

## Meanings of Border in the Territorialization Processes of Migrants Settled in the Soconusco Region of Mexico

### Significados de frontera a través de los procesos de territorialización de migrantes establecidos en la región Soconusco, México

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#### ABSTRACT

This article aims to present the concept of the border based on migrants settled in Tapachula and Ciudad Hidalgo (municipal seat of Suchiate). From qualitative, ethnographic, and phenomenological research, the meaning of the border is studied from the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary through the territorialization processes that include experiences and ways of internal and external appropriation of housing and the city. The relevance of the topic is based on reflecting on the construction of a border concept based on the experiences narrated by the migrants. The concept of border is extrapolated beyond the external physical, that is, migrants experience internal borders in their being that are reflected outside in their territorialization processes, which implies a latent reality of great importance in migration studies.

*Keywords:* 1. Southern Mexican border, 2. Soconusco region, 3. migrants, 4. territorialization, 5. housing.

#### RESUMEN

Este artículo tiene por objetivo presentar las definiciones del concepto de frontera a partir de la voz de los migrantes que se establecen en Tapachula y Ciudad Hidalgo (cabecera municipal de Suchiate). Desde una investigación cualitativa, etnográfica y fenomenológica, se estudian los significados de frontera desde lo real, lo simbólico y lo imaginario, a través de los procesos de territorialización que incluyen las experiencias y las formas de apropiación interna y externa de la vivienda y de la ciudad. La relevancia del tema se sustenta en la reflexión en torno de la construcción del concepto de frontera a partir de las vivencias narradas por los propios migrantes. El concepto de frontera se extrapola más allá de lo físico, es decir, que los migrantes experimentan fronteras internas en su ser que se reflejan afuera en sus procesos de territorialización, lo cual implica una realidad latente y de gran importancia en los estudios sobre la migración.

*Palabras clave:* 1. frontera sur de México, 2. región Soconusco, 3. migrantes, 4. territorialización, 5. vivienda.

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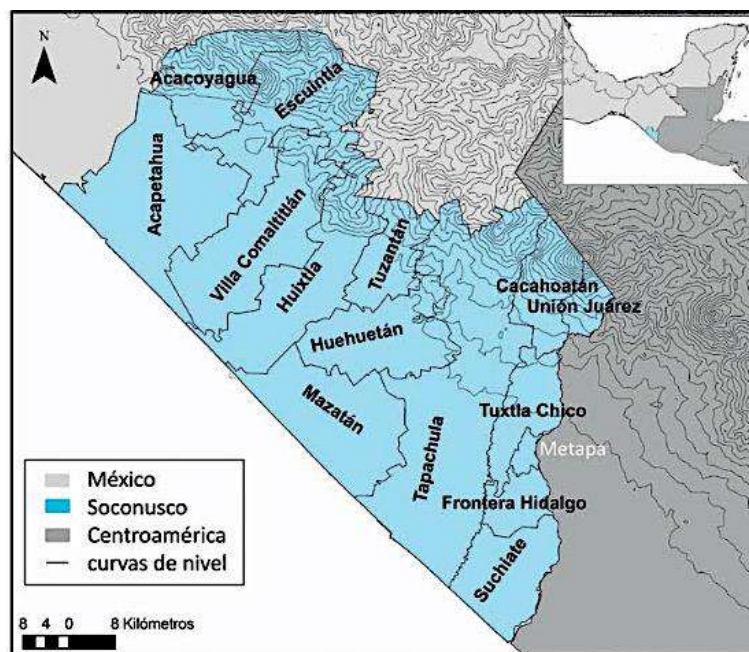
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## INTRODUCTION

The geographical position of Mexico makes it a territory of potential transit from the south of the continent to reach the United States, the favorite country to fulfill the “American dream”. This term, coined by historian James Truslow in 1931, stands for aspiring to a wealth and growth that should be guaranteed to all citizens, regardless of their social class or the conditions in which they are born (Moya Choy, 2017), to begin the search for opportunities under better conditions than those provided by the country of origin. The reasons for migrating are due to various situations, such as poverty, widespread violence, natural disasters, political persecution, violation of human rights, emergency situations, among others. Hence it follows that the Soconusco region, located on the border territory of the State of Chiapas, in the southeast of Mexico and in the north of Guatemala, is an obligatory passage by land, since that is the point where Mexico and Central America meet; great commercial, migratory and political activity is concentrated in this region. For this research, the study focused on the migrant population established in Tapachula (municipal seat) and Ciudad Hidalgo, municipal seat of Suchiate.

Map 1. The Soconusco region and its municipalities



Source: *Atlas de las orquídeas del Soconusco. Modelos digitales de nichos ambientales entre Centro y Sudamérica* (Bertolini, Damon & Ibarra-Cerdeña, 2016).

The methodological strategy was based on qualitative research methods, particularly on the use of the ethnographic and phenomenological method. The process was developed in two main parts: in the first, interviews were recorded where questions were asked such as What do you like and what do you not like about the city? What places do you consider the most attractive or beautiful in the city? Where do you like to go and why? What places do you consider less attractive or ugly in the city? What was your home like before and what is it like now? In the second part, interviewees were asked to free-draw a mental map of the places that they like and those that they do not, the most visited, the ones

visited daily, the house of their place of origin. They were given several options to make their drawing based on the topics covered in the interview, so that they would remember and represent what was most significant at that moment. “Each drawing is made from the knowledge and urban experience of the one making it; however, these maps also represent the places that symbolize the history, identity and socio-cultural characteristics of the city” (De Alba, 2004, p. 127).

The interviews were aimed at people who had experienced the migration process with the explicit goal of arriving in the United States, or to leave their native country and settle in another, so as to improve their living conditions, although due to fortuitous situations they decided to settle in the border of the Soconusco region and not continue with what was projected in their initial migration journey. Migrants who shared their experiences and their valuable collaboration in this research are thus not only protagonists but also authors, since through their narrations and drawings they allow us to understand territorial appropriation and what the border means to them.

Through the Migrant Service Office in the City Hall of Suchiate, the people whose support was essential to carry out the interviews were contacted. In the case of Tapachula, the contacts of the migrants were obtained through the residents who provided accommodation during this research.

#### MIGRATION, TERRITORY AND APPROPRIATION

Migrants who decided to settle in Tapachula and Hidalgo City, and have managed to obtain a legal stay in Mexico, have at the same time acquired rights and obligations by having access to basic services as citizens, obtaining a job and living in a home. All this has allowed them to take settle, belong and live peacefully as inhabitants of a territory that offers them better conditions than those they had in their countries of origin.

Said request is made before the Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid (COMAR, acronym in Spanish for Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados) to obtain protection and the right not to be returned to the native country; having proof of this procedure, a visitor card for humanitarian reasons can be requested from the National Institute of Migration (INM, acronym in Spanish for Instituto Nacional de Migración), which allows the person to work while the process of obtaining a visa is underway. Once having a visa, the person can move through Mexican territory without being deported and/or stay to find a job and settle down. A visa can also be requested at the INM when the migrant means to undertake paid activities, or for family, study, or business, among other reasons.

The migrant population that decides to settle on the border experiences processes of territorial appropriation that are evident in their ways of inhabiting housing and in the recognition of the city where they live. The term border refers to the existence of limits, boundaries or confines. “Borders are elementary spatial structures of linear shape, serving purposes of geopolitical discontinuity and of referential realization in the three registers of the real, the symbolic and the imaginary” (Foucher, 2013).

The southern Mexican border cannot be considered a single region; it should rather be understood as a large territory with significant regional variations. In order to define it, it is necessary to look at it from different fields, perspectives and identities (Fábregas, 1985; Pohlenz

Córdova, 2005). Undoubtedly, if one is to address the topics of borders and appropriation, the concept of territory becomes important:

Territory always implies, at once (...) a symbolic and cultural dimension, through a territorial identity attributed by social groups, as a form of ‘symbolic control’ over the space where they live (being also, therefore, a form of appropriation), and a more concrete dimension, of a political-disciplinary nature [and political-economic, we should add]: the appropriation and ordering of space as a form of domination and discipline of individuals (Haesbaert, 2011, p. 80).

Hence, territory itself constitutes a “space of subscription” to culture (Giménez, 2007, p. 129) understood as a “pattern of meanings” (Geertz, 2003, p. 20). Hannerz (1996) states that “culture-independent human nature does not exist. Between what genetics say and what we have to know in order to live there is an information gap, and we fill this gap with culture” (p. 64).

Territory, territoriality and territorialization occur simultaneously. When it comes to territorialization, this process:

implies a link between the individual, community or social group and their land, with a portion of the earth’s surface that is theirs in some sense; however, like all links, it is dynamic and in constant generation, regeneration, transformation and disappearance (López & Figueroa, 2013, p. 15).

In turn, deterritorialization is the movement by which a territory is abandoned, “it is the line of flight operation;” and reterritorialization consists of the territory construction movement (Deleuze & Guattari, 1997, p. 224, cited in Haesbaert, 2011, p. 106). To talk about deterritorialization thus means that “every process and social relationship will always imply simultaneously a territorial destruction and reconstruction. Therefore, to build a new territory the one you are in has to be destroyed, or you have to build a new one in the same space” (Haesbaert, 2013, p. 13).

All of the above means that a migrant who settles on the border undergoes a process of territorialization, in which a phase of signification and appropriation takes place that entails feelings of rooting and possession.

A fundamental element of territory for the human being is housing, understood “as a physical construction, the architecturally and legally bound place wherein someone resides, their domicile” (Cuervo Calle, 2010, p. 80). Housing allows living in community, identifying each inhabitant with respect to the other and to the place; it provides a sense of belonging and delimits the relationships that arise between individuals. The house is “our corner of the world” (Bachelard, 2000, p. 28), “it is the transition between body and community, at once a unit of property, of domain” (Ramírez Velázquez & López Levi, 2015, p. 133). Housing symbolizes the way people are and how they want others to perceive them (Arévalo, 2016). That is to say, the house is the dwelling territorialized by the human being that manifests himself in the way the house is inhabited, constituting it as his habitat.

As can be inferred, the place where migrants decide to settle temporarily or permanently is part of the relationship they hold with the territory, which makes them think, build and design the desired habitat. In this context, the process of inhabiting becomes an important goal in the life of humans, because through it they socialize and develop interpersonal and group ties.

In the same way, architecture and image become important as recurrent instruments to make the city. Due to the fact that by “the construction of the habitability of space, appropriated by cultivating its indistinct presentation (...) the place becomes an element of identity by localizing the roots of the individual” (Méndez, 2012, p. 44), it is a meeting place where diverse identities, knowledge, values, meanings, and feelings that are part of the daily life of the inhabitant come together.

It is through these physical and tangible elements that the cognitive representation that each inhabitant has of their territory is known, as is the practical or emotional significance that the territory produces in the inhabitant. The architecture and image of the city constitute one of the main ways of social representation of the inhabitant.

Therefore, in order to study what the concept of border means for migrants settled in Tapachula and Hidalgo City, from the real, symbolic and imaginary approaches, the processes of territorialization of housing and the territory in which they were established are analyzed.

Within this order of ideas, Lacan affirmed that all human reality is organized by three instances: the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. He states that “it could be said that the real is what is strictly unthinkable” (2019, p. 4); “the symbolic concerns what the subject commits to in a properly human relationship” (1977, p. 8), “the idea of the *eidos*, which despite everything is a very good Greek term to translate what I call the imaginary (...) without the *eidos*, there would be no chance for names to stick to things”<sup>2</sup> (2019, p. 114).

For his part, Castoriadis (1983) explained that:

The imaginary of which I speak is not an *image of*. It is unceasing and essentially indeterminate creation (social-historical and psychic) of figures/forms/images, from which it can only be *some thing*. What we call ‘reality’ and ‘rationality’ are works of it (p. 5).

From this framework, the imaginary of the actors is constituted through a symbolic language that manifests itself in individual or collective expressions. It aims at understanding the world, but also at justifying behavior and the meaning that life has for each one. It is in this way that each individual shares some symbols with others, fostering connections through common identities and imagining themselves as part of a community.

In his 1998 book *The Image of the City*, Lynch presented the elements that refer to physical forms, that is, to the perceptible physical objects of the city. He classified them into five types: paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks.

Paths are the conduits that the observer normally, occasionally or potentially follows. They can be represented by streets, paths, traffic lines, canals or railways (...) Edges are the linear elements that the observer does not use or consider paths. These are the boundaries between two phases, linear breaks in continuity, like beaches, railroad crossings, development edges, walls. They constitute lateral references and not coordinated axes (...) Districts or neighborhoods are the sections of the city whose dimensions range between medium and large, conceived as having a two-dimensional scope, in which the observer enters mentally

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek term εἶδος translates as the “appearance-form” through which reality is understood and given meaning.

and which are recognizable as if they had a common character identifying them (...) Nodes are the strategic points of a city to which an observer can access to and constitute the intensive foci from which he starts or to which he goes (...) Landmarks are another type of reference point, yet in this case the observer does not enter them, as they are external to him (Lynch, 1998, pp. 62-63).

By means of these elements it becomes possible to know what image of the city migrants have. For Silva (2006) “the territory refers rather to a complicated symbolic elaboration that never ceases to appropriate and rename things in a characteristic existential-linguistic exercise: what I live I name; subtle and fruitful strategies of language” (p. 56). This way, the drawings and narrations of migrants established in Tapachula and Hidalgo City are evidence of this symbolic elaboration, one constructed from their own experience as inhabitants of the border and their territorialization processes in the houses and the city they inhabit.

### THE BORDER THROUGH CITY APPROPRIATION

Based on this research, it can be categorically affirmed that the border territory can no longer be solely considered only as a place of passage, but that it is given due importance as a recipient of populations that modify economic, social and political life at different scales. The goal of many migrants is to live on the border because they feel close to their country that way; others consider the border a place of passage that, due to various circumstances, has become now permanent, and even others are still waiting to find out what it will become for them.

A recognition of the city takes place in this process; places are appropriated as they begin to acquire meaning for people; material ties and social networks emerge that allow survival and achieving better conditions to inhabit the city.

Cities are a set of many things: memories, desires, signs of a language; they are places of exchange, as all economic history books explain, but these exchanges are not only of merchandise, they are also exchanges of words, wishes, and memories (Calvino, 2019, p. 8).

As can be seen, the value of city appropriation is that it allows for us to know what image a migrant has of the new country in which he has settled, that is, what elements of the city where he lives in are part of his memory. “Memory is redundant: it reiterates signs so that the city begins to exist” (Calvino, 2019, p. 22). Licona (2003) referred to this as follows:

The memory-places that inhabit the geography of the imaginary and make up a memory-capital (...) Memory-capital is a corpus of images that refer to local objects that make it possible to build an identity image. Identity image is understood as the set of common representations, points of concurrence (p. 107).

The places in Tapachula and Hidalgo City that migrants have managed to appropriate and that they remember as representative of the public image of each city are described below. Migrants recognize these places as part of their daily lives and identify which ones they like and which ones they do not, which ones they visit the most and which ones they visit the least.

## Tapachula

Tapachula is the seat of the Soconusco region, known as the Pearl of Soconusco for being an important economic and political center (Regional Development Program [Programa Regional de Desarrollo], 2012). The border activities of the region are concentrated in this city and it is a territory of great importance due to its migratory transit and labor supply. Its economy focuses on agri-food, trade, services and port activities at the local and regional level. The city has significant human and commercial mobility, a product of formal and informal economic activities, in which migrant population participate to a large extent.

Frequently visited places, either daily or on special occasions, are named, explained and reflected in a drawing, constituting for migrants the public image of the city, as these places are in their memory and part of their daily lives.

Azucena is a 25-year-old woman, family mother, whose mother took her out of Honduras at the age of 6 along with her three brothers, because she had problems with her father. She has lived most of her life in Tapachula; in her drawing, Azucena shows a grid wherein she positions the places that she likes in the city and those that she does not (Figures 1 and 2). Neighborhoods such as Indeco, Bonanza, Solidaridad 2000, Cafetales and Parque Central, are places that she perceives as unsafe and therefore does not like. Whereas Plaza Galerías, Parque los Cerritos, Plaza Cristal, Cafeto, Centro and City are the places that she likes the most and that she always visits. These places are considered nodes, as they are meeting places with recreational, commercial and aesthetic characteristics pleasing to the majority of the population.

Figure 1. Places I do not like

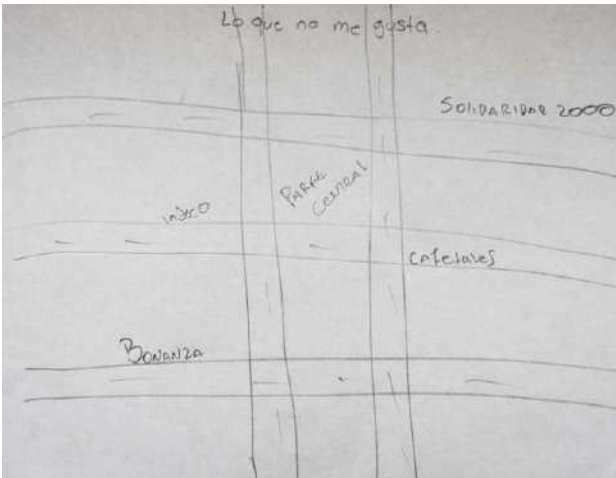
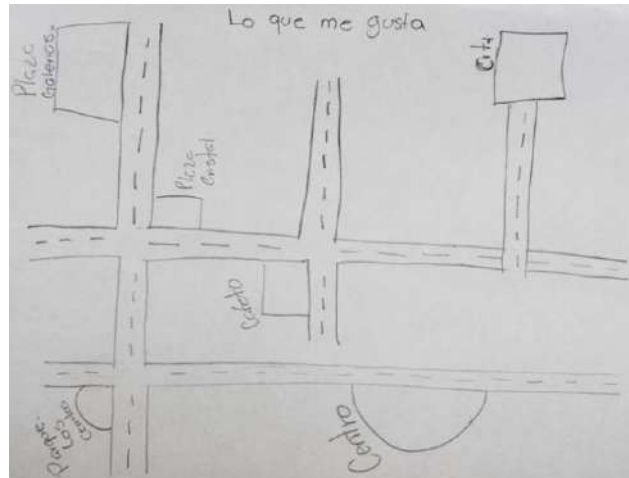


Figure 2. Places I like



Source: Made by Azucena.

Fabio is originally from Guatemala. When he was a child, he traveled with his family during harvest season to work on the coffee farms. He decided to stay in Tapachula upon meeting the woman who would become the mother of his three daughters; he has been settled in Mexico for 39 years. As can be seen in Figure 3, Fabio marks with an X the neighborhoods in Tapachula that he does not like because he considers them unsafe: Vida Mejor and Confeti. In Figure 4, Fabio shows his most frequented places, such as Mercado San Juan, the church of San Agustín, Parque Bicentenario, downtown, and 17 Oriente avenue, which crosses the city.

Figure 3. Places I do not like

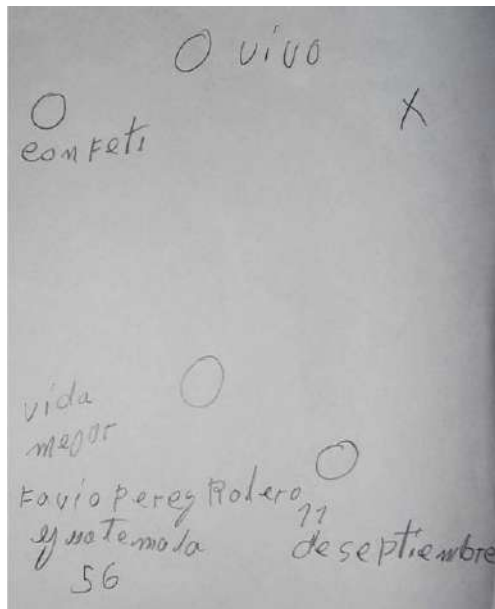
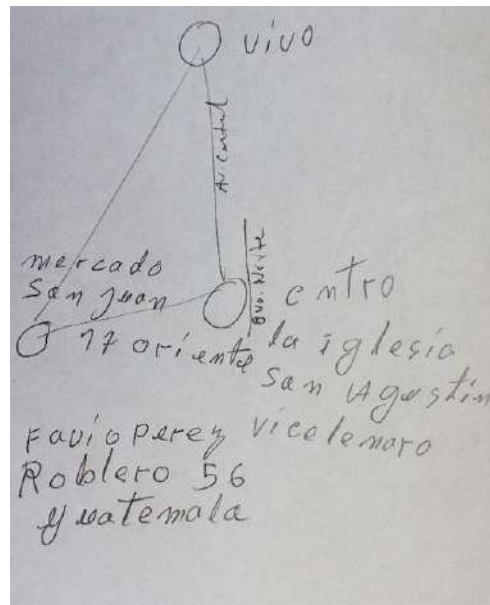


Figure 4. Places I like



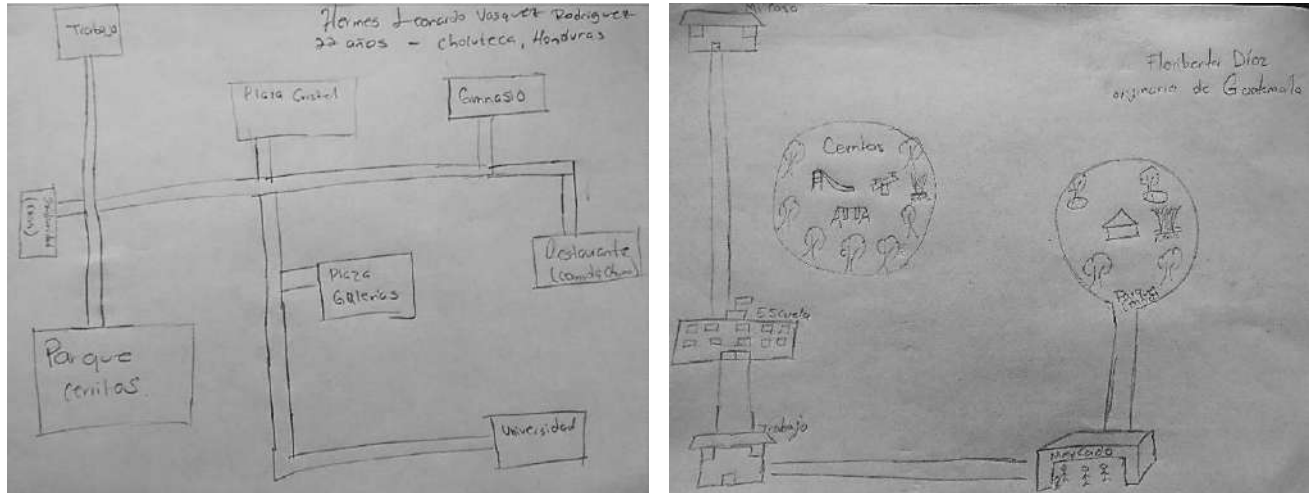
Source: Made by Fabio.

His workplace, Parque Los Cerritos, the Central Square, Plaza Galerías, the gym, the Chinese food restaurant, and the university are the places frequented by Hermes, a 24-year-old university student from Choluteca, Honduras, who was taken to Tapachula by his mother when he was 5 years old, along with his sisters.

Her house, Parque Los Cerritos, her school, the market and Parque Central are the places most visited by Floriberta, a 41-year-old woman, mother of three daughters, originally from San José Ojetenám, department of San Marcos, in Guatemala. She first migrated to Tapachula when she was 12 years old to work as a domestic worker, given her circumstances of poverty. At the age of 1, she and her four siblings lost their mother and her father was unable to meet basic needs.



Figures 5 and 6. Frequently visited places in Tapachula



Source: Made by Hermes and Floriberta.

Well, here in Tapachula, places where we've been, where I've been with my girls: Cerritos, it's more fun because of the games, they can play there, the pools, that sometimes they like to go for a swim, that's almost it, there's not many places here that I... Another one around here is the esplanade but beyond that... downtown sometimes, not very often. We do go to church, the parish is close nearby. Almost no places here, I'm not one of those who like to go out or visit very often. Some neighborhoods like 5 de febrero, Lomas de Soconusco, I don't go there too much, because they say there are a lot of thugs in those places, Xochimilco; so that's why I told you about the esplanade, it's still very nice, but we hardly go there much, because they say they rob a lot there, so that's why are almost never there, and then well, being old, they can easily take your purse, well in my case I don't carry much money, but in the case I go with my daughters, that they kidnap them or something, I better stay home (Floriberta Díaz, personal communication, January 25, 2020).

The districts referred to by Lynch (1998) as having a “common character” are classified by their inhabitants, by being assigned own characteristics that make them points of reference in the city. For example, there are several neighborhoods perceived unfavorably by people:

There are a lot of neighborhoods here that, as I told you, have many small gangs, well, the kind of places that you don't want to work in or neighborhoods you wouldn't live in (...) Well, there used to be one... well, by the 11 de septiembre, by the 5 de febrero (Fabio Pérez, personal communication, October 29, 2019).

Well, there are many neighborhoods that I don't visit because they are very marginalized, but if you don't go there then everything is fine, there are many neighborhoods that I don't, at least I myself don't know, I wouldn't like things to happen, things that I lived before and I don't want to live again (Nelly Mesías, personal communication, November 2, 2019).

Neighborhoods can become urban limits and borders expressed as territories wherein people do not interact nor enter because they are considered dangerous.

During interviews and in drawings, it became noticeable that migrants limited themselves to saying that they only travel from home to work and to some places that are part of their daily commute. However, they also recognized that the downtown is an important node for meeting and for carrying out procedures or purchases that are necessary at some point. Parque Central, Parque Bicentenario, Mercado Sebastián Escobar and Mercado San Juan, and religious centers as well, are also meeting points and important nodes. Central avenue constitutes a highly mobile path recognized as such by all interviewees, as are the streets that make up the city downtown, which are highly traveled.

Interviewees reported that downtown locations are recognized but not highly frequented. The greatest mobility occurs wherever most daily activities are carried out, commonly limited to nearby places and their commute to work. Very rarely do they go for a walk and/or to places far from their neighborhoods. Recognition of the city is part of their habitat.

The biggest concern for a migrant is having a job to ensure the daily sustenance of his family. On the other hand, the city symbolizes the opportunity for work and progress, the means to meet their goals, to provide for their family and live in peace. In their stories they express having decided to develop a life project in Tapachula and being grateful for the opportunities and better living conditions that they now enjoy. Their liking for the city is related to the opportunity it provides to build a better life than the one they had in their native country.

In any case, the situation for migrants has not been easy. In their stories they tell us how they live day to day when it comes to expenses; they state that it has been difficult but not impossible to support themselves, as employment opportunities are better than in their country of origin:

Well, when I have a job I focus on it, because living here you have to buy everything, you don't grow anything, you can't say well I have something to eat anyway, if you don't work for a week then whatever little money you saved, it runs out and you go missing, when you don't have a job and you can't find it, well you have to put up with it because sometimes you don't have a secure job, construction work is hardly secure, you're done in one place and you have to look elsewhere (Fabio Pérez, personal communication, October 29, 2019).

Different perceptions help explaining the choice of a city to live in, just as there are experiences of comparison with other territories and feelings attached to them:

I was highly impressed! Now yes, how can I tell you, from one place to another one feels good, you say, well how beautiful, you adapt to other things because, how can I explain it, in the way of speaking, the food, when you enter people's houses, they're quite pretty and it's a new environment that you experience. The weather was a little difficult the first few days, but after a week or two, well you adapt to the heat (Floriberta Díaz, personal communication, January 25, 2020).

As for me I love Tapachula, I mean to say, it's my second country, I wouldn't change it for anything, I've lived here so many years and unfortunately I couldn't live freely in my country but here I can, I have my children, my husband. I'm a virtuous woman, I can say it myself, because I work in what I like. I help my husband in the house, so I have no words, I love Tapachula because everything God gave me I got it here (...) I like my neighborhood because

I live here and it's safe, I've made my life, huh, well it's pretty here (Nelly Mesías, personal communication, November 2, 2019).

Truth be told, what I like about Tapachula is that there are more jobs here than over there where we lived, there is more work (...) Well, the truth is that Tapachula is quite nice, I really like it here in Tapachula (Fabio Pérez, personal communication, October 29, 2019).

There are other assessments of the image of the city:

What I see in the city is that it's very dirty, there's a lot of rubbish in the streets, nylon, that pollutes a lot, wrapped nylon (...) all the streets are dirty here, if you go to the downtown market you'll see a lot of toilet paper, that pollution causes diseases, leptospirosis, and even cholera I believe, poor sanitary conditions cause that. That's different from what I see in my city over there, what I do see as an improvement here is public transport, because buses come by all the time, there's no transport shortage, and this other thing I have noticed is a certain rejection of a good sector of Mexican society towards us, I have noticed that (Francisco Manzanet, personal communication, January 2, 2020).

The National Institute of Migration is part of the memory and life of migrants, it is a node and a point of reference, as every migrant turns to this place.

By living on the border, migrants have found a job and the freedom to live peacefully, two key aspects to understand why they settle permanently and why they do not plan to return and/or leave for at least a long time.

### *Hidalgo City*

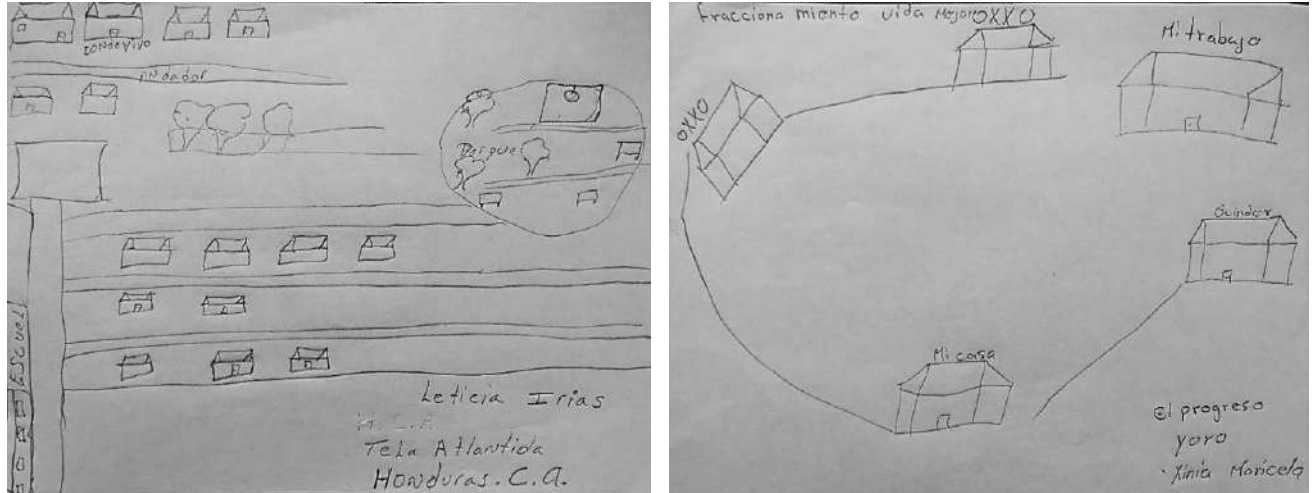
This border city, municipal seat of Suchiate, is of great importance because it is an obligatory step when arriving in Mexico if you cross the Suchiate River from Tecún Umán (department of San Marcos) in Guatemala. It is a border port characterized by an intense flow of people and merchandise, since it is common for daily activities to be carried out by the inhabitants on one side or the other of the border, the Suchiate River being an element not only of territorial division but also of union between Mexico and Guatemala. Border-crossing is made by means of rafts or over the international bridge Dr. Rodolfo Robles, and the bridge Engineer Luis Cabrera is used for cargo transport. This border port is closely related to the city of Tapachula, around which the economic activities of the region are organized.

Regarding the city, people expressed their perceptions and the reasons why they stay to live in it:

Well, my children motivate me, that they can continue studying, that they have what I did not have, that they study, I want them to have a future. Because here things are more relaxed and everything, each place is more expensive, everything changes (Maricela Calderón, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

I think it is peaceful here, I mean it, I like it here to live in peace, you can see constructions, over there in Honduras I worked in construction and you can see the works there, having papers I can adapt to any place and work, in this table I can work, thank God, I can grab any work tool (Moisés Guevara, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Figures 7 and 8. Frequently visited places in Hidalgo City



Source: Made by Leticia and Maricela.

Figures 7 and 8 show drawings of the park, the school, the river, the workplace and Oxxo stores as places that are part of everyday life. These drawings were made by women who work in a restaurant in the city. Figure 7 shows a drawing by Leticia, originally from Tela, Honduras, and Figure 8 one by Maricela, originally from Yoro, Honduras, who have lived in Hidalgo City for two and seventeen years, respectively:

We don't go out, it's from here to work, from work to home. We buy things at the market or at Chedraui, Bodega, those are the only places because there's nothing good here, I don't like it. Only the beach because there's no other place here, the movies, when I go out I go to the movies in Tapachula with my children (Maricela Calderón, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

There are other perceptions that show the few places for recreational activities in Hidalgo City:

I only to go the park frequently, because actually here in Hidalgo City there's still a lack of investment in for example a museum, a university let's say, a hospital, so you do notice things that are missing due to economic reasons or whatever, or for political reasons, the city still doesn't have them, unlike Tapachula, Tapachula is a bigger city, I don't know if double or triple the size of Hidalgo (Moisés Guevara, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Figure 9 represents migrants crossing the Suchiate River. Peter is originally from Nicaragua and sells food in the streets. The riverside is one of his favorite places where he can sell food. Figure 10 shows the drawing made by Moisés, who has lived in Hidalgo City for 6 years and works in tricycle transportation, so he clearly draws the blocks and the location of the places in the city downtown.

Figure 9. Suchiate River

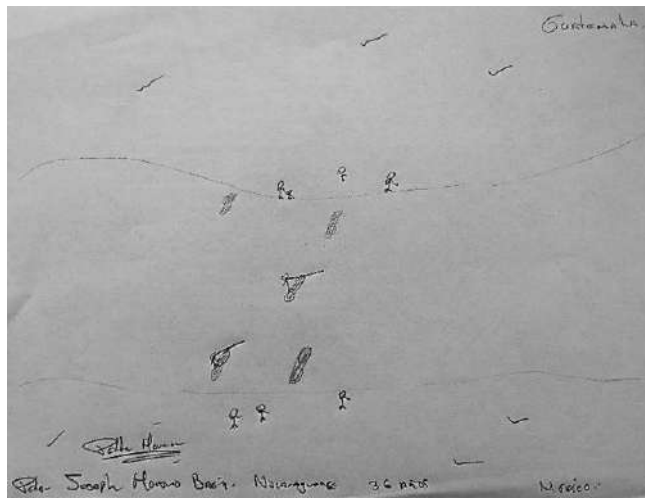


Figure 10. Hidalgo City



Source: Made by Peter and Moisés.

The river is part of the life and landscape of the municipality, it is understood as a border but it is also a path because in it there is movement, fluidity, communication, exchange. The train tracks also refer back to roads, although perceived as a dangerous place they are a reference point in the city, a not quite favorable one:

I don't like the places on the edge of Hidalgo because they are characteristically dangerous, where unfortunately robbing takes place, assaults and even rapes. Basically all along the train tracks there are dive bars, cunning whorehouses we call them (Peter Moreno, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

Those pubs are not nice at all, walking through those places it's not a nice experience; Coco Bongo is a night club, a party club, there's a lot of party in those businesses here in Hidalgo City. There's no nice place that you can go and relax, there's no place to have a good dance, if you go to those places you're looking for trouble, they'll try to mess with you. Drugs, drinks, we are on the border and you know everything goes on the border (Maricela Calderón, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

That's where dirty places are, both because of all the dust and because most of the people there is somewhat aggressive (Moisés Guevara, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Photographs 1 and 2. Hidalgo City is a commercial city with a strong migration flow



Source: Personal archive, Hidalgo City, 2019.

As can be seen, experiences in the city are different and therefore perceptions and opinions also vary.

I like many things about Hidalgo, the jobs, when you have a job you can walk around freely as long as you don't cause any damage, you can walk around safely and well, most people are kind, I will not say everyone is because there's always highs and lows, most people are kind even when some are not, some are a bit conflictive (Moisés Guevara, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

The beach becomes a point of confluence: several interviewees told us that they frequently visit El Gancho beach, which is half an hour from Hidalgo City by land transport, this becoming a node by being a strategic recreational point. This is how Moisés describes it, who works transporting the citizens by tricycle cart:

Hidalgo is big, yes, but there are pretty places here for example, common lands, there are common lands that are pretty, some of the beaches are striking although waves are somewhat dangerous, but you get used to it; for example El Gancho, there's Puerto Madero, Bonita beach is quite visited (Moisés Guevara, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

The beach reminds me of Tela, it's not the same, right? but... another place would be the church (Leticia Irías, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

And I also like to go to El Gancho beach, which is 32 km from Hidalgo City, I go two or three times throughout the week (Peter Moreno, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

Other places that are points of reference due to inhabitants buying their groceries there are Bodega Aurrera and Chedraui. The church is another meeting and gathering place, although less mentioned, as well as the park that the vast majority state not liking or being of no relevance to them; both spaces constitute nodes of Hidalgo City.

In Hidalgo, the park, the river, because you always go to the river when there's no money to go to the beach, you go to the river and sometimes it's even better than the beach because it's quieter. I like the lifestyle here, it's more relaxed. On its shores it's the territory of two countries, but for inhabitants it's a river that they have to cross to visit their relatives, buy things, bring or take things over. To others it brings back memories of their country, you visit the river to live again those memories of your original territory (Moisés Guevara, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

The Suchiate River brings to mind the place of origin, as many migrants come from coastal places or places near rivers, which makes it so that they feel familiar and closer to the place they left. The riverside is the workplace of many people, for example street vendors of food or merchandise. This activity allows them meeting other migrants, exchanging experiences and providing guidance to those who are arriving. This is the case of Peter from Nicaragua, who sells sandwiches and atole in the city and by the river, one of his favorite places to carry out his activity.

I like to go to the riverside and look at people come and go throughout the day, even other fellow migrants, how they come, how they arrive, and even when working I've made efforts and have taken care that when I find migrants I advise them, I send them to Mr. Sergio Seis' office, who is a lawyer, and have even taken risks many, countless times, taking Honduran people, people from Nicaragua, to Tapachula in my car, to COMAR's offices (Peter Moreno, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

Peter has lived in Hidalgo City for three years, he already has a permanent residence and his work has made him economically prosperous, in addition to having been recognized by other migrants and by local officials who work in the city council for his social and labor collaboration with them.

In migration, the person lives a process of deterritorialization due to the abandonment of their former territory, their loss of control over and uprooting from the previous location they inhabited, and they are forced to reterritorialize themselves through the recognition, rearrangement, adaptation and domination of a new territory.

The image of the city held by migrants settled in Tapachula and Hidalgo City corresponds in most cases to specific places related to their jobs and the satisfaction of their basic needs: home, workplace, school, the supermarket. Their appropriation accounts for their daily life and what is necessary for their living. Few stories address recreational and cultural activities. In both cities, when migrants refer to unpleasant or rarely visited places, they associate them with lack of public safety.

## THE BORDER THROUGH HOUSING APPROPRIATION

The construction of their place of habitation, their habitat, can be counted among the territorialization processes that migrants settled in a territory go through; for this they resort to their knowledge and to what the new territory offers them. Such appropriation is expressed in the ways they make use of the places and the elements necessary for their inhabiting.

Briefly said, migrants' drawings allow us to know their journeys and how people keep each place in their memory; they show how they live in and relate with city. Next, the drawings and photographs of the homes of the migrants settled in Tapachula are shown, as well as the narrative of the memories of their previous and current homes.

### *Tapachula*

The house is the immediate territory adapted to satisfy basic daily needs, yet is also the place where life projects are cultivated and the motivations to achieve them are built.

Our visit to the Infonavit Solidaridad 2000 subdivision took place because, when asking about migrants living in the city, Nelly was referred to us, a woman from Honduras who has had a food stall for 20 years now, and who has established her home in this Tapachula subdivision for 30 years already; that is how she has come to know other people from her country, who were also contacted to be interviewed.

Photographs 3 and 4. Nelly's house



Source: Personal archive, Tapachula, 2019.

The photographs show the arrangement of the objects and the need for more space. Regarding her home, Nelly stated:

I like my house, because I own it and I live a little better here. We lived in a house that was made of sticks, it had nylon, and then little by little we were adding adobe and the truth is that it has been... I had a very ugly childhood. Things change, the house for example, in this case I live in a condominium, I live in a building on the third floor, on the other hand, over there we lived in a one-room house and it didn't have the comforts that I have here (Nelly Mesías, personal communication, November 2, 2019).



Photographs 5 and 6 show Floriberta's home, located in the Amores neighborhood, which she has been building for many years with the support of her husband and her daughters. In the interview she expressed how glad she is to own a home:

I like everything! [laughs] The truth is, I am very excited about my little house, more than anything I already managed not having to pay rent, it's mine, even if we wouldn't have enough to have it like this, if we maybe had to make it a little simpler, I would still be happy because I already know this is mine and I can cultivate what I want. I wanted my little house to be nothing but a large room and then divide the inside with fabric or whatever, but the construction worker told us "why don't we do it this way?" I wanted my windows to be large because I don't like feeling locked up; I want big windows, I want doors at the front and another one as an exit back there to go to the bathroom, so that was my idea. The bathroom is outside the house (Floriberta Díaz, personal communication, January 25 of 2020).

Photographs 5 and 6. Floriberta's house



Source: Personal archive, Tapachula, 2020.

Owning a home is part of the imaginary of progress, because in addition to being a physical construction, it is also a symbolic one as it is built from the imagery, identity and projection of life of those who inhabit it.

Photographs 7 and 8 show the one-bedroom home of José, who was deported from the United States and separated from his wife and his two children; he is now punished under immigration law and will not be able to visit his family for the next 10 years. He fled Honduras because his eldest son was killed and the family received death threats. He pays 500 Mexican pesos for rent, lives alone, and has other migrants as neighbors. There are no good ventilation or hygiene conditions since the kitchen space is very small and only a curtain separates it from the bathroom. There is also a laundry sink in the same space. He told us that his children are the ones who pay for the room and he has no possibility of paying more.

Photographs 7 and 8. José's house



Source: Personal archive, Tapachula, 2019.

When talking about the house where they currently live, it is inevitable to remember the space they inhabited before:

The houses are not alike. There we had a simple one-room house but it was bigger, there was more space, my whole family could live there, we built it for my family and then my family that was growing because of my children, but then they started leaving to buy their own plots and build their little houses (José Sorte, personal communication, November 3, 2019).

Figure 11 shows the drawing made by Francisco, originally from Baracoa, Guantánamo province, Cuba, who told us: “I left because of the situation in Cuba, because of government repression, the dictatorship of my country against human rights activists. While drawing he stated:

My house was made of sawn hardwood and metal tiles, but I felt very good there because I had land where I planted and all that, I never used fertilizer for the crops, you know, crops were natural, the water was very drinkable, very good, it flows there in the city where I lived, there is a coastal place on the north coast and there approximately fourteen rivers flow, all of them clean water. My beautiful house, my wooden house. There I grew yucca, banana, tomatoes, it was very fertile soil, they call it the Jamal Valley, there growers don't use fertilizers, they grow lettuce, watercress, spinach, tangerines, oranges, all that grows easily there (Francisco Manzanet, personal communication, January 21, 2020).

Figure 11. Housing in Cuba



Figure 12. Housing in Guatemala



Source: Drawings made by Francisco and Carlos, interviewees.

The drawing in figure 12 was made by Carlos, born in the municipality of Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, department of Escuintla, Guatemala, who remembers what the houses where he lived were like:

Well, housing there, the little houses such as we had, all wood; it used to be customary to build adobe houses with this red clay, they got these big bricks of about 50 by 40 centimeters I think they were, constructions were made with them, but then people realized that sometimes these houses couldn't stand earthquakes, so then they started to cut down trees, getting wooden boards from them, wooden joints, and houses were made all of wood, basically (Carlos Robledo, personal communication, March 5, 2020).

Photographs 9 and 10 show that the place where he sleeps is the same where he cooks, it has little ventilation, and he raises chickens. Overcrowding and precarious housing conditions linked to the poverty experienced by migrants living on the border are common.

Photographs 11 and 12 correspond to an apartment in the Infonavit Solidaridad 2000 subdivision where two brothers live with their stepfather and a baby. Four siblings were brought as children by their mother from Honduras, due to the problems she had with her husband, the father of the children. Eight people lived in this department for many years, which led to an expansion. The photograph shows the access stairs to the second level. Azucena explained that:

Well, when we were little we all played together, we didn't look for other children because we are a lot of siblings, we played everywhere together and well, my dad started building, there is more space upstairs, he built because there's a lot of us, this is my father's house. He lives here with us. What I don't like about my home is that it's a building, because for example here when you're walking the lady downstairs can hear, if you walk in the middle of the night the lady downstairs will be knocking on her roof with a stick for us to quit

making noise. There's very little freedom to do things, if you play music the lady gets upset (Azucena López, personal communication, November 3, 2019).

Photographs 9 and 10. Fabio's house



Source: Personal archive, Tapachula, 2019.

Photographs 11 and 12. Azucena's house



Source: Personal archive, Tapachula, 2019.

As can be seen and deduced, each of these homes is not only a house but a refuge for each of its inhabitants. It tells stories made of experiences, moments, feelings and objects that have been

building and expressing it through time and the passage of its inhabitants, who keep in their minds the memories of the place they inhabited before, and of the one they are fighting to build and continue inhabiting.

### *Hidalgo City*

Photographs 13 and 14 show Maricela's home, who has lived in Mexico since she was 17; she left her country because of problems with the Mara street gangs and because she became a single mother.

I'm fine with my house being small, I'm happy as long as my daughters can have their small room, I have mine. The space I like the most is my room.

The house where I lived was just normal, my aunt's house had bedrooms, a living room, an independent kitchen, and she also had a pool and drinks business, my aunt. The house was made of blocks with clay tile. It is a small town called Sabana de San Pedro. There we cooked over firewood, we had fire not stoves. Early in the morning at 4 am we would go to the mill and make tortillas, before I went to school I would leave everything ready (Maricela Calderón, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

Photographs 13 and 14. Maricela's house



Source: Personal archive, Hidalgo City, 2020.

Her original migration plan did not involve Hidalgo City as destination, as she confided in the interview:

My dream at that time was leaving for the United States, but unfortunately we crossed through this place, I was with my cousins, the situation with gangs was really ugly at that time and well, I decided to get back, turned myself to immigration authorities; but of course I didn't mean to return to my country, I didn't want to return, and I told immigration that I

was Salvadoran and at least at this other border I was closer to try again. I have three Mexican children three Honduran. My son did cross to the United States, he's there, he left when he was 16. Immigration detained my son there, they left him there as he was still underage, they sent me a request for his papers and all else to do paperwork and get him in school, he's in school there so he can stay (Maricela Calderón, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

She currently lives with four of her children; photographs 13 and 14 show that the house is equipped with appliances and furniture that make it comfortable and meet their needs. She has a spacious kitchen that allows her to prepare the typical dishes of her country: "I cook everything, platanitos, bananas, fried chicken with slices, flour tortillas, I always cook everything" (Maricela Calderón, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

#### Photographs 15 and 16. Peter's house



Source: Personal archive, Hidalgo City, 2020.

As of right now I pay rent, but the owner of the property is willing to sell in payments, and I already went to the bank and they would approve the credit.

There's a lot of red brick in this house, just like in Nicaragua it's used a lot in hot places, at the border with Honduras, at Somotillo, La Paz Centro, those are hot places, León, Chinandega, Granada, Riva, those are very hot places in the capital and they use red brick a lot for coolness, in the capital they use both red block and brick, they always come together, right? Red brick is characterized for making houses cooler (...) The house is maybe somewhat bigger, but not the yard, the yard here is three times the size of the other, I barely had a yard over there but the construction was larger. I have AC in the rooms, my own garden, and I keep the yard quite well, the back is quite large, I have bananas, plantains, I trim it constantly, trimming, watering, I built a small hen house, I have my own hen house at the back of the yard, right? I like having those things (Peter Moreno, personal communication, January 28, 2020).

Fixing the house results in better living conditions, for example painting it, equipping it with air conditioning, planting flowers and fruit trees in the garden and raising animals.

Photographs 17, 18 and 19 show the electrical appliances that Leticia has acquired with effort. The photos she keeps are part of the decoration and memories from Honduras.

Despite having a larger and more comfortable home in Honduras, Leticia explains that there are stronger reasons to feel at home:

How safe is here. Yes, there have been many cases of murders lately and they all seem to be by the Maras, from large organizations because if (...) if we don't mess with anyone, no one messes with us and that, the tranquility here in Hidalgo, as I was telling you I feel one foot in my country because here there are many people from my country, and even if it is only from time to time we get together and we have our customs and we make our little meals, which are made with ingredients from over there, we look for them and we make prepare things the same, and there you go, we have our catracha food (Leticia Irías, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

Photographs 17, 18 and 19. Leticia's house in Hidalgo City



Source: Leticia Irías, Hidalgo City, 2020.

Each of the migrants holds housing imaginaries, and consequently adapts their home according to how they want to inhabit it. For this they have objects, colors and distributions that satisfy their tastes and needs. Each home is different and its uniqueness is provided by the identity of the people inhabiting it.

### CLOSING REMARKS

The qualitative, ethnographic and phenomenological methodology applied in this study allowed migrants to express the real meaning of the border from their position and imaginary, which is symbolized in the processes of housing and city territorialization, becoming understandable through verbal and non-verbal expressions that tell their own experiences and are reflected in their drawings and stories, thus contributing to border studies. Knowledge originates from the

experiences of those who have migrated and have settled in the territory of the southern Mexican border.

The meanings of border for migrants settled in the Soconusco region arise through the appropriation of the city and housing as symbolic elements of the territory; the knowledge that people bring in the memories of their native country, the imaginaries that they hold as migrants and that they materialize as inhabitants when they settle on the border are combined. Ideas and feelings take root, giving meaning to their daily life and to the construction of a border territory in which they participate through the meaning they subscribe to it.

The meaning of border is understood through the processes of territorialization taking place in it, which are the expression of the imaginaries of those who inhabit it. Home and the city are symbols that acquire meaning through experiences, memories, routes and events, which generate emotions in migrants, each inhabitant thus providing them with subjective value from their particular perception.

Migrants settled at the border live modestly, in many cases under precarious conditions of overcrowding, insecurity and poverty, however they express feeling better, happier and calmer as they have better chances in life. Their conditions are not always favorable, since most of their jobs can barely provide to meet daily expenses. Although there is an intense migration flow and high commercial activity in the border territory, there is no commercial structure that generates jobs with legal benefits or that provides labor, economic and social security to the population in general.

Many migrants have settled at the border even when staying there was not their original goal in most cases, yet the possibility of resuming the journey to the United States is always there. Many perceive the border as a territory close to their old home, a notion strengthened by the communication networks that have facilitated the exchange and mobility of people and goods.

The border as territory is appropriated, lived, sensitized and taken root in, therefore it is also dynamic and flexible. The transformation of the daily life of people when moving through and living in different territories constitutes, by means of their experiences, valuable contributions to understanding the migration process, and also the processes of providing a territory with meaning.

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