo had long battled drug addiction and had a history of defying authorities. At Casa del Migrante, Pablo was warned he would only be allowed to stay for a three-month period, during which he would have to work, save up for his own place, and, of course, not consume any drugs. This would prove a herculean task since Pablo was far away

9 James Fredrick, "Shouting 'Mexico First,' Hundreds In Tijuana March Against Migrant Caravan," News, NPR, November 19, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/11/19/669193788/shouting-mexico-first-hundreds-in-tijuana-march-against-migrant-caravan.

from where he had called 'home' his entire life and would not get to see his 4-year old daughter grow up. Nevertheless, Casa del Migrante equipped him with the tools to fight the urge to use drugs and, perhaps more importantly, to build his life in Tijuana.

The shelter connected him to various jobs, collected the majority of his paycheck and put it away in a safe, paired him with a counselor, and showered him with patience and affection. After his three months stay, Pablo found a place to live nearby and continues to visit Casa del Migrante as a volunteer. He is working hard to save up and apply for a visa to enter the U.S. and visit his daughter, and he has managed to stay away from drugs and alcohol. During his interview, Pablo said, "In one sentence, this house gives you a second chance at life."

However, shelters are not the only factor influencing Central American migrants' lives in Tijuana. Documentation has also proven to be a challenge, as migrants attempt to bring a sense of normalcy to their new reality.

Initially, the Mexican government had committed to providing Central American migrants with a one-year humanitarian visa, which would allow them to regularize their status in the country and access formal work while their asylum case was reviewed in the United States. The first caravans to arrive in Mexico benefited from this document. Once the flow of Central Americans showed no signs of abating, however, the Mexican government shut down the program, leaving thousands without proper documentation.[10]

Central American migrants who lack documentation are not only forced to find work in the informal economy, rife with exploitation and risks, but are also unable to access banking services, send or receive money, access health care services, or enroll their children in school.

Such was the case of Alex, who depended on the good will of parishioners from his church to find a place to live, find informal employment, and send money to his wife and son in Honduras. Without the help of Good Samaritans, Alex would remain excluded from society and unable to provide for himself during his time in Tijuana. Relying on locals to build and maintain a life can prove exponentially challenging when xenophobia and indifference is the norm.

Adding to the many challenges Central American migrants are confronted with in Tijuana is the lingering fact that they have no sense of how long they must reside in Mexico. It could be months, or years. Migrants must attend multiple court hearings before their asylum cases are resolved and these hearings are spaced out in intervals of three months or more. There is little sense in planning ahead when change can strike suddenly, crumbling any plan to the ground.

Caravan (his chosen name) is a former youth pastor from Honduras. Caravan had noticed the lack of proper shelters for women and children and resolved to establish his own. With the help of two other migrants, he garnered the financial support of a non-profit in the United States and was gifted a property to build his shelter. After months of arduous work, the shelter was inaugurated. Caravan's greatest concern then became what he would do if he was granted asylum in the United States. Who would take charge? How could he ensure his vision was executed appropriately? Luckily for the women and children in need of specialized assistance, Caravan's concern was not a deterrent for establishing the shelter, but one could not blame him if it had been.

Migrants who are forced to live under exceptionally stressful conditions upon arrival in a new place become unable to process their natural migratory grief, entering into a permanent state of crisis.[11] Central American migrants in Tijuana are exposed to a series of stressors, such as a lack of proper shelter, documentation, work, and healthcare; exclusion from society; and the constant reminder of their uncertain future. The concomitant presence of these stressors, in addition to the trauma endured before and during their journey, increases the risk of Central American migrants developing the Ulysses Syndrome *en masse*.

To make matters worse, recent developments in the United States' foreign policy will likely exacerbate

10 Giaritelli, "Mexico Halts Program for Temporary Asylum Requests after Another Caravan Forms."

11 Bianucci et al., "The 'Ulysses Syndrome': An Eponym Identifies a Psychosomatic Disorder in Modern Migrants."

the migratory mourning experienced in Central Americans even further. The Trump administration recently reached an agreement with Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador to establish the three as 'safe third countries.'[12] These agreements would force migrants to seek out and be denied asylum in each of the countries they transit through to get to the United States prior to requesting asylum in the U.S. If granted asylum in any of the safe third countries, migrants will have to remain in that country and forgo claims to asylum anywhere else. The three countries make up what is called the Northern Triangle, a region known for its chronic violence, corruption, and lack of economic opportunity.[13]

The Remain in Mexico program has greatly impacted the lives of thousands of Central American migrants who, unable to integrate and lacking a sense of belonging, are living in a state of limbo: blocked from entering the U.S., fearful of returning home, and excluded from Mexican society. It is important to note that the implications of the Remain in Mexico program are catastrophic not only for the Central American migrant population, but also for Tijuana at large. As the effects of the Ulysses Syndrome take hold and the gap between expectations and reality widens, migrants may have to resort to desperate measures that can have lasting consequences on their mental health and the well-being and safety of their host community.

12 Nick Miroff, "Trump Administration Reaches Deal to Send Asylum Seekers to El Salvador in an Effort to Deter Migrants from Entering the United States; The Pact Will Send Migrants to a Country Known to Be Dangerous," *Washington Post,* September 20, 2019; Lauren Carasik, "Trump's Safe Third Country Agreement with Guatemala Is a Lie," *Foreign Policy,* July 30, 2019, https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/30/trumps-safe-third-country-agreement-with-guatemala-is-a-lie/.

13 Amelia Cheatham, "Central America's Turbulent Northern Triangle," Council on Foreign Relations, October 1, 2019, https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/central-americas-turbulent-northern-triangle.

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