

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

## **Environmental Justice as Place-Making: A Study of Mexican Migrants, Transnational Advocacy, and Urban Rehabilitation in Matamoros, Mexico**

Suzanne Simon

### **Introduction**

Since the publication of Gupta and Ferguson's seminal volumes Culture, Power, Place (1997) and Anthropological Locations (1997), anthropologists and others have taken a greater interest in denaturalizing the presumed isomorphic relation between people, culture and space, and in studying strategies of place-making. In this essay, I explore place-making practices among a population doubly displaced in the classic sense - migrants from the interior of Mexico who are now "border" subjects in Mexico's northern frontier. More specifically, I analyze the activities of one environmental justice group, Las Caracaras, and suggest that while the activism of Las Caracaras was clearly "environmental justice" oriented, members of the group were equally concerned with the possibility of making a permanent place for themselves in Matamoros. Place-making, an essential component in the stories of migrants' journeys and lives, gets erased by the broad and presentist framework of "environmental justice" through which most border environmental activism is interpreted.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is based on research that the author conducted in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, Mexico from November 2001-February 2003. All local personal and organizational names have been changed to protect the informants. The author is grateful to the Social Science Research Council, the Cross Border Institute for Regional Development, and the Center for US-Mexican Studies (UCSD) for support at various stages of research.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

As a consequence of the NAFTA debates of the early nineties, the US-Mexico border has developed a rich and vibrant activist community. While it was common knowledge in the pre-NAFTA era that the border zone was highly contaminated with toxic and organic wastes (Brenner, Ross, Simmons, and Zaidi 2000; Bath, Tanski and Villarreal 1998; Carlos Vasquez 1993; Simon 1997) and there was significant local activism devoted to remedying region or city-specific problems, the NAFTA debate produced a much more concerted effort among the transnational NGO community, civil society networks, and US and Mexican institutions to develop coherent and tangible solutions to border environmental problems. These national or regional level efforts exist alongside and with the plethora of "local" environmental efforts that have historically characterized border zone activism (Barry 1994; Bejarano 2002; Brooks and Fox 2002; Kelly 2002).

Environmental justice activism is thus ubiquitous throughout the border region. This incident described by Brooks and Fox is a classic example of border activism - the dynamics, issues, and challenges of which are repeated interminably throughout the length of this territorial marker:

Along the US-Mexico Border, U.S. environmental groups fighting to block the proposed Sierra Blanca nuclear waste dump found coalition partners among concerned environmental and community counterparts in northern Mexico. The nuclear waste, which was to be trucked all the way from states abutting the Canadian border, was targeted for burial so close to the Mexican border as to internationalize a classic environmental justice campaign. This binational network managed to block the project, despite its strong backing from then Texas governor George W. Bush and from powerful private corporations.

Although such stories abound, what do they add up to? They appear as isolated events in news reports - a brief binational effort here, a cross-border rendezvous around an issue there. But these engagements emerge from the

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

broader, evolving interchange among representatives of social constituencies in Mexico and the United States. [Brooks and Fox 2002:3]

Although clearly important, impressive, and an integral feature of border culture, my concern has to do with the ways in which this policy and activist oriented framework elides an equally important component of this social activity; namely, the way in which the attempt to carve out a home fits into the broader (and longer) trajectory of migrants' personal and collective histories. The "presentist" and area-specific nature of many border studies, as well as the language of policy circles and institutions, tends to elide this historical trajectory and, in the process, to reify the "border zone" as separate from the international, historical, and economic relations of production that have *produced* the "borderlands". While this essay is limited to an exploration of this place-making subtext within one Mexican environmental justice organization, there may be similar tendencies to be found among other border groups.

There are several important reasons for recovering the "place-making" component of Las Caracaras' environmental justice activism. One reason, already noted, is that it speaks more directly to the trajectory of migrants' lives as they travel from the interior of Mexico to the northern frontier, both disrupting and adding another layer of complexity to border activism as it is currently interpreted. Accounting for a broader spectrum of referents – of home or memories of home - which shape both environmental justice and place-making activities draws attention to the broader historical forces at work in the making of the border, and restores complex stories and histories that get erased by the immediacy of the problems of the border zone itself. Second, allowing this type of before and after, "elsewhere" and "here" analysis to bleed into the frame of border-specific

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

activities provides a richer backdrop from which to understand the activities of Las Caracaras and others. It draws into the picture the shifts in Mexican politics and economics over the course of the past three decades, and illustrates these shifts in terms of the tangible effects that they have had on border populations' lives and present actions. Third, drawing attention to the place-making aspect of border environmental justice work - at least in the case of this organization - seems to restore to the population under study some of the agency which the overwhelming structural determinants of migration tend to elide. To reduce this activism to mere expedient responses to the pressing demands of the border area suggests that these migrants are merely reacting to their environment, rather than trying to create a new one which would fulfill the dreams which brought them to the border in the first place.

The salience of migrant memory to the creation of rehabilitated urban spaces is particularly relevant when analyzing the activities of Las Caracaras. As will be described here, it is principally the memories of "home" or "elsewhere" that animated the activities of organization members. The comparison of present day Matamoros with the "elsewhere" of Cuernavaca, San Luis Potosi, or Veracruz encouraged group members to conclude that the "problem" with Matamoros was that it was a "city of strangers", lacking both a culture of cleanliness and the sense of citizenship that pervades other areas of Mexico. At the same time, the organization was exemplary of the type of cross-border advocacy or "transnationalization of grassroots politics" typical of NAFTA era (Evans 2000; Brooks and Fox 2002; Mancillas 2002; Smith 1994). In this effort, the organization was partially supported by the Sierra Club's "Beyond the Borders" program, a program

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

designed to provide seed money and organizational support to Mexican environmental and environmental justice organizations.

In the rest of this paper, I will discuss, first, the membership and goals of Las Caracaras in relation to environmental justice and border health issues. In the second section, I will describe the migratory routes that brought many of them to Matamoros. Third, I will relate some of the ways in which memories of home or places of origin function as referents and a basis of comparison as they differently size up the "problems" of Matamoros. In the fourth and final section, I discuss these activities as they relate to place-making practices in the border zone, as various populations attempt to carve a niche for themselves in an otherwise destroyed landscape.

## Las Caracaras

Members of Las Caracaras are largely residents of several *colonias*<sup>2</sup> that border the *Dren Cinco de Marzo* as it travels from the center of Matamoros to the city's southeastern outskirts. These *colonias* are among many that surround Matamoros, and they are composed predominantly of migrants from interior regions of Mexico. These neighborhoods - and the populations that dwell within them - were created by *maquilization*, alongside cheap textiles, appliances and automobile parts. Services are generally inadequate; many people lack indoor plumbing, roads are unpaved and pocked with treacherous potholes, and telephone and electricity services are incomplete. The majority of the people who live in these neighborhoods either work or have worked for a

---

<sup>2</sup> *Colonias* is the broad term used to describe the unincorporated, or partially incorporated, settlements which surround the city centers of most contemporary Mexican border cities, and which also dot US side of the border throughout its length.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

*maquila* at some point in the life, or they are unemployed, homemakers, service workers or street vendors.

As is the case with many poorer *colonias* of Mexican border cities, there is a fair amount of environmental contamination. In this area, the main culprit is the *Dren Cinco de Marzo* - a wide, malodorous canal that offends both the eye and the olfactory senses as it snakes lazily through these *colonias*. The canal was originally constructed to flush the city of excess water during the rainy seasons, but it is now a repository for "*aguas negras*"<sup>3</sup>, and it is believed by many to be contaminated with industrial and chemical wastes as well. It originates in the city center, travels through the industrial park and past the municipal dump, eventually arriving at the semi-pristine Laguna Madre, approximately twenty kilometers to the south of Matamoros.

Las Caracaras originated in the late 1990s as a consequence of the anencephaly clusters which emerged in the Matamoros-Brownsville area during the earlier part of that decade, and concerns over the reported birth defects among Mallory plant workers' children.<sup>4</sup> These two events were dramatic crystallizations of ongoing work and environmental health concerns within Matamoros or the twin cities, and made local residents more aware of the possible ill health effects of the *Dren Cinco de Marzo*. Since its inception, the primary goal of Las Caracaras has been to have the canal "*entubado*", or

---

<sup>3</sup> Sewage.

<sup>4</sup> Knight, Danielle. 18 June 1998. "Health: Birth Defects Continue in US-Mexico Border Areas". Inter Press Service, [http://www.oneworld.org/ips2/june98/19\\_57\\_093.html](http://www.oneworld.org/ips2/june98/19_57_093.html), "Environmental Issues Thorny", by Tony Vindell. *Brownsville Herald*, Oct. 15, 1996, page 1, Sec. A. "Families Settle Maquila Suit for \$15 Million", by Dane Schiller, *Brownsville Herald*, Jan. 25, 1995, page 1, Sec. A. "Los Ninos Mallory: Un Calvario Que no Termina y una Leccion Para No Olvidar", by Erick Muniz, *Hora Cero*, February 2002, pp. 5-8.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

enclosed, so that the smell and sight of it would be less offensive, and it would cease to pose a health risk to community members. Some of the founding members discovered that, as they traveled the length of the canal, they found children who had unusual spots on their skin and who had repeatedly been bitten on their hands, feet, or face by rats. People began investigating and found clear evidence of "*aguas negros*" as well as what they believed to be discharges from *maquilas*. In many cases, they believed that the piles of mud left on the banks of the canal was residue from the single water treatment plant in Matamoros, and these "*lodos*", or left over mud, would necessarily include industrial wastes.

One woman, Irena, who lived right next to the canal, said that when the rainy season came, the water level would rise and rats would overrun her house and frighten her children.<sup>5</sup> Rats the size of small cats had recently been seen and had bitten the children. As another young member of the group, Tomas, put it,

The Dren Cinco de Marzo is supposed to be a clean water drain for the city, but it is being used to get rid of sewage and people throw a lot of garbage around the canal. The water, when it isn't flowing or when there aren't any rains, the water becomes a source of mosquitos and infection. It is also the home of rats, snakes, and cockroaches - all sorts of animals that really are like plagues. They are plagues for the people who live next to the canal.<sup>6</sup>

There is nothing unusual about the health problems that Rosalia and other Caracaras members attributed to the waterway. The question of whether or not these inner city ditches are contaminated with organic wastes is not in question by state,

---

<sup>5</sup> Interview conducted by author with Irena in her home, November 1, 2002.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

municipal, or state authorities. It is widely known that they function as sewage canals for the poorer *colonias* on the outskirts of the city, and that this exposed waste encourages the high rates of infectious diseases and pose a general public health risk throughout the border region. The question of toxic waste is more hotly debated: NGOs mostly claim that the *maquilas* continue to dump as they did in the pre-NAFTA era; Mexican and American state environmental agencies like to believe that the wastes are repatriated, as per hazardous waste agreements of the NAFTA; and municipal authorities tacitly acknowledge that the possibility of illegal dumping continues to exist. As for members of Las Caracaras, there appeared to be no doubt. Not only were the smells, vapors, and colors of the canal indicative of non-organic waste, but one member had, in a previous occupation as a city garbage man, routinely dumped toxic chemicals either at the municipal dump or directly into the canal.

Health problems associated with either airborne pollutants or effluents and water ways are common in Matamoros and other border cities. As early as 1990, the American Medical Association referred to the US-Mexican border as a "virtual cesspool and breeding ground for infectious disease" (quoted in Moure-Eraso et al. 1994:315). In a study performed in 1994, investigators reported that,

Two of Matamoros' colonias (or squatters' camps), where maquiladora workers live, are next to open drainage ditches. Residents of one colonia obtain water from shallow wells (less than 20 feet deep) made by improvised hand-drilling methods, within approximately 100 feet of the drainage ditches of FINSA, an industrial park. The canal collecting the effluent of one *maquiladora* plant in this park has such a high level of volatile organics in the drainage ditch that the stream itself

---

<sup>6</sup> Interview conducted by author with Tomas, October 26, 2002.

<sup>8</sup> *Social Justice: Anthropology, Peace and Human Rights*, ISSN 1563-1036

© IUAES Commission on Peace and Human Rights, in association with the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

would be classified in the United States as hazardous waste. [Moure-Eraso et al. 1994:316]

The energies of Las Caracaras were devoted primarily to trying to get the municipal authorities of Matamoros to clean up the banks of the canal, have it covered with cement as it was in the city center and, more broadly, to cease the dumping of toxic wastes into a canal which ran literally through the backyards of many people's homes. However, the goals of the group were not merely practical responses to the need for rehabilitation and cleanup, but extended to an idea of area beautification which would integrate the canal into a healthy and functional urban environment. The organization had the additional goal of creating a beautified space which would make their new homes aesthetically pleasing and amenable to healthy child-rearing practices. It is not coincidental that many of the most active members of the group were women with children of their own. The organization ultimately aspired to see the edges of the river lined with a playground for the children, to have various shrubs, bushes and trees growing there and, most importantly, to have a walkway which traversed the entire length of the then covered canal. Clearly, the goal was not merely a functional rehabilitation and enclosure, but also to create an aesthetically pleasing venue that all members of the community could enjoy, and which would serve as a source of some pride and community building. The plan contained a clear suggestion of transforming what was originally a temporary dwelling place - the squatter camps of migrants, hopeful border crossers, and *maquila* workers - into a permanent urban space. In order to understand some of the area beautification aspiration of Las Caracara members, it is helpful to turn to some of the migrant histories that brought them to the border in the first place.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

## **Migrant histories**

The idea that the environment of Matamoros was inferior could only take hold in people's imaginations when they had some other place or time to which Matamoros could be compared. For most people, this was the "home" from which they had migrated. As already mentioned, many of the members of the group had complex and moving histories of personal migration. All members of the group came from different parts of the Mexican interior, representing in microcosm one of the most dynamic components of Mexican border cities; namely, that very few people are actually "from" these cities or have ties that span more than a single generation.

There is nothing new, of course, about Mexican migration northward - either to the border zone or to the US. Migration to the United States began in earnest under the Bracero program. When that program ended, many Mexican men were stuck, unemployed, in many of the border cities. The Programa Nacional Fronteriza (PRONAF) and better known Border Industrialization Program (BIP), instituted in the 1960s, were intended to alleviate some of the problems of border city unemployment. With the trend toward outsourcing production and manufacturing in the late sixties and early seventies, *maquilas* took hold in the northern border region, attracting many from rural Mexico with higher wages and, perhaps - for those who wanted to cross - the advantage of closer proximity to the US. Intensive migration from deep in Mexico accelerated dramatically during this period as relatively well-paying factory work provided an antidote to the shrinking possibilities for peasant populations in rural areas.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

By many accounts, legal and illegal immigration to the US has intensified under NAFTA. The neoclassical liberal economic model holds that migration and trade should be treated as "substitutes" (Cornelius 2002:287), with successful and deepened economic trade canceling out the need or desire for immigration. Deepening economic integration is supposed to offset the need for the populations of "sending" countries to migrate as their own infrastructures and economies develop, thus improving the incentive for otherwise migrating populations to stay at home. Cornelius argues that NAFTA, rather than discouraging increased migration, has actually accelerated the pace of migration to the US, and that it is unlikely that this pattern will be eradicated in the near future. In reference to the state of Jalisco, for example, he notes that,

[T]here is no evidence that migration to the United States from Jalisco has declined under NAFTA, despite the relative abundance of jobs; indeed, Jalisco continues to be the largest exporter of labor to the United States among Mexican states. Many *jaliscienses* have been pushed into the migratory stream by the adverse impacts of NAFTA on small-scale corn farmers and milk producers. There is a substantial body of evidence that free trade has caused severe dislocation in these sectors of Mexico's rural economy. [Cornelius 2002: 294]

The stories of migration among various members of Las Caracaras were all, largely, variations on a similar theme: people moved because of the lack of opportunity in their places of origin; they wanted to pursue educational opportunities for themselves or their children; and there was generally a sense that they would have "no future" if they stayed where they were. In the case of Rosalia, the president of Las Caracaras, for example, her family was originally from Jalisco, but her grandparents had moved to northeastern Mexico during the cotton boom of the "Mexican miracle". The family lived

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

on an *ejido*<sup>7</sup> near a small town about two hours' drive southwest of Matamoros. Rosalia met and married her husband, Arturo, there. The young couple immediately migrated to Stockton, California where they lived in huts and worked the fields for seven years, mostly harvesting strawberries, lettuce, and tomatoes. On one occasion, there was an INS raid on the workers in the field. Arturo was arrested and deported to Mexico. The family was reunited when he walked on foot back from Tijuana, spending eight days walking through the desert to get back to his wife and the two small children that they then had.

When they tired of living in the United States and felt that their life opportunities had not been significantly improved by the move, they decided to go back to their *ejido* landholdings. However, due to the fact that there was no work in the country, they moved again - this time to Matamoros. When they first came to Matamoros, they stayed with Rosalia's uncle for two and a half years. They then squatted the plot of land in where they now live, eventually purchasing the "lote" from the city for the equivalent of two hundred dollars. Since its initial settlement, the camp of "*paracaidistas*"<sup>8</sup> has since become a full scale *colonia* with many cement homes, clearly defined - if still dirt - roads, city services of trash removal and internal plumbing, and the promise of forthcoming telephone poles and wires.

According to Maria (Rosalia's daughter), the house in which the family now lived was first

---

<sup>7</sup> The *ejido* as a unique Mexican institution was established after the Mexican revolution as part of the overall populist program of breaking up large haciendas and redistributing land among peasants. They were intended to be plots of land that formed the basis of subsistence agriculture. Under Salinas de Gortari, the parceling up and selling of individual plots of *ejido* lands was legalized, and many people chose to do this, intensifying the rural-urban migration pattern. The selling of *ejido* lands was part of an overall economic strategy beginning in the early eighties toward privatization, an opening of the economy to more foreign influence, and a transition from state control ISI to more liberal economic policies.

<sup>8</sup> Literally, "parachuters", the Mexican term for squatters.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

made of cardboard, then it was made of wood. My mother maintained the house here while my father worked outside of the house. Later my mother worked in a maquiladora - and that was how we began picking ourselves up, little by little, trying to move ahead. This house [she points around the room] the way it is now, this is how it was before with four rooms. My mother drew it on a page in a notebook, and there she kept her dream of having a house like this. That is how she wanted to build it, and that is how it is now.<sup>9</sup>

Katerina, a young woman and another member of the organization, was born in a small town just south of Ciudad Victoria, the capital of Tamaulipas. She first came to Matamoros as a young girl, but she had also spent time in California as a teenager. Her mother had had eight brothers and sisters; four of them were now here in Matamoros, along with her mother, and three of them were on "the other side". Only one remained on the ranch where she grew up. Her mother worked in Tampico until four or five years before, when she also moved to Matamoros. In contrast to her mother's large family, Katerina had only two half-brothers. One was already in the US, and the other was currently living with Katerina and her husband in Matamoros. He was seventeen and had arrived only a few short months before from their hometown. Although he wanted to cross illegally to the US, she had convinced him to stay, work, and wait until he got the proper papers.

---

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Maria, Oct. 29, 2002. Although Maria does not refer to this specifically, it is common knowledge that poor populations that migrate to border cities often times originally construct their homes either from the pallets or from the cardboard boxes which are thrown away by the maquilas. These packing materials are used to import duty-free the materials which will be used in the assembly work of the maquilas, the finished products of which are then exported again. This duty free importation of building materials combined with additional duty free export of finished products (excepting the value added to raw materials once converted into finished products) is one of the primary reasons why the maquila industry is unable to develop backward and forward linkages with the Mexican economy in general, and thus does not generate industrial or economic development at a scale which would affect all sectors of society. Therefore, the "discarding" and subsequent recycling of these packing materials into homes is also a highly symbolic process.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

Katerina first came to Matamoros when she was ten. One of her aunts came to their farm and asked if Katerina would like to come to Matamoros and take care of her children. Katerina had already finished primary school, and because there was no secondary schooling available in the rural area in which she lived, she would have to relocate if she wanted to continue with her education. She came north to live with the Matamoros aunt, whom she stayed with while she attended high school. She would occasionally return to her hometown while on school vacation in Matamoros. On one visit, another aunt who lived in Santa Ana, California showed up telling her that since she was single and essentially "without a future" in Mexico, she would be willing to take Katerina to California with her. She could go to school there, learn English, and take care of the aunt's children. Since Katerina's housing and board had become something of a burden for the first aunt, she agreed to let Katerina go. At thirteen years of age, Katerina made a harrowing journey across the border with a coyote that the California aunt and uncle had paid five hundred dollars.

On the path where we crossed [near Tijuana] the coyotes eventually abandoned us. On the hill we met other coyotes that we did not know. And these were the ones who took us to California to the other coyotes. The others who had originally contracted with my aunt did not follow through, they left us on the hill. We had to cross on foot, running, and drop to the ground every time the migra came by. Once on the ground a tarantula crawled up on my face, I was so afraid - but I could not scream - and I held down the scream until I got rid of the tarantula! We slept on the hill for one night - on the ground, with branches, dirt, and everything.<sup>10</sup>

When she was fifteen, she was run out of the house and onto the streets of a city that was still strange and unfamiliar to her. She went to live with a nun, and began

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Katerina in her home, November 6, 2002.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

cleaning houses on Saturdays and Sundays in order to earn a living while she continued to go to school. Finally, she could not take it anymore. Earlier, she had purchased false papers for employment purposes, but now her aunt was threatening to report her to the INS. She caught a bus to Tijuana and eventually made her way back to Matamoros. In Matamoros, she stayed with the aunt that she had previously lived with, finished high school, and met her husband. Katerina was now struggling to get through an English language course which would prepare her to become an elementary school English teacher. The course which she participated in at the local *Universidad Autonoma* was part of a Mexican government sponsored program which recruited students to become certified primary school English language teachers, and paid them during the period of their enrollment.

Gabriela, for example, was a woman in her mid-thirties who had worked in a *maquila* for seventeen years in an administrative position. Her family had a farm near San Luis Potosi, and she had three brothers. She came to Matamoros with an uncle and his family when she was only fifteen, mostly in an attempt to better her own lot in life, but also to separate herself somewhat from her father's alcoholism. Her parents eventually followed. She came primarily so that she could continue her education.

I came when I was fifteen because our economic situation, well, it seemed better to find some work and be able to continue studying at the same time. We did not have an economic situation there that would support any of us going to school. And two of my brothers were already here. (...) So it was mostly my decision. My parents were not doing well, I needed to separate myself from them, and they also saw that they could not support me while I went to school, and I had only studied through the second year of high school at that point. So, going to school and

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

studying as well, that is, going to work from seven until five then making time to go to school and study at night.<sup>11</sup>

She goes on to say that she continued to work and study at night until she finished her education, then she went to work in a *maquila* in a management position.

Alejandro was another very active member within Las Caracaras. He and his wife, Griselda, lived in the poorest *colonia* of the area and they had four children together. They previously lived on an *ejido* in Panuco in the state of Veracruz. They had migrated almost twelve years before, primarily in order to be able to earn the better wages which would allow them to send their children to school. Matamoros was chosen simply because, with all of the construction, it seemed like a good place for Alejandro to find work as a mason. Their transition to Matamoros was difficult, even though they had friends here, and contacts that were masons. Griselda says that,

I also went to work for a man doing cleaning and received 30 pesos a day for that - three dollars per day which helped a lot. Later the oldest girl began to do housework and that also helped. Then I was pregnant again, and I gave birth and we kept working on and off in the restaurants and in people's houses. This is how we continued until later we were able to rent. We rented for six years over on Avenida del Nino, until we came to live here. But yes, we struggled a little. Well, in the first place, he [her husband] did not earn much in his work, and then with the older girl in high school and working, I had to stay at home with the kids.<sup>12</sup>

Felipe was one of the more educated members of the group. He worked in Matamoros in a wholesale food distribution business, and he had come to Matamoros during his third year of high school as members of his family were going separate ways - his mother to the US, and a brother and sister came to Matamoros. He followed his

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Gabriela in her home, July 16, 2002.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

siblings and came to live with them and his grandmother here. His mother's departure to the US in pursuit of a romantic relationship had not been well accepted by the children, and his father had died in a car accident only a few years before. He came to Matamoros so that he could live with his grandmother and, hopefully, benefit from some of the economic advantages of the northern border region.

The salaries in Morelos are the lowest salaries in Mexico. Every region has its own minimum wage, and in Morelos it was much lower than on the border. The work situation there is also not very good. There are only some very small factories and they are all Mexican owned with very low salaries. The salary in Morelos is very low compared to the border; right now the salary - at the utmost - is about 500 pesos per week, or fifty dollars at current exchange rates. But the salaries there are generally between 350 and 500 pesos.<sup>13</sup>

One of the younger members of the group, Tomas, had an interesting story of migration that, similarly to Rosalia, he traced back to his grandparents. His grandparents were originally from Tula, Tamaulipas, which was far to the south, near the border with the state of San Luis Potosi. "They came here to Valle Hermoso [a city about sixty miles to the southeast] originally for the cotton harvest and they lived here for a while, then returned to Tula. My mother first went back with them, but she had family here in Valle Hermoso and they had a farm, so she came to stay with them." He was born there in Valle Hermoso, though he does not know his father, who now lives in Reynosa. He was brought to Matamoros right after he was born and lived with someone here until he was six, when he was returned to his mother who then lived on an *ejido* close to San Fernando. His mother is a seamstress, so she later came to Matamoros looking for work.

---

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Alejandro and Griselda in their home, Oct. 20, 2002.

<sup>13</sup> Interview conducted with Felipe in the office of Las Caracaras, August 15, 2002.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

They have since lived in their home in the same *colonia* as Alejandro and Griselda. This story of migration was repeated in different forms at different times: Alejandra and her husband were from San Luis Potosi; Rosana, Rosalia's daughter in law, was from Monterrey, Father Gonzalez was from a small town near Ciudad Victoria; Laro had come from an ejido landholding in San Fernando, and so forth.

As Smith (1994) has noted, among refugees, exiles, and im/migrants, there is an undeniable tendency to want to create in one's new space a sense of home or "place". Speaking of "Little Havana", "Koreatown" and other ethnically defined spaces within US cities, he notes that "in these social spaces, selected elements of the past are recaptured in the place-making spatial practices of new immigrants and refugees". Clearly, these were all stories of extreme hardship, yet somehow they all found the energy and motivation necessary to try and make Matamoros a home, rather than just a landing place dictated by circumstance. As members of this rather colorful composite gathered together in late night meetings huddled in Rosalia's front yard or in a spare room of the local church, they brought these disparate histories with them as they attempted to forge something in common; namely, a future for themselves and their children. Perhaps most importantly, these social actions "express the desire to reterritorialize as a collective response to displacement and deterritorialization"(Smith 1994:19). While it appears certain that most members of Las Caracaras know that they could not "go back" or recreate what they once had, knowledge of what they once had reminded them that they what they currently had was not enough.

## **Drawing Comparisons Between "There" and "Here"**

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

For some members of Las Caracaras, comparisons between "there" and "here" were voiced clearly in terms of the superiority of "nature" in their place of origin, compared with the relative lack of nature in Matamoros. For others, the comparison was made simply with regard to other cities or places that they had been to. Many believed that the very fact that Matamoros was a "city of strangers" was the source of its environmental problems, requiring no less than a change of consciousness before the city itself could be cleaned up. This "change" was also part of their long term mission, a program of consciousness-raising in the style of Paolo Freire, which would educate people about both their civic duties and their obligations to the natural environment.

Tomas, for example, who lived in Matamoros until he was six, then out to an *ejido* with his mother, then back to Matamoros again, painted one of many nostalgic, and perhaps romantic, versions of country life:

There it is very quiet, and all of the people are good people. When I lived there, everything was good, there were plenty of harvests (corn, beans, sorghum) and there was just a lot of life there. There you could sustain a family just by working the harvest and selling it. Life there was better. All of the food was healthy and nutritious. Meat, eggs, vegetables, fruit - all types of vegetables. The air was fresh, not like here, it was surrounded by mountains - there wasn't any contamination in that air. The *ejiditarios* were united as a community. Afterward, this all disappeared, people began to sell their lands and some people went to the US - that was around 1994.<sup>14</sup>

In making clear reference to the widespread *campesino* protests which took place throughout the countryside during 2002-2003, he says that he would be happy to go back to this rural area if only

---

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Tomas, October 26, 2002.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

the government might give more support to the farmers who work on the land. There, you live well, but, well this is what is affecting the farmers - that they are not supported by their own government. On the other hand, there's the United States, China, and the farmers here cannot sell their products. So what I would like is that the government provide more support to the farmers here than in other countries, so that farming might be stable. All over Mexico there have been protests around this theme.<sup>15</sup>

He says that he has no plans of going back to the countryside because he has to work. He might go to another Mexican city.

Gabriela, describes her rural home near San Luis Potosi with great detail and flourish, while remaining cognizant that perhaps her "romantic" memories of the countryside are colored by childhood bliss. Her home, she says,

....was very pretty. To me it seemed very pretty but perhaps that was because I was the only girl and I was very spoiled and loved! As the only girl, I do not remember ever lacking anything. It is countryside there, it was something beautiful because you can enjoy the countryside, the air, the night with the stars and the moon in its full splendor, not like here that sometimes with the contamination you cannot enjoy the same things. And the food - well, we did not eat much meat, but the food that we did eat was very nutritious. Whatever came from milk we ate a lot, we grew fresh vegetables, we ate very well! Here, if you have money you can eat more or less well, right? But with regard to the environment, for me it was much healthier there, definitely. Here no, here you pass by the canal in the morning and you have to cover your nose because of the horrible odors. You go to work in a maquiladora and you enter into the maquiladora and your eyes burn, you feel horrible. There, the morning was fresh, right? Pleasant, rich, and the nighttime as well. There you could go chasing butterflies, little birds and everything. And here, where are the butterflies? I have never seen a butterfly here.<sup>16</sup>

Katerina was always happy to talk about her childhood on the ranch. She says that they never had any money and she has no idea how her grandmother raised nine of her own children there, plus three grandchildren. As in the case of Gabriela, the comparison

---

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

which she draws hinges as well on the presence or absence of money, employing a familiar rural/urban and traditional/modern trope in which the "traditional" is always positioned as purer than the urban.

On the ranch we had everything: mangos, oranges, limes, squash, cows, milk, everything! When we did not have coffee, my grandmother made tea from the leaves of avocado trees, also fried plantains. We ate very well - roosters, chickens, eggs, nopales. Thank God, we never lacked good food to eat. My grandfather also grew corn, sugarcane, beans, wheat - we had everything there! Now things are falling apart little by little. But my grandmother made cheese from the milk and we used to sell the cheese. She also prepared "fritanga", types of snacks with chile and we sold these things as well. My grandmother sold used clothes and I helped her. Sometimes they paid us with roosters rather than money. The corn that my grandfather grew we sold occasionally, but this was very rare since we used it to prepare everything. We made tamales and tortillas. There was a well to get water, a river, mangos, everything. We had no money, but we were not lacking in anything. Life was so much better then! It was all natural, nothing was contaminated, we cut everything from the root and since we grew the corn ourselves, of course we knew that it too was not contaminated. We planted it ourselves, we shucked the corn ourselves. We lived on a ranch, nothing was contaminated. Well, there were not any cars or anything. They say that the environment gets contaminated with cars and fumes, but we had none of that. In terms of the quality of life, food and all, my opinion is that it was much better before than it is now. Sure I was a child and childhood is the most beautiful period of your life because you have no worries - you just ask for things - which I understand now that I am a mother.<sup>17</sup>

Unlike many of the others, Felipe's basis of comparison was not with a rural area but, rather, with another major city, Cuernavaca. He says that he was surprised by many things when he moved to Matamoros - the slower pace of life, the fact that it was a city with a "rural mentality", and so forth - but that he had always thought about this:

How is it possible that a city like Matamoros, with so many resources for work, so many factories, and with some of the higher salaries, with this superior source of income because of all the factories that are here....How is it possible that there are

---

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Gabriela in her home, October 16, 2002.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Katerina in their home, November 6, 2002.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

so many streets full of trash, rivers full of water - it rains just a little and it begins flooding immediately! How is it possible that with so many resources, this city could be like this? In contrast, how is it possible that in Morelos, where the salaries are so much lower and you do not have the same resources with the factories, that it is so much cleaner there?<sup>18</sup>

His answer, and the answer of many of the others, was that in Cuernavaca there was a sense of community and mutual obligation, social ties which were present when a population remained tied to one place, and fractured when they are displaced. He goes on to say that in Cuernavaca they do not even have the same kind of problems with, for example, the city dump. There, the dump is located far outside of the city limits and people have no fear of being contaminated by it. This is unlike Matamoros, where the dump is within the city limits itself, has an ongoing blaze which cannot be extinguished, and is surrounded by neighborhoods which butt right up against the trash piles.

Continuing his comparison of the infrastructure of the two cities, he adds that even the water and solid waste drainage systems seem to be haywire in Matamoros. The two are intertwined, whereas in Cuernavaca, as in most Mexican cities, the two are completely - and hygienically - separate. "The drain [here] which is used for sewage is the same as the one which is used for rain. In most parts of Mexico, the drainage systems are completely separate." He hypothesizes that the constant flooding of Matamoros during the rainy season is due not only to the lack of water drains, but also to the possibility that the existing water drains are being invaded by the sewage system. In other words, perhaps the city is swimming in its own filth. Felipe had married since coming to Matamoros, and he was now planning on having children of his own. Like most people, his concern was

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview conducted with Felipe in the office of Las Caracaras, August 15, 2002.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

in establishing a sanitary environment that was at least equal to that which was available in other parts of Mexico.

The social composition of Matamoros was largely blamed for its environmental problems. Felipe, Gabriela, Alejandro, and Tomas in particular, articulated strong views regarding both the relationship between one urban environment and another, as well as the possible social explanations for why Matamoros uniquely (or, like other border cities) suffered such dire environmental problems. For them, the answer could be found largely in the population profile of the city. At the time of these interviews - with the onset of the rainy season and the prospect of flooded streets, homes, and garbage floating everywhere - the city was in the midst of its "*cultura de basura*" and "*tirar la basura*"<sup>19</sup> campaign. Some articulated their views through this prism, while at the same time remarking sardonically that the city officials only pursued this during times of "crisis" or elections. For example, Felipe - again comparing Cuernavaca and Matamoros - had this to say:

There [Cuernavaca], people are a little bit cleaner than here. People get up early and clean their homes. Similarly, the city has street sweepers and cleaners who get up early to keep the city clean. With regard to Matamoros, it seems as though there are more people here. But there is also a different work culture. In Cuernavaca, there is only one work shift. In Matamoros, there are three. People here are working so much here that it is hard for them to take an interest in things outside of themselves and their routine. Perhaps if there were a park or a zoo, or something like that, it would get their attention and make them pay more attention to their immediate environment. Really, though, they tend to worry more about their personal concerns, than the general environment or other people.<sup>20</sup>

He goes on to discuss the problems with Matamoros having largely a transient population, or a population that aspires to be elsewhere - namely, on "the other side":

---

<sup>19</sup> Roughly, a campaign for a "culture of cleanliness" or to encourage people to "put trash in its place".

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

There are many immigrants who make it Matamoros but then cannot make it to the other side. There is a constant problem of this "transient" population. When one comes to Matamoros - especially after returning from a cleaner city - Matamoros looks like a city from a movie, almost apocalyptic, but it doesn't seem to matter to most people, plus they all ignore or mistreat each other. There is no sense of responsibility or consciousness that, if one person throws down their trash in the street, other people are going to throw down their trash as well. It makes them lazy, or they do not want to worry about the future or what might happen.<sup>21</sup>

He added that it was the population itself that needed to be educated and made more self-conscious of its actions. "Perhaps if this can be done, as new people come they will see a clean city and perhaps they will also try to keep it clean. But if the same people who live here do not do anything to maintain their areas clean, then who else is going to keep their home clean?"

These sentiments were echoed by Alejandro, who blamed the lack of a "*cultura de basura*" on the population profile of Matamoros: "People come from all over Mexico. They do not treat each other kindly. In other parts of Mexico cities are kept more clean because people are in their own communities and have the social relations to discipline them to respect their own environments." He was also unequivocal in placing the blame for the pollution squarely on the backs of Matamorenses themselves: "We have to learn to clean up after ourselves, we have to learn to respect our environments and offspring enough. We are ultimately responsible - and nobody else."<sup>22</sup>

Gabriela, who maintained that she was doing her work with Las Caracaras thinking primarily of the future of her daughter, also echoed these themes.

---

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Felipe, November 2, 2002.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Alejandro in his home, October 20, 2002.

24 *Social Justice: Anthropology, Peace and Human Rights*, ISSN 1563-1036

© IUAES Commission on Peace and Human Rights, in association with the Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, George Mason University

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

I would say that about eighty percent of the population of Matamoros is not from here. Different cultures, different ideas, different everything. There is a total lack of control in everything, in not throwing trash, in everything. Everyone just does what they want to here. I can pass by and throw down my trash, I pass by and burn a tire, I pass by and you pass by ....you see?

For Tomas, it was primarily the lack of education and sense of citizenship that kept Matamoros "in chaos". He reiterated the views - stated strongly by Alejandro, Felipe, and Gabriela, but also voiced more quietly and on a continual basis by other Las Caracaras members - that the problem of contamination and pollution was not limited to the city authorities and *maquilas*. Instead, the population of Matamoros had to develop its own sense of place, community, citizenship and stewardship toward both the natural and built environment. The bigger problem, then, remained the fact that the "social composition" of Matamoros was the greatest obstacle to instilling this type of consciousness. The hope of the organization was that, in accomplishing concrete tasks - like covering the canal and getting its banks cleaned, and importing some "nature" with the planting of native trees and shrubs - they would begin to instill a sense of pride and community in local neighborhoods, and the city would begin to "pick itself up", little by little.

## **Conclusion: Place-making in the Borderlands**

"Space" has historically figured highly in the study of the culture, political economy, and history of the border zone (see for example Anzaldua 1987; Brady 2002; Dwyer 1994; Eduardo Ruiz 2000; Ortiz 1999, 2001). This is logical given that the US-Mexico border is the longest territorial line in the world to separate the so called "first" and "third" worlds, and the border has, in many ways, developed its own unique culture.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

In this essay, I have attempted to draw attention to the place-making activities of Mexican border populations within this border space, while at the same time remaining mindful of the ways in which the “space” of the border zone has been produced in relation to its contiguous nations. As Buchanan has noted, the border is neither an autonomous border zone nor a completely transnationalized zone, but one in which cross-cutting influences and interests are constantly mutually constituting (2001).

Although the activities and goals of Las Caracaras - in a limited sense - clearly fit the parameters of the term “environmental justice”, the term just as clearly does not capture the breadth of their vision, nor the nuanced ways in which environmental justice is also a means of making a new home for themselves in the borderlands. Although environmental justice activism has become a global phenomenon (see e.g., Collinson 1996), the term "environmental justice" was originally coined to describe the activities and goals of predominantly black, Hispanic, and economically marginalized constituencies within the US (Bullard 1990; Camacho 1998; Hofrichter 2000, 1993). Emerging in the 1970s, these communities and organizations maintained that, because of their race or social class, they were exposed to a greater range of environmental pollutants. Environmental justice activism was intended to call attention to the unequal distribution of risk associated with these spatial strategies, as well as the ways in which this spatialization of waste mirrored relations of social and economic inequality within the nation as a whole.

The intertwining of environmental rehabilitation and place-making goals for Las Caracaras is largely a function of their role as settlers within emergent urban

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

communities. The goals of Caracaras members was more personal and phenomenological than the term "environmental justice" allows and, in some ways, it seems as though the full trajectory of *their* migrant journey is arbitrarily cut short by the term. The very environment that they hope to rehabilitate was created by the same processes of industrialization and *maquilization* that brought them to the border. The link between people and place, in this case, is contingent, pragmatic, and based largely on overarching structural determinants. At the same time, the agency which they exert in their efforts to reconstruct a small portion of the border zone has a tangible effect in the making of place and "home".

## REFERENCES CITED

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

Anzaldúa, Gloria. 1987. Borderlands, La Frontera: The New Mestiza (San Francisco CA: Aunt Lute Books).

Barry, Tom. 1994. The Challenge of Cross-Border Environmentalism: The US-Mexico Case. Albuquerque, NM: Resource Center Press and Bisbee, AZ: Border Ecology Project.

Bath, C. Richard, Janet Tanski, and Robert Villarreal. 1998. "The Failure to Provide Basic Services to the Colonias of El Paso County: A Case of Environmental Racism?" in David Camacho, ed. Environmental Injustices, Political Struggles: Race, Class and the Environment, pp. 125-138. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Bejarano, Fernando. 2002. "Mexico-US Environmental Partnerships" in David Brooks and Jonathan Fox, eds. Cross-Border Dialogues: US-Mexico Social Movement Organizing, pp. 113-132 (La Jolla, CA: Center for US-Mexican Studies.)

Brady, Mary Pat. 2002. Extinct Lands, Temporal Geographies: Chicana Literature and the Urgency of Space. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

Brenner, Joel, Jennifer Ross, Janie Simmons, and Sarah Zaidi. 2000. "Neoliberal Trade and Investment and the Health of Maquiladora Workers on the US-Mexico Border" in Jim Yong Kim, Joyce Millen, Alec Irwin, and John Gershman, eds. Dying for Growth: Global Inequality and the Health of the Poor, pp. 261-292. Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press.

Brooks, David and Jonathan Fox. 2002. "Movements Across the Border: An Overview" in David Brooks and Jonathan Fox, eds. Cross-Border Dialogues: US-Mexico Social Movement Organizing, pp. 1-68. (La Jolla, CA: Center for US-Mexican Studies.)

Buchanan, Ruth. 2001. "Border Crossings: NAFTA, Regulatory Restructuring, and the Politics of Place" in Nicholas Blomley, David Delaney, and Richard T. Ford, eds. The Legal Geographies Reader. pp. 285-297. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers)

Bullard, Robert. 1990. Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Camacho, David. 1998. Environmental Injustices, Political Struggles: Race, Class, and the Environment. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Carlos Vasquez, Xavier. 1993. The North American Free Trade Agreement and Environmental Racism. *Harvard International Law Journal*, Vol. 34(2): 357-379.

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

Cornelius, Wayne. 2002. "Impact of NAFTA on Mexico-to-US Migration" in E.J. Chambers and Peter H. Smith, eds. NAFTA in the New Millennium, pp. 287-304. (La Jolla, CA: Center for US-Mexican Studies)

Dwyer, Augusta. 1994. On the Line: Life on the US-Mexico Border. Nottingham, England: Russell Press.

Eduardo Ruiz, Ramon. 2000. On the Rim of Mexico: Encounters of the Rich and Poor. (Boulder, CO: Westview Press)

Evans, Peter. 2000. "Fighting Marginalization with Transnational Networks: Counter-Hegemonic Globalization" *Contemporary Sociology*, Vol. 29, No. 1: 230-241.

Gupta, Akhil and James Ferguson, eds. 1997. Culture, Power, Place: Explorations in Critical Anthropology. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

- 1997. eds., Anthropological Locations: Boundaries and Grounds of a Field Science. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press)

Hofrichter, Richard. 2000. "Introduction: Critical Perspectives on Human Health and the Environment" in Reclaiming the Environmental Debate: The Politics of Health in a Toxic Culture, pp. 1-14. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

-1993. Toxic Struggles: The Theory and Practice of Environmental Justice. Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers.

Hollinson, Helen, ed. 1996. Green Guerrillas: Environmental Conflicts and Initiatives in Latin America and the Caribbean. (London, UK: Latin American Bureau).

Kelly, Mary. 2002. "Cross-Border Work on the Environment: Evolution, Successes, Problems, and Future Outlook" in David Brooks and Jonathan Fox, eds. Cross-Border Dialogues: US-Mexico Social Movement Networking, pp. 133-144. (La Jolla, CA: Center for US-Mexican Studies, UCSD).

Manuel Rafael Mancillas "Transborder Collaboration: the Dynamics of Grassroots Globalization" in Claudia Sadowski-Smith, ed., Globalization on the Line: Culture, Capital, and Citizenship at U.S. Borders, pp. 201-220. (New York, NY: Palgrave Press, 2000)

Moure-Eraso, Rafael, Meg Wilcox, Laura Punnett, Leslie Copeland, and Charles Levenstein. 1994. Back to the Future: Sweatshop Conditions on the Mexico-US Border. I. Community Health Impact of Maquiladora Industrial Activity. *American Journal of Industrial Medicine* 20: 311-324.

Ortiz, Victor. 2001. The Unbearable Ambiguity of the Border. *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict, and World Order*, Vol. 28, No. 2: 96-112

# Social Justice: Anthropology, Human Rights and Peace

Volume 6, Number 1

- 1999. Only Time can Tell if Geography is Still Destiny: Time, Space, and NAFTA in a US-Mexican Border City in *Human Organization*, Vol. 58, No. 2: 173-181.

Simon, Joel. 1997. Endangered Mexico: An Environment on the Edge. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

Smith, Michael Peter. 1994. Can you Imagine? Transnational Migration and the Globalization of Grassroots Politics in *Social Text*, No. 39:15-33.