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# Transitory Self-Inclusion of Migrant Populations in the Northern Border of Mexico

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† This posthumous publication is dedicated to my esteemed co-author, whose profound insight and wisdom remain forever woven into this work.

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## Abstract

This study examines the process of self-inclusion among migrating populations in two cities in Northern Mexico when enforcement policies at the border generate involuntary immobility—the entrapment of asylum seekers in a prolonged socio-legal limbo. It demonstrates that despite conditions that result in border stranding and migrant "stuckness" (Carling, 2002), asylum seekers who face structural exclusion, such as lack of legal status, limited access to goods and services, and discrimination, create processes aimed at self-inclusion, even if temporary, by investing in building mutual-aid networks to navigate resources, to resist, and to adapt to structural containment—without necessarily giving up on their final migratory objectives. Through ethnographic work and interviews with Haitian and Cuban asylum seekers in Tijuana, Baja California, and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, this article explains how asylum seekers exercise agency and leverage resources to overcome obstacles to inclusion.

## Keywords

migration policy; self-inclusion; transitional integration; US–Mexico relations

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## 1. Introduction

Sociological theories concerning inclusion and exclusion have received notable attention, starting with Parsons (1951) in the mid-20th century and developing further through the work of Luhmann (1997) in the late 20th century. Rather than treating inclusion and exclusion as binary absolutes, these sociologists problematized the issue as two sides of the same coin: Any given individual is rarely completely included or excluded. Later, other sociologists suggested that inclusion and exclusion are multidimensional in character, arguing that "exclusion consists of dynamic multidimensional processes driven by unequal power relationships interacting across [multiple] dimensions and at different levels…[resulting] in a continuum of inclusion and exclusion" (Popay et al., 2008, p. 36). Thus, inclusion and exclusion exist on a sliding scale, where individuals can occupy intermediate positions or experience both inclusion and exclusion simultaneously within the same social structure (Mascareño & Carvajal, 2015). Moreover, Parsons explicitly noted that individuals could be included and excluded in different respects or facets of the same system. Building on this scholarship, Stichweh and Windolf (2009) introduced the concept of "inclusive exclusion" and "exclusive inclusion," while Fitoussi and Rosanvallon (2010) argued that no one is ever fully included nor fully excluded, suggesting that no one is fully "inside," and no one is fully "outside." These concepts are further nuanced by concepts such as over- and under-inclusion (Reid & Buchanan, 2024) and over-exclusion (Yzerbyt et al., 1995). Collectively, these theorists demonstrate that inclusion and exclusion are dynamic processes, not states of being. In other words, individual trajectories vary over time, and inclusion and exclusion can be shaped by functional or structural inequalities that produce and shift an individual's or group's position on the broader society's inclusion–exclusion spectrum.

Another critical component underpinning the problem of exclusion is the core drivers, such as racism, xenophobia, socioeconomic class, unequal access to goods and services, etc. (Haslanger, 2016). These barriers can be explicitly legal, manifesting as the denial of fundamental human, civic, political, and socio-cultural rights (Calvert, 2024). Regarding immigration, for example, such exclusions are often tied to citizenship or legal residency status (Waters & Kasinitz, 2021). Other exclusions are mere practices, even illegal ones, including ethnic or racial, gender, age, or body discrimination. These can be subtle, sometimes taking the form of microaggressions or verbal, behavioral, or environmental slights (Spencer, 2017).

But even considering that structural barriers to inclusion are often difficult to overcome, marginalized individuals are not rendered passive victims. Instead, despite a disadvantageous position on the inclusion–exclusion spectrum, individuals are also agents, capable of independent action, strategic choice, and influencing their environment (Medina, 2019). Marginalized individuals can access and leverage certain resources, create opportunities, engage in advocacy, and pioneer mechanisms for their own inclusion. This capacity building allows them to carve a space within a larger community or context, often by reclaiming their identity, owning their condition, and creating opportunities for inclusion (Bleich, 2003). Migrant agency is a well-developed line of research. It is usually approached from three perspectives. Under the capability and aspirations framework, migration is not a passive choice but a rational response to certain conditions. Individual aspirations propel the move, and migrants mobilize their capabilities even under structural constraints (de Haas, 2021). In the literature on agency under structural and legal precarity, Menjívar (2006) introduces the concept of liminal legality, a grey zone between fully documented and undocumented statuses. Under these conditions, migrants navigate, negotiate, and assert social agency even when their rights are restricted or when they face temporal uncertainty. Third, under critical border studies and the

autonomy of migration approach, migrants also shape the spaces they arrive at and even border enforcement, forcing border regimes to constantly adapt, reorient, and reorganize (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013). This essay leans on these contributions to migrant agency to examine the way the case studies under examination developed.

These conceptual pillars—inclusion and exclusion as a dynamic continuum, the nature and attributes of structural barriers limiting inclusion, and migrant agency—are vital to understanding the experiences of migrant communities stranded at the US–Mexico border over the last decade, particularly those that found themselves waiting for months and even years to complete their migratory trajectories due to US restrictive immigration policies and enforcement and Mexico's increasing willingness to cooperate with US migration policies. This study posits that migrants bottlenecked at the border under the restrictive migration policies of both the first Trump (2017–2021) and Biden (2021–2025) administrations serve as a critical test case for understanding how migrants facing exclusion while immobile in border towns can exercise a degree of agency in processes where they deliberately act to self-include in the broader community by generating mechanisms to create value for themselves and the host cities. Ultimately, this research investigates the extent to which stranded migrants navigate the inclusion/exclusion spectrum toward a more favorable position, how they negotiate structural barriers, and how they mobilize their agency to carve out spaces of opportunity for self-inclusion to cope with their prolonged liminality, thus moving them to a more favorable position along the inclusion–exclusion spectrum.

## 2. The Emergence of Migrant Communities at the US–Mexico Border

Driven by survival migration (Betts, 2013) and converging mass mobility (Taylor & Williamson, 1997), influxes exceeding asylum processing capacity overwhelmed a politically underfunded US asylum apparatus. The response of the US government to institutional bottlenecks was to hyper-territorialize and externalize asylum enforcement, which created conditions of entrapment (Núñez & Heyman, 2007) that confined asylum seekers to legal limbo within Mexican border states, dependent on scarce humanitarian infrastructure. The conditions shaping migrant immobility were the result of decades of evolving enforcement strategies designed in Washington, with strong Mexican cooperation since 2019. The trend was not new. It started in 1986 with the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). US strategy shifted toward intense border militarization, which accelerated in the 1990s (Payan, 2016). This approach created a contradiction: Physical barriers and detentions expanded just as the US and Mexico deepened economic integration through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA; Alba & Nee, 2003). By the mid-2010s, demographic patterns had shifted dramatically from historical single-male labor flows to diverse family units, women, and children, often in large-scale caravans. US policy responded by further externalizing asylum processing (FitzGerald, 2020), especially under the first Trump administration and through the Covid-19 pandemic. It did so through restrictive mechanisms detailed in Figure 1, such as metering, Title 42, the CBP One app, and the Migrant Protection Protocols (the "Remain in Mexico" protocols, henceforth referred to as MPP), which forced asylum seekers to await preliminary hearings on Mexican soil. A key clarification is warranted. While the first Trump administration was extremely restrictive in asylum processes, the Biden administration appeared to "reopen" the asylum process. Soon, however, overwhelmed institutional capacity prompted the administration to reimplement Title 42 and externalize asylum programs like the CBP One app. These measures once again slowed processing and stranded asylum seekers at the border. Furthermore, initial messaging implying an open border triggered renewed large-scale

arrivals, further compounding administrative backlogs. Thus, under Trump (1st administration), Biden, and Trump (2nd administration), the number of asylum seekers bottlenecked at the border soared at times to the hundreds of thousands.

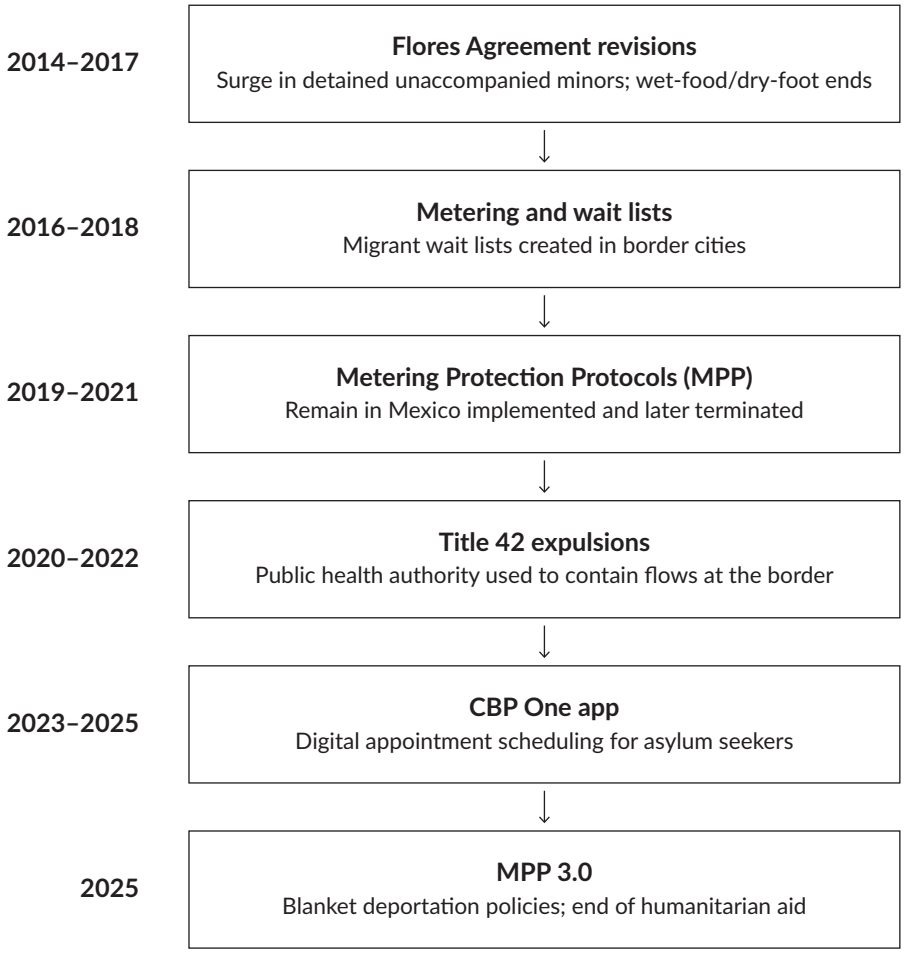



**Figure 1.** Timeline of migration policy shifts to contain asylum seekers and to externalize asylum. Source: Authors' elaboration.

As the number of asylum seekers in Mexican cities grew over time, encampments surged. Within these border encampments, they faced layered vulnerabilities. Beyond navigating non-citizen legal status and hostile policy environments, individuals faced pervasive threats from organized crime. These dynamics turned shelters into places of both refuge and confinement. For instance, Manuel, an asylum seeker interviewed at Tijuana's Centro Integrador Carmen Serdán in September 2021, and Oscar, a displaced father from Michoacán interviewed at Ciudad Juárez's Centro Integrador Leona Vicario in December 2021, both reported that families avoided leaving the shelters due to severe fear of being targeted or tracked by local cartels and criminal gangs.

The exclusionary pressures were compounded by socio-cultural barriers. While internally displaced persons (IDPs) from other regions in Mexico and some Latin American migrants possessed native language advantages, non-Spanish-speaking populations, including cohorts from Haiti, the Middle East, Africa, and Asia, faced heightened marginalization originating in language barriers. As asylum policy hardened and wait times stretched into months and even years, stranded populations from certain nationalities established

community networks, as was the case of Cubans and Haitians, crafting pioneering strategies for inclusion within host environments. The stranded asylum seekers along the US–Mexico border—a consequence of strict US enforcement, border closures, and Mexican policy alignment—provided a rich empirical context for examining migrant agency in the face of structural barriers. That is, this environment met three core dynamics for this test: inclusion and exclusion function as a spectrum; structural barriers that can be negotiated, in this case conditions related to immigration status; and sufficient exclusionary pressures to prompt asylum seekers to leverage community resources to generate paths for self-inclusion.

## 3. Migrant Humanitarian Infrastructures on the US–Mexico Border: A Key Contextual Variable

Migrant self-organization must be analyzed alongside a critical *problématique*: the incapacity of local humanitarian infrastructures to absorb sustained, large-scale arrivals. Unilateral and bilateral crisis management policies transformed the US–Mexico border cities into migrant immobility spaces, especially between 2018 and 2024. In response, an extensive multi-scalar network of state, non-governmental, and religious actors had emerged, driving an exponential expansion of shelter capacity—for instance, growing from two to 32 facilities in Ciudad Juárez and peaking at 88 in Tijuana (López Reyes, 2022; López Reyes & París Pombo, 2023). However, because these spaces were originally designed for short-term transit, they were quickly overwhelmed by prolonged stays by tens of thousands of asylum seekers already in waiting even as large-scale arrivals continued. This systemic saturation ultimately forced asylum seekers to mobilize outside formal humanitarian infrastructures to generate autonomous survival strategies.

## 4. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, ethnographic multi-method design to analyze the experiences, agency, and strategies among Cuban and Haitian communities in Tijuana (Baja California) and Ciudad Juárez (Chihuahua) as they faced prolonged stays while awaiting US asylum proceedings. Using a purposive, most-likely-scenario case selection strategy, the study examined two major border enclave settlements: Little Haiti in Tijuana and Little Havana in Ciudad Juárez. As primary transit and containment hubs along the US–Mexico border, both sites received rapid, large-scale influxes of Haitian and Cuban nationals who were stranded for extended periods due to restrictive US migration regimes and Mexico's alignment with US policy. The authors considered that these sites function as optimal test cases for the theoretical framework: If migrant agency operates to shift conditions along the exclusion-inclusion spectrum under structural constraints, empirical evidence of self-organization for inclusion should be most evident in these high-density, highly constrained contexts. Conversely, the absence of these mechanisms would challenge the premise.

### *4.1. Fieldwork*

Primary data collection was conducted in phases between March 2019 and December 2021, with follow-up observational visits between 2025 and 2026. The later visits aimed to verify the trajectory of the originally observed conditions. What had changed between the first field research period and the second set of visits was that the Joseph R. Biden administration (2021–2025) reopened the border, and many community members had left for the United States, ratifying the initial intuition that, despite efforts to self-include, most asylum seekers never gave up on their original migratory project. Research comprised continuous field

immersion in Ciudad Juárez and periodic, targeted field research visits to Tijuana. Participant observation during the visits to the Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez urban areas where these communities were concentrated allowed systematic documentation of daily routines, settlement dynamics, and informal interactions in field diaries, designed to observe community life without interrupting local routines. Informal conversations and key participant communications with asylum seekers (individuals and families), government officials, and civil society advocates were conducted to capture subjective perceptions, navigation of structural barriers, resource mobilization, and self-organization strategies.

It is important to note that all precautions were taken to ensure the confidentiality of the participants and the protection of all data, ensuring that no individual was traceable in the research. The appropriate ethical protocols of the institutions the authors belong to were also followed to protect asylum seekers from any adverse action. When citing, fictitious names were used.

### *4.2. Analytical Framework*

The empirical data obtained from the fieldwork was organized to understand the processes and mechanisms each community used to navigate the structural barriers they faced and to mobilize available social and cultural resources to shift their position along the exclusion-inclusion spectrum. A final comparative section was added to highlight the similarities and differences between the two communities. Figure 2 summarizes the methodological route the authors employed in conducting this study.

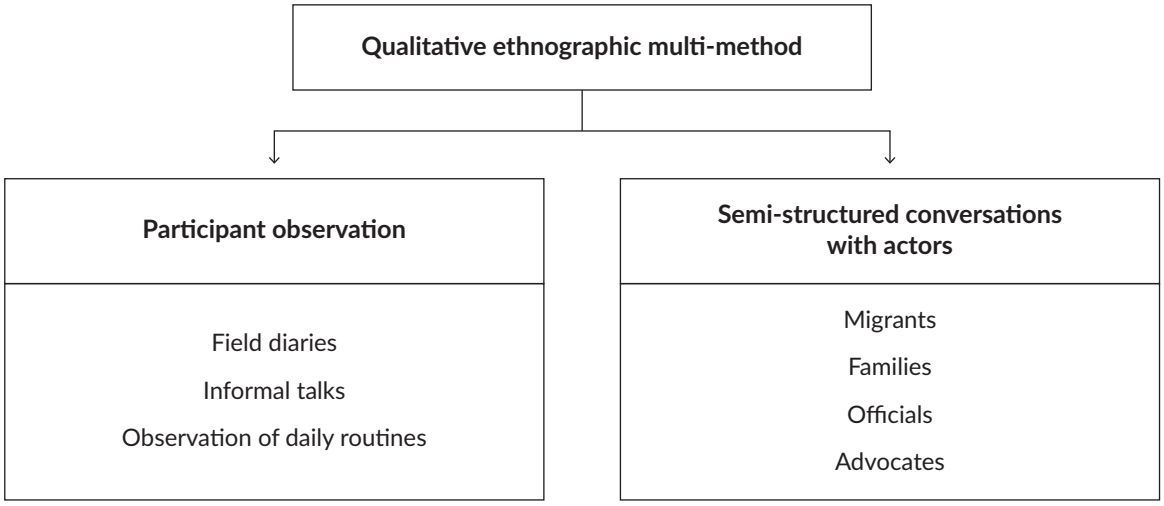



**Figure 2.** Methodological strategy. Authors' elaboration.

### *4.3. Case Studies*

To empirically evaluate the theoretical proposition that migrant agency can shift outcomes along the exclusion-inclusion spectrum under conditions of severe structural constraint, this study adopts a most-likely case design (Eckstein, 1975; George & Bennett, 2005). Under this methodological logic, if active mechanisms of self-inclusion operate anywhere, they should be clearly observable in contexts of acute migrant immobility, social precarity, and even environmental hostility. Conversely, a failure to observe these mechanisms in such a critical setting would offer support for the hypothetical statement of this essay.

The border cities of Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez during the 2019–2024 analytical window represent an exemplary text environment due to the convergence of key structural conditions. First, there is macrostructural containment and policy externalization. The "migrant crisis"—as this situation was often referred to—originates in Washington-designed policies executed unilaterally and bilaterally. This led to mass displacement (Taylor & Williamson, 1997) and survival migration (Betts, 2013) due to a paralyzed asylum system. This transformed the border into a territorial trap, aided by aggressive militarization and other mechanisms such as the MPP and Title 42 policies. Border cities became territorial traps (Núñez & Heyman, 2007), and asylum seekers were left stranded in legal limbo and involuntary immobility. Second, insecurity and environmental hostility compounded the situation. Stranded populations were immobile but also faced pervasive threats from organized crime. Shelters became sanctuary, but also spaces of containment. Field testimonies from Tijuana's Centro Integrador Carmen Serdán and Ciudad Juárez's Centro Integrador Leona Vicario highlighted asylum seekers' awareness of these dangers. Third, layered socio-cultural and linguistic margins, especially among non-Spanish-speaking asylum seekers, led marginalized groups to pioneer survival and integrative strategies.

In sum, extreme structural pressures created by restrictions on asylum, institutional failure due to the overwhelming number of arrivals, sociocultural barriers, and even physical danger in both cities create a hard-test environment for agency-driven strategies for self-inclusion.

## 5. Statement of Hypothesis

If shifts in US migration policy strand asylum seekers in one place for prolonged periods, a complex humanitarian-migration infrastructure would likely emerge to support transitory integration. However, if this infrastructure collapses, under the weight of mass mobility, asylum seekers—individuals and groups—should be expected to start assessing and navigating systemic barriers and risks independently of humanitarian infrastructures. Under these conditions, asylum seekers should be expected to pursue strategies for inclusion in host communities by mobilizing economic, social, and cultural resources to build navigational capacity. This self-driven agency should, hypothetically, shift their position along the inclusion–exclusion spectrum in a more favorable direction. To test this hypothetical statement, the experiences of Haitian and Cuban asylum-seeking populations in Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez served as case studies. As most-likely cases, their experiences will either provide support for the hypothetical statement if self-inclusion occurs or present an important challenge to the theoretical proposition if it fails to materialize.

## 6. Analysis

This section examines the two case studies chosen to understand the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within the selected communities: Haitians in Tijuana, Baja California, and Cubans in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Inclusion and exclusion are treated as a dynamic spectrum to understand how asylum-seeking communities leverage social and cultural, internal and external resources to engineer mechanisms for self-inclusion in the face of rigid structural barriers, such as legal status. The fundamental premise is that by actively generating their own spaces and opportunities, these populations can shift their position along the inclusion–exclusion spectrum in the direction of greater inclusion into their host communities.

### *6.1. The Case of Tijuana: Little Haiti*

A confluence of crises in Haiti, including social unrest, climate disasters, political strife, and pervasive crime and violence, drove widespread emigration across Latin America (Douyon, 2023). While these migratory flows initially comprised individuals, they eventually expanded to include entire families. Despite embarking on protracted and often circuitous routes, most Haitian asylum seekers maintained a singular goal: reaching the United States. Even many who had previously settled in countries like Chile and Brazil journeyed north through Mexico, arriving at towns along the US–Mexico border. A significant number of them converged on Tijuana, Baja California, abutting San Diego, California. Although Haitians qualify for international asylum and protection due to the conditions in their homeland, they face unique systemic barriers compared to other Latin American migrant groups. They are French-speaking or Creole-speaking people of African descent, with unique religious and culinary traditions. These characteristics presented additional challenges (Rodríguez, 2025). These linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences posed substantial hurdles for humanitarian organizations tasked with supporting and processing asylum seekers through Mexico toward the United States.

Although their main goal was to enter the United States, changes in US asylum policies and practice forced many Haitian asylum seekers to stay in Mexico. As a result, Tijuana experienced a swell of Haitian temporary residents, forcing the city to hastily adapt and arrange temporary urban settlements. Civil society and migrant advocacy groups made significant efforts to accommodate this population, frequently navigating pronounced cultural and social differences between the asylum seekers and the local community. To bridge these gaps, numerous migrant shelters—notably the Padre Chava Refectory (Desayunador Salesiano Padre Chava) and the Ambassadors of Jesus (Embajadores de Jesús) church—modified their physical spaces and daily operations to support the Haitian community.

Still, linguistic barriers, specifically a lack of proficiency in Haitian Creole, combined with the stigmatization of Afro-Caribbean religious practices, distinct culinary preferences, and unfamiliarity with local mobility networks, hindered aid delivery. These factors complicated the integration processes at migrant reception centers, shelters, and dining facilities. Compounding these challenges, the fluctuating nature of US asylum policies across the first Trump administration (2017–2021) and the Biden administration (2021–2025) left thousands of Haitians immobile in Tijuana. Entire families settled around the city's humanitarian infrastructure, such as the Padre Chava Refectory and the Ambassadors of Jesus shelter, two pillars of Tijuana's humanitarian network (Albicker & Velasco, 2019; López Reyes, 2022).

In 2016, the Ambassadors of Jesus shelter was still expanding capacity to welcome larger influxes of asylum seekers. Over the years, the facility evolved to accommodate growing numbers of Haitian asylum seekers, progressively adapting to the population's specific needs. The shelter is situated in an impoverished, marginalized sector of Tijuana known as Scorpion Canyon (Cañón del Alacrán), located near the boundary of the Playas de Tijuana borough. This area severely lacks basic infrastructure. Potable water is scarce or nonexistent, street lighting is virtually absent, and the roads are unpaved. Few city services reach this area. Furthermore, accessing the shelter requires residents to traverse long stretches of arid terrain and navigate a creek bed running parallel to a major highway. During rainy periods, this creek frequently becomes clogged with debris and animal carcasses, rendering the route impassable.

Later, the Ambassadors of Jesus shelter relocated to a large plot of land, featuring a church and other buildings modified for Haitians seeking asylum in the United States but unable to determine when they could be called for a hearing. The facility included a kitchen alongside expansive dormitories filled with dozens of beds and cots. To accommodate the overflow of arrivals, tents were erected across the property, eventually transforming the site into a large encampment where residents congregated. As the population swelled, the need for internal organization and governance became critical. The Haitian community embraced this responsibility and actively sought to establish rules, demonstrating an ability to build governance capacity. According to the shelter's director:

> Given the arrival of [some ten] Haitian families, we could only offer them space in the lot to set up tents, and they stayed there, but then there were fifteen…and slowly they built their community…they cleaned, flattened the area, and built fairly simple [huts], using stones from the canyon, and they lit up the streets. They started what came to be known as Little Haiti, some of them found jobs, and the women engaged in a division of labor in the community, especially for the preparation of food…they did not interfere with anyone; they just wanted to work while their [migratory] condition was resolved. (pastor-in-charge, personal communication, February 2020)

This story illustrates how a displaced community can develop governance mechanisms to ensure order and conflict resolution as well as to organize collectively. While the migratory infrastructure provided the initial physical space, Haitians had ultimately moved beyond reliance on institutional charity or on goods and services provided by local and international organizations and built a self-governing community. They organized communal life around specific rules and behavioral expectations, demonstrating a capacity to articulate socially. They also created their own welcoming space and, with a physical base to operate from, they went out and engaged in the labor market, primarily as employees in the maquiladora and the services industry. They understood that labor market participation was essential for the community members to avail themselves of additional resources. Community organization began to produce useful information to live within the community, to interact with the host community, and to identify employment opportunities. They also understood that to avoid local resistance to their presence, they had to adjust and adapt to earning their own living while maintaining their language and customs, but in a way that contributed to the larger community rather than interfered with it.

While the Ambassadors of Jesus provided the initial architecture, Haitians breathed life into it, transforming it into a vital platform for communal cohesion and communitarian practices. Once organized, asylum seekers built bridges to the broader community, created pathways to access healthcare and education services, and engaged in the local labor market. This demonstrated capacity building to advocate for the needs of the community at large and to identify opportunities in the local labor market. Although the community and its processes sometimes appeared chaotic to an external observer, they were governed by an intricate set of unspoken, internal rules—producing governance and a degree of order. Over time, Tijuana's citizens came to view the Haitian population as an integral part of its workforce and began to value their unique cultural contributions to the broader community. This showed that rather than passively accepting systemic exclusion, Haitians strategically leveraged the available infrastructure to navigate a complex urban environment, and they did this despite differences between them and other migrant groups from Spanish-speaking Latin America. Ultimately, Little Haiti transformed into a sanctuary of identity, safety, and resilience. It became a space where Haitian asylum seekers could practice their faith, speak their language,

support newcomers' integration, and maintain a workable relationship with their host city and other groups. In general, Haitians demonstrated that it was possible to produce governance, advocate for the community, and participate in the local economy, all while maintaining and reproducing their cultural practices. Figure 3 shows the makeshift church Haitians built to practice their faith.




**Figure 3.** Little Haiti, Tijuana, Baja California. Source: López Reyes, February 2020.

The case of asylum seekers from Haiti exercising agency to dismantle structural barriers and foster communal acceptance stands as a powerful example of grassroots integration. However, this stability remained transitory, as most families never abandoned their primary migratory objective: reaching the United States. This underlying reality became clear in 2021, when the United States Government extended temporary protected status (TPS) for Haitian nationals, prompting a rapid exodus of Haitians from Tijuana. Despite building a thriving enclave and negotiating a harmonious relationship with the larger Tijuana community, many Haitian individuals and families left their homes, jobs, local ties, and even their small businesses to cross the border. Nonetheless, in a June 2026 visit, the presence of many Haitians who chose to stay in the city was clearly palpable. One of the authors spoke with a few in local businesses and, while their Spanish remained accented, they felt Tijuana was now their home.

The narrative, however, remains open-ended. The advent of the second Trump administration triggered another contraction in US asylum policy, dismantling the process and, as per a recent US Supreme Court case, placing the TPS of many Haitian nationals in jeopardy over the course of 2026. Haitians may again find themselves rebuilding their relationship with a city where their presence is more entrenched than before; they are still highly visible within the general populace, increasingly tied to the region through intermarriage, and still able to pursue residency through the Mexican asylum system. While numerous families and individuals departed Little Haiti for the United States under the auspices of TPS, a steady influx of new Haitian arrivals ensured community continuity. With the foundational infrastructure in place, these newcomers could build on previous successes. They transformed the enclave into a living space and

continued to negotiate with municipal authorities and external stakeholders for essential infrastructure, including water, sewage systems, street lighting, education, and even healthcare (as per notes from the field, from 2021).

### *6.2. The Case of Ciudad Juárez: Little Havana*

In 2018, Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, located across the border from El Paso, Texas, experienced a marked shift in migratory patterns. This shift involved the arrival not only of individuals but also of entire families seeking protection under US asylum law. Many of these arrivals came from the Caribbean, including Cuba. The growing presence of Cuban asylum seekers at the US–Mexico border was closely connected to the Barack Obama administration's recalibration of US–Cuba relations and, specifically, the January 2017 termination of the "wet-foot/dry-foot" policy. When he sought to reset relations with Havana, Obama suspended the application of the Cuban Adjustment Act, which had given Cubans special treatment among migrants—if they reached US soil, they could be granted asylum immediately (USCIS, 2021). After the policy ended, Cuban asylum seekers faced the same enforcement framework applied to other asylum seekers, requiring many to undertake longer and more irregular routes north. This policy shift led many Cubans toward the US–Mexico border, where they found themselves stranded in Ciudad Juárez, waiting for an opportunity to complete their migration plans. Although Ciudad Juárez had long served as a transit point for Central American migrants and Mexican IDPs, the scale of Cuban migration through the city represented a relatively new development. According to an interview with the former commissioner of Mexico's National Migration Institute in Ciudad Juárez:

> We started seeing entire families line up on the international bridge, mainly of [internally] displaced Mexicans, Central Americans—especially Hondurans…[and] Cubans due to the end of the "wet foot, dry foot" policy, a policy which was particularly advantageous to Cubans at some point. That change closed the gates for them. And this shift accelerated the movement of Cubans [toward the border], increased human smuggling, and all this only became worse under the [first] Trump administration. (September 2020)

Termination of the "wet-foot/dry-foot" policy encouraged Cuban migration to the US through Mexico. It also subjected Cuban nationals to standard asylum procedures and the administrative constraint of border metering (París Pombo, 2020). Consequently, protracted wait times at ports of entry transformed a transient population in Ciudad Juárez into a semi-permanent community defined by enforced immobility. Although metering operated at multiple locations along the US–Mexico border, Ciudad Juárez is illustrative because the accumulation of Cuban asylum seekers produced distinctive forms of social organization that emerged during this period. Figure 4 illustrates the operation of the metering system, displaying both the total number of asylum seekers registered on the waiting list and the most recent number called for processing at the port of entry.

Earlier observations during this study showed that the growing concentration of Cubans initially generated tension, mistrust, and unease between newcomers and the residents of Ciudad Juárez. Similar dynamics arose in migrant shelters, where Cubans shared space with Central American asylum seekers and Mexican IDPs. Tensions often stemmed from differences in religious and cultural practices. Shelter staff noted that Afro-Caribbean traditions, such as Santería, were unfamiliar to many, sometimes leading to




**Figure 4.** Waiting list at the Paso del Norte Bridge in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. Source: López Reyes, 2019.

misunderstandings and conflict. Interviewees also pointed to differences in communication styles, with Cubans perceived as more direct and assertive, which complicated early interactions. Over time, however, tensions eased as asylum seekers of various nationalities became more accustomed to one another. As the manager of the CIM shelter explained:

> The committees that oversaw the Integration Center Leona Vicario in Ciudad Juárez…agreed that the common areas and open spaces were to be used by different national migrant groups at different times on Sundays so that they could hold their organizational meetings and practice their religious ceremonies…but this was not enough and [things] went out of control so that it was later agreed that migrants who wanted to go to Mass could leave the shelter or find a place of worship of their choice outside it. (May 2020).

In any event, unlike other groups, which relied on the humanitarian infrastructure established along the border, such as the Centro Integrador Leona Vicario, Cubans tended to pursue alternative forms of settlement. Rather than residing in shelters or staying there too long, they preferred to rent apartments or reserve hotel rooms. Most of them concentrated in downtown Ciudad Juárez, where entire families established temporary residence while awaiting an opportunity to cross the border. As for labor market participation, Cubans tried to secure individual or group employment in local businesses, including merchants, hotels, and restaurants. These residential and economic arrangements afforded Cuban asylum seekers access to the city's housing, labor, and commercial networks, producing a pattern of temporary urban incorporation.

Over time, Cuban asylum seekers reshaped downtown Ciudad Juárez, an area marked by abandonment and economic decline since the 2007–2010 violence period. Unlike former residents who had fled the area due to that violence, Cubans lacked prior experience with it and engaged the urban space differently. Instead

of seeing the area as dangerous because it was run down, they established temporary residence in available space, formed social networks to organize, share information, and advocate—demonstrating capacity for social articulation. They also opened businesses such as restaurants and *paladares* (privately operated eateries) and even salsa studios, showing not just labor market participation but also an ability to create economic activity. In this sense, Cubans showed an entrepreneurial spirit in engaging the city's economy. The concentration of Cubans reshaped commercial activity in downtown Ciudad Juárez as they proved vigorous consumers of local goods and services. Local businesses adapted to the growing Cuban presence, illustrating how demand from these temporary residents generated economic opportunities. One example was Ms. Ibarra, the owner of a local taco restaurant, who expanded her menu to include Cuban and Caribbean dishes and hired Cubans as cooks. Similar initiatives soon followed, including the establishment of Little Havana, a restaurant specializing in Cuban cuisine. Drawing on field observations, these businesses offered traditional Caribbean dishes and became gathering spaces for the Cuban community while also attracting local patrons (Ms. Ibarra, personal communication, April 2019). The emergence of these establishments demonstrates that Cubans were both consumers of the local economy and active participants in reshaping its commercial landscape. As the manager of the shelter known as CIM explained in an interview,

> The ability of Cubans to adjust quickly, their willingness to engage the labor market, and their organizational skills, however, allowed them to be seen as a value added to the city. (May 2020)

These activities revitalized public life, while visible cultural expressions, including street gatherings and Caribbean music, transformed the area's atmosphere. Cubans had mobilized the reproduction of their culture as a resource for social incorporation. Despite their temporary status, Cubans became active contributors to the downtown district's social and economic dynamics, exemplifying a form of temporary urban incorporation and revitalization.

However, as Cuban asylum seekers became increasingly visible in downtown Ciudad Juárez, they attracted greater attention from local law enforcement. Responding to what authorities perceived as growing disorder and public disturbance, municipal police intensified patrols and implemented measures intended to restore public order. Interviews conducted for this study, however, suggest that these encounters often extended beyond routine policing. One Cuban family recalled:

> Sometimes in the late afternoon, before it gets dark, between 6:00 pm and 7:00 pm, when we hang around downtown after work, the police stops us, and they check everything we have, including our wallets, our clothing, and they would also threaten to report us to Mexican migration enforcement, and would ask us for money to leave us alone, taking sometimes our money.

Although local and state police lacked authority over immigration enforcement, interviewees described these practices as intimidating and extortionary, reinforcing asylum seekers' sense of insecurity despite their growing participation in the city's social and economic life.

In the end, however, like in the Haitian case, reduced asylum backlogs and improved access to legal assistance, along with financial support from relatives in the United States, enabled many Cubans to continue northward. As departures accelerated, businesses and housing tied to the Cuban presence in downtown Ciudad Juárez emptied. A smaller group established more durable ties, sought asylum in Mexico, and remained, leaving only

a small Cuban community by 2025. This trajectory shows that their incorporation into the city's social and economic life, though tangible, was contingent on a broader migration project toward the United States; like many Haitians, their inclusion was temporary, as Mexico was not their ultimate destination.

## 7. Little Haiti and Little Havana in Comparative Perspective

Political instability, insecurity, and limited economic opportunity in Haiti and Cuba had encouraged substantial outward migration, with the United States serving as the principal destination. During the periods examined, Haitians concentrated primarily in Tijuana, while Cubans became especially visible in Ciudad Juárez. Both populations included individual men and women, single parents with children, and entire family units. Their numbers allowed them to form recognizable communities within larger urban settings, even as shifting US asylum policies left them stranded. Faced with legal uncertainty and restricted mobility, both groups drew on cultural knowledge, social networks, labor, and commerce to participate in local life. Their agency, therefore, did not eliminate exclusion; rather, it enabled temporary forms of self-inclusion as they navigated relationships within their own communities and with the surrounding cities.

Both studies illustrate how prolonged, forced immobility transforms transit cities into sites of bottom-up urban incorporation. Despite being stranded by volatile US border policies and Mexico's policy alignment with the US, and despite some opportunities for migrant capacity-building, both Haitians in Tijuana and Cubans in Ciudad Juárez exercised significant agency to establish livelihoods, adapt spaces, and build social cohesion. In this regard, there are some key analytical takeaways. First, both communities were created by abrupt shifts in US immigration policy (ending the wet-foot-dry-foot policy for Cubans and shifting asylum and TPS policies and metering for Haitians, among other nationalities) that turned transit points into long-term waiting sites. Second, despite economic and spatial integration, self-inclusion in both cases remained contingent on the goal of reaching the United States. When legal pathways opened (e.g., TPS extension in 2021 for Haitians), mass departures quickly emptied enclaves. Third, adaptation models clearly diverged. Haitians achieved self-inclusion via collective spatial reclamation of an isolated fringe (Scorpion Canyon), whereas Cubans integrated through individual—and family-level commercial insertion into an established downtown core. While the central hypothesis is given support, comparative analysis also reveals important features. These are presented in Table 1.

The two cases under study reveal differences as well. Haitians appear to have relied more on the humanitarian infrastructure already established, particularly support from the Ambassadors of Jesus and the settlement space through which community life developed. By contrast, interviews and field observations suggest that Cubans drew more extensively on private resources—including financial support from relatives in the United States—to secure hotel rooms or rental housing in downtown Ciudad Juárez. Their strategies of economic incorporation also diverged. Haitians primarily entered the local labor market as wage workers, becoming an important source of labor within and beyond their settlement. Cubans, while also participating in the labor market, frequently established small businesses, including restaurants, dance halls, and other commercial ventures that reflected their cultural traditions. These differences, however, represent distinct pathways rather than fundamentally different outcomes. In both cases, asylum seekers transformed existing cultural and social resources into mechanisms of participation, converting food, music, labor, and other forms of cultural capital into economic and social opportunities that facilitated social articulation, interest aggregation, advocacy, and temporary incorporation into local urban life despite continuing legal uncertainty.

**Table 1.** Comparative analysis.

| | Little Haiti (Tijuana) | Little Havana (Ciudad Juárez) |
|---|---|---|
| Driver of immobility | Fluctuating US asylum policy, including Title 42 and TPS shifts | End of the 2017 wet foot/dry foot policy and metering |
| Sociocultural profile | Creole-speaking and Afro-descendant; language and racial barriers | Spanish-speaking; shared linguistic roots with host culture |
| Settlement pattern | Peripheral enclave of tents and huts in an underserved canyon | Centrally located and dispersed; rented apartments and hotel rooms downtown |
| Relationship with local authorities | Negotiated basic services with authorities and NGOs | Targeted by municipal police for extortion and harassment |
| Economic impact | From institutional charity to recognition as wage workers in local industry | Revived a decaying downtown through entrepreneurship in restaurants and music halls; supported by foreign remittances |
| Community structure | Collective and grassroots; internal self-governance | Individual and market-driven, adaptation through employment |

Source: Authors' elaboration.

Yet, despite their different strategies, both communities showed the same underlying dynamic. Through community organization, social articulation, economic participation, and the strategic mobilization of cultural and social resources, Haitian and Cuban asylum seekers reduced many of the barriers associated with exclusion and established meaningful forms of participation within their host cities. Yet this incorporation was never intended to become permanent. For most asylum seekers, Tijuana and Ciudad Juárez functioned as spaces of prolonged waiting rather than destinations. Strategies for self-inclusion became an adaptive response to legal uncertainty and enforced immobility rather than an alternative to the broader migratory project. Still, the temporary character of this incorporation did not diminish its significance. On the contrary, it demonstrated that migrants could exercise meaningful agency despite enduring structural constraints, creating forms of inclusion that were simultaneously genuine and contingent and oriented toward a future beyond the border cities in which they emerged.

## 8. Conclusion

This study advances the sociological and migration literature by reconceptualizing inclusion and exclusion not as rigid binaries, but as a fluid, multi-dimensional spectrum where individuals—in this case, asylum seekers—can craft and occupy intermediate positions, specifically through the deployment of strategies for self-inclusion. Theoretically, it demonstrates that structural containment, such as involuntary immobility enforced on Haitians and Cubans by restrictive US asylum policies and Mexico's policy alignment with US objectives, does not negate migrant agency. On the contrary, wresting agency from asylum seekers turned out to be rather difficult. Instead of living and moving in a restrictive environment, stranded populations actively mobilized social, cultural, and economic capital to engineer a "transitory self-inclusion," proving that self-inclusion functions as an adaptive response to systemic exclusion rather than its opposite. Both communities provide evidence to understand how, under such restrictive conditions, asylum seekers opened opportunities for mobilization without giving up on their migratory project—reaching the United States.

A comparative analysis of the two case studies reveals both striking similarities and distinct divergences in how these processes unfold. Both Haitian asylum seekers in Tijuana and Cuban asylum seekers in Ciudad Juárez were bottlenecked by abrupt and constant shifts in United States asylum policy, and yet they formed recognizable enclaves out of prolonged waiting and engaged in self-organized community building while monitoring the opportunity to enter the United States—their ultimate objective. However, the strategic paths followed by these communities diverged based on available resources and dynamics unique to each location. Haitians relied heavily on collective spatial reclamation within established humanitarian infrastructures, forming dense enclaves (Little Haiti) in peripheral areas and sought to engage in cultural reproduction while engaging the local wage-labor market. Conversely, Cubans leveraged private resources and transnational financial support to secure rental housing in a decaying urban core, and through cultural reproduction and entrepreneurial activity they drove commercial revitalization. Downtown Ciudad Juárez (Little Havana) was invigorated by entrepreneurial ventures and individual and family insertion in the local markets.

Despite robust theoretical contributions, primarily advancing the concept of self-inclusion in restrictive contexts with important structural barriers, the central argument's primary limitation lies in its focus on two distinct, highly visible nationalities with specific cultural and linguistic profiles, with very different access to external capital. Future research should examine whether these self-inclusion mechanisms are replicable among other large-scale displaced populations—such as Venezuelan or Honduran immigrants—who may face different structural constraints, possess varying degrees of transnational support, or face an environment where the local government (e.g., Mexico) does not provide temporary resident documentation, opportunities for insertion in the labor market, or access to certain services. Both communities, in the end, benefited from Mexico's openness despite policy alignment with the United States. Therefore, further scholarly inquiry is warranted regarding the role of political and community entrepreneurship, as well as how evolving geopolitical and domestic policy contractions across successive US and Mexican administrations continuously reshape the boundaries of transitory migrant incorporation.

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## Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## Data Availability

The notes and diaries for this research are available in the archives of the authors.

## LLMs Disclosure

No LLM tools were used in the research or elaboration of this article.

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