



From Transit to Settlement. A Mexican Border Town's Transition from a Transit Space to a Waiting Territory

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Tanapan, a border town in southern Mexico has long been a point of passage for Central American migrants bound for the United States. Since 2014, new restrictions have gradually changed it into a waiting territory. How was it transformed into a new involuntary destination?

In early July 2016, Lucy¹ invited me for lunch at her house. I had met her the previous summer, while she was staying at La Palma, a migrant shelter located in Tanapan, a small town in southern Mexico where I conducted ethnographic fieldwork for close to two years (2015–2017). Fleeing violence and poverty, Lucy had left El Salvador planning to get to California, find a job, and eventually save money for her three kids to join her across the border. When I first met her, in 2015, Lucy said she would be leaving Mexico in the next few days, and that next time we talked it would be a California–New York conversation. More than a year later, Lucy was still more than 4,000 kilometers (2,500 miles) away from the Mexico–US border.

La Palma, like most shelters on Mexico's southern border, had been conceived as a space to offer migrants a moment of pause in their northbound journey. For years, thousands of people like Lucy had arrived at the shelter to get a couple of days' rest, a shower, food, and basic medical attention, before continuing their journey towards the United States. However, since 2016, the length of stay in the shelter has gone from less than a week to more than a month, on average.

Lucy, for example, stayed at La Palma for more than eight months and left early in May 2016. She rented a small room in Tanapan for herself and her smallest child, furnished only with a mattress and an electric stove. Next to her room, other Salvadorans and Hondurans shared the same experience. All of them were waiting, either for some sort of regularization of their migratory status, or to save money through occasional jobs in order to continue their northward journey.

As migratory surveillance and control in the region increase, journeys become tougher, more dangerous and more expensive. The new conditions force migrants to reformulate migratory strategies, better assess risks, and explore new routes, thereby altering migratory journeys and spaces. In La Palma and Tanapan, these changes translated into a lengthening of stays in what had historically been a space of transit. What had once been a space of quick-paced mobility and momentary transit was now becoming a space of prolonged waiting and semi-permanent settlement. This article explores some of the changes that have taken place as a result of this transformation in migratory dynamics.

¹ Names of people and places have been changed throughout this article for confidentiality purposes.

Tanapan: the consolidation of a space of transit

Located around 60 kilometers (35 miles) from the Guatemala–Mexico border, Tanapan, with a total population of 32,579,² has always been a border city. Historically, Tanapan’s economy was driven by the rubber industry, which relied on the daily border crossing of workers from Guatemala to Mexico. Tanapan is also the closest city to one of the official crossing points between Mexico and Guatemala, one of the main entry points in Mexico’s southern border, and an active site of trade and international commerce. During the second half of the 20th century, migratory flows started changing and Central Americans, displaced from their homes by civil wars, poverty, political turmoil, and violence, started crossing Mexico’s southern border without the intention of returning by the end of the day.³

By the 2000s, Tanapan became one of the main entry points on migrants’ and refugees’ northbound journeys. It was not only close to the border, but also one of the places where *La Bestia* (“The Beast”) stopped, a freight train that became one of the main means of transportation for migrants heading to the US. Clinging to the train’s carts and riding on the top of the boxcars, migrants “rode” the Beast all the way from the southern border to the northernmost part of Mexico. In 2011, a group of Franciscan monks opened La Palma, a shelter for migrants that offered a safe space to stay for a few days, rest, get hot meals and medical attention, and gather information in order to continue their northbound journey.

As more and more migrants traversed through Tanapan, the city’s streets started reflecting its intricate connection with migration. A walk along the city’s main street revealed dozens of small stores and street kiosks selling backpacks, baseball caps, flip-flops, and sneakers. The abandoned railroad station had been turned into an informal hotel operated by locals, where five pesos got you a shower before getting on the train. Along the tracks, people rented rooms, and offered currency exchange, international phone calls, and shoe repair, among other services.

Figure 1. Services offered along the train tracks in Tanapan



The photo on the left shows a sign that says, “Shoes repaired,” and the one on the right says, “Bathrooms, rooms, currency exchange, international calls for immigrants.”

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² According to 2010 census data.

³ Since a considerable proportion of the people who leave Central America travel without regular migratory status, it is nearly impossible to estimate the exact number of displaced people. However, as an approximation, according to UNHCR data, since 1980, more than four million people (4,417,333) from Central America’s Northern Triangle (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador) have been recognized as refugees or asylum seekers in Mexico and the United States.

However, the emergence of the aforementioned migration industry (Basok *et al.* 2015) represented a business opportunity not only for local residents of Tanapan but also for criminals who profit from and prey on migrants, primarily smugglers and human trafficking networks. The residents of Tanapan resented what they perceived to be a visible decline in the city's safety, and blamed the migrants for it.

From transit to waiting

In the summer of 2014, and as a result of US pressure to seal the border with Central America, the Mexican government implemented its *Programa Frontera Sur* (Southern Border Plan), which substantially increased border surveillance in southern Mexico and turned the entire Mexican territory into a 5,000-kilometer (3,100-mile) border (Anguiano Téllez and Villafuerte Solís 2015). Central American migrants who intended to cross Mexico in order to reach the US were forced to hide and travel routes that became increasingly dangerous and expensive (Casillas 2016; Knippen, Boggs, and Meyer 2015; Reina 2019; Yáñez 2015). With their northbound movement obstructed by restrictive border policies and returning home seen as an unviable option, migrants' movement was blocked, and many were increasingly trapped, stranded, and immobile in many ways.

At La Palma, the length of stays visibly increased. In 2016, the staff at La Palma started talking about a "permanent population" comprising those who had been in the shelter for more than three months. In the summer of 2016, the permanent population was slightly over 130, or about 40% of the shelter's total population. Prolonged stays led to overcrowding and strained the shelters' resources. Also, as transit turned into temporary settlement for many, the needs of people staying at La Palma also changed. Families with children started looking to enroll them in school. The shelter's medical module—mainly focused on treating feet, dehydration, and providing over-the-counter drugs—proved insufficient to tend to people with diabetes, HIV, hypertension, and other chronic ailments. People's scant savings ran out and more and more needed support in finding employment in order to cover the costs of the remainder of their migratory journeys.

In Tanapan, the lengthening of stays intensified the interaction between migrants and the inhabitants of the local community. Some Tanapanos welcomed migrants, and local authorities had made some efforts toward their inclusion. Since 2016, migrants have participated in the city's yearly carnival, a celebration of the town's history and a week-long party where there are traditional dances and food fairs. In the summer of 2016, the food fair included stands with Honduran *baleadas* and Salvadoran *pupusas*.

Unsurprisingly, longer stays also brought about tensions and possibilities for conflict. In the waiting room of the local hospital, I witnessed how a woman from Tanapan complained that migrants were getting better medical attention than the locals. Schools refused to enroll migrant children, and in several conversations I had with Tanapanos, migrants were blamed for an increase in crime and violence, unemployment, and decaying public services. Tanapan, a former space of transit where migrants stayed for a few days as they took a break on their journey north, was becoming one of these territories of immobility for migrants and refugees—a "waiting territory" (Musset 2015).

The majority of migrants I met wanted to leave. They imagined their futures elsewhere, whether that be in the United States or other parts of Mexico, but certainly not in La Palma or in Tanapan. However, in spite of migrants' desire to leave, the lengthening of their stays meant that, whether they intended to or not, they inhabited Tanapan. Their participation in Tanapan's social world had changed the dynamics within the shelter and outside the shelter's walls. In Tanapan, it has fostered efforts for integration and triggered xenophobic reactions; it has shown the insufficiency of local public services and attracted the attention of national and international media.

Around the world, millions of migrants and asylum seekers remain trapped in border areas like Tanapan, unable to move on along their planned migratory journeys to reach their intended

destinations. How will increasingly restrictive border policies transform these unintended destinations? How will these transformations reconfigure borders and their meaning, management, and social dynamics?

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To cite this article:

Isabel Gil-Everaert, “From Transit to Settlement. A Mexican Border Town’s Transition from a Transit Space to a Waiting Territory”, *Metropolitiques*, 3 March 2020. URL: <https://www.metropolitiques.eu/From-Transit-to-Settlement-A-Mexican-Border-Town-s-Transition-from-a-Transit.html>.