



# Haitijuana

Sergio Rodríguez-Blanco\*

The first photograph Hans-Maximo Musielik (Pforzheim, Germany, 1974) took was with his father's old Canon when he was seven years old. Hans, the son of a German doctor and a Spanish pediatrician mother, remembers that he put a model boat in his bathtub at home in Germany and had fun trying to use the split-screen viewfinder. All the photos came out yellow, dark, and blurry. Since 2004, the social dynamics in Mexico and that “everyday ebb and flow,” as he calls it, led him to settle here to do his work as a photographer.

*Haitijuana* is a documentary piece of images taken by Musielik in Tijuana between December 2016 and February 2017. The photos show the perspective of the Mexicans who have taken in the Haitian migrants who massively flowed into the border city starting in February 2016. At the same time, the shots bring to the surface the point of view of the Haitians themselves as those migrant actors of globalization, actors that have already been both visibly and invisibly incorporated into the daily life of almost every society on the planet.

Late capitalism has produced an undefined area occupied by the logic of conflict and the production of systemic violence. In social and economic terms, this area is effected by the precariousness of existence, and, according to Bertrand Ogilvie,<sup>1</sup> produces an institutionalized form of extreme violence: disposable lives. However, some local inhabitants do exist who deposit their grain of sand to reverse this trend, and some migrants, on their way, resist being represented—at least visually—in situations that make them victims.

This is what happens in *Haitijuana*.

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It is December 31 in Tijuana. It's cold and an intermittent rain is falling. In front of the façade of the Juventud 2000 shelter, a young Tijuana girl holds out her selfie stick and asks a group of young Haitians to pose with her. They are migrants and are wearing clothing just donated to them.

"You look great! This merits a selfie. [Click]".

It's not the first time that this young woman is at the shelter: her activist father brings the migrants basic items.

In the photo inside the photo, the Haitians flirt with the idea of knowing that they're on the young girl's social media. Hans Musielik captures here a meta-photograph in which the mechanisms of self-representation both of the migrant community and the receiving Tijuana community can flower.

When the Haitians arrive in Mexico, the National Immigration Institute (INM) gives them a 20-day permit to transit through the country. In that time, they mainly move toward Tijuana and Mexicali, where the INM, in coordination with U.S. immigration authorities, gives them a date for entering the country of the "American Dream." Many request a humanitarian visa to be able to remain in Mexico while they wait to enter the United States.





Marie Cookie was born in Guadalajara, Jalisco. Many people call her María Galleta, the Spanish translation of her last name, which she has kept from the years when she was married.

The border is just a few feet from the canal in the photo's background. For many years, migrants in transit slept on its banks. Across the street is the El Chaparral border crossing. Anyone going or coming from there has to cross in front of her little office, one room and a bathroom. Cookie opened an office on the Plaza Viva México called Deported Mothers and Families in Action to support migrants.

Before being an activist, she was a day laborer in the United States. She later married a U.S. soldier of Filipino descent, and, when she became a U.S. citizen in the 1980s, she began helping migrants and deportees with HIV on both sides of the border. Today, she works on the Mexican side. She keeps her office open with her pension and a few donations, offering Spanish and English classes as well as psychological support to deportees and migrants. The office also provides some clothing and basic personal hygiene items, and, of course, a haircut so that immigrants can make themselves presentable to look for a job. It's all free of charge.



▲ The same white wall that witnessed the selfie-stick scene is now painted with blue wings. It's January; the painting is unfinished, but was done by a local artist who used to live in the Juventud 2000 shelter. You go by this wall just before you get to the patio where the tents are pitched.

This is the only photograph this young Haitian would let Musielik take. He didn't want to give his name. What we do know about him is that he lived for a time in Brazil. The 2010 earthquake that killed 200 000 people and the cholera outbreak sparked a massive exodus of Haitians from their country. Most countries offered humanitarian aid, and one of them was Brazil, where the refugees worked on the construction of the infrastructure for the 2016 Olympic Games. When the political crisis broke out in Brazil and unemployment spiked, thousands of Haitian and African families decided to try their luck in the United States, asking for temporary protection status.

For this young man, it is as though the shelter wall had become a sanctuary where he can smilingly represent himself, with his technological tool in hand. That's how he wants to be remembered.



▲ In the background, behind the counter, is Linda. She's Mexican; she has one daughter and lives in an old trailer with her partner in the patio where all the migrants' tents are pitched. Linda is the first contact with the Haitians who come to Juventud 2000. They speak Creole French and need help with their documentation: anything from a request for a humanitarian visa to health issues. She's a strong woman. She's also efficient.

The woman with her back to the camera just arrived in Tijuana with her little girl to ask for shelter. Like many others, she has arrived on her way from Brazil and Central America. A few minutes before this photo was taken, Linda helped a Haitian man who had just received his Mexican humanitarian visa and wanted to ask for a job in a warehouse distributing goods; that's the same job he had done for the years he was a refugee in Brazil.

Tijuana is used to receiving migrants, but the wave of Haitians that began in May 2016 saturated the existing shelters and required that they be expanded and new ones opened up. By December, the waiting time for getting into the United States had extended from 20 days to 5 months.

By February, Chelet Thomas, the man in the window, had gotten his humanitarian visa and invested his small savings to open a Haitian kitchen in the front part of a little room a few feet from the Juventud 2000 shelter. Chema, the shelter's director, helped him with merchandising. His specialty is chicken with rice. Haitians don't like the smell of raw chicken, so they wash it several times with lime and water; then they let it soak for a while; after that, they spread a spicy paste over it and fry it. The result is dry, fibrous chicken with a neutral flavor. The rice is juicier. The food is served on plates that can be closed for take-out. One serving costs Mex\$40, or Mex\$50 with a soft drink.

In the picture, Thomas, who knows he's being photographed, smiles in satisfaction, with dignity in the middle of his work day.





▲ Many migrants volunteer in the shelter. This back-lit photo that almost completely erases the color of the migrants' skin shows the free food they will be eating the day it was taken. It is all made with donations from Tijuana residents and religious organizations. The shelters sometimes get support from the municipal and state governments, mainly medical services and a ride in an ambulance in the case of emergency. In Tijuana, you can count on one hand the shelters that are well-equipped, with legal and psychological counseling, rooms with bunk beds, showers, and bathrooms, to care not only for the 4 500 Haitians currently residing in the city, but the entire flow of migrants. It is common to find modest shelters and churches where the owners manage the donated resources and food to make it stretch for everyone.



◀ The light from a cell phone illuminates the face of one of the migrants, who sleeps in one of the 70 tents purchased by the shelter. The relationship the Haitians have with their cell phones is not very different from that of any smartphone user. In January, the municipal government donated the structure to put a roof over the patio. The federal government has given practically nothing.



Gustavo Banda Acevedes is the pastor of the Ambassadors of Jesus Protestant church. By February 2017, the church was hosting almost 300 migrants from Haiti, but in December, it had held more than 500. Some churches, both Catholic and Protestant, open their doors and spread a sea of mattresses in front of their altars to temporarily house the migrants. Banda Acevedes says that they need about 2 sacks of rice (about 46 kilograms each), half a sack of beans, 20 large cans of sardines, and about 8 boxes of chicken to feed this number of people. This all comes from donations and his and his wife's wages; so, when there isn't enough money, they manage with half of what they need.

The photo shows a ceremony in which the pastor is trying to give the man physical strength, in the presence of other members of the congregation; the enormous effort he is making can be seen on his face.



▲ Gustavo Banda Acevedes plans to build 10 cabins on church land that used to be a soccer field. The municipality of Tijuana has opposed their construction because the area is prone to mudslides, even though the entire area of the Alacrán Canyon and the canal, 300 feet downstream, where there are lots of buildings, is in the same potential danger. Seemingly, the situation has been legalized. Gustavo says the houses will be occupied by the Haitian migrants who want to live there. In the photo, the pastor and some Haitian men are helping build the second cabin.

The second house, the one under construction, is for Timothy, a married Haitian man who wants to stay in Mexico, at least for now. The cabin is made out of plywood with a gable roof. Timothy, wearing a t-shirt and cap with logos of U.S. cities, straightens up for the photo. If he eventually decides to leave, the cabin will be occupied by new migrants. ▼







In mid-February, 2017, Zaida Guillén, Gustavo's wife, took the Haitian children living in the Ambassadors of Jesus church to the beach. A wall of metal bars separates Mexico from the United States in the area known as Friendship Park, near the lighthouse. From the sand, it looks easy to swim and cross to the other side, but there's a double wall and the entire U.S. side is watched by the Border Patrol. Even so, some migrants have managed to cross over. Meanwhile, the children in the photo have fun climbing the border wall by the sea.



A few feet up from the beach, some Mexican DJs, one from Tijuana and the other from San Luis Potosí, finish writing a song criticizing Donald Trump's wall. They pose for Musielik in front of the wall painted with a U.S. flag, gazing out toward infinity. There's no smiling.



▲ Back at the beach, that same day, on a February weekend, 8-year-old Wilberlande Pierre enjoys the waves just feet from the United States.

Zaida Guillén tells us that a month later, in mid-March, Pierre crossed the border with his father. They have family there. His mother and two little sisters stayed in Mexico, housed in the Ambassadors of Jesus church, waiting for the news that they can join their family across the border. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Bertrand Olgivie, *El hombre desechable. Ensayo sobre las formas de exterminio y la violencia extrema* (Buenos Aires: Nueva Visión, 2013).