SHAPING THE BORDERLANDS:
LOCAL PERCEPTIONS OF HAITIAN MIGRATION TO DEL RIO, TEXAS AND CIUDAD ACUÑA, COAHUILA (2021-2023)

by

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ABSTRACT

MEGAN WHITE. Shaping the Borderlands: Local Perceptions of Haitian Migration to Del Rio, Texas and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila (2021-2023).
(Under the direction of DR. KRISTINA SHULL)

This thesis explores the Haitian migrant influx of September 2021 to the twin border cities of Del Rio, Texas, and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, particularly examining the ways in which people reacted to, adapted to, and navigated this event and its aftermath on a local level, thereby shaping the borderlands in nuanced ways. By examining community perceptions gleaned from twenty-four semi-structured interviews with border residents, and employing a transborder approach, this research aims to counter reductive media narratives that often emphasize crisis and migrant vulnerability. Findings suggest that local perceptions of the Haitian migrant influx significantly reflect the complexities of community experiences and interactions in relation to migratory phenomenon, revealing layered and uneven impacts on both sides of the border that evolve immediately and over time. The thesis concludes that future research should continue to document evolving dynamics, with an emphasis on centering the lived experiences of people living in the borderlands as migration patterns and political landscapes shift across the United States-Mexico border region.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. Kristina Shull for her invaluable guidance and mentorship throughout the development of this thesis, which has been instrumental in shaping this work. I am also sincerely thankful to my committee members, Dr. Eric Hoenes and Dr. Benny Andrés, for their thoughtful feedback and encouragement. I extend my great appreciation to the Capitalism Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte as well as Gilbert and Jancy Patrick for their financial support through the Patrick Graduate Student Award, which made this research possible. I would also like to thank the communities of Del Rio, Texas, and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, for their generosity and openness in sharing their experiences. Your stories and perspectives have been central to the heart of this work, and I am honored to have learned from you.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my late father, Robert White. Though we often held opposing political views, your openness, willingness to listen, and unwavering support for my passions inspired me throughout this journey. Your belief in me and encouragement of my work meant more than I can express. Your passing during the writing of this thesis was a profound loss to our family, but your memory has been a constant source of strength. This work is a tribute to the values you taught me and the love you shared.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CBP	Customs and Border Protection
COLEF	Colegio de la Frontera Norte
COVID-19	Coronavirus disease of 2019
DPS	Department of Public Safety
FIFA	International Federation of Association Football
HBA	Haitian Bridge Alliance
HPU	Horse Patrol Unit
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Services
MPP	Migrant Protection Protocols
NAFTA	North American Free Trade Agreement
SB	Senate Bill
SENTRI	Secure Electronic Network for Travels Rapid Inspection
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
VVBHC	Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition

INTRODUCTION

In September 2021, the U.S.-Mexico twin border towns of Del Rio, Texas, and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, grappled with an influx of 15,000 asylum-seeking Haitians to the area, prompting United States Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and its Border Patrol to implement a border shutdown in this zone. Transpiring in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, this event garnered international media attention as images released at the time depicted a dire situation of migrants' uncontrollable movement across the Rio Grande and the large makeshift encampment that they formed under the International Bridge on the Texas side of the border. The resulting outrage on social media reached its peak when harrowing photographs were shared of Border Patrol agents on horseback apparently chasing and whipping Haitian migrants in an attempt to prevent them from touching United States soil.[1] This development raised ethical and humanitarian questions regarding Border Patrol's treatment of Black migrants and spawned a federal investigation which found that four members of the Horse Patrol Unit (HPU) "behaved in a manner not in keeping with the professional standards of conduct expected of federal law enforcement personnel" in their response to the incident.[2]

While those agents faced criticism and subsequent disciplinary actions, residents of Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña experienced their own versions of events as well as

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[1] Eileen Sullivan and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Images of Border Patrol's Treatment of Haitian Migrants Prompt Outrage," *New York Times*, September 21, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/us/politics/haitians-border-patrol-photos.html.

[2] Carl Lindskoog, Yael Schacher, and Tina Shull, "Biden's Anti-Black Border Patrol," *Migration Archives*, Migration Scholar Collaborative, last modified October 1, 2021, https://migrationarchives.mailchimpsites.com/october-1-2021; United States Customs and Border Protection, "CBP Releases Findings of Investigation of Horse Patrol Activity in Del Rio, Texas," https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/national-media-release/cbp-releases-findings-investigation-horse-patrol-activity-del-rio.

changes in their daily lives. Amplifying the voices of members of this binational community, this study employs a transborder approach to explore the ways in which people reacted to, adapted to, and navigated the Haitian migrant influx and its aftermath on a local level, thereby shaping the borderlands in nuanced and complex ways. How did people living and working in Del Rio and Acuña adjust to and manage the short and long-term impacts of this migrant presence? How did Haitians as well as responding law enforcement officials contribute to the local economy and integrate into social spheres? How do residents' perceptions and experiences differ from media reporting on migration and the United States-Mexico border? In the following chapters, I will argue that local perceptions of the Haitian migrant influx to Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña significantly reflect the complexities of community experiences and interactions in relation to migratory phenomenon, revealing layered and uneven impacts on both sides of the border that evolve immediately and over time while challenging the media's one-dimensional migrant "vulnerability" and border "crisis" narratives. Notably, as we will in the following chapters, this study uncovered two different stories on each side of the border, as the U.S. community did not experience the migratory phenomenon in the same way as those in Mexico. This exploration will therefore provide a fuller view of contemporary mass migration to the United States-Mexico border, in which members of the border community describe associated impacts and relationships in diverse and often positive ways while also relaying instances of residents' and migrants' agency within the larger systems of border strategy, law enforcement, and media spectacle.

Although the few cities dotting the Texas-Coahuila border increasingly receive name recognition thanks to national news sources, academic studies concerning the

Haitian migratory phenomenon of 2021 in particular are lacking due to the newness of the topic and limited timeframe in which researchers have had to investigate.[3] For this project, I will rely on the examination of a selection of news articles as well as an analysis of my own interviews conducted with twenty-four members of the border community in July and August of 2023 to compare and contrast media reporting with local residents' perceptions in regards to the event.[4] As factors such as policy, public health, and the economy continue to impact daily life at the border–at a time when displacement, migration, and political instability is projected to increase in the larger Western Hemisphere, especially in the case of Haiti–the centering of lived experiences becomes crucial in bringing more awareness of issues to the broader benefit of local residents, migrants, policymakers, and media pundits alike. This study will contribute towards this effort by seeking to provide a more rooted and nuanced perspective on migration, moving away from reductive narratives and toward a more comprehensive understanding of the everyday realities of people on-the-ground, ultimately illuminating how their experiences and interactions actively shape the borderlands.

1.1 Background

The most recent trajectories and policies governing Haitian migration in the Americas have been well-documented by journalistic reporting and research studies over

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[3] Anna Giaritelli, "Border crisis: Abbott hits 100 days since locking out feds in Eagle Pass," *Washington Examiner*, April 24, 2024, https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/policy/immigration/2972387/border-crisis-abbott-hits-100-days-since-locking-out-feds-in-eagle-pass/; Laris Karklis, Arelis R. Hernández, and Nick Miroff, "Mapping the Texas governor's effort to control the border at Eagle Pass," *The Washington Post*, February 28, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2024/02/28/eagle-pass-texas-border-greg-abbott-immigration/.

[4] The University of North Carolina at Charlotte's Institutional Review Board (IRB) approved the protocol for this study on July 26, 2023. The author conducted interviews in Del Rio, Texas and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila between July 27th and August 31st, 2023.

the past fifteen years. With a cataclysmic 7.1 magnitude earthquake shattering the capital area of Port-au-Prince in 2010, hundreds of thousands were displaced from their homes overnight and ultimately fled the country.[5] Much of the affected population purchased flights to South American destinations that did not require entry visas, such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru. From there, migrants traveled by bus or on foot to reach the Brazilian border where they initially filed for refugee status. In 2012, Brazil began granting humanitarian visas, allowing Haitians to reside within the country and providing the opportunity to later apply for permanent residency. It was under these circumstances that Haitians found ample work in the construction of infrastructure for the FIFA World Cup and Olympic games that took place in 2014 and 2016, respectively. However, as Brazil faced economic and political crises at this point in time, migrants encountered barriers to sustaining employment and sending remittances back to Haiti became more difficult.[6] Reportedly, Haitians then traveled to and resided in Chile until the Piñera presidential administration ordered their repatriation in 2018, causing the migratory trajectory to shift yet again.[7]

With their sights set further north, Haitians reached Colombia, where the government passively allowed for migrant groups to travel through the country without official documentation (and therefore without protection), and from there they crossed the Darien Gap. This strip of land connecting Colombia and Panama is infamously known for

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[5] Mallory Simon, "7.0 quake hits Haiti; 'Serious loss of life' expected," *CNN*, January 13, 2010, https://www.cnn.com/2010/WORLD/americas/01/12/haiti.earthquake/index.html.
[6] Martha Balaguera, Luisa Farah Schwartzman, and Luis van Isschot, "Racial Frontiers: Hemispheric Logics of Haitians' Displacement and Asylum in the Americas," *Antipode* 56, no. 2 (2023): 379-399, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdfdirect/10.1111/anti.12979.
[7] Haitians also began arriving to the U.S.-Mexico border in greater numbers in 2016 and 2017; Nancy Adossi, Tadios Belay, Carl Lipscombe, and Benjamin Ndugga-Kabuye, "Black Lives at the Border," Black Alliance for Just Immigration (January 2018), http://nyf.issuelab.org/resources/30546/30546.pdf.

its dangerous and deadly path, and researchers have found that criminal organizations especially targeted Haitians in human trafficking operations through the region. Aside from confronting these types of threats, Haitians transiting Central America faced increasingly hostile migration policy, such as Guatemala's *Operation Governance* (launched in 2019) which tasked militarized National Guard troops with detaining and deporting undocumented migrants.[8] Those who reached Guatemala's northern border experienced further detention settings upon crossing into Tapachula, Chiapas, before receiving new humanitarian permits from the Mexican government.[9] Though Haitians possessed official documentation to move freely about the country, human rights advocacy groups reported concerns over Mexican police and immigration authorities' abuse of power and discriminatory practices directed at migrants as they continued northward.[10] To combat this, Haitians as well as Central Americans employed group-protection and transit strategies such as the formation of highly-visible migrant "caravans" and the usage of cell phone technologies for outside support and guidance.[11] By the end of the 2010's, those who endured the difficult overland journey arrived at various points along the northern Mexico-U.S. border, such as Tijuana, Mexicali, and

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[8] Louidor Louidor Woodly Edson, "Trazos y trazas de la migración haitiana post-terremoto," *Revista Política, Globalidad y Ciudadanía* 6, no. 11 (2020): 50-72, https://www.redalyc.org/journal/6558/655869548003/655869548003.pdf.

[9] Belen Ferndandez, *Inside Siglo XXI: Locked Up in Mexico's Largest Immigration Center* (OR Books, LLC, 2023).

[10] José Miguel Vivanco, "Mexican Soldiers and Immigration Agents Violently Detain Asylum Seekers," *Human Rights Watch*, September 8, 2021, https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/09/08/mexican-soldiers-and-immigration-agents-violently-detain-asylum-seekers#:~:text=The%20scenes%20have%20been%20truly,young%20child%20in%20his%20arms.

[11] Amarela Varela, "México, de 'frontera vertical' a país tapón:' Migrantes, deportados, retornados, desplazados internos y solicitantes de asilo en México," *Revista de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Iberoamericana* 14, no. 27 (2019): 49-76, https://www.redalyc.org/journal/2110/211062829005/211062829005.pdf; Rosa María Garbey Burey, "Estrategias migratorias en el tránsito de emigrantes haitianos hacia Estados Unidos," *Huellas de la migración* 2, no. 4 (2018): 93-123, https://huellasdelamigracion.uaemex.mx/article/download/4604/8005.

Reynosa. There, migrants waited for the chance to claim their right to asylum in the United States, a process made more difficult under the Trump administration's employment of Title 42 in 2020 and subsequently the Biden administration's roll-out of the faulty CBP One mobile application in early 2021.[12] Back in Haiti, developments such as Hurricane Matthew in 2016, another earthquake and the assassination of president Jovenel Moïse in 2021, as well as a violent, unfolding gang war provided cause for additional displacement and more reason for people to need to seek refuge in other countries.[13]

As for the specific case of Haitians who arrived in Ciudad Acuña and Del Rio, a survey carried-out by sociologists from the Colegio de la Frontera Norte (COLEF) suggested that the migrants followed similar trajectories as their predecessors who reached other border towns in the years prior. From a sample of 55 Haitians surveyed in migrant shelters in Acuña in September 2021, 80% previously lived in either Brazil or Chile, 96% reached Mexico on foot, and 92% passed through Tapachula in August 2021. Interestingly, 42% of respondents claimed they decided to come to Acuña to find work and planned on staying there long-term. One interviewee elaborated on his reasoning for

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[12] Immigration Act of 1965; Emily McConnville, "An Old Illness: How the United States Uses Racist and Xenophobic Ideas About Disease to Exclude Haitian Migrants During the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Indiana Journal of Law and Social Equality* 11, no. 2 (2023): 360-380, https://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1170&context=ijlse; Austin Kocher, "Glitches in the digitization of asylum: how CBP One turns migrants' smartphones into mobile borders," *Societies* 13, no. 6 (2023): 1-15, https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/13/6/149/pdf.

[13] Sam Jones and Amanda Holpuch, "Haiti death toll rises to 842 after Hurricane Matthew," *The Guardian*, October 7, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/oct/06/hurricane-matthew-haiti-rescuers-battle-reach-remote-areas; Haitian Bridge Alliance, "Beyond the Bridge: Documented Human Rights Abuses and Civil Rights Violations against Haitian Migrants in the Del Rio, Texas Encampment," 2022, https://rfkhr.imgix.net/asset/Del-Rio-Report.pdf; Evens Sanon and Dánica Coto, "Haiti in upheaval: President Moïse assassinated at home," *AP News*, July 7, 2021, https://apnews.com/article/haiti-president-jovenel-moise-killed-b56a0f8fec0832028bdc51e8d59c6af2; Dánica Coto, "Gang violence displaces thousands in Haiti's capital," *Independent*, June 15, 2021, https://www.independent.co.uk/news/report-gang-violence-displaces-thousands-in-haitis-capital-haiti-portauprince-gang-violence-families-unicef-b1866367.html.

opting to stay in the border community, stating: "I think I will stay in Acuña because this is where they have received us. They don't want to receive us in the United States. They have received us in Acuña with great pleasure. Some of us have already found work here. If we're able to stay, we will stay."[14] Although Haitians would have likely preferred to cross into Del Rio, they nonetheless appeared content about the possibility of remaining in Acuña where they were well-received and had job opportunities. Additional research conducted by the advocacy group Haitian Bridge Alliance provided further details about the migrants, namely that the majority had been living in South America for 3 to 7 years prior, 40% were children, and a small minority were nationals of other countries such as Cuba, Honduras, and Venezuela.[15] Concerning their trajectory as represented by local news sources, one article reported that busloads of migrants first attempted to enter the neighboring border town of Piedras Negras (located sixty miles southeast of Acuña) on September 19th with the intention of crossing the Rio Grande into Eagle Pass, however, police reacted quickly to physically block off roads and therefore denied Haitians' access to the city. As a result, they continued their journey by walking westward and ultimately reached Acuña within a couple of days.[16] Due to the limitations of the present study, including the inability to recruit Haitian migrant participants for interviews, it remains unclear as to *why* members of this group selected these specific and rather isolated ports-of-entry areas as potential crossing sites. Despite this, it should be noted that smaller yet

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[14] Socorro Arzaluz Solano, Felipe Javier Uribe Salas, and Oscar Misael Hernández, "En búsqueda de refugio: Población migrante haitiana en tres ciudades del noreste de México," El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, January 2022, https://docs.google.com/viewerng/viewer?url=https://www.colef.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/En-bu%CC%81squeda-del-refugio-comprimido-3MB.pdf.

[15] Haitian Bridge Alliance, "Beyond the Bridge."

[16] Melissa Guzmán, "Desatan caos migrantes en Piedras Negras," *El Diario de Coahuila*, September 19, 2021, https://eldiariodecoahuila.com.mx/2021/09/19/desatan-caos-migrantes-en-piedras-negras/.

steady migrant influxes of mainly Central Americans and Venezuelans had been arriving in these locations earlier in the year with some success of entering into the United States, perhaps making it possible for Haitians to follow word-of-mouth guidance from their recent predecessors regarding trajectories and destinations.[17]

Starting on September 21st and continuing over the following week, an estimated 15,000 migrants crossed the Rio Grande into Texas in hopes of surrendering themselves to Border Patrol and claiming asylum in United States territory. The scores of waiting men, women, and children, unable to enter further into the city of Del Rio, established a camp under the International Bridge as Border Patrol agents and steel border fencing contained them to the immediate area. From there, U.S. officials undertook the seemingly impossible task of processing individual cases, either deporting migrants back to Mexico or Haiti, or initiating asylum petitions and releasing them to the Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition (VVBHC, Del Rio's non-profit migrant shelter) which coordinated their swift departure from the area by bus.[18] Meanwhile, CBP took precautionary measures to close the port-of-entry due to public health and safety concerns, halting all vehicular and pedestrian traffic for ten days while authorities steadily worked to clear out the camp.[19] It seemed as if all eyes were on Del Rio, as

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[17] Dudley Althaus, "Migrant influx overwhelms Southwest Texas border counties," *San Antonio Express News*, May 6, 2021, https://www.expressnews.com/news/border-mexico/article/del-rio-grand-border-crisis-16158461.php; "Migrant Protection Protocols Update," Immigration Updates, Texas Impact, last modified April 20, 2021, https://texasimpact.org/immigration-updates/; Varela, "México, de 'frontera vertical' a país tapón;'" Garbey Burey, "Estrategias migratorias en el tránsito de emigrantes haitianos hacia Estados Unidos."

[18] Lomi Kriel, "Biden administration speeds up deportation flights for Haitians in growing Texas migrant camp," *The Texas Tribune*, September 18, 2021, https://www.texastribune.org/2021/09/18/texas-immigration-border-deportations/; KHOU-11 News, "Haitian migrants prepare to board bus as they are processed in Del Rio," https://www.khou.com/video/news/special-reports/at-the-border/haitian-migrants-prepare-to-board-bus-as-they-are-processed-in-del-rio/285-e7570631-9409-4265-846c-6746a3b4a245.

[19] Dave Mistich and Carrie Kahn, "The Border is Reopening at Del Rio after the U.S. Clears Migrant Camp," *NPR*, September 25, 2021, https://www.npr.org/2021/09/25/1040706287/the-border-is-reopening-at-del-rio-after-the-u-s-clears-migrant-camp.

Texas Governor Greg Abbott took matters into his own hands by deploying State Troopers to cut off physical entry points–ultimately causing migrants to return to Acuña, and media outlets from around the globe swooped in to cover this spectacular "crisis" at the border.[20]

Aside from a couple of newsworthy natural disasters, this event marked one of the first times that Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña garnered widespread attention.[21] Colloquially nicknamed "the Land of Friendship," this transnational community is considered to be relatively *tranquila* (peaceful), as residents perceive a unifying harmony amongst the locals and cite the absence of cartel violence in the region. This area accounts for just one of the 43 official ports-of-entry established along the nearly 3000-mile U.S.-Mexico borderline that was mainly defined by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848. Fifteen pairs of binational twin cities hug this line that extends from the Pacific Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico, with Del Rio-Acuña sitting 380 miles inland from the easternmost border towns of Brownsville-Matamoros.[22] The nearest metropolitan zone, San Antonio, is two and half hours to the northeast by car, while the next border crossing in the neighboring towns of Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras can be reached by driving an hour southeast. Both Del Rio and Acuña were established around the turn of the 20th century following construction of irrigation canals for local agriculture and were sustained by modest

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[20] Sandra Sanchez, "Del Rio a 'flashpoint' in immigration crisis where troopers are being surged," *Border Report*, September 18, 2021, https://www.borderreport.com/immigration/del-rio-a-flashpoint-in-immigration-crisis-where-troopers-are-being-surged/.

[21] *The Herald Times*, "At least 15 people dead in Texas flooding," August, 15, 1998, https://www.heraldtimesonline.com/story/news/1998/08/25/at-least-15-people-dead-in-texas-flooding/118600070/; Angelo Young, "'Total Chaos' as Category 4 Tornado Rips through Mexican Border City, Killing at Least 13," *International Business Times*, May 25, 2015, https://www.ibtimes.com/total-chaos-category-4-tornado-rips-through-mexican-border-city-killing-least-13-1937169

[22] United States-Mexico Border Health Commission, "The Border at a Glance," https://web.archive.org/web/20120915105245/http://www.nmsu.edu/~bec/BEC/Readings/10.USMBHC-TheBorderAtAGlance.pdf.

amounts of tourism in the subsequent decades, however more significant economic growth in this border sector did not occur until the 1990's with the passing of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). This regulated the cross-border flow of commercial goods through the port-of-entry and allowed for the building of new *maquiladoras* (factories) in the area. Opportunities for work in the manufacturing sector attracted migrants from Central and Southern Mexico, many of whom settled permanently and started families who now remain part of the local community.[23] It should be noted that these economic policy and demographic changes in the 1990's accompanied increased border militarization efforts as well as a shift in Border Patrol culture and composition from one that was previously predominantly white to one that is much more Latinx today.[24]

With Del Rio and Acuña hosting populations of 34,000 and 160,000 residents, respectively, these communities are rather close-knit and interconnected. In fact, it is not uncommon for individuals to have family members and friends residing in both cities. Those who hold a passport, visa, or *mica* (border crossing card) take advantage of their ability to commute to the other side, often making several trips per week to visit relatives, attend local events, shop, eat at restaurants, see their doctors, or go to work.[25] However, the freedom to cross does not come without its challenges. Long lines and wait times are typical at the port-of-entry if driving, especially on weekends, holidays, and during

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[23] Socorro Arzaluz Solano, ed., *Violencia y crisis social en el último rincón de la frontera: Piedras Negras y Acuña* (El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, 2017).

[24] Timothy J. Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border, 1978-1992: Low-intensity Conflict Doctrine Comes Home* (CMAS Books, University of Texas at Austin, 1996); Irene I. Vega, "Empathy, morality, and criminality: The legitimation narratives of US border patrol agents," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 44, no. 15 (2018): 2544-2561, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1369183X.2017.1396888.

[25] A *mica* is an identification and travel card issued by the United States government to Mexican citizens for the purpose of temporary cross-border visits.

morning and evening rush hours. Opting for pedestrian crossing, at least during the summer, means enduring 100-plus degree heat for over a mile of largely uncovered concrete walkway. Aside from this, local residents must remain alert to scheduled *simulacros*, as officials complete regular practice exercises in preparation for terrorist attacks or other potential threats that would necessitate a border shutdown. Perhaps the longest-lasting cross-border traffic interruption occurred during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which only essential workers were permitted to pass through the port-of-entry.[26] Multiple security checkpoints and dozens of surveillance cameras line the path over the International Bridge, and the release into the other side feels jolting and takes a few minutes to acclimate to. While Del Rio–though riddled with border patrol, state troopers, and local police–is rather sleepy and spread out (the main residential and commercial areas lie approximately three miles north of the border), Acuña, in stark contrast, feels crammed–with people and buildings–and is bursting with bustling activity noticeable upon walking directly into the *centro* (downtown).

These atmospheric elements exemplify how the individual cities of Del Rio and Acuña have fundamental differences between them, despite residents' perceptions of a larger transborder unity. No doubt these distinctions have been shaped in part due to the dividing national borderline of the Rio Grande and the enforcement tactics that have been employed to maintain it. This division is prevalent in this study's findings, as contrasts exist in relation to how residents from each side discussed the Haitian migrant influx of

[26] Scott Neuman, "U.S., Mexico Planning to Restrict Border Crossings to Stem Pandemic," *NPR*, March 20, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/coronavirus-live-updates/2020/03/20/818784141/u-s-mexico-planning-to-restrict-border-crossings-to-stem-pandemic; Uriel J. García, "'Happy to see you again;' U.S. reopens land borders with Mexico to vaccinated travelers after 19 months," *Texas Tribune*, November 8, 2021, https://www.texastribune.org/2021/11/08/texas-mexico-border-reopens/.

2021. While Del Rians emphasized big picture aspects such government, law enforcement, and media involvement in the event, *Acuñenses* revealed more personalized and experiential interactions that they shared with migrants who remained in their city up to a year after the fact.

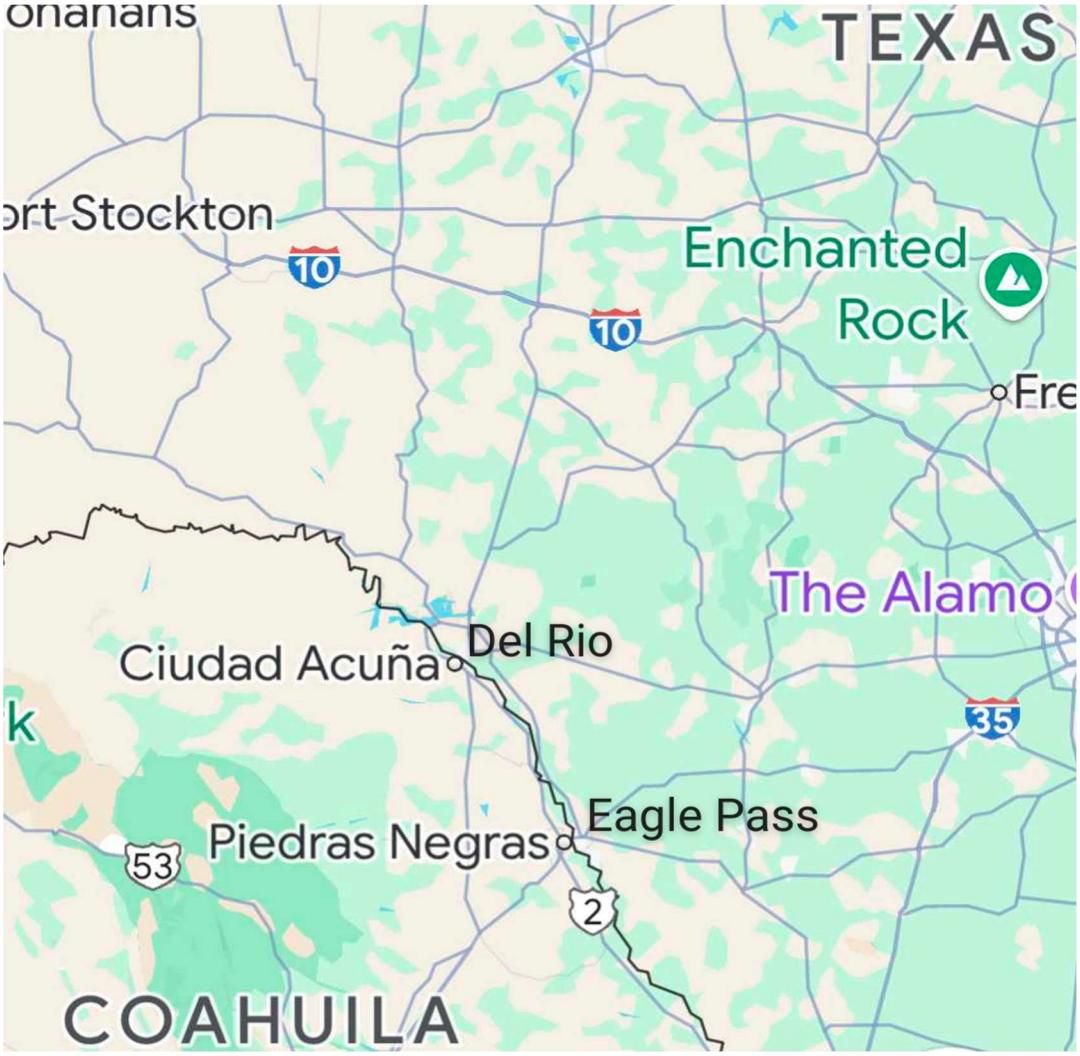

Figure 1. Migrants first attempted to cross the border from Piedras Negras, Coahuila, into Eagle Pass, Texas, however, local officials ultimately denied them entry into these cities. Migrants then adjusted their trajectory towards the nearest port-of-entry area of Ciudad Acuña and Del Rio, about sixty miles to the northeast (screenshot from Google Maps, edited by author).

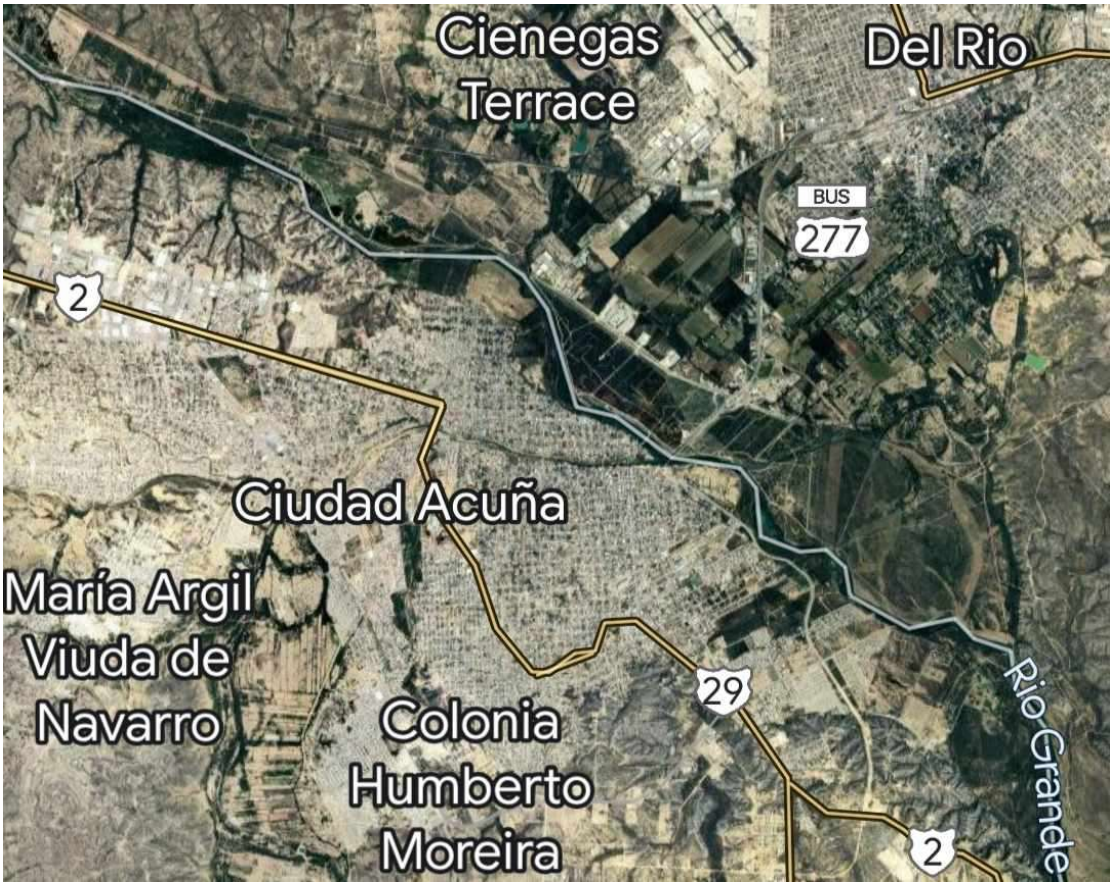

Figure 2. Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña are connected by the International Bridge (Highway 277) which crosses the Rio Grande. While Acuña's central zone is bordered by the riverbanks, Del Rio enjoys a 3-mile buffer of private ranch lands between its downtown and the port-of-entry (screenshot from Google Maps).

Figure 3. Border fencing near the port-of-entry and International Bridge. This fence runs parallel to the Rio Grande about half a mile north of the riverbanks. Migrants crossing from Mexico enter this area and are subsequently apprehended by Border Patrol (photo by author, August 2023).

1.2 Primary Sources and Methodology

I first became familiar with the Del Rio-Ciudad Acuña community shortly after relocating to San Angelo, Texas–just 150 miles north of the border–for my service term with AmeriCorps VISTA in August 2021. In my role as Data Collection Specialist for an Education Service Center, I conducted program evaluation for public schools throughout West Texas, which included the San Felipe-Del Rio Independent School District at the southern point of our regional footprint. About a month into my service, the big news about the Haitian migrant influx broke. Although I had not yet visited Del Rio for work at that point, my geographic proximity to the events felt surreal to me. The fact that the migrants were mainly from Haiti further captured my attention, as I had previously spent time in the Caribbean as a Peace Corps volunteer. From what I saw in the news and on social media, the situation of mass migration at the border looked disastrous, but my

office coworkers in San Angelo spoke of another side of the story, one not highlighted in the media. Those who had friends and family in Del Rio and Acuña were concerned that the closure of the International Bridge would prevent them from crossing over to access work and school. In the months that followed, even after the initial media craze subsided, my coworkers continued to update me about the population of Haitians who remained in Acuña, some of whom apparently married Mexican citizens and enrolled their children in local schools. These compelling and underreported aspects, along with the people who brought them to my attention, inspired me to conduct more in-depth research on this topic for my master's thesis in Latin American Studies. This particular case is important to examine due to a combination of factors that set it apart from other migrations: 1) the high volume of migrants arriving to and departing from the area within a short timespan; 2) migrants' establishment of a camp on the U.S. side of the border; 3) the context of the COVID-19 pandemic; 4) the social, cultural, and linguistic differences between Haitians and the local community 5) the implementation of a full and prolonged port-of-entry closure in response to migration; 6) the increased and ongoing deployment of law enforcement and military personnel in response to migration; and 7) the intense media attention surrounding these events.

For this project, I spent six weeks in July and August of 2023 living primarily in Del Rio and crossing into Ciudad Acuña on a bi-weekly basis for day or overnight trips.[27] During my stay at the border, I employed a transborder approach and conducted twenty-four interviews with residents of both cities who I recruited either via my own personal contacts or through snowball sampling. These interviews were semi-structured and audio-

[27] This fieldwork was fully funded by the Patrick Graduate Student Award provided by the Capitalism Studies Department at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.

recorded, taking place primarily in participants' homes, places of work, or in a public library. In general, individuals' ties and claims to either Ciudad Acuña or Del Rio varied in terms of their place of birth, length of time living in their respective city of residence, and where their family or work was located. Of the twelve study participants living in Acuña, seven were born in the city and had lived there their whole lives; two of whom crossed the border into Del Rio regularly for work purposes. Three of the Acuña residents had relocated from other parts of Mexico (Jalisco, Veracruz, and Torreón, the capital of Coahuila) as children or young adults in the 1990's or early 2000's; one of whom crossed the border weekly to go shopping. The remaining two were born in interior parts of Texas (Fort Stockton and Dallas) and moved to Acuña (where they had family roots) also as children or young adults in the 1990's; both of whom crossed the border regularly for work and family visits. The majority of the Acuña participants were Spanish-only speakers, except for the two born in Texas who were bilingual. As for the twelve study participants living in Del Rio, four were born in the city and had lived there their whole lives; three of whom crossed the border into Acuña at least semi-regularly to shop or visit family. Five of the Del Rio residents were born in Acuña and moved to Del Rio in various decades as adults after gaining either permanent residency or U.S. citizenship; all of whom crossed the border frequently to visit family. The remaining three were born in other U.S. states (Colorado, Iowa, and Washington) and moved to Del Rio in various decades as children or adults; two of whom crossed weekly into Acuña for missionary work. As for language, six of the Del Rio participants were bilingual, three spoke English only, and three spoke Spanish only. All of the participants were either Mexican or Mexican-American, except for the two missionaries just mentioned who were white and

non-Latino. As I introduce participants in the following two chapters, I will include more details particular to each individual which may provide the reader with additional context in understanding residents' perceptions and experiences regarding the Haitian migrant influx. Although the original intent of this study was to include Haitian migrants as study participants so as to assess their immediate and long-term experiences of living at the border, I unexpectedly found that their presence had significantly decreased in the area upon my arrival in the field. According to my local contacts, the small pockets of Haitian migrants who remain, specifically in Ciudad Acuña, are now not as visible in the community, therefore making it difficult for me to establish connections with this population within the allotted time frame. I also did not interview any law enforcement personnel for this study, as media and public policy discussions already over-represent these official viewpoints.

In the weeks prior to traveling, I prepared a list of six guiding questions which aimed to get to the heart of each participant's perception of the migrant influx of 2021 and its aftermath. The resulting conversations generally lasted between thirty minutes and two hours per interview–most closing around the one hour mark. The interview questions included the following:

1. What happened during the time of the Haitian migrant influx and international bridge closure?
2. How did you personally respond and react to these developments?
3. How did the local community respond and react?
4. How did these events impact the local economy?
5. Do any Haitians remain in the community?
6. What changes has the community undergone since then?

After the research trip, and upon returning to my university in North Carolina, I engaged in manual transcription and coding processes. This exercise proved useful in that I could

then pinpoint elements that complicated the story further than what media reported on during that time frame, which came to prominently highlight the following:

Ciudad Acuña	Del Rio
● Material aid response from the local community ● Cultural, language, and social interactions ● Haitians' impact on the local economy	● Media involvement ● Port-of-entry closure ● Law enforcement and military deployment

Table 1. List of study themes and topics pertaining to Ciudad Acuña and Del Rio.

In employing a transborder approach, I found that study participants tended to emphasize distinct themes and topics depending on their city of residence, therefore showcasing the different ways in which they perceived and experienced the migrant influx and its aftermath. For example, Acuña residents contributed more details about their day-to-day interactions with Haitians, who remained in the city for months after their initial arrival, while Del Rians generally did not speak to this type of personal experience– perhaps because most migrants who passed through only accessed certain spaces, such as the VVBHC shelter and the Greyhound bus station, for a limited amount of time. I will note that the categories listed above should not necessarily be considered as perfectly fixed or rigid. Just like the border community itself, there exists opportunity for cross-over. In fact, study participants from both sides spoke of the impacts of the port-of-entry closure rather equally, however, for organizational purposes, I have placed this topic under the Del Rio column as those residents more generally viewed the events in terms of these types of U.S.-led and larger-scale government interventions. Any areas of cross-over, such as this, will be noted further in the main chapters of this paper. Aside from comparing the findings between Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña, I will also interweave

media analysis throughout the text to examine how the migrant influx was reported on and contrast this with the narratives that I gathered from local residents.

1.3 Literature Review and Dialogue

Although scholars have not yet published extensive work on the Haitian migrant influx to Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña, the larger fields of U.S.-Mexico border and migration studies are rich with important contributions from disciplines such as history, political science, anthropology, and sociology. Some of the previous scholarship that can dialogue with my own study includes that which examines border policing and immigration enforcement, migration in the Americas, as well as media and political framing of immigrants and the border. In the following section, I will address the research questions, methods, and conclusions that have guided and formed collective and academic knowledge on these topics and then state how the present study fits into this larger conversation.

The line drawn between the United States and Mexico has consistently been a point of contention within the realms of border enforcement and immigration policy. Historians have used a wide range of archival evidence such as legal cases, newspapers, diaries, census data, and immigration records to answer questions related to federal intervention in border security, as well as the parameters and effects of official immigration policy. At least since the 1880s, the cross-border movement of people and goods (both authorized and unauthorized) have defined the region, and authors argue that the geopolitical and physical line separating the United States and Mexico has been rather

permeable and not entirely secure.[28] In reaction to this, lawmaking and enforcement agencies such as the Immigration and Naturalization Service and the Border Patrol have contributed towards border strengthening and stricter immigration control, though these institutions have generally responded to and been reflective of complex social, political, and economic conditions of the borderlands.[29] While earlier United States immigration policy since the establishment of the Border Patrol in 1924 adhered to the discriminatory National Origins Quota System enacted that same year, a major shift occurred with the passing of the Immigration Act of 1965. This new legislation established the framework for the contemporary system which prioritizes family members of citizens and permanent residents, as well as migrant workers and refugees, and has ultimately spawned a demographic revolution more inclusive of receiving immigrants from Asia, the Caribbean, and Latin America. However, a less-appreciated impact of these reforms was the placement of numerical limits on Latin American immigration for the first time, thus resulting in an increase in unauthorized migration into the United States.[30]

Although official pathways to immigration have opened considerably over the past several decades, unauthorized migration into the United States has continued to be a prevalent characteristic of the border region. Social scientists have used ethnographic methods, interviews, participant observation, and surveys to understand the impacts of border enforcement tactics in relation to this phenomenon. In the early 1990s, the urban

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[28] Patrick Ettinger, *Imaginary Lines: Border Enforcement and the Origins of Undocumented Immigration, 1882-1930* (University of Texas Press, 2010); Julian Lim, *Porous Borders: Multiracial Migrations and the Law in the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (University of North Carolina Press, 2017).
[29] Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol* (University of California Press, 2010); S. Deborah Kang, *The INS on the Line: Making Immigration Law on the US-Mexico Border, 1917-1954* (Oxford University Press, 2017); George T. Díaz and Holly M. Karibo, *Border Policing: A History of Enforcement and Evasion in North America* (University of Texas Press, 2020).
[30] Gabriel J. Chine and Rose Cuison Villazor, *The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965: Legislating a New America* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

sectors of El Paso, Texas, and San Diego, California, were central to paradigmatic shifts in Border Patrol strategy, with Operations Hold-the-Line and Gatekeeper in 1993 and 1994 facilitating a greater concentration of resources aimed at physically barring and reducing migrant crossings.[31] Later studies conducted at the Arizona border and Sonoran desert revealed that tactics such as Prevention through Deterrence and Consequence Delivery Systems, as well as Border Patrol agents' indoctrinated disregard towards migrant life has contributed toward significant suffering, violence, and death of Mexicans and Central Americans trying to reach the U.S. via these rural and hostile geographic areas.[32] These types of efforts have not only taken place in the context of the U.S.-Mexico border, but rather, the United States and other global powers have worked to externalize and create an elitist "border enforcement regime" around the world through coercive foreign policy and free trade agreements, enabling migration for the wealthy and restricting movement for the poor, and disproportionately Black and Brown people.[33]

Haitians have a long history of migration in the Americas navigating border enforcement regimes and immigration control policies.[34] Historians argue that these

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[31] Timothy J. Dunn, *Blockading the Border and Human Rights: The El Paso Operation That Remade Immigration Enforcement* (University of Texas Press, 2009); Joseph Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond: The War On "Illegals" and the Remaking of the U.S. – Mexico Boundary* (Taylor & Francis, 2010).

[32] Prevention through Deterrence (PTD) is a Border Patrol strategy that deliberately pushes migrants away from urban crossing areas into desert terrains and leverages the remote, hostile natural environment in attempting to deter unauthorized migration; Consequence Delivery System (CDS) is an immigration control strategy that administers systematic and punitive measures, such as deportation and detention, to unauthorized migrants caught crossing into or residing the United States; Jason De Leon, *The Land of Open Graves: Living and Dying on the Migrant Trail* (University of California Press, 2015); Jeremy Slack, Daniel E. Martínez, and Scott Whiteford, eds. *The Shadow of the Wall: Violence and Migration on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (University of Arizona Press, 2018); Francisco Cantú, *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border* (Penguin Publishing Group, 2019).

[33] Todd Miller, *Empire of Borders: The Expansion of the US Border Around the World* (Verso Books, 2019); Austin Kocher, "Glitches in the digitization of asylum: how CBP One turns migrants' smartphones into mobile borders," *Societies* 13, no. 6 (2023): 1-15, https://www.mdpi.com/2075-4698/13/6/149/pdf.

[34] Matthew Casey, *Empire's Guestworkers: Haitian Migrants in Cuba During the Age of US Occupation* (Cambridge University Press, 2017).

nationals in particular have been subjected to extraordinary levels of exclusion and punishment, as exemplified in the later decades of the 20th century by maritime interdiction protocols targeting migrants traveling by boat as well as mass incarceration programs for Haitian refugees in the U.S.[35] As Caribbean migrants shifted their main trajectories and modes away from the sea and towards land routes throughout the 2010s, political scientists began to ask questions about how governments manage and frame this newer movement. Research suggests that Haitians have been subjected to increasingly hostile migration policy throughout the Americas and have often been viewed as a security threat, though some countries such as Ecuador and Peru have been more intentional about implementing measures aimed at protecting this group.[36] During this decade, Haitians as well as migrants of Central and South American origins increasingly traveled through Mexico with the intention of reaching the Northern border in large and visible groups of hundreds or thousands at a time; a phenomenon that has been popularly categorized as "caravan migration." Perhaps the most notable (and highly publicized) of these departed San Pedro Sula, Honduras, in late 2018 and arrived in Tijuana, Mexico, in early 2019 which comprised upwards of 9,000 migrants of mainly Honduran and Guatemalan origin. The vast majority of these individuals did not immediately cross the border to surrender themselves to Border Patrol, but remained "stranded" on the Mexican side of the border for months while they awaited their appointments to appear before a

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[35] Jeffrey S. Kahn, *Islands of Sovereignty: Haitian Migration and the Borders of Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 2019); Carl Lindskoog, *Detain and Punish: Haitian Refugees and the Rise of the World's Largest Immigration Detention System* (University of Florida Press, 2019); Kristina Shull, *Detention Empire: Reagan's War on Immigrants and the Seeds of Resistance* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

[36] Louidor Woodly Edson, "Trazos y trazas de la migración haitiana post-terremoto," 50-72; Balaguera, Schwartzman, and van Isschot, "Racial Frontiers," 379-399; Luz Maricela Coello Cerino, "Gobernabilidad por niveles: el caso del flujo de migración haitiano en América," *Migraciones internacionales* 10 (2019): 1-22, https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/migra/v10/1665-8906-migra-v10-e2155.pdf.

judge in the United States to claim asylum. Though receiving societies in Mexico met these newcomers with a mixture of solidarity and xenophobia, migrants nonetheless exercised significant levels of resilience and agency in actively coordinating aspects of their journey while overcoming obstacles along the way.[37] It is unclear whether Border Patrol, law enforcement, or other military personnel surged to the U.S. side of the border in response to the situation, however, the port-of-entry connecting Tijuana and San Diego, California, stayed open at that time and therefore the cross-border flow of travelers and goods continued without interruption. The following year, with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both the United States and Mexico restricted access to asylum as immigration offices and processing courts shut down, exacerbating the backlog of cases waiting for approval, impacting migrants of all origins, including Haitians. Additionally, both the Trump and Biden administrations invoked Title 42 to block migrants from entering the country under the pretense of slowing the spread of the virus, using this measure to justify their exclusion, mistreatment, and dehumanization that echoed anti-Black historical associations of foreignness with disease.[38]

Similar to Central Americans who arrived and resided in Northern Mexico for an extended period, Haitians, as well, experienced rather uneven levels of reception and

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[37] Eduardo Torre Cantalapiedra and Dulce María Mariscal Nava, "Crossing borders: migratory strategies in transit of participants in migrants caravans." *Estudios fronterizos* 21 (2020): 1-21, https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/estfro/v21/2395-9134-estfro-21-e047.pdf; Garbey Burey, "Estrategias migratorias en el tránsito de emigrantes haitianos hacia Estados Unidos," 93-123; Heather M. Wurtz, "A movement in motion: collective mobility and embodied practice in the central American migrant caravan." *Mobilities* 15, no. 6 (2020): 930-944, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8340914/. Maria de Lourdes Rosas-Lopez, Vincent Guilamo-Ramos, and Jorge Mora-Rivera, "Joining a migrant caravan: herd behaviour and structural factors," *Third World Quarterly* 44, no. 6 (2023): 1137-1154, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/01436597.2023.2176299.

[38] Bruno Miranda and Aída Silva Hernández, "Gestión desbordada: solicitudes de asilo en Estados Unidos y los mecanismos de espera allende sus fronteras," *Migraciones internacionales* 13 (2022): 1-21, https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/migra/v13/2594-0279-migra-13-rmiv1i12385.pdf; McConnville, "An Old Illness," 360-380.

integration into local communities. In Reynosa, for example, researchers found that Haitians in particular had limited access to education and healthcare services while living in the city, and that they were more likely to accept low-wage jobs and precarious working conditions during their extended stay.[39] Some ethnographic studies provided further evidence of Haitians' "vulnerability," detailing their experiences with racism, exclusion, and other adverse factors that created obstacles in navigating social and economic spheres in Mexican border towns. One interviewee conveyed feelings of exclusion from the labor market in Baja California, stating that "there are employers that are racist. We go to ask for work and they tell us that they don't work with Haitians."[40] While this demonstrates the challenges Haitians faced in integrating into border society, other study findings contrast this notion, concluding that Haitians in Monterrey and Mexicali enjoyed success in entering the labor market, pursuing entrepreneurship, and establishing social relations with Mexicans despite language barriers and cultural differences.[41] It should be noted that state and municipal governments across the border

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[39] Oscar Misael Hernández-Hernández and Rosa Isabel Medina Parra, "Repensando la vulnerabilidad de migrantes haitianos en tránsito por Reynosa, México," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 28, no. 2 (2022): 168-197, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/27233986.pdf?casa_token=Eks3Sb4wGsUAAAAA:TyywByWKrRFnPKgSS0FPVGaTfEARvankEpAhUM3XS0NZT7jiLGC5uC9LnLcuE0ROw9-g0sRfg-LGz5hJjL9_1d8risvwAAcMPz8Ywg-JK689nJKrqXEgVg; Edel José Fresneda Camacho, "Haitianos hacia el sur, desde la vulnerabilidad hacia la incertidumbre," *Revista mexicana de sociología* 85, no. 3 (2023): 669-696, https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S0188-25032023000300669&script=sci_arttext.

[40] Nancy Rios-Contreras, "Desastre Migratorio en el Tránsito México-Estados Unidos: Control de la Migración, Racismo y Covid-19," *Revista de Estudios Latinoamericanos sobre Reducción del Riesgo de Desastres* 5, no. 2 (2021): 168-181, https://revistareder.com/ojs/index.php/reder/article/download/78/89; Hugo Méndez-Fierros and Rodolfo Hlousek Astudillo, "Representaciones sociales de racismo y exclusión social. Migraciones haitianas contemporáneas en América Latina," *Revista Interdisciplinar da Mobilidade Humana* 31 (2023): 161-176, https://www.scielo.br/j/remhu/a/ZV4mxMV5dnrNCqGjhspmsMh/.

[41] Garbey Burey, "Estrategias migratorias en el tránsito de emigrantes haitianos hacia Estados Unidos," 93-123; Rafael Alonso Hernández López and Iván Francisco Porraz Gómez, "From Xenophobia to Solidarity: Border Ethnographies of the Migrant Caravan," *Frontera norte* 32 (2020). https://www.scielo.org.mx/scielo.php?pid=S0187-73722020000100118&script=sci_arttext&tlng=en; Schwarz Coulange Méroné and Manuel Ángel Castillo, "Integración de los inmigrantes haitianos de la oleada a México del 2016," *Frontera norte* 32 (2020), https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/fn/v32/0187-7372-fn-v32-e1964.pdf; Ramírez Meda and Méndez Fierros, "Espera y atrapamiento en la frontera;" Yetzi Rosales

that received migrants throughout the 2010's failed to manage the situation and did not supply adequate resources to newcomers, leaving local and civil society to step-in and provide humanitarian assistance.[42] In Tijuana, researchers asked members of civil institutions and collective action networks about their experiences with serving this population. Many interviewees referred to Tijuana as a "city of migrants" and cited a unique history of diversity, solidarity, and welcoming–an antecedent which guides their work with Haitians in adherence to a framework of human dignity, justice, and anti-discrimination.[43]

Media and political pundits are not always as accepting in their representations of immigrants and the border region in general. Scholars have asked questions about how these topics are presented to the public, how this influences the public mindset, and how these representations compare with reality. For example, research shows that articles from newspapers in the United States often dehumanize migrants, portraying them as "dangerous threats" capable of breaching the nation's security and sovereignty.[44] Another common media framing placed migrants in the role of "victim" and therefore dependent on the nation-state for humanitarian assistance and fulfillment of basic needs. Authors

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Martínez, Luis Enrique Calva Sánchez, and Blanca Delia Vázquez Delgado, "Experiencias de incorporación laboral de migrantes haitianos en la zona metropolitana de Monterrey," *Región y sociedad* 34 (2022): 1-24, https://www.scielo.org.mx/pdf/regsoc/v34/2448-4849-regsoc-34-e1702.pdf.

[42] Mirando and Hernández, "Gestión desbordada," 1-21; Coello Cerino, "Gobernabilidad por niveles," 1-21; Héctor Parra García, "Redes de cuidado frente al entrampamiento migratorio por COVID-19 en México," *Yeiyá, Revista de Estudios Críticos* 2, no. 2 (2021): 123-134. https://journals.tplondon.com/yeiya/article/download/2058/1491; Kenia María Ramírez Meda and Hugo Méndez Fierros, "Espera y atrapamiento en la frontera: el caso de los haitianos en Mexicali, BC, México," *Trayectorias Humanas Trascontinentales* 8 (2022), https://www.unilim.fr/trahs/index.php?id=4737&lang=en.

[43] Aída Silva Hernández and Vianney Padilla Orozco, "Instituciones en crisis y acción colectiva frente a las migraciones globales. El caso de la llegada de haitianos a Tijuana, BC, 2016-2017," *Desafíos* 32, no. 1 (2020): 77-113, http://www.scielo.org.co/scielo.php?pid=S0124-40352020000100077&script=sci_arttext.

[44] Leo Chavez, *The Latino Threat: Constructing Immigrants, Citizens, and the Nation* (Stanford University Press, 2013).

argue that these frames simultaneously create and reproduce popular conceptions of migrants, as well as problematically suppress their actual complex characteristics.[45] Similarly, when analyzing media coverage about U.S.-Mexico border communities, studies reveal that state and national news sources mainly emphasize violence and insecurity stemming from immigration and organized crime as well as failing economic, education, and healthcare systems in the region. These points divert attention from real community assets which should be recognized and celebrated, including rich cultural capital and innovative approaches to problem-solving.[46] Uplifting and more realistic stories about the border and immigrants who cross that line are at-risk of being overshadowed by nativist rhetoric and political agendas which fuel public anxiety and fear of this geographic region as well as the foreign (and often Black or Brown) "other."[47] Authors argue that immigration is a highly politicized issue in the United States, in that Far Right extremists, such as former president Donald Trump, embrace anti-immigrant views while Democrats remain complicit in their lack of cohesion regarding policy and reform measures, while also affirming border securitization.[48]

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[45] Otto Santa Ana and Celeste González de Bustamante, eds., *Arizona Firestorm: Global Immigration Realities, National Media, and Provincial Politics* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012); Sabine Pfleger, "Las dos caras del framing mediático de la migración en México: las personas-peligro y las personas-víctima contra el Estado-nación," *Discurso & Sociedad* 4 (2019): 647-669, https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Sabine-Pfleger/publication/338412427_Articulo_Las_dos_caras_del_framing_mediatico_de_la_migracion_en_Mexico/links/60185a67299bf1b33e40439c/Articulo-Las-dos-caras-del-framing-mediatico-de-la-migracion-en-Mexico.pdf.

[46] K. Jill Fleuriet, *Rhetoric and Reality on the US—Mexico Border: Place, Politics, Home* (Springer Nature, 2021).

[47] Santa Ana and González de Bustamante, eds., *Arizona Firestorm*; Chavez, *The Latino Threat*; Denvir, *All-American Nativism: How the Bipartisan War on Immigrants Explains Politics as We Know It* (Verso Books, 2020).

[48] Ibid.; Justin Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, *No One is Illegal: Fighting Racism and State Violence on the U.S.-Mexico Border* (Haymarket Books, 2018).

Nativist, anti-immigrant standpoints are prevalent in the state of Texas, including in the border city of Del Rio. These public and political views especially came to light during the Haitian migrant arrival of September 2021, as found in a recent study which used official documents, press conferences, and in-person interviews with local residents to better understand and characterize this event.[49] The author argues that the Texas-Coahuila border exemplifies a "cruel cosmovision of law and violence," such that local and state government officials as well as federal Border Patrol agents commonly prioritize the protection of a geopolitical line over the safeguarding of human life. This notion is apparent in Mayor Bruno Lozano's call to shutdown the Del Rio-Acuña International Bridge, which he condoned as a "precautionary measure" to combat the "invasion" of Haitians to U.S. territory, hoping to prevent health and safety threats from entering his community. Meanwhile, Border Patrol used this racialized scapegoating to justify their violent policing of migrants with impunity, as this geographic zone represented a "legal limbo" where officials could both make and break laws in support of a statist form of sovereignty. Residents of Del Rio who were interviewed for this study generally supported these official actions, perceiving Haitian migrants as "scary" and undeserving of entering city limits. While these findings are important in contextualizing the Haitian migrant influx of September 2021, they focus exclusively on Del Rio's reaction to the event, ignoring that of Ciudad Acuña's and therefore falling short of providing a full picture of the ramifications felt in these twin border cities.

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[49] This author used a cold-approach method in public spaces and places of business in eliciting interviews from members of the Del Rio community during the time of the migrant influx and international bridge closure in September 2021; Alexandra Villarreal, "Two Bridges, A Century Apart: The Cruel Cosmovision of Law and Violence at the Texas-Mexico Border." *Sociology Lens* 36, no. 1 (2023): 94-111. https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/johs.12410?casa_token=XQJPU_-jZggAAAAA:fVQBPMh0hF7Kkf-otxiE5Br0LWAYg-u-fRaygcsopFDPkoZpBYGAtNAmDAzHkT-y_9Xu4GpTewF0-9sLxg.

In accordance with ethical border research methodology, studies in this field require a "transborder" approach that considers changing migration and border policy as well as how this impacts communities on both sides and the region as a whole. Scholars who undertake this work must engage in ongoing reflection in how to approach research challenges such as sampling, trust, time limits, vulnerability of target populations, sensitivity to emerging social and political climates, as well as equity in dissemination of findings.[50] These practices align with methods of decolonized anthropology in that they seek to establish dialogue and reconciliation across nationalities, races, classes, and gender identities in the co-production of academic and general knowledge about cultures and communities.[51] The present study strives to adhere to these pillars of responsible scientific research and aims to center the lived experiences of border residents to better understand their roles and relationships within the larger systems of mass migration as well as border and law enforcement through the extraordinary context of the Haitian migrant influx to Del Rio, Texas, and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila.

1.4 Chapter Summary

Proceeding from this introduction, this thesis is arranged into two chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter will examine the local perceptions, interpretations, and reactions to the Haitian migrant influx in Ciudad Acuña and the second chapter will explore these aspects in the context of Del Rio. Each chapter begins with a media analysis of local, state, and national news articles reporting on the migration event from

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[50] Colin M. Deeds, Anna Ochoa O'Leary, and Scott Whiteford, ed., *Uncharted Terrains: New Directions in Border Research Methodology, Ethics, and Practice* (University of Arizona Press, 2013).
[51] Association of Black Anthropologists, "Decolonizing Anthropology: Moving Further Toward an Anthropology of Liberation," American Anthropological Association, 1997.

the late September 2021 timeframe, with chapter 1 analyzing Mexican articles and their use of the "migrant vulnerability" framing and chapter 2 analyzing U.S. articles and their use of the "border crisis" framing. From there, each chapter is divided into three subsequent parts focusing on the most prevalent themes derived from my interviews with study participants. Chapter 1 continues by detailing the collective efforts to carry-out a material aid response for Haitian migrants staying in Ciudad Acuña, acknowledging the individuals and groups who participated in these actions as well as the types of resources that they provided in the absence of the state. From there, I will examine any cultural differences between Mexicans and Haitians, as perceived by local residents, and discuss linguistic and social factors in their interactions with migrants. Next, I will reveal how Haitian migrants contributed to the local economy as both customers and workers while also touching on instances of discrimination and exploitation that this group faced in these realms while living in Ciudad Acuña. In Chapter 2, I examine the media attention garnered by the migration event to the Texas border in terms of overall scope and reach, accuracy, amplification of political voices, and local perceptions of the Horse Patrol Unit incident. Then, I will uncover the perceived reasons for the ten-day International Bridge closure along with how residents from both Del Rio and Acuña overcame any challenges or interruptions to regular border-crossing routines. This chapter will conclude with an overview of law enforcement and military deployment to Del Rio in response to the Haitian migrant influx, including the agencies and branches involved, materials aid and support from the local community, as well as any resulting social and economic impacts from this increased and continued official presence in the city.

CHAPTER 1: CIUDAD ACUÑA

"I first found out about the Haitians' arrival to Acuña because I saw it with my own eyes! I believe it was on the national news, because they would usually let us know in advance when a caravan was heading towards the border and we would wait a while for it to come. Well, this time, we didn't have to wait very long. De un día, noche, de la mañana*, I woke up and left my house and I was in another city! It was full of them walking everywhere. They arrived quickly after I had heard on the news that a caravan was on its way."*[52]

This is how local resident of Ciudad Acuña, Brenda, set the scene of the sudden and mass arrival of Haitian migrants to the Coahuila border in late September 2021. Proceeding a seemingly delayed forewarning from Mexican media outlets, the city visibly changed from the outset of this event as over 15,000 newcomers took up space in the streets and other public areas. According to regional news sources and confirmed by study participants, Haitians and other foreign nationals traveled northwest along Highway 2 after bypassing the neighboring border town of Piedras Negras and furthermore utilized this main route to enter into the southeastern sector of Acuña near the *colonias* of Morelos and Valle Verde. The migrants then dispersed throughout the city though residents particularly noted their concentration in the central zone nearest to the International Bridge and the Rio Grande. Migrants who did not immediately cross the river, along with those who returned to Acuña after attempting to do so, camped in parks and *plazas*, lived in shelters and hotels, or rented private homes and apartments during their stay. In the days, weeks, and months following the Haitians' initial arrival, the

[52] Brenda, Interview by author, Vidrios y Aluminios Tamez office in Ciudad Acuña, August 2, 2023.

sustained migrant presence became increasingly integrated and interwoven into the daily life and fabric of Ciudad Acuña. In fact, local residents' interactions with migrants contributed to shaping new and nuanced cultural, social, and economic dynamics at the border, revealing the layered and evolving impacts of migration in this community. Complicating the one-dimensional migrant "vulnerability" narrative prevalent in Mexican media reporting, community perceptions shed light on diverse factors such as collective action through local material aid response efforts, social, cultural, and language interactions between Haitians and Mexicans, and migrants' active participation in the border economy. In this chapter, I will explore twelve Acuña residents' perceptions related to the Haitian migrant influx, highlighting how their views reflect complex community experiences as well as how these individuals interpreted and responded to resulting social, cultural, and economic changes on a local level.

Similar studies concerning Haitian migrant presence and integration into Mexican border cities provide evidence for the aforementioned phenomena in other municipal contexts. While these nationals waited for official documents and immigration processing, they met a spectrum of acceptance and rejection at the hands of receiving societies throughout the region. A study conducted in Mexicali, Baja California, in 2018 found that Haitians and Mexicans successfully established social relationships with each other and furthermore created informal support networks, contributing towards intercultural ability and skill development for both migrants and residents alike. Here, Haitians also showed signs of "appropriating" Mexican culture in areas such as religion, art, and cuisine and reported an overall "sense of belonging" within the larger

community.[53] While these findings highlight migrants' capacity to adapt within new cultural and linguistic settings, others concluded that they in fact experienced mistreatment by local residents in the forms of marginalization, discrimination, racism, and exclusion. For example, Haitians living in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, testified in a 2021 study that it was difficult for them to construct social relationships with Mexicans due to their differences in cultural identities as well as the existing language barriers between Haitian Creole, French, English, and Spanish.[54] Considering the varying dates and locations of this field research, it is unknown whether attitudes of Northern Mexican receiving societies shifted from acceptance to rejection over time or if these cities mentioned hold different attitudes towards Haitians newcomers in general.

Additionally, authors suggest that the Mexican state has been rather absent in its management of mass migration and that civil society has stepped in to fill the gaps in addressing the basic needs of Haitians and other asylum-seeking nationals at the border. Wide-scale "citizen participation" has been especially apparent in Tijuana, Baja California, where a study conducted in 2016 found that community members provided essentials such as food and shelter; actions invoked by a collective sense of "solidarity" felt towards Haitians and migrants in general.[55] However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, local residents faced increased difficulty in their attempts to disburse material aid as border crossing restrictions and lockdown measures affected resource and

[53] Ramírez Meda and Méndez Fierros, "Espera y atrapamiento en la frontera," 161-176.
[54] Hernández-Hernández and Medina Parra, "Repensando la vulnerabilidad de migrantes haitianos en tránsito por Reynosa, México," 168-197.
[55] Silva Hernández and Padilla Orozco, "Instituciones en crisis y acción colectiva frente a las migraciones globales," 77-113.

personnel availability.[56] Field research from Monterrey, Nuevo León, in 2021 subsequently concluded that Haitians did not rely on civil institutions and charity to survive, as they experienced success in labor market incorporation into construction work and small business spheres. Haitians who were interviewed relayed that they did not face job competition with Mexicans and that employers were willing to hire them despite language barriers, but conditions tended to be precarious and provided no benefits or contracts–placing them at higher risk for physical danger and economic exploitation in the work environment.[57] From research conducted in Mexicali in 2021, authors shared evidence of Haitians playing a significant role in advancing local economic development through their labor and commercial participation, both formally and informally.[58] These findings show an interesting shift over the past eight years that moves away from material aid responses from local communities to Haitians actively incorporating themselves in a way that is beneficial for Mexican border economies.

Notably, these socioeconomic conditions are largely ignored in Mexican media representations of Haitians at the Northern Mexico border. News sources instead advance a simplistic framing of migrants as "vulnerable" and also amplify government and political voices over those of migrants or local residents, as I will outline in a forthcoming media analysis. In the remainder of this chapter, I will present my own findings from interviews with twelve residents of Ciudad Acuña which in some cases reinforce concepts found in the literature discussed previously and also provide many

[56] Coello Cerino, "Gobernabilidad por niveles," 1-21; Miranda and Silva Hernández, "Gestión desbordada," 1-22.
[57] Rosales Martínez, Calva Sánchez, and Vázquez Delgado, "Experiencias de incorporación laboral de migrantes haitianos en la zona metropolitana de Monterrey," 1-24.
[58] Ramírez Meda and Méndez Fierros, "Espera y atrapamiento en la frontera."

new insights into the state of Haitian migration to the Northern Mexico border. This will be laid out in three main sections, starting with the context of the aid distribution efforts that local residents carried-out in response to the migrant arrival to Acuña in September 2021. Then, I will detail how Mexicans perceived cultural and language differences between themselves and Haitians, as well as describe the social interactions and relationships that these groups constructed in the aftermath of the migrant influx. Lastly, I will discuss the impact that Haitians had on the local border economy through their active contribution as both consumers and workers in Acuña before I provide a chapter summary and conclusion. Overall, these findings reveal a plethora of complex and multi-faceted responses, interactions, and impacts which stemmed from Haitians' arrival and presence in Ciudad Acuña, highlighting how local perceptions reflect the nuances of community experiences in relation to migratory phenomenon at the border.

2.1 Media Analysis

For this media analysis, I examined a sampling of twelve articles from established and widely-read Mexican daily newspapers at three levels: municipal (Ciudad Acuña), state (Coahuila), and national (Mexico). Each article was written and published online between the dates of September 17th through 29th–the period of the main migrant influx and International Bridge closure. Through this analysis exercise, I found that media reporting prominently framed Haitian migrants at the Coahuila border as "vulnerable" or "at-risk." Drawing from ethnographic and policy studies that categorized Haitian migrants specifically as "vulnerable," as they faced various problems related to precarious, uncertain, or unfavorable situations during transit, I created a "vulnerability"

framing to apply to media reporting on the 2021 migrant influx to Ciudad Acuña.[59] I consider this as distinct from another common framing which positions migrants as "victims" that centers their exploitation, humiliation, and discrimination by more powerful persons or entities.[60] Both of these framings acknowledge a simplistic and one-dimensional nature that suppresses actual migrant complexity and individuality. My analysis furthermore found that news articles focused on international aid responses as well as state control and restriction of Haitians' movement in the state of Coahuila. These articles heavily featured quotes by Mexican government officials or political actors and involved few descriptions of migrant agency, while the voices and experiences of local community members went ignored.

Municipal, state, and national Mexican news sources all applied the migrant "vulnerability" framing in their depictions of Haitians at the Coahuila border during the later part of September 2021. Photographs of migrant families wearing facemasks and crossing back-and-forth across the Rio Grande were prevalent aspects of these articles, accompanied by descriptions of migrants "in search of food, crossing deep and dangerous waters, and carrying their young children on their shoulders."[61] This emphasized migrants' exposure to life-threatening risks such as hunger and drowning, a situation made more critical by the presence of small children who were likely less capable of protecting themselves from these types of harms. An article from state-level newspaper, *El Siglo de Torreón*, furthermore reported that migrants in Ciudad Acuña "found

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[59] Fresneda Camacho, "Haitianos hacia el sur, desde la vulnerabilidad hacia la incertidumbre," 699-696.; Hernández-Hernández and Medina Parra, "Repensando la vulnerabilidad de migrantes haitianos en tránsito por Reynosa, México," 168-197.
[60] Sabine Pfleger, "Las dos caras del framing mediático de la migración en México, 647-669.
[61] *Zócalo*, "Retornan migrantes; temen ser deportados," September 21, 2021, https://www.zocalo.com.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ACU_Local_21092021.pdf.

themselves without support in public spaces," suggesting that the streets of this Mexican border town were unsafe, inadequate, unkind, and not welcoming towards such a vulnerable transitory population.[62] Therefore, as reporting advanced, they required some form of safe haven that involved providing humanitarian assistance and protection by outside parties.

State and local media sources provided details of humanitarian response efforts carried-out in Ciudad Acuña by various international groups and organizations in support of Haitian migrants staying in the city. According to *El Siglo de Torreón*, migrants "decided" to camp in Braulio Fernández Park on the banks of the Rio Grande where they were met with well-known and established entities such as Doctors without Borders, the International Organization for Migration, UNICEF, and the Red Cross. These groups "provided food, drinks, and medicine…and installed mobile consult units to attend to migrant families, some of whom presented with urinary infections and respiratory problems."[63] Again, this reporting foregrounded migrant vulnerability while maintaining that they were dependent upon these outside and better-resourced entities to ensure their survival and health at the Coahuila border. National newspaper, *La Jornada*, also reported that city and state government officials from Texas and Coahuila met to "elaborate a plan for humanitarian rescue" of migrants at the border–underscoring Haitians "helplessness" and need for state intervention to save them from despair.[64]

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[62] René Arellano Gómez, "Organismos internacionales brindan ayuda a migrantes en Acuña," *El Siglo de Torreón*, September 22, 2021, https://www.elsiglocoahuila.mx/noticia/2021/organismos-internacionales-brindan-ayuda-a-migrantes-en-acuna.html?from=old.

[63] Ibid.

[64] Ramos, Leopoldo and Martín Sánchez Treviño, "Coahuila y Texas elaboran plan de rescate de haitianos," September 19, 2021, https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2021/09/19/politica/coahuila-y-texas-elaboran-plan-de-rescate-de-haitianos/.

However, it appears that this "rescue" plan prominently consisted of implementing stronger measures to control or restrict migrant movement in the state of Coahuila. Mexican government and political officials provided comments on various strategies and intentions to partner with local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies in tackling the "migratory crisis." The Attorney General of Coahuila, Gerardo Márquez Guevara, for example, stated that "in conjunction with the *Instituto Nacional de Migración*, document inspection of foreigners will be carried out to verify their legal status in the country;" meanwhile the mayor of Ciudad Acuña, Roberto De los Santos Vásquez, confirmed that "police will conduct highway sweeps to find and rescue incoming migrants."[65] This asserts the state's role in controlling the migrant influx in their deployment of authorities who have the power to determine the fate and movement of individuals transiting through the area. Most notably, while several other government voices were featured in these articles, I found no direct quotes from migrants themselves nor from border residents–problematically suppressing migrant complexity and seriously downplaying their compelling daily interactions with people living and working in Acuña at the time.

2.2 Material Aid Response from the Local Community

While Mexican media sources emphasized international humanitarian assistance operations, residents highlighted impressive levels of localized collective action and citizen participation in distributing aid to Haitian migrants in Ciudad Acuña. Much of this

[65] Ibid.
Zócalo, "Refuerzan estrategia para crisis migratoria," September 21, 2021, https://www.zocalo.com.mx/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/ACU_Local_21092021.pdf.

was carried-out within the landscape of aid groups and structures already existing in the city, which then included approximately fifteen churches, five service-based community organizations, and seven government-funded community centers which acted as temporary shelters for migrants who remained in the area after Mexican authorities cleared the encampment at Braulio Fernández Park.[66] Study participants gave context to the situation by discussing the governments' passivity and inadequacy in addressing the mass migration, and also acknowledged the individuals and groups who stepped in as well as the various resources they provided to fill the gaps and meet the needs of Haitians staying in Acuña. They contribute an overall uplifting side of the migrant influx story, perceiving a sense of unity and solidarity that shaped and reflected how Mexican border residents "received" Haitian newcomers into the community.

To provide context to the situation, study participants commented on the lack of state involvement in assisting the thousands of Haitians who arrived and stayed in Ciudad Acuña in September 2021 and in the months that followed. My interview data revealed instances of uncertainty, unpreparedness, and inadequacy in official management of the migratory phenomenon. Alberto, a school principal in his forties who moved to Acuña from Jalisco as a teenager, claimed that he saw the "authorities in panic mode, not knowing what to do," while Brenda, an Acuña-born and raised civil society leader in her thirties, commented that "it was badly managed by the municipal government. *Sí, se salió de sus manos totalmente*" (it totally fell out of their hands).[67] Residents shared that the city did not have designated shelters or sufficient structures in place, which ultimately led migrants to establish the encampment in Braulio Fernández Park where hundreds stayed

[66] Arzaluz Solano, Uribe Salas, and Hernández, "En búsqueda de refugio."
[67] Alberto, Interview by author, AirBNB in Del Rio, August 29, 2023; Brenda, Interview by author.

for several weeks after their initial arrival. Most often, though, residents recognized an outright absence of government response, as José, a *maquiladora* worker in his twenties who has lived in Acuña his whole life, described: "I didn't see the local authorities anywhere. They didn't take any actions for the well-being of the migrants! Instead of saying, 'we will help them,' it was more like 'let's wait a bit and we'll just see what happens.'"[68] Participants relayed feelings of upset and frustration at the municipalities' seemingly passive attitude and negligence in caring for Haitians in Acuña. Political scientists previously documented the states' absence from implementing sufficient migratory management protocols in Tijuana, Baja California, in 2016, but these findings contrast with Mexican media reporting which emphasized cross-border government cooperation and planning to "rescue" migrants arriving in Coahuila.[69] Oswaldo, a photographer in his forties who was born in Fort Stockton, Texas and moved to Acuña in the late 1990's, provided some insight on the matter, relaying that "during the Haitian encampment, the mayor of Acuña and the mayor of Del Rio had a falling-out because they had different views of the situation."[70] Although Oswaldo did not elaborate further on this, it is possible that Mexican officials either did not follow through on these plans or were unable to successfully realize their objectives.

While authorities remained passive, the local community actively worked to coordinate a material aid response effort in solidarity with Haitian migrants who were present in Ciudad Acuña. Study participants accredited various local groups as well as individual families and residents in receiving the newcomers with caring and supportive

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[68] José, Interview by author, House in Ciudad Acuña. August 19, 2023.
[69] Miranda and Silva Hernández, "Gestión desbordada," 1-21.; Leopoldo and Sánchez Treviño, "Coahuila y Texas elaboran plan de rescate de haitianos."
[70] Oswaldo, Interview by author, Val Verde Public Library in Del Rio, July 27, 2023.

offerings that included food, water, clothing, blankets, hygiene products, and toys for children. When asked about the community reaction to the migrant arrival, Fernando, a radio show producer in his fifties who was born and raised in Acuña, stated: "we were very kind to the Haitians. We have always supported migrants who arrived at this border, whether they came from Mexico or other countries. It was the same with the Haitians…Citizens, non-profit organizations, the churches, and local businesses all got involved in helping them."[71] To justify these collective efforts, *Acuñenses* invoked a long-standing tradition of receiving and welcoming migrants at the border; a sentiment also prevalent in ethnographic interviews with migrant aid groups in Tijuana from 2016.[72] Fernando and other study participants referenced the numerous types of entities that supported Haitians during their stay in Acuña. For example, Brenda commented on the community-level response as well as her personal reaction to the migrant arrival, sharing: "first, I asked myself, 'what can I do for them? How can I help?' Because there were a lot of babies and children…There was a lot of solidarity with the migrants. Everybody here, including organizations, different sectors, helped."[73] Although residents perceived a sense of "solidarity," reflected in their collective actions, they consistently viewed Haitians as in need of "help." This notion echoes the migrant "vulnerability" framing found in Mexican media, which assumes that migrants are in a perpetually dependent state, diminishing their autonomy in making choices and their ability to hold power over their journey. Despite these initial community perceptions, residents would

[71] Fernando, Interview by author, Noticias en la Web office in Ciudad Acuña, August 1, 2023.
[72] Silva Hernández and Padilla Orozco, "Instituciones en crisis y acción colectiva frente a las migraciones globales," 77-113.
[73] Brenda, Interview by author.

later recognize more of Haitians' agency within border society, for example in their economic activities, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

A compelling component of the community-level response was the employment of social media in soliciting and fulfilling requests for outside resources. According to study participants from Ciudad Acuña, platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter played an important part in the migrant influx story. As Alberto explained:

> The trend at that time was social media, not so much television or journalism. Citizens and churches "went live" on Facebook, asking their followers to send help for the migrants. This made an impact because a lot of people throughout Mexico were attentive to these transmissions. Everyday, I saw people posting online to share information about the Haitians and what was going on at the border.[74]

While Acuña residents perceived social media's role as overshadowing that of traditional mass media formats, they also highlighted it as a means to promote awareness and share on-the-ground developments in real-time to viewers in both Mexico and the United States. Pablo, a pastor in his forties who recently moved from Acuña to Del Rio as an adult after gaining U.S. permanent residency, also noticed this tendency:

> Every time somebody helped, it went public. Social media was really good because you were aware without official communication or you could ask online about what was needed. "Look, someone donated a ton of water, they don't need anymore water right now. Maybe we should send hot food." Even people in San Antonio were watching and sending donations![75]

This points to border residents' autonomy and resourcefulness in their ability to recognize needs, organize, and carry-out relief efforts independent of government or law enforcement involvement, even under these challenging and restrictive circumstances. Social media also provided an opportunity to extend the "reach" of this cause,

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[74] Alberto, Interview by author.
[75] Pablo, Interview by author, Camino Verdad y Vida Church office in Del Rio, July 27, 2023.

transcending the national borderline as support from the U.S. arrived in the form of both monetary and material donations of basic necessities, producing a seemingly positive impact for Haitians in Mexico.

Similarly, churches and other local groups in Acuña drew upon pre-existing cross-border connections with entities in Texas to further facilitate resource distribution to migrants. For example, Brenda shared: "I am part of a network that works with organizations in Del Rio and San Antonio. They reached out to me so that they could donate and send items…I remained in consistent communication with them."[76] In this case, Brenda relayed that CBP allowed one of her contacts in Del Rio to utilize the shut-down International Bridge to transport materials into Acuña. This contact, Shon, a missionary and migrant shelter worker in his fifties who moved from Iowa to Del Rio in 2015, corroborated the story in my interview with him, explaining: "they granted me special permission to take five vans full of supplies. We drove to the exact borderline on the bridge and handed everything off to Mexican authorities."[77] Apparently, official personnel facilitated this effort, though if it was in fact part of the aforementioned government "rescue plan," it went unmentioned in news articles. This circumstance was undoubtedly outside of the norm in terms of cross-border collective action, as other study participants mentioned scenarios that did not necessitate official intervention. For example, Gabriel, a musician in his twenties who moved to Acuña from the capital city of Torreón, Coahuila, as a child, stated: "at my church, there is a program that maintains communication between missionaries in the United States and Mexico…I think our church leaders did a good job because they used that connection to bring in food and

[76] Brenda, Interview by author.
[77] Shon, Interview by author, Val Verde Public Library in Del Rio, August 10, 2023.

clothing for the migrants during the months that they were here."[78] Such groups effectively gathered outside assistance via their use of pre-established cross-border relationships and programming, but other instances demonstrated more internalized efforts and organizing from within the immediate community.

Some *Acuñenses* formed more contained and localized ad-hoc groups in support of Haitian migrants, as not all residents possessed existing connections in the United States or a feasible way to obtain supplies from across the border due to limitations with transportation and visa documentation. Despite these potential barriers, study participant María, a *maquiladora* worker in her twenties born and raised in Acuña, still wanted to engage in the collective action efforts. She shared: "at my workplace, we prepared *colectas* to take to the migrants camped in the park and downtown…My co-workers and I got together to collect canned food for them."[79] This exemplifies the initiative and organizing efforts that transpired amongst Acuña's local labor force in attending to perceived needs of migrants staying in the city. Meanwhile, other residents banded with political parties, as Carlos, a maintenance worker in his twenties who moved to Acuña from Veracruz as a small child, explained:

> A lot of people helped the Haitians and organized *despensas* (groceries) for them, including political parties like the *PRI*. I participated with them, passing out sandwiches, coffee, and sodas. We went out and bought the cheapest ingredients from a store that charges by weight, because there were so many migrants. I think we did something good and productive for them.[80]

Though study participants were not directly questioned about their political party affiliations, Carlos voluntarily shared this instance that places the *PRI*'s responding

[78] Gabriel, Interview by author, House in Ciudad Acuña, August 1, 2023.
[79] María, Interview by author, House in Ciudad Acuña, August 19, 2023.
[80] Carlos, Interview by author, AirBNB in Del Rio, July 29, 2023.

efforts in a favorable light. This was the only mention of a specific Mexican political party in my interview data, which, as we will see in the next chapter, greatly contrasts with the conversations that I had with Del Rians who often centered Democrat and Republican figures in their narratives and readily clarified which party they saw as more competent in managing migration and border issues.

Not only did more formal groups participate in gathering and distributing aid to Haitian migrants in Acuña, but individual residents also engaged in an informal and impromptu manner. These actions occurred rather spontaneously on the streets and in other public spaces. For example, Brenda shared: "I saw people offering to buy stuff for migrants at the Oxxo. They said, 'I'll buy you a pizza, or a hamburger.'"[81] When possible, *Acuñenses* chose to modify part of their daily routines, such as visiting the convenience store, to include and accommodate Haitians who they perceived as "in-need" within the immediate vicinity. In other cases, migrants approached residents to solicit extra support or monetary resources, as Alberto experienced: "I was driving and stopped at a *semáforo* (stoplight). A migrant came up to my car and said 'help, please,' and I helped him because it touched my heart. Mexicans are very sentimental people. It doesn't matter if you only have two *pesos*, you give it to that person who needs it."[82] Alberto's perception of Mexicans as "sentimental" not only shaped his personal experience with the migratory event in his community but also guided his decision to provide assistance to a Haitian migrant in-need and on the streets. Pablo noticed similar occurrences, stating: "Hispanics and Haitians are the same because they knock on doors! Haitians were going up to people's houses and into local businesses in Acuña, asking for

[81] Brenda, Interview by author.
[82] Alberto, Interview by author.

help. That would never happen in Del Rio because the United States community is not accustomed to that."[83] Similarly to Alberto's previous statement, Pablo perceives a mutual behavior between "Hispanics" and Haitians (knocking on doors) which reflects the larger community's experience and acceptance of migrants' support-seeking methods. He also paints people in the U.S. as unwilling or unable to help migrants in this way due to a cultural difference or mindset. Though this may be true, it is also necessary to consider how CBP and Border Patrol tactics likely played a role in limiting Del Rians' capacity to engage in direct aid distribution for Haitians, as officials maintained a physical degree of separation between these populations through migrant detention conditions under the International Bridge as well as through the implementation of the port-of-entry closure.

My interview data revealed very few instances of *Acuñenses* either unable or unwilling to support Haitians arriving at the border. Apparently, Mexican officials intervened in specific settings and blocked residents from providing aid to migrants, most notably along the highway connecting Piedras Negras and Ciudad Acuña. Brenda shared details about these occurrences when asked about the modes of transportation that Haitians used to reach the city, claiming:

> At first, they arrived in buses, but then authorities started placing restrictions on bus companies and fining them for transporting migrants…I saw families walking on the side of the highway, but I couldn't give them rides or even a bottle of water because it would have gotten me into legal trouble. It was tough for me because I am dedicated to serving others.[84]

[83] Pablo, Interview by author.
[84] Brenda, Interview by author.

Gabriel also relayed that very few migrants traveled in cars or buses at that time because it was "illegal" for Mexican citizens to transport them.[85] Though this may be true, it is also possible that Haitians preferred to travel in more visible manners such as pedestrian caravans to ensure group protection, as social scientists observed with Central American groups traveling through Mexico in 2018.[86] Aside from official-imposed restrictions, the data also uncovered some anti-immigrant and nativist attitudes amongst the Acuña community that likely shaped and reflected some residents' decisions to opt out of the collective action efforts. Sergio, a freelance journalist in his sixties who has lived in Acuña his whole life, insisted that "Mexico does not have the capacity to receive people from other countries. We need to attend to our own problems first. A lot of the migrants did not deserve the help because they tried to invade our sovereignty!"[87] His perspective represents an outlier in the conversations I had with Ciudad Acuña residents, though it should be mentioned that previous historical studies have revealed a much more pervasive anti-immigrant sentiment and policy in Mexico and the borderlands.[88] It is unknown if the lack of xenophobic views in my interviews with residents of Ciudad Acuña represents a recent shift towards acceptance of migrants or if participants preferred to hide these attitudes to paint themselves in a good light. Nevertheless, as we have seen

[85] Gabriel, Interview by author.
[86] Varela, "México, de 'frontera vertical' a país tapón," 49-76.
[87] F, Sergio, Interview by author, Noticias en la Web office in Ciudad Acuña, August 1, 2023.
[88] David Scott FitzGerald and David Cook-Martín, *Culling the Masses*: *The Democratic Origins of Racist Immigration Policy in the Americas* (Harvard University Press, 2014); Dieter George Berninger, *Mexican attitudes towards immigration, 1821-1857* (The University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1972); María Elena Mishima Ota, *'Destino México,' Un estudio de las migraciones asiáticas a México, siglos XIX y XX* (El Colegio de México-Centro de Estudios de Asia y África, México, 1997); Marta María Saade Granados, "Inmigración de una 'raza prohibida' Afro-estadounidenses en México, 1924–1940," *Aztlán: A Journal of Chicano Studies* 34, no. 1 (2009): 169-192, https://online.ucpress.edu/aztlan/article/34/1/169/198230; Moisés González Navarro, *Los extranjeros en México y los mexicanos en el extranjero*, *1821-1970* (Colegio de México, Centro de Estudios Históricos, 1993).

in the narratives presented, the vast majority of *Acuñenses* interviewed contributed positive examples of individuals and groups utilizing cross-border and community resources to assist Haitians to the best of their ability during their extended stay at the Coahuila border. This aligns with the trend of citizen participation and migrant aid efforts that researchers observed in Tijuana in previous years, as these stories of unity and solidarity reveal resilience and adaptability to migration influxes that can be instructive and hopeful in meeting future instances.[89]

Figure 4. Hundreds of Haitian migrants camped in Braulio Fernández Park for months after their initial arrival to Ciudad Acuña where local community members and organizations carried out a material aid response, providing basic necessities such as food and clothing (photo by Mitchelle Grant, October 2024).

[89] Silva Hernández and Padilla Orozco, "Instituciones en crisis y acción colectiva frente a las migraciones globales," 77-113.

Figure 5. After Mexican authorities cleared the camp at Braulio Fernández Park, migrants relocated to temporary shelter sites such as this municipally funded community center in Colonia Santa Martha (photo by author, August 2023).

2.3 Cultural, Language, and Social Interactions

These material aid distribution activities provided ample opportunities for Haitian migrants and local Acuña residents to connect and establish relationships with each other. As Haitians remained in the community for several months after their initial arrival in September 2021, their sustained presence became increasingly integrated and interwoven into the daily life and fabric of Ciudad Acuña. Local residents' perceptions and interactions with migrants contributed to shaping new and nuanced cultural and social dynamics at the border, revealing more layered and evolving impacts of migration in this community. Highlighting stories not covered by traditional media, study participants relayed details about perceived cultural differences, overcoming language barriers, and

the spectrum of social interactions that they directly experienced with Haitian migrants during their extended stay at the Coahuila border. Overall, these narratives underscore a sense of "coexistence" between these two groups as they lived side-by-side and consequently cultivated greater empathy and understanding in the space and performance of regular daily life activities.

Residents perceived cultural differences between themselves and Haitians from the outset of their arrival, most notably within the realms of food and clothing. The local community focused much of their attention on providing such necessities to the migrants during their stay, however, according to study participants, not all of these efforts were accepted or appreciated, perhaps due to group preferences. When asked about the types of items donated during the aid distribution period, Carlos shared that "people were giving food to the migrants, like *frijoles*. But they didn't want the beans. They only wanted meat, so they went and bought their own plates of chicken instead."[90] Not only does this allude to differences in dietary habits and cuisine, but it also indicates Haitians' agency in choosing to accept or reject offerings while actively pursuing other options to satisfy their tastes and inclinations. In the months that followed the initial migrant arrival, Michael, a grant writer in his twenties who was born in Dallas, Texas, and moved to Acuña as a child, also observed Haitians' distinct culinary preferences as they remained in the community and carried-out their daily routines. He remarked: "when the Haitians were here, they didn't eat out at the restaurants because they weren't used to Mexican food. I mainly saw them in the supermarkets buying the ingredients that they were more familiar with. Their eating habits are different, their lifestyle too."[91] While it may be true

[90] Carlos, Interview by author.
[91] Michael, Interview by author, Val Verde Public Library in Del Rio, August 7, 2023.

that migrants opted to frequent grocery stores instead of restaurants due to access to familiar ingredients, it is also likely that items were less-expensive in these stores which might have influenced their decision to shop rather than dine out. Although Michael did not specify the types of food that Haitians ate while at the border, these anecdotes revolving around migrants' diet also intersect with their contribution and impact on the local economy–a facet which will be discussed in a subsequent section of this chapter.

Residents further noted Haitians' apparently disparate style of dress (or lack thereof) upon their entrance into the Acuña community. Again, this initially came to light during the material aid distribution efforts, as migrants not only declined certain types of food offerings but also clothing donations, as Gabriel observed: "the migrants came very well-dressed (*bien vestidos*)! It's not a bad thing, but it says a lot because they were all wearing clothing *de buena marca* (brand clothing) and they discarded everything else they were given. They only wanted things that were good quality (*lo bueno*)."[92] This echoes historical accounts of migrants who returned to Haiti in the 1930's after working the seasonal sugarcane harvest in Cuba, as this newly-monied group apparently purchased and donned high-quality clothing to flaunt their elevated social status in Port-au-Prince.[93] It should be noted that those interviewed for my study generally described Haitians' clothing habits in a binary; either as very well-dressed or completely naked. This contrast is reflective of the diversity of community perceptions of Haitian migrants who stayed in Ciudad Acuña. For example, Verónica, a hospital cleaner in her sixties who recently moved to Del Rio but still crosses into Acuña multiple times per week to visit her son, relayed: "When the Haitians were there, I often saw them naked in the river

[92] Gabriel, Interview by author.
[93] Casey, *Empire's Guestworkers*.

near where they stayed in the park. I don't disapprove of them or get scared but it was just something that Mexicans aren't used to seeing."[94] Though she claims indifference towards these instances of Haitians' public nudity, she also "others" them in a way that is consistent with psychoanalytic theory associating Blacks with nakedness and therefore animalistic or uncivilized qualities.[95] However, it is unclear whether Haitians' tendency to bathe in the Rio Grande represents real customary and cultural differences between them and Mexicans or if migrants carried themselves in this manner due to limited access to bathroom and washing facilities during their stay.

In addition to mentioning food and clothing differences, residents also spoke of broader cross-cultural connections and learning opportunities in relation to their interactions with migrants who stayed in Ciudad Acuña. When asked about how the Haitians' sustained presence impacted the local community, Tania, a baker in her twenties born and raised in Acuña, concluded: "it was a matter of different cultures meeting and introducing different ways of thinking. But I don't think it was a problem, *si no cuestión de choque cultural, más bien*. It was something beautiful."[96] This perceived "culture shock" was not necessarily a negative experience for local residents, but rather reflected their greater understanding of Haitians and the migrant experience. As Alberto shared: "We were living alongside them and getting to know their culture which is very different from Mexican culture. It was something new for our city! We had never known French culture before this. I appreciated this experience because I gained new knowledge about them."[97] Although they sometimes conflated Haitian with French culture, residents

[94] Verónica, Interview by author, House in Del Rio, August 21, 2023.
[95] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (Grove Press, 1967).
[96] Tania, Interview by author, House in Ciudad Acuña, August 19, 2023.
[97] Alberto, Interview by author.

such as Alberto and Tania nevertheless expressed gratitude for this cross-cultural learning opportunity and perceived this as an overall positive impact resulting from the migrant presence in the Acuña community.

Language was perhaps the most significant cultural factor at-play during the Haitian migrant influx of September 2021 and throughout the months that followed. As gathered from my interview data in this area, study participants detailed the multiple languages that Haitians spoke, including differing tones and inflection patterns, as well as the challenges that Mexicans encountered in communicating with this population and the ways in which they surpassed these barriers in conjunction with migrants. Undoubtedly, Haitians contributed towards shaping and changing atmospheric elements within border society through their introduction of foreign languages into the community, as Alberto noticed in daily life situations:

> I would go to restaurants with my friends to eat and chat, and at the next table there would be Haitians speaking French! In Acuña, it's very normal to go out and hear people speaking not only Spanish but also English, because we get visitors from the United States. But, in this situation, there were Mexicans, Americans, and Haitians all in the same restaurant and I'd be hearing three distinct languages at once![98]

As perceived by study participants, the arrival of Haitians at the Coahuila border both shaped and reflected a shift from a traditionally bilingual environment to a now multilingual one, as migrants apparently introduced various new languages into the community, such as French, "African," and "*otros idiomas*" (other languages) that residents could not identify. Interestingly, my interview data revealed no mention of migrants speaking Haitian creole during their stay, which again could suggest residents conflating this official language of Haiti with its' other official language, French.

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[98] Ibid.

Outside of discussing these "other languages," study participants also spoke about the migrants' Spanish and English-speaking capabilities. Overall, the data uncovered quite a bit of variance in relation to how much or how well Haitians communicated in these languages, ranging from "not at all" to "fully fluent," pointing to nuanced local perceptions of Haitian migrants in the community. Shon provided the most background information and nuanced insight into the factors that likely contributed to these linguistic conditions, explaining:

> The Haitians left their country due to the earthquake and ended up in South America. There, they worked to build infrastructure for the World Cup, and also went to Chile to do mining. Then, some immigration thing happened and they got kicked out, so they started their migration through other Latin American countries. That's why all of them speak Spanish. It's broken Spanish. The women don't speak much Spanish, but the men do because they were the ones who were always working.[99]

As we can see, Shon attributes Haitians' language skills to their time living and working in Latin America, though he gauges them at a lower proficiency level overall and furthermore makes a gendered distinction between men and women's Spanish-speaking skills and communication abilities.

Related to language, study participants also noticed certain inflections and tones in the way that the migrants spoke, reacting either negatively to this or, in some cases, relaying more acceptance and understanding, indicative of diverse community perceptions in this area. Timothy, a missionary in his eighties who moved from Washington to Del Rio as a child, labeled the Haitians' speech as "aggressive" which apparently "turned off" a lot of Mexicans who tried to communicate with them.[100]

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[99] Shon, Interview by author.
[100] Timothy, Interview by author, Faith Mission International office in Del Rio, July 27, 2023.

Alejandra, a non-profit director in her forties who was born and raised in Del Rio, further commented on these interactions, stating:

> I remember shelter volunteers would say that the migrants were yelling and that they were too "aggressive." But, I was thinking, no, they just speak differently. There was an incident where the Del Rio police were going to arrest one of the migrants because they thought he was stirring people up. He was actually trying to inform them because he was the only one there who knew English.[101]

A previous case study conducted in the early 1990's at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, yielded similar findings; advancing that Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) officers often punished Haitian detainees who spoke in a "loud" and "passionate" manner that they perceived as "misbehaving" and "acting up."[102] These situations exemplify U.S. authorities' linguistic misunderstandings or assumptions about Haitians that have historically held negative ramifications for those refugees in custody. In the context of daily life at the border, study participants from Ciudad Acuña also observed Haitians struggling to order food at restaurants, while other residents perceived Haitians as "difficult to understand" and therefore avoided talking to migrants altogether. Despite this, these groups found ways to overcome language barriers and communication difficulties. Alberto shared that Haitians who remained in the city started teaching French and English classes for local residents to improve mutual understanding, while Verónica, Tania, and Yoly observed that migrants themselves made an effort to learn Spanish and in some cases could rely on reading and writing due to written similarities amongst romance languages.[103]

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[101] Alejandra, Interview by author, Casa de la Cultura office in Del Rio, August 8, 2023.
[102] Jennie Smith, "Policies of Protection: The Interdiction, Repatriation and Treatment of Haitian Refugees since the Coup d'Etat of September 1991," *Journal of Haitian Studies* 1, no. 1 (1995): 57-74, https://www.jstor.org/stable/41715032.
[103] Alberto, interview by author; Verónica, interview by author; Tania, interview by author; Yoly, Interview by author, AirBNB in Del Rio, August 27, 2023.

While subverting language barriers, local residents and Haitian newcomers engaged in a wealth of social exchanges and relationships both during and after the initial migrant influx to Ciudad Acuña. Study participants illuminated a spectrum of interactions between these groups which included public greetings, chatting and socializing, and establishing friendships and romantic bonds. Aside from relaying details about these direct forms of contact, residents also spoke more broadly about Haitians' social incorporation into the community and their "coexistence" alongside Mexican individuals and families. In general, these findings align with results from other ethnographic studies conducted in the mid to late 2010's with Haitian migrants residing in various Northern Mexican cities who apparently "integrated" successfully into these receiving societies.[104] Despite these positive cases, my data furthermore revealed a few negative views about Haitian migrants often tied to anxieties relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, which residents understandably perceived as a real health threat at the time. Overall, these narratives highlight how social interactions and relationships formed between residents and migrants contributed towards shaping more layered and evolving impacts of migration in the Acuña community.

At the most superficial level of interaction, Haitian migrants and local residents engaged with each other through the social act of *saludando* (greeting). Mainly occurring in public spaces and on the streets, this type of exchange provided opportunities for these groups to build mutual familiarity in an informal manner. Carlos recounted his own personal experience with this, stating "I would bump into the same guys downtown *(nos*

[104] Garbey Burey, "Estrategias migratorias en el tránsito de emigrantes haitianos hacia Estados Unidos," 93-123; Méroné and Castillo, "Integración de los inmigrantes haitianos de la oleada a México del 2016;" Ramírez Meda and Méndez Fierros, "Espera y atrapamiento en la frontera."

topábamos). *Nos saludamos*, 'hey brother! How are you?' We bumped into each other just like anyone else would."[105] This suggests not only a casual familiarity, but also Mexicans' inclusion of migrants into social norms that are considered as typical and applicable in a public setting.[106] Meanwhile, other residents engaged in regular conversations with migrants in these communal and public spheres. One of the most compelling stories of socializing between these groups came from Gabriel, who commented: "I knew one of the Haitians and we would often chat in the *plaza*. I even sang with him because I always had my guitar with me. My father was also there, so the three of us played music together."[107] Here, we encounter a case of the social and the cultural realms intersecting. Whereas most study participants observed the cultural *differences* between them and migrants, Gabriel provides a hopeful view of these groups' ability to unify and create shared experiences through art and cultural practice. This case may be slightly different from that of Haitian residing in Tijuana in 2016 who showed signs of "appropriating" Mexican culture including in the area of art.[108]

Through participation in social activities, residents constructed a deeper understanding of Haitian migrants and often developed a sense of empathy towards these individuals. Study participants relayed that they "got to know" those who remained in Acuña in terms of their personal histories and migration trajectories. For some, these exchanges were particularly impactful, as Gabriel remarked:

> It was sad to hear their stories. I tried to imagine what it was like to be in their situation. Some of them were lawyers and engineers, but they had to sell their

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[105] Carlos, Interview by author.
[106] Rafael Areiza Londoño and Alejandro David García Valencia, "¿Qué Significa Saludar?" in *La perspectiva no etnocentrista de la cortesía*, ed. Diane Bravo (Switzerland: Asociación Internacional para los Estudios de la Comunicación en Español, 2018), 71-85.
[107] Gabriel, Interview by author.
[108] Ramírez Meda and Méndez Fierros, "Espera y atrapamiento en la frontera."

> homes and belongings because they faced difficult situations in Haiti. They told me that they had friends who didn't survive the journey. Hearing their stories, knowing that some didn't make it–that was the most impactful.[109]

This encapsulates some of the most common perceptions that residents held in regards to Haitian migrants, as many viewed this population as part of a monied, educated, and professional class. As we will see in the next section of this chapter, study participants attributed Haitians' active participation in the local economy to the supposed fact that they had previously sold their properties and possessions before leaving Haiti and therefore arrived at the border with sufficient financial resources to spend. It should furthermore be noted that while residents claimed they "got to know" the Haitians in this way, my interview data did not yield any cases in which study participants explicitly shared their own personal details with migrants, suggesting that these exchanges were often non-reciprocal.

Perhaps the most profound level of social interactions between local residents and Haitian migrants involved the establishment of friendships, neighborly and family-like ties, as well as romantic relationships. Both Carlos and Gabriel remarked that they "made friends" with some of the migrants (*hicimos amigos*), while Michael mentioned that he had heard cases of individuals becoming romantically entwined (*historias de amor*) and Tania shared that she "got to know" a Haitian mother with two children who had moved into her *colonia*.[110] Alberto detailed how his family became particularly close to a migrant named Fortunato, relaying: "my parents treated him like a son. He's now in the United States, trying to get his citizenship there. He still keeps in contact with us, too."[111]

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[109] Gabriel, Interview by author.
[110] Carlos, Interview by author; Gabriel, Interview by author; Michael, Interview by author; Tania, Interview by author.
[111] Alberto, Interview by author.

This case reveals a sustainable aspect to these relationships, as apparently some individuals remained in communication even after the migrants eventually crossed the border and departed the area. Outside of the individual and personal spheres, study participants also spoke more broadly about Haitians' "integration" into the community, as Brenda noted: "it was impossible not to integrate! Throughout the city, there were Mexican families coexisting (*conviviendo*) with Haitian families. That's how we got to know them and their culture." Aside from gaining a deeper understanding of Haitians and their way of life, this reference to the concept of *convivir* underscores a sense of coexistence amongst residents and migrants as they lived, worked, and carried-out their daily activities in a side-by-side manner.

Evidently, not all residents of Ciudad Acuña readily accepted the influx of Haitian migrants and their prolonged presence within the city, again pointing to more nuanced and layered community perceptions. Study participants cited real public fears and perceived dangers of interacting with migrants as potential carriers of COVID-19 or other diseases, though none relayed any details regarding actual outbreaks amongst the local population. These views may reflect United States pandemic policy which justified the exclusion of Haitian migrants by espousing racist ideas about disease, as legal scholars and social scientists have suggested.[112] My interview data also revealed general feelings of anger and insecurity, as some residents apparently "took it badly" and wanted the migrants to "go back to Haiti."[113] Furthermore, Diego, José, and Tania all mentioned that certain community members discriminated against migrants, "abused" them, were unkind to them, or said racist jokes about them; which researchers have found to be the case for

[112] McConnville, "An Old Illness," 360-380.
[113] José, Interview by author; Tania, Interview by author.

Haitians living in Reynosa, as well.[114] While instances of discrimination and abuse may have existed within these contexts, Acuña residents discussed these negative topics to a lesser degree compared to more positive stories of building understanding and empathy through social relationships with migrants, despite the cultural and language differences between them.

Figure 6. Plaza Benjamín Canales in downtown Ciudad Acuña where Haitian migrants camped and also participated in social interactions and relationship-building with local residents (photo by author, August 2023).

2.4 Haitians' Impact on the Local Economy

In addition to engaging in new sociocultural interactions and relationships alongside local residents, Haitian migrants also made economic contributions to border

[114] Diego, Interview by author; José, Interview by author; Tania, Interview by author; Hernández-Hernández and Medina Parra, "Repensando la vulnerabilidad de migrantes haitianos en tránsito por Reynosa, México," 168-197.

society as both consumers and workers during their stay in Ciudad Acuña. While Mexican media sources emphasized Haitians' dependence on international organizations and government agencies for basic supplies such as food and water, local perceptions gleaned from my interview data recognize migrants' agency in obtaining these resources from local businesses in addition to arriving with their own capital and respective social status from their home country. Aside from providing details on the great variety of products and services that Haitians purchased, as well as identifying the locations where these transactions occurred, study participants also discussed the types of jobs that migrants most often took and their perceived overall economic impact on the community. Though these narratives mainly highlight Haitians' active contribution and participation in this realm, residents also observed some cases of economic discrimination and exploitation against migrants throughout the initial influx stages and in the months that followed. Despite this, study participants overwhelmingly considered the Haitians' presence in Ciudad Acuña to be beneficial for the local economy as will become evident in the following section.

From the outset of their arrival in late September 2021, migrants entered into existing consumer markets in Acuña and, in some cases, created conditions which caused businesses to acquiesce to the newcomers' demands for specific products and services. Study participants most often pointed to Haitians' immediate impact on the local restaurant industry, as migrants frequented these types of locations and bought large quantities of *comida hecha* (cooked, hot food) to meet their needs and satisfy their dietary preferences. This contradicts previous participants' mentions of Haitians preferring to shop in grocery stores for familiar ingredients, though clearly this situation was more

nuanced. Echoing Gabriel's previous perception of Haitians as only accepting of good-quality clothing items, Sergio observed that "the migrants bought the best food in Acuña's restaurants! Chicken, food plates, *tacos tapatios*…they bought bags and bags full of cooked food!"[115] Media photographs indeed included depictions of migrants crossing the Rio Grande into Del Rio while carrying these ubiquitous white plastic bags, assumedly filled with styrofoam containers of the food that they purchased in Ciudad Acuña, but these sources failed to mention how this sudden, high volume of new customers contributed towards small, locally-owned restaurants' ability to survive and thrive during the initial migrant influx period and the COVID-19 pandemic. As we will see, study participants by-and-large viewed this activity as a beneficial opportunity for businesses to generate profits, even while they faced the temporary loss of cross-border clientele from the United States due to the ten-day closure of the International Bridge.

Aside from purchasing food in restaurants, Haitians also frequented the small "mom and pop" type of shops throughout Acuña to procure goods and supplies needed for their extended stay in the city. Study participants identified a plethora of items which Haitians bought from these stores including water, sodas and other bottled beverages, packaged snack foods, clothing, tents, mattresses, cots, blankets, and various hygiene products. When asked about how these small businesses fared during and after the migrant arrival, Oswaldo shared: "small shops especially profited, because that's where the Haitians would buy their food and water…Even the *paleteros* who take their carts to sell popsicles, that was some of the busiest days of their careers! They were constantly having to go back and refill. Some sold up to five carts per day!"[116] Haitians' demand for

[115] Sergio, Interview by author.
[116] Oswaldo, Interview by author.

certain products clearly provided an economic boost for these existing small business ventures in Acuña, both formal and informal. In some cases, residents' perceptions of migrants' wants and needs shaped and reflected new economic opportunities to sell specialized services to this population. For instance, Fernando affirmed Oswaldo's previous observation, as well as added new insight into the evolving situation, stating: "yes, the small businesses benefited. *Los que traían dinero, compraron* (the migrants who had money made purchases)...Some people parked their cars by the *plaza* and rented their phone chargers to migrants who were there! They made between fifty to one hundred *pesos* per phone."[117] This economic consumption can be compared to the mutual aid efforts discussed above in that Haitians acquired the same types of goods and services from both of these outlets and seemingly benefitted. It should be noted that study participants also mentioned that Haitians' spent money in larger convenience store chains, such as Oxxo and Six, as well as regional supermarkets, like Soriana and Gutiérrez, but these transactions did not seem to make as much as a direct or visual impact on the local community compared to those that took place in small businesses.

Aside from buying food, water, and other various items from restaurants and stores, migrants also spent money on hotel accommodations during their stay at the Coahuila border. As a city with a long history of tourism, Ciudad Acuña has at least a dozen hotel options available for visitors, most of which are located in the central zone. Study participants commented that these hotels were "at-capacity" for months after the arrival of Haitian migrants in the area, as Alberto described: "the majority of Haitians who came to the city spent money. *Hubo un* boom *económico de repente* (there was a

[117] Fernando, Interview by author, Noticias en la Web office in Ciudad Acuña, August 1, 2023.

sudden economic boom). The very old hotels that usually rent their rooms for cheap were suddenly full!"[118] While some migrants contributed towards this stimulation of the local hotel industry, others rented rooms, apartments, and homes directly from residents. When asked about whether any Haitians have remained in the area since the time of the initial influx, José responded and highlighted a mutually-beneficial theme: "yes, a lot of them stayed here and are now renting houses from people. It's a good thing because the migrants have a stable place to live and the homeowner makes a little extra money."[119] Though study participants also mentioned a few new shelter sites that opened in Acuña to accommodate migrants, it appears that these individuals exercised agency in choosing the housing option that would best suit the needs of themselves and their families during their stay in the area–though this was likely dependent upon the availability of sufficient financial resources to pay for rent, hotel booking fees, or other utility expenses.

While some residents narrowed in on the products that migrants purchased as well as the businesses that were most affected, others discussed Haitians' impact on the local economy in broader, more generalized terms. Similar to Alberto's previous description of Ciudad Acuña experiencing a "boom *económico*," study participants characterized this phenomenon in a variety of ways including as a *flujo de economía* (economic flow), *movimiento económico* (economic movement), *mejor etapa para los negocios* (the best time for business), and a "big opportunity for commerce."[120] Perhaps most compelling was Gabriel's likening of the event to a "wave of tourism," sharing that "there was a lot

[118] Alberto, Interview by author.
[119] José, Interview by author.
[120] Alberto, Interview by author; Carlos, Interview by author; Diego, Interview by author, Barber shop in Ciudad Acuña, August 19, 2023; Oswaldo, Interview by author; Brenda, Interview by author; Fernando, Interview by author; Sergio, Interview by author.

of economic movement with the Haitians. The waves of tourism (*olas de turismo*) that we usually get when Americans visit Acuña during holidays, the migrants covered that part instead."[121] As we can see, most study participants viewed Haitians' contribution as a positive impact on the local community, however, some also pointed to a darker side of the story that contrastingly placed migrants in a defenseless and vulnerable economic position, again revealing more layered and nuanced perceptions and community experiences at this time.

Residents shared a few cases of local businesses discriminating against Haitian clientele during their stay in Ciudad Acuña. While migrants tried to buy food in restaurants, for example, some experienced unequal treatment as well as racism, as Sergio observed: "Not all of the restaurants let migrants come inside. They'd only let two or three come in at a time. *Me di cuenta porqué eran negritos* (I realized it was because they were Black). 'No! Get out of here! Wait outside and we'll bring you the food.'"[122] While restaurants' decisions to limit indoor capacity could have also been related to real concerns over COVID-19 and related safety protocols, Sergio alludes to local restaurant workers' racist attitudes towards Black people which reflect why some Haitians were not allowed to enter into these places of business. Apparently, members of the local community also held similar problematic views of migrants which impacted businesses in other ways. For example, Diego, a university student in his twenties who was born and raised in Acuña, stated: "Some local businesses were negatively affected because there were residents who said 'we don't want Haitians here. We're not going to go into the restaurants or shops when they're in there.' So a lot of people stayed home and

[121] Gabriel, Interview by author.
[122] Sergio, Interview by author.

businesses lost their normal customers."[123] Though it may be true that local residents opted out of visiting and spending money at certain businesses while Haitians were also present, it is also likely that these places continued to profit as migrants' active consumption replaced any potential economic losses in this sphere.

Not only did Haitian migrants face discrimination during their stay in Acuña, but they were also subject to forms of economic exploitation. Some study participants perceived Haitians as unfamiliar with the new environment and border economy, foregrounding their vulnerable state and potential exposure to these types of risks. For example, Tania relayed that "the migrants encountered some barriers. They don't know how our economy works. They don't know our currency, either. The situation was not easy for them. *Sí, algunos batallaban*."[124] Though this places Haitian migrants in a defensive "battle" position through meeting these challenges, others viewed this population as succumbing to exploitative situations while attempting to navigate the local economy. When asked about how businesses treated Haitians in the community, José explained: "Racism continues to exist! A ride in a taxi that normally costs us fifty *pesos* to go anywhere in the city, the migrants were being charged triple that price to go somewhere close by. *Cómo no conocen, no saben, aprovechaban de ellos* (they were taken advantage of because they didn't know). It was a big problem!"[125] This may provide further evidence of Mexicans' racist attitudes towards Haitians in Ciudad Acuña, though some study participants viewed these price hikes as nondiscriminatory. Carlos experienced this directly in his daily routine, stating: "Prices went up for everything. We

[123] Diego, Interview by author.
[124]Tania, Interview by author.
[125] José, Interview by author.

were all affected by that. The businesses in Acuña took advantage of the migrants because they had a lot of money and could pay any price. It bothered me because it was unfair to Haitians. Mexicans also had to pay more, and that made me angry."[126] Though local residents felt frustration in these circumstances, it is possible that migrants did not necessarily view these expenses as a barrier to participating economically while residing in the community. In fact, this situation likely contributed even further to the "boom" conditions as businesses not only increased their customer base but also profited more as they augmented their prices for goods and services sold.

Although local residents perceived Haitians as possessing sufficient financial resources upon their arrival in Acuña, they also discussed a further economic layer in migrants' entrance into the labor market. In interviews, study participants discussed a wide variety of migrant jobs and places of employment which ranged from informal to more formal settings. These findings align with research conducted in Monterrey, Nuevo León, which showed that Haitian migrants had successfully entered the labor market in areas of entrepreneurship, small business, and construction.[127] At the most informal level, Haitians in Ciudad Acuña made money *de manera ambulante* (traveling from place to place, roving) selling a product or a service. Most often, residents noticed migrants selling trash bags, as Michael described: "To make money, they would go around to the different supermarkets and sell big black plastic trash bags, like outside of the Merco and the Gutiérrez. I guess the migrants realized that people actually buy those trash bags. Maybe they saw a Mexican person selling them first, so then they started doing it."[128]

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[126] Carlos, Interview by author.
[127] Rosales Martínez, Calva Sánchez, and Vázquez Delgado, "Experiencias de incorporación laboral de migrantes haitianos en la zona metropolitana de Monterrey," 1-24.
[128] Michael, Interview by author.

This demonstrates migrants' ability to perceive an available entrepreneurial opportunity which influenced their actions to fulfill a particular market demand. Other forms of informal work which Haitians undertook included selling candy (*vendiendo dulces*) and washing car windows (*lavando ventanillas*) on the streets. Though migrants seemingly experienced success in entering into these itinerant work realms, it is still unclear whether they competed with Mexican transitory workers for physical space and potential patrons during that time.

Moving into a more formal setting, local residents also observed Haitians working in established places of business throughout Ciudad Acuña–the same types of locales in which they shopped and spent their money as previously discussed. Perhaps as a way to accommodate the increase in clientele, local and regional customer service-based businesses hired migrants to fill temporary staffing needs. Again, it is not clear as to whether Haitians competed with Mexicans for jobs during their stay at the border, but, if they did, it likely contributed to a lowering of wages similar to what Haitians previously experienced in entering the labor market in Reynosa, Mexico.[129] Nevertheless, when asked about Haitians' impact on the local economy in Acuña, Alberto explained: "I started seeing them working in supermarkets, restaurants, and shops. I went out for *tacos* and was attended by a Haitian on several occasions! It was different, but it was good that they were working!...It changed the economy because it generated jobs for migrants."[130] Here, we see the intersection of new and nuanced economic and cultural dynamics at play, as Haitians sold traditional Mexican food items to earn money while also

[129] Hernández-Hernández and Medina Parra, "Repensando la vulnerabilidad de migrantes haitianos en tránsito por Reynosa, México," 168-197.
[130] Alberto, Interview by author.

contributing towards stimulating local business activity. It should be noted that study participants also perceived a gendered-division of labor in regards to migrants' money-making pursuits. Both Brenda and María claimed that they saw Haitian women working in beauty salons, for example. In describing the jobs that migrants took, Brenda affirmed: "the women worked in *salones de belleza*. I saw them painting nails, giving pedicures, and styling hair. It's because they already knew how to do it!"[131] While Haitian women perhaps seized a formal opportunity to apply their previously-developed skill sets, it is interesting that residents observed them working in traditionally female-centered industries such as beauty and not necessarily outside of this. The only other mention of women earning money was in the area of informal sex work, as Gabriel stated: "a lot of the women went around to the local bars, selling their bodies. It was shocking to see but I can't judge them because I don't know their personal situation or what compelled them to do that."[132] Aligning with an aforementioned psychoanalytic theory, this sentiment reinforces both sexist and racist stereotypes that reduce Black women to play the role of the "whore;" tropes which can also be used by non-Blacks to "other" this demographic.[133]

Most significantly, study participants noticed migrants entering into construction jobs during their stay in Ciudad Acuña. This echoes Shon's aforementioned remarks on Haitians contributing towards building infrastructure for the 2014 FIFA World Cup while residing in Brazil after the 2010 earthquake. As with women migrants who applied their skills in the local beauty industry, others (most likely men) did the same in the realm of

[131] Brenda, Interview by author.
[132] Gabriel, Interview by author.
[133] Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*.

construction. When asked about what Haitians did for work, Seferino, who has lived in Del Rio his whole life but frequently crosses into Acuña to go shopping, explained:

> The Haitians came to pursue the American dream, but those who couldn't cross the border decided that the "Mexican dream" was just as good. There were about a thousand Haitians who stayed in Acuña for a few months after the initial incident and the majority of them worked in construction sites. That's how they made a living and advanced here.[134]

It is unclear where these sites were located or what Haitians were building, but it is worth noting that several large-scale construction projects have been carried out in Ciudad Acuña since 2021–preceding the opening of a Super Walmart, Little Caesars Pizza, Starbucks, and a sports complex. Interestingly, official reports show that municipal financial assets increased by 36% and tax revenue increased by 20% from 2021 to 2022 which has likely contributed towards the implementation of the city's 2022-2024 Economic Development Plan prioritizing the construction of "productive and sustainable infrastructure."[135] As researchers ascertained about Haitians' contribution towards advancing economic development in Monterrey, it is entirely possible that the money they spent and generated during their time in Acuña created the necessary surplus for the municipality to engage in the planning and executing of new and ambitious projects, further revealing the evolving impacts of migration to this border sector.

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[134] Seferino, Interview by author, Val Verde Public Library in Del Rio, August 8, 2023.
[135] Ayuntamiento de Acuña, Coahuila, "Informe de avance gestión financiera 3er trimestre 2022," 2022, https://presidenciaacuna.com/cuenta-publica-ejercicio-2022/.; Municipio de Acuña, "Plan municipal de desarrollo 2022-2024," 2022, https://presidenciaacuna.com/plan-municipal/.

Figure 7. Haitian migrants bought food and worked in small restaurants throughout Ciudad Acuña during their stay in the city (photo by Mitchelle Grant, October 2024).

2.5 Chapter Conclusion

As thousands of Haitian migrants arrived and remained in Ciudad Acuña in late 2021 and into 2022, their sustained presence became increasingly integrated and interwoven into the daily life and fabric of this community. In fact, local residents' perceptions and interactions with migrants contributed to shaping new and nuanced cultural, social, and economic dynamics at the border, revealing the layered and evolving impacts of this migration phenomenon. This began in the context of the immediate material aid response, as residents utilized social media, cross-border connections, and internal community resources to provide basic necessities to migrants in the apparent absence of the state. Though study participants detailed perceived cultural differences between Mexicans and Haitians, including in the area of language, these groups nevertheless participated in a wealth of social interactions with each other and in many cases experienced a wider sense of coexistence, solidarity, and understanding. Migrants

furthermore made a significant impact on the local economy, actively contributing as both consumers and workers in Acuña, though they were sometimes met with instances of discrimination and exploitation on behalf of local residents. These diverse factors complicate the one-dimensional migrant "vulnerability" narrative prevalent in Mexican media reporting about the Haitian migrant influx, and, as we will see subsequently, also contrast the heightened sense of "crisis" pushed by news outlets in the United States. This, and other local community perceptions in regards to media involvement, the port-of-entry closure, and law enforcement and military deployment to Del Rio, will be explored in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 2: DEL RIO

"It happened very suddenly. People started to freak out about the migrants crossing the river. I got calls from my family in Colorado, asking 'are you okay? Is it a warzone down there?' It doesn't feel good when people think that this beautiful town is in a crisis. When the news is telling the world that this town is getting rocked and I'm in this town, feeling the shaking…It was definitely a little scary at first! But it wasn't as bad and didn't last as long as the news made it seem. It was actually manageable."[136]

This account, provided by local resident Jaden, underscores an atmosphere of initial fear and panic–perhaps exacerbated in part by media attention–that gripped the Del Rio community (and beyond) in reaction to Haitian migrants' mass movement into the United States in September 2021. While news reports displayed scenes of an uncontrollable "crisis" unleashing itself on this Texas border city, U.S. officials responded to the situation by implementing a strict port-of-entry closure and called for additional law enforcement and military presence in the area. During the initial stages of the influx, migrants crossed the Rio Grande back-and-forth by utilizing the existing "weir dam;" a low concrete structure connecting Ciudad Acuña to the opposing riverbanks that runs parallel and to the west of the International Bridge. As border-crossing numbers escalated and migrants formed a camp on the Texas side, Governor Greg Abbott ordered authorities to block-off of the weir dam which ultimately caused transiting Haitians to return to Mexico. From there, migrants immediately rerouted themselves to a shallow, yet riskier, river-crossing area to the east of the International Bridge and continued to enter into the camp from that point. Over the next ten days, Border Patrol apprehended,

[136] Jaden, Interview by author, Val Verde Public Library in Del Rio, July 29, 2023.

detained, and initiated asylum processing for thousands of migrants before coordinating their departure via bus travel to interior cities such as San Antonio or deportation flights back to Haiti.[137] This case was different from previous "caravan migrations" because large numbers of individuals immediately and successfully crossed the Rio Grande into Del Rio and therefore many were not necessarily "trapped" in Mexico as with the group of Central Americans that arrived in Tijuana, Baja California, in 2019. Whereas migrant camps were common in border cities in previous years on the Mexican side, the case of Del Rio was unique because migrants formed a camp on the U.S. side as they waited to surrender themselves to Border Patrol with the intention of claiming asylum.[138]

As migrants spent little time in Del Rio and entered into few public spaces while passing through, residents did not experience the same level of personal interactions with Haitians nor did this group have a direct contribution to the local economy as was the case in Acuña–pointing to the uneven impacts of the migrant influx on either side of the border. In fact, in employing a transborder approach, I found that my interviews with Del

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[137] Available asylum data shows that an estimated 7,000 Haitians filed for asylum within the United States in 2021, with nearly 18,000 cases filed across all nationalities between July and October of that year. Additionally, U.S. Customs and Border Protection invoked Title 42 to expel 13,000 migrants of "other" citizenship groupings (not originating from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, or Mexico) across the Southwest land border in September of 2021. Title 42 was a Trump-enacted policy continued under the Biden administration that placed restrictions on asylum in response to the COVID-19 pandemic; Ryan Baugh, "Refugees and Asylees, 2021," Annual Flow Report, U.S. Department of Homeland Security, October 3, 2022, https://ohss.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/2023-12/2022_0920_plcy_refugees_and_asylees_fy2021_v2.pdf; "Number of Service-wide Forms, Fiscal Year 2021, Quarter 4," U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services, December 15, 2024, https://www.uscis.gov/sites/default/files/document/data/Quarterly_All_Forms_FY2021Q4.pdf; "Southwest Land Border Encounters, September 2021," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, accessed October 19, 2024, https://www.cbp.gov/newsroom/stats/southwest-land-border-encounters; "Title 42," Documents Library, U.S. Customs and Border Protection, last modified January 22, 2024, https://www.cbp.gov/document/foia-record/title-42.

[138] Torre Cantalapiedra and Mariscal Nava, "Crossing borders," 1-21; Garbey Burey, "Estrategias migratorias en el tránsito de emigrantes haitianos hacia Estados Unidos," 93-123; Wurtz, "A movement in motion: collective mobility and embodied practice in the central American migrant caravan," 930-944; Rosas-Lopez, Guilamo-Ramos, and Mora-Rivera, "Joining a migrant caravan, 1137-1154.

Rians shed light on other complex factors such as how they perceived media's involvement in the event, how they overcome barriers associated with the International Bridge closure, as well as their social interactions and economic transactions with newly deployed law enforcement and military personnel to the area. Adding depth and nuance to the U.S. media's one-sided portrayal of the Texas border "crisis," this chapter will explore local insights relating to these elements as conveyed by twelve members of the Del Rio community.

One of the most defining aspects of United States-Mexico border history has been the high level of official presence and intervention in the region as well as the employment of various tactics aimed at impeding illicit cross-border activity and controlling the local population. Since its inception in 1924, the Border Patrol in particular has routinely subjected residents as well as migrants to surveillance and state-inflicted violence, though authors conclude that the agency has been influenced by borderlands individual and special interests in regards to implementing such features.[139] In fact, historian Kelly Lytle Hernández found that early Border Patrol strategies aligned to local Anglo-American elites' nativist beliefs targeting Mexican migrants which ultimately afforded agents to earn respect and upward socioeconomic mobility within border society.[140] In addition to these deeply-rooted racial aspects of enforcement and intervention, militarization of the region has become another pressing theme in U.S.-Mexico border literature. Timothy Dunn argues that since the 1970's, low-intensity

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[139] The Border Patrols' origins also stem from longer-standing militia and vigilante violence in the borderlands, most notably slave patrols in the 1800's and the mounted Texas Rangers; Monica Muñoz Martinez, *The Injustice Never Leaves You: Anti-Mexican Violence in Texas* (Harvard University Press, 2018).

[140] Lytle Hernandez, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*.

conflict doctrine has been incorporated in attempts to "pacify" the local population which includes officials' use of high-tech surveillance equipment as well as military presence and operation at the border.[141] These tactics have become a rather normalized part of daily life in this region, as Border Patrol and other law enforcement and military personnel have ultimately gained the trust of residents– especially considering the shift in agents' culture and composition from predominantly white to more Latinx since the 1990's–though unbalanced power dynamics between these groups remain evident.[142]

While the topics of immigration and the United States-Mexico border have certainly become focal points in U.S. history, media scholars have also argued that intense news coverage plays a significant role in fueling anxiety and fear surrounding these issues and ultimately shapes public opinion about them. The "immigration crisis" reporting on the political conflict associated with the passing of Arizona Senate Bill 1070 in 2010 provides a prime example of this phenomenon.[143] In fact, one media study revealed that sixty percent of stories published about SB 1070 centered on the mass public protests which followed the bill-signing, demonstrating the media's tendency to cover upheaval and controversy surrounding immigration topics as well as its' use of polarizing rhetoric and powerful effect on instilling public division.[144] When examining news reporting about the border region in general, another media analysis illuminated a main focus on factors such as failing healthcare systems, political corruption, and cross-border drug smuggling. In particular, news coverage about the Rio Grande Valley in

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[141] Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border*.
[142] Vega, "Empathy, morality, and criminality."
[143] This legislative response to curb unauthorized immigration essentially made it legal for law enforcement to racially profile and facilitate swift deportation of Latinos in the state of Arizona.
[144] Santa Ana and González de Bustamante, eds., *Arizona Firestorm*.

South Texas throughout the 2010's implied that this area required state and federal intervention and control to tackle these issues and furthermore reinforced dominant understandings about the border rooted in a problematic idea of the Global South. Interestingly, this study also incorporated interviews with Valley business and nonprofit leaders whose stories contrasted with negative media reporting in highlighting the regions' rich cultural capital, resilience, and creativity in local problem solving.[145] My own media analysis of articles that centered on the Haitian migration event of 2021 to the Texas border, as well, finds that publications consistently ignored these types of community strengths and instead preferred to amplify the "crisis" narrative common in border and migration reporting. This media framing is consequential in that it primarily provides a troubling and limited view of the actual region, however, this can be offset by instead centering the voices of local residents. Not only do their stories provide a fuller and more nuanced understanding into highly publicized events such as the Haitian migrant influx, but they also offer important insights into how people perceive, interpret, and react to migration on a local level.

[145] Fleuriet, *Rhetoric and Reality on the US-Mexico Border*.

Figure 8. Looking north to the Border Patrol apprehension and detention area from Braulio Fernández Park in Ciudad Acuña. After Texas Governor Greg Abbott ordered authorities to block-off the weir dam access point to the west of here, migrants returned to Mexico and rerouted themselves to this shallow, yet risky, river-crossing area located east of the International Bridge (photo by author, August 2023).

3.1 Media Analysis

To ensure a systematic approach, I followed the same protocol for this media analysis as presented in the previous chapter and applied it to articles published by news organizations in the United States. The twelve articles sampled were published between September 17th through 29th and come from established and widely-read news sources representing three levels: city (Del Rio), state (Texas), and national (United States). This analysis exercise yielded results showing that United States media reporting of the Haitian migrant influx to Del Rio advanced a "border crisis" narrative that preferred to center political disagreement on immigration issues and paid special attention to the controversial Border Patrol Horse Unit incident that took place on the banks of the Rio Grande. Similar to Mexican media reporting on the event, government officials were heavily quoted in these articles which again prioritized their views and opinions on the matter instead of that of border residents or migrants themselves.

Selected articles from the United States advanced a "border crisis" narrative in chronicling the mass arrival of Haitian migrants to Del Rio which was especially consistent with national news sources–regardless of these publications' associated political leanings. Reports utilized alarmist language that described the situation as "total chaos unfolding at the Texas border" and "a relentless crisis exploding at the southern border," as reported by the *New York Times* and *Fox News*, respectively.[146] Photographs captured by drone were also a prevalent feature in these reports, providing a birds-eye

[146] Eileen Sullivan and Zolan Kanno-Youngs, "Images of Border Patrol's Treatment of Haitian Migrants Prompt Outrage," *New York Times*, September 21, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/21/us/politics/haitians-border-patrol-photos.html; Adam Shaw and Bill Melugin, *Fox News,* "Images of Haitian migrant surge at Del Rio show chaos under bridge as numbers soar past 11,000," September 17, 2021, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/texas-del-rio-haitian-migrant-surge-images.

view of the sheer magnitude of persons crowded under the International Bridge and furthermore conveying an environment of overwhelm. These images were accompanied by word choices that media typically uses as synonymous with migratory phenomena such as *overflow*, *surge*, *spike*, *rush, stream*, and *wave*. Not only are these words akin to natural disasters and therefore effective in triggering a "crisis mode" in media audiences, but they also dehumanize migrants by lumping them into one faceless group devoid of individual complexities and likens them to inanimate objects such as bodies of water.

U.S. news reporting furthermore advanced this crisis narrative by centering political debates related to immigration control and border policy. These articles featured quotes from prominent government and elected officials which painted Republicans as unified in their blaming of Democrats for allowing or inviting the migrant influx and Democrats as divided within the party on these issues. When detailing the Biden administration's handling of these developments, the *San Antonio Express-News* relayed that "although federal officials are responsible for securing national borders, [Texas Governor] Abbott has launched his own effort to crack down on illegal immigration, repeatedly condemning what he refers to as 'open border' policies."[147] While many other Republican leaders were quoted as criticizing Biden and Democrats, this also exemplifies a divergence between national and state powers in what they deem as appropriate responses to migratory movements. As President Biden and Secretary of Homeland Security, Alejandro Mayorkas, reacted by deporting thousands of migrants via flights back to Haiti, Democrats like House Majority leader Chuck Schumer expressed their outrage to news outlets, as he stated: "We cannot continue these hateful and xenophobic

[147] Anna Bauman, "Abbott defends border agents in images." *San Antonio Express-News*, September 28, 2021.

Trump-era policies that disregard our refugee laws."[148] While partisan and bi-partisan disagreement is indeed troubling and noteworthy, the medias' emphasis on these debates distracts from on-the-ground conditions, impacts, and lived experiences of migrants and border residents who come into contact with these matters on a daily basis.

This sample of U.S. news articles furthermore focused on the controversy surrounding the Border Patrol Horse Unit incident that took place on September 19th, 2021, on the northern banks of the Rio Grande. As previously mentioned, this occurrence sparked a federal investigation into the professional behavior of those who were involved; however, immediate media reporting featured official voices that either condemned agents' actions or doubted their significance altogether. Much of the discussion centered on whether or not Border Patrol utilized whips against Haitian migrants, to which *Fox News* quoted an agent who claimed: "we do not carry whips and the only thing I see in their hands are horse reins."[149] Interestingly, local news sources were silent on contributing to this argument, however, they did incorporate voices, such as Del Rio mayor Bruno Lozano, that expressed "concern" for Border Patrols' safety and supported them in their efforts to block "security and health threats" from entering the community.[150] This suggests that local media reporting might defend agents' behavior in the horse chase occurrence or at least remain complicit in it–a theme that often aligns with Del Rio residents' interpretations of the incident as we will see in the next section.

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[148] Sullivan and Kanno-Youngs, "Images of Border Patrol's Treatment of Haitian Migrants Prompt Outrage."
[149] *Fox News*, "Images of Haitian migrant surge at Del Rio show chaos under bridge as numbers soar past 11,000."
[150] Karen Gleason, "Border Patrol chief: Migrant numbers going down," *The 830 Times*, September 22, 2021, https://830times.com/news-border-patrol-chief-migrant-numbers-going-down/; Karen Gleason, "Nine thousand immigrants camped under International Bridge according to Del Rio mayor," *The 830 Times*, September 16, 2021. https://830times.com/news-nine-thousand-immigrants-camped-under-international-bridge-according-to-del-rio-mayor/.

3.2 Media Involvement

As the story of the Haitian migrant influx broke and began to dominate U.S. news cycles, residents of Del Rio noted the media's exceptionally intense reporting on the event and shared their reactions to this coverage. Previously, the city had garnered moderate levels of attention from reporting on local natural disasters such as the 1998 flood and 2015 tornado which tragically took the lives of upwards of thirty people combined.[151] Moving away from weather-related events, the mass arrival of Haitian migrants to this sector of the Texas-Coahuila border represented a shift in the media's portrayal of Del Rio that instead attempted to redefine the city as the latest victim of the ongoing "border crisis." Study participants provided insight into the medias' involvement in the migrant influx story by describing the overall reach and accuracy of reporting while pointing to prominently-featured political voices in the news and also weighing in on the controversial Horse Patrol Unit debate. They contribute an overall disconcerting view of the media's role in response to these developments which sowed panic in the public sphere as well as exaggerated real and on-the-ground conditions at the border in damaging ways.

In relation to the media focus on Del Rio and the Haitian migrant influx, local residents detailed the prominent reach of this news coverage to external audiences and also commented on how it influenced international perceptions of this border city. While the area had experienced instances of isolated, yet somewhat nominal, media attention in

[151] *The Herald Times*, "At least 15 people dead in Texas flooding," August, 15, 1998, https://www.heraldtimesonline.com/story/news/1998/08/25/at-least-15-people-dead-in-texas-flooding/118600070/; Angelo Young, "'Total Chaos' as Category 4 Tornado Rips through Mexican Border City, Killing at Least 13," *International Business Times*, May 25, 2015, https://www.ibtimes.com/total-chaos-category-4-tornado-rips-through-mexican-border-city-killing-least-13-1937169.

years past through state and national outlets, the mass arrival of asylum-seeking Haitians in September 2021 put Del Rio "on the map" internationally for the first time. When asked about her reaction to this new media attention, Alejandra shared that:

> It was important, but also sad. A lot of people around the world now connect Del Rio to that incident. They'll say '"hey, you guys had all those Haitians under the bridge, right?" I get outsiders asking me if it's safe here because they just see people on the news standing with AK-47's on the border wall…I still feel like this is a safe community though.[152]

While residents noted the media's role in raising crucial awareness to a far-reaching viewership, they also perceived this as detrimentally and falsely painting Del Rio as an "unsafe" place. This tension is representative of residents' competing yet simultaneous interpretations and reactions to the media's intense reporting on the events. This partly supports previous study findings regarding news coverage about the U.S.-Mexico border which claim that these stories have the power to shape public opinion as well as spread anxiety and fear about the geographic region as a whole.[153] Negatively-framed media reporting can ultimately be damaging since labeling border communities as "dangerous" often does not reflect the truth and furthermore diminishes the real rich, unique, and multifaceted nature of these spaces.[154]

Aside from tainting Del Rio's reputation and renown, the media's involvement in the Haitian migrant influx also brought about more positive results by inspiring a new flow of aid resources to the area. Study participant, Shon, who works for Val Verde Border Humanitarian Coalition (VVBHC), an organization that sheltered and aided Haitians in Del Rio at the time, noted how "all media is good media. Even at VVBHC!

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[152] Alejandra, Interview by author.
[153] Santa Ana and González de Bustamante, eds., *Arizona Firestorm*.
[154] Fleuriet, Rhetoric and Reality on the US-Mexico Border.

Not that we were trying to be in the media at that time. We were just serving and doing our mission. Being in the media, we didn't ask for help but help was coming."[155] Shon attributes the increase in donations to the shelter and other local organizations to the media's extensive coverage of the migration event, mirroring a similar occurrence across the border in Ciudad Acuña where residents utilized social media to create awareness and subsequently obtain supplies for Haitians staying in the city. It should also be mentioned that while the media apparently played a significant role in driving additional resources to migrants in Del Rio, my interviews furthermore revealed a more nuanced perception that critically framed certain aid groups as "hungry" for money or recognition. As Shon claimed, "the world was looking down on Del Rio. It brought out a lot of Haitian activist groups who were really just trying to get their name out there in front of Congressmen. They were only causing more problems and honestly didn't need to be here."[156] While it is true that national non-profits such as Haitian Bridge Alliance (HBA) were in fact present in Del Rio at the time, it remains unclear on whether their work had any immediate or direct impact on migrants detained under the International Bridge. However, HBA has since then published one of the only reports documenting the abuse and civil rights violations committed against Haitians in Del Rio which may have contributed towards larger conversations around asylum and migrant treatment within the political sphere as a result.[157]

In addition to criticizing the presence of "attention hungry" non-profit organizations in Del Rio, study participants similarly questioned the media's elevation of

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[155] Shon, Interview by author.
[156] Ibid.
[157] Haitian Bridge Alliance, "Beyond the Bridge."

opportunistic political voices in response to the migration event. In fact, most interviewees perceived politicians or government officials as "using" news outlets for their own motives while not necessarily aiming to resolve the situation at-hand. As Pablo stated: "the media promoted politicians that came here to take advantage of the opportunity (*vinieron a aprovechar a la oportunidad*). Everything just turned to chaos."[158] While he seems to point to "chaos" as a side-effect of the media's focus on official voices, study participant Alejandra claimed that creating this type of insecure atmosphere was actually their main goal. She relayed that "the government knew exactly what they were doing. If it looked chaotic on TV it's because they wanted it to look that way. It was just a show!"[159] Though Alejandra did not clarify *why* the government would want to instill chaos, her notion nevertheless aligns with the "border crisis" framing that I found in my analysis of U.S. news articles surrounding the Haitian migration event which tends to center controversy and instability in the region.

While some study participants spoke more generally about "politicians" in the news, others specifically pointed to Texas Governor Greg Abbott for his appearances on media networks during the time of the Haitian migrant influx to Del Rio. Overall, residents' perceptions of how Abbott utilized the media to handle these developments were mixed, perhaps reflecting a diversity of political leanings and beliefs in the community. When asked about his reaction to the media attention, Seferino, an assisted-living facility director in his thirties who has lived his whole life in Del Rio, stated: "I personally know that Governor Abbott was trying his best to broadcast and show exactly

[158] Pablo, Interview by author.
[159] Alejandra, Interview by author.

what was going on under the International Bridge."[160] This paints Abbott's media response to the migrant encampment in a positive light focused on exposing the truth of the situation, yet other participants did not find this to be the case. Katy, a small business owner in her forties born and raised in Del Rio, held a contrasting viewpoint:

> Abbott would come on the news every day to give a new number of how many Haitians had crossed the border. He made it seem like an invasion. I had to tell my own father in Colorado, 'you of all people should know how Del Rio is. You grew up here! I live here, your granddaughter lives here, and we feel very safe. You're just falling victim to Abbott and his media crap!' The news was very misleading.[161]

This exemplifies how Del Rio residents recognized, and often criticized, the amplification of political voices in the media reporting surrounding the Haitian migrant influx to the Texas-Coahuila border which they perceived as "misleading" to viewers. Furthermore, the difference in opinion between Katy and her father could certainly be linked to the tendency for news media to center political disagreement in response to immigration topics which often utilizes polarization rhetoric and powerfully instills division in the public at large.[162] Unfortunately, this media-induced conflict might spawn negative feelings even amongst family members which could be unnecessarily detrimental to the family unit.

Additionally, community members who "tuned in" to traditional news formats commented on how the migrant influx and encampment story was portrayed to viewers. Many residents echoed Katy's description of "misleading" reports that did not necessarily contrast on-the-ground conditions but instead tended to "exaggerate" them. For example,

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[160] Seferino, Interview by author.
[161] Katy, Interview by author, Skilletz restaurant in Del Rio. July 27, 2023.
[162] Santa Ana and González de Bustamante, eds., *Arizona Firestorm*; Chavez, *The Latino Threat*; Denvir, *All-American Nativism*; Akers Chacón and Mike Davis, *No One is Illegal*.

when asked about the media attention and reaction to the event, Jaden, a small business employee in her twenties who moved to Del Rio from Colorado during the COVID-19 pandemic, stated that:

> A lot of it was "played up." Probably because we don't see such a large amount of people crossing the border that often. The news made it look so huge, and it was huge at first! But then things calmed down because the migrants started to leave to get to where they needed to go, but the reports kept making everything look crazy.[163]

Study participants alluded to the fact that news networks, such as Fox, continuously replayed the same drone footage of the encampment under the International Bridge though residents observed (through the border fencing) that Border Patrol had begun to remove migrants from the detention area. Pablo likened this reporting to "yellow journalism" (*amarillista*) as media outlets honed in on the sensational aspect of the Haitian migrant arrival to Del Rio and portrayed the event as "bigger than it actually was."[164] Though media scholars have not necessarily argued that reporting on the border and immigration is "exaggerated" compared to on-the-ground conditions, as described by local residents, their findings do emphasize the one-sidedness of news coverage which tends to purport "crisis" narratives and overshadows the either positive or more complex aspects of these topics.[165]

Not only did residents interpret the media's portrayal of the situation as "played up" and "misleading," but they also provided specific examples of this type of television content. In relation to the migrant camp, some study participants discussed how news reporting advanced an environment of "chaos" not necessarily aligning with on-the-

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[163] Jaden, Interview by author.
[164] Pablo, Interview by author.
[165] Fleuriet, *Rhetoric and Reality on the US—Mexico Border*; Santa Ana and González de Bustamante, eds., *Arizona Firestorm*; *Chavez, The Latino Threat*; Denvir, *All-American Nativism*.

ground conditions. For instance, Pablo described that "the images on the news showed chaos and disorganization. They made it seem like a concentration camp. But that wasn't the case! *Promovieron el desorden* (they promoted disorder)."[166] Though the "concentration camp" description might be extreme, it is difficult to ascertain the actual state of the camp as local residents did not physically enter the area and therefore did not have the same first-hand experience as migrants or Border Patrol agents. Katy furthermore provided another example of exaggerated media content that did not accurately reflect real circumstances in Del Rio. She stated: "the media made it seem like hundreds or thousands of migrants were roaming and taking over our town. I actually did see a few Haitian families walking by my house because I live really close to the shelter, but it was fine!"[167] Clearly, residents felt rather disconcerted at the media's application of the "border crisis" narrative to Del Rio which not only blew the events out of proportion but also contributed towards creating intense emotional reactions within the community and beyond.

The media's depiction of the migrant influx to the Texas-Coahuila border provoked real mental and emotional consequences for viewers. Study participants pointed to feelings of *fear*, *panic*, and *tension* in response to news coverage that apparently portrayed Haitians as "invading" the United States. Pablo, for example, relayed that "the media created panic because of the overflow of people crossing the border. *Génerο un estado de alerta muy fea* (it generated an ugly state of alert). At my church, I saw people in emotional crisis, having panic attacks, and dealing with anxiety because of what they

[166] Pablo, Interview by author.
[167] Katy, Interview by author.

saw on TV."[168] While the media contributed to an atmosphere of "panic" in Del Rio, members of the Ciudad Acuña community experienced a distinct, yet related emotional effect. Study participant José stated:

> I saw images on the news that showed the Haitians being taken away in helicopters. It turned out they were being sent back to their country. The media used that story as a way to cause tension. I felt anxiety from seeing that because I know Haiti has very bad conditions. They shouldn't have been forced to go back like that.[169]

The reporting on the migration event produced layered and uneven emotional reactions on either side of the border, as Pablo points to a community perception in Del Rio that reacted to an incoming migrant "invasion" while José's feelings appear to come from a place of compassion and concern for Haitians. Nevertheless, these testimonies support authors' claims that the media often fuels public anxiety and fear surrounding the topics of migration and the border.[170] As evidenced in this study, this notion apparently applies even to those who live locally and furthermore demonstrates the power of the media in shaping public opinion as well as the potency of the "border crisis" framing device.

Undoubtedly, the biggest news story of September 2021 involved the release of images and video of Border Patrol agents on horseback and their questionable interactions or treatment of Haitian migrants on the banks of the Rio Grande. As this sparked a significant controversy online and around the world, members of the Del Rio community, as well, centered their interview narratives on this great debate. Though residents could not witness these developments in-person due to migrant detention parameters, they exercised their judgements of the situation based on what they observed

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[168] Pablo, Interview by author.
[169] José, Interview by author.
[170] Santa Ana and González de Bustamante, eds., *Arizona Firestorm*; Chavez, *The Latino Threat*.

in the news and how they personally perceived the now-infamous photographs. Interestingly, most study participants who weighed in on this topic either felt sympathetic towards the Border Patrol agents or claimed outright that these officers did not enact violence against the migrants, revealing complex views reflective of pre-existing community dynamics. For example, Timothy concluded:

> The media made those pictures look so terrible! Those horses did not hit those people! If you look closely, you can clearly see that they did not use whips against them. Yet, the president responded and those agents lost their jobs! It's sad! The media makes it look like Texas is mean and terrible, but we are actually very compassionate![171]

Pablo also denied the allegations in support of the Border Patrol, stating:

> There was a news story that said Border Patrol hit a migrant with their horse. It was so stupid because that agent was actually trying to save the migrants' lives! It was a bad accusation because that man is a part of our community and is known to be an excellent cowboy (*un vaquero excelente*). The media created a lot of negative attention for him.[172]

Through these examples, it appears that these study participants viewed Border Patrol as the compassionate saviors in the situation who were unfortunately misrepresented by the media and therefore wrongly accused of abuse. This common perception was likely influenced by residents' pre-established connections with Border Patrol personnel as well as their acceptance and inclusion into the larger community. Del Rians' embrace and trust of these official agents align with Irene I. Vega's studies on the normalization and changing demographics of Border Patrol since the 1990's, advancing that the racial composition of personnel has shifted from an Anglo-American to a more Latinx racial composition similar to that of borderlands residents themselves.[173]

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[171] Timothy, Interview by author.
[172] Pablo, Interview by author.
[173] Vega, "Empathy, morality, and criminality."

Though Del Rians more often discussed the Horse Patrol Unit incident in interviews, overwhelmingly siding with Border Patrol, one study participant in Ciudad Acuña also weighed in on the debate. Fernando seemingly had more sympathy for the migrants in the situation, recounting: "we had never seen anything like that before. We saw the American authorities chasing (*correteando*) Haitian families. I could tell that the migrants were really scared. Of course, national and international news outlets came and covered that story. They only come to the border when it's something sinister (*siniestro*)."[174] Though Fernando did not mention Border Patrols' use of whips (or lack thereof), he did acknowledge that the agents engaged in chasing and scaring migrants who were attempting to cross the Rio Grande. He furthermore realized the media's rather disconcerting role in the events, as new outlets unsurprisingly focused on the most grim or ominous subject matter. As we have seen in this section, study participants interpreted the media's coverage of these events as either exaggerating or ignoring real and on-the-ground events. This reflects the community's criticism of the media hype surrounding the Haitian migrant influx of September 2021 as individuals disputed its accuracy and amplification of political voices as well as perceived a resulting fall-out that has negatively impacted Del Rio's reputation in a long-lasting way.

3.3 Port-of-Entry Closure

While the mainstream media focused on creating a scene of crisis and controversy in relation to the Haitian migrant influx, it did not report extensively on the resulting ten-day closure of the port-of-entry between Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña. This bridge between

[174] Fernando, Interview by author.

the United States and Mexico is integral to the border economy and way of life, as it is not uncommon for local residents to cross over multiple times per week to go to work, school, shop, or visit relatives on the other side. The community had already experienced negative impacts in the previous year due to the COVID-19 pandemic which brought about a partial border shutdown that separated families and hurt businesses for months on end.[175] However, the ten-day border closure in September 2021 was perhaps equally as significant because it marked the first time that United States Customs and Border Protection had completely halted port-of-entry operations in response to a migration event. Study participants' reactions to this official intervention were overall mixed as they cited various reasons and justifications as to why it was or was not a necessary action and also relayed problems, solutions, and long-term impacts associated with the border shutdown. This section will incorporate the narratives of study participants from both sides of the border, as the impacts of the port-of-entry closure, though layered, manifested rather evenly regardless of city of residence. Though residents of Del Rio and Acuña revealed feelings of frustration, they also highlighted a strong resilience in their ability to adjust and overcome challenges related to the closure of the International Bridge.

Study participants' views varied on the necessity of the port-of-entry shutdown in the context of mass migration to the Texas-Coahuila border. When asked whether or not this was the "correct" measure, slightly more participants stated that they were in favor of this action though at the same time this group did not discount the community-level challenges that arose as a result. Bruno, a military veteran in his forties who was born and

[175] Neuman, "U.S., Mexico Planning to Restrict Border Crossings to Stem Pandemic;" García, "'Happy to see you again."

raised in Del Rio and occasionally crosses into Acuña to go shopping, acknowledged that "shutting the bridge was not an easy decision for leadership, but it needed to be done considering the circumstances."[176] This reveals an underlying tension between officials' implementation of such a strict "security" measure in the face of extraordinary migratory events while also understanding the broader impacts this action could have on local residents and their daily routines. Notably, in comparing interview responses from residents on both sides of the border, data showed that Del Rio residents more often favored the shutdown while members of the Acuña community more often opposed it. Verónica, who lives in Del Rio and visits her children in Ciudad Acuña on a weekly basis, stated: "*sí, fue necesario* (yes, it was necessary)" and Diego, who lives in Acuña and has never crossed the border, concluded that it was a "bad decision (*una mala decisión*)."[177] Overall, study participants' border-crossing habits or frequency did not seem to influence their views about the necessity of the port-of-entry closure, but there was a more notable difference in opinion related to what side they lived on, albeit quite small. Nevertheless, their differing levels of support reflects the complexities of community experiences in regards to migration as well as to this type of strict official intervention.

Aside from weighing-in on whether or not it was the "correct" action, residents pointed to various reasons as to why officials made the decision to close the International Bridge. Most often, study participants cited the "emergency situation" and the need to "protect public safety." For instance, Verónica expressed that "things were getting out of control. Closing the bridge was the only way to safeguard the border (*salvaguardar la*

[176] Bruno, Interview by author, Val Verde Public Library in Del Rio, August 23, 2023.
[177] Verónica, Interview by author; Diego, Interview by author.

frontera) and our community. We don't know what might have happened otherwise."[178] While some perceived the port-of-entry closure as a general precaution in a state of emergency, others specifically described their anxieties about an "invasion" or a need to "contain the flow" of migrants trying to cross into Del Rio. It should be reiterated that Haitian migrants, due to visa restrictions, were not allowed access to regular pedestrian or vehicular pathways through the port-of-entry, and therefore crossed the border via the Rio Grande which is considered to be an "irregular" channel. Nevertheless, a few study participants perceived Haitians as being capable of surpassing the limitations of their immigration or detention status, such as Timothy, who usually crosses weekly into Acuña to carry-out his missionary work. He conveyed that "the Haitians were different because they were revolutionary and radical. They were on the verge of breaking out and stampeding the bridge. If the bridge had stayed open, the people here who normally commute could have been hurt or killed!"[179] This exemplifies a rather common perception of Haitians as a threat to public safety which points to racist and nativist attitudes especially present within the Del Rio community. Again, these types of perceptions echo previous case study findings conducted in the early 1990's at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, which advanced that Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) officials often viewed Haitian detainees as "loud," "misbehaving," and "acting up."[180] Though the nation of Haiti has a history of revolution in its' freedom from France in the late 1700's, whether or not migrants were exhibiting radical behavior underneath

[178] Verónica, Interview by author.
[179] Timothy, Interview by author.
[180] Jennie Smith, "Policies of Protection," 57-74.

the International Bridge in Del Rio is currently unclear due to the limitations of the present study and inability to interview persons who were actually there at the time.

Although many supported the port-of-entry closure as a means to protect public safety, local residents nonetheless faced a multitude of challenges and interruptions in carrying-out their daily routines and normal activities during the time of the Haitian migrant influx. Speaking from the Del Rio perspective, Katy, very rarely visits Acuña herself, shared about how the border shutdown impacted her workplace, stating: "during that time, I had a job at a car dealership. Three of my co-workers who lived in Acuña could not cross to come to work. We were short-staffed and that caused me to feel stress. I also felt sad because those women lost their wages. It set everyone back."[181] Clearly, the closing of the port-of-entry presented attendance and staffing challenges in Del Rio workplaces, as these spaces are typically integrated and inclusive of employees from across the border. Not only did workers from Acuña not get paid, but businesses on both sides lost their regular cross-border customers as a result of this measure. As Del Rio resident Timothy explained: "everything stopped. People couldn't cross, trucks couldn't cross. Mexicans couldn't come and spend their money in Del Rio. Americans couldn't cross and spend their money over in Acuña. There was a major financial impact."[182] Interestingly, Timothy, though realizing the financial impacts of closing the International Bridge, was in support of this measure in terms of protecting public safety; exemplifying the complex community tensions between official intervention and preserving local livelihood in the context of migration. Additionally, while Timothy perceived significant economic repercussions, he did not seem to realize that businesses recuperated at least a

[181] Katy, Interview by author.
[182] Timothy, Interview by author.

portion of monetary losses due to Haitians' and law enforcement officers' spending in Ciudad Acuña and Del Rio, respectively, as was observed by other study participants. Although academic studies on economic impacts of previous U.S.-Mexico port-of-entry closures are currently limited, findings from European countries show that both partial and full border shutdowns enacted during the COVID-19 pandemic indeed contributed towards economic losses in cross-border communities.[183] However, it is difficult to compare these cases as the present study includes the added layer of migrant and law enforcement consumership largely retained to their respective sides of the border.

For the most part, Acuña residents relayed the same types of problems and feelings about not being able to cross the International Bridge in their usual and accustomed manners. Study participants mentioned issues with accessing work, school, and shopping as well as feelings of upset and complaint. Lupe, a factory worker in her fifties who crosses the border almost daily to go to work and visit her daughter, shared: "*batallamos para cruzar* (it was a struggle to cross). I tried to cross using the pedestrian pathway but they wouldn't let me through! Everything slowed down. We were all affected."[184] Not only was Lupe personally impacted and unable to cross the border in her usual way, but she also recognized the problems and delays encountered by the community as a whole. Alberto, who crosses into Del Rio on a weekly basis to go shopping, expanded on this sentiment and discussed how Acuña residents felt in the face of these challenges, stating that "people were desperate and also very bothered by the bridge closure, especially workers and students from Acuña who cross daily into Del Rio.

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[183] Roberta Capello, Andrea Caragliu, and Elisa Panzera, "Economic costs of COVID-19 for cross-border regions." *Regional Science Policy & Practice* 15, no. 8 (2023): 1688-1702, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1757780223007655.

[184] Lupe, Interview by author, House in Del Rio, August 8, 2023.

I will say that we did not place the blame on Haitians, though. It was the authorities' fault for not warning us or giving us more time to adjust."[185] In contrast to Del Rian's citing the influx of migrants as the direct reason for the port-of-entry closure, Alberto suggested that perhaps authorities mismanaged the situation or at the very least could have advised the Acuña community in advance of this decision which may have contributed towards lessening the negative ramifications. Furthermore, the compassion he expressed for the displaced Haitian population in taking the "blame" off of them aligns with the feelings of empathy that were typical of Ciudad Acuña residents in their interactions with the migrants during their stay in the area, as was previously discussed. These differences in who Del Rio and Acuña participants blamed for the International Bridge shutdown (migrants' fault versus authorities, respectively) reflects the complexities of community experiences in relation to migration as well as border security and enforcement.

Regardless of who study participants held accountable for the port-of-entry closure, members of the border community persevered and found ways to overcome border-crossing challenges during this difficult period. These instances of adaptability and successful navigation of these circumstances manifested rather evenly for residents on both sides of the border, though in layered ways depending on individual circumstance. Many workers and students, for example, reacted quickly to adjust their schedules or make changes to their daily routines and encountered relative success in implementing these modifications. Residents discussed returning to remote work which they felt was a rather seamless transition considering that that practice became the "norm" during the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Pablo, who now lives in Del Rio but at

[185] Alberto, Interview by author.

the time of the Haitian migrant influx still resided in Acuña, shared his own experience, stating:

> My family was used to crossing into Del Rio each day for work and school. We had to readjust while the bridge was closed. My daughter had to go back online even though her class had just gone back in-person not long before that. Workers also had to go back online. I'm a pastor, so I had to communicate with my church members through Zoom and messages. We were able to readjust pretty easily and quickly.[186]

This exemplifies how workers and students utilized telecommuting technologies to overcome disruptions to their routines caused by the port-of-entry closure, however, not all workers had this online option. Del Rio resident Verónica, who worked in a factory on the U.S. side of the border at the time, discussed how employees confronted staffing and attendance problems. She explained that "those of us who lived in Del Rio worked double shifts (*doblaban hasta turnos*). Luckily, we were able to work overtime to continue with production."[187] While employees who lived and worked on the U.S. side of the border apparently welcomed the opportunity for extra work hours, those who usually crossed the bridge for in-person jobs that could not be completed remotely had to find other ways to adjust and meet challenges.

In addition to overtime and remote work, study participants also discussed drawing upon existing cross-border family and professional relationships to surpass obstacles in attending school and work. For example, when asked about how the bridge closure impacted his daily routine, Michael, who usually crosses into Del Rio on a daily basis to go to work, expressed:

> My lifestyle did not change besides the fact that I could not go home. A couple days before it happened, I was already hearing on the news that the migrants were coming and people in my office were saying they might close the bridge. I already

[186] Pablo, Interview by author.
[187] Verónica, Interview by author.

> had my suitcase in the car and had spoken to my aunt. I ended up staying at her house in Del Rio and still went to work so I feel like I wasn't really affected at all.[188]

Although study participants blamed authorities for not forewarning the community of a border shutdown, others, like Michael, claimed that this information had already been circulating in certain spaces and, therefore, residents could anticipate and prepare for any changes in personal schedules. Nevertheless, these modifications were still emotionally difficult for some. Brenda, whose children usually cross into Del Rio to attend school each day, shared: "I dropped my kids off with their grandparents in Del Rio ahead of time so they wouldn't miss out on school. A lot of families did the same. As a mother, it was hard to do." Aside from opting to stay with family across the border, study participants also mentioned finding temporary accommodation with co-workers, employers, and in hotels. However, once the port-of-entry was officially closed, residents adjusted once more and utilized other crossing points in order to continue carrying-out their normal routines and responsibilities. Relatedly, it should be noted that partial border closures previously implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic–in which only essential workers were permitted to cross through ports-of-entry–did not seem to provide avenues for border residents to overcome restrictions in such ways. In fact, primary source material from Brownsville, Texas, and Matamoros, Tamaulipas, suggests that cross-border families were totally separated at this time which contributed to difficult emotional and psychological effects on residents of these communities.[189]

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[188] Michael, Interview by author.

[189] Center for Humanities and the Arts, "Twin Cities Torn Apart: Borders in Globalization by Bertha Bermúdez-Tapia & Mario Jiménez-Díaz," YouTube, December 11, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EGam0Q1P5uI.

As U.S. Customs and Border Protection implemented the closing of the Del Rio-Acuña International Bridge, cross-border commuters turned to other ports-of-entry in the area that remained open during the initial stages of the Haitian migrant arrival. Namely, residents traveled to the neighboring pair of binational border cities of Eagle Pass, Texas, and Piedras Negras, Coahuila, which they were able to reach within an hour by car. When asked about how the border shutdown impacted the community, Seferino shared that "the bridge is vital for our survival. I know people from Del Rio who just decided to drive and cross over in Eagle Pass to Piedras Negras so they could still go to their doctor appointments in Acuña. It was a strain but it also showed the character and resilience of our community."[190] In addition to using the alternate port-of-entry to attend scheduled appointments, residents also took this route to go to work, school, visit family, and also to bring aid resources to Haitian migrants in Acuña. Although they were ultimately able to cross, study participants cited further challenges such as traffic jams, traveling through isolated areas, and spending extra gas money when opting to utilize the Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras port-of-entry. This again points to the layered effects of officials' decision to close the Del Rio-Acuña International Bridge, though the present study findings show that both of these communities grappled with the resulting impacts in rather even ways.

Aside from discussing the numerous immediate impacts of the September 2021 border closure, residents furthermore noticed that Customs and Border Protection has since then implemented additional security protocols at the port-of-entry which cross-border commuters continue to confront on a daily basis. Interestingly, study participants refer to the Haitian migration event as the catalyst for these new regulations and

[190] Seferino, Interview by author.

operations standards that apparently include increased and more strict inspections of persons and vehicles crossing the bridge. This exemplifies the way in which layered impacts evolve over time in border communities and how official changes can be "cemented" by migration events. As Shon, who travels to Acuña almost every day for his missionary work, explained:

> Nowadays, there's two checkpoint areas on the bridge. The first one is kind of like a 'pre-check' area that has barbed wire and roadblocks to stop people, if necessary. Then, there's an additional check where we have to flash a [border crossing, *mica*] card or passport to a camera which is a new thing they added as a response to the Haitians being here.[191]

According to study participants, the main reason for these long-term changes is to ensure that those traveling from Mexico are not transporting persons who otherwise do not have authorization to enter into the United States, yet, as a result, local residents who often cross the border experience slower lines and longer wait times in their commutes. Lupe discussed facing these conditions on her daily trips through the port-of-entry, stating that "the lines are longer and slower now. Normally, I pass through around six o'clock in the morning and it's very slow. It takes me about an hour on weekdays, and over an hour and half on weekends."[192] Also contributing to delays and disruptions in crossing the bridge includes CBPs' implementation of regular border shutdown "simulations" as well as the removal of officers who are sent to complete "data activities" off-site. However, it appears that some of the problems associated with these changes have been alleviated due to the installation of new SENTRI lanes (Secure Electronic Network for Travels Rapid Inspection) that allow eligible travelers fast entry into the United States after meeting

[191] Shon, Interview by author.
[192] Lupe, Interview by author.

requirements and paying a five-year membership fee of over a hundred dollars.[193] Community support of SENTRI is overall mixed, reflective of complex perceptions in relation to long-term migration impacts, as some study participants recognized that only those with disposable incomes are able to access this higher tier of cross-border travel which is unfair to residents with limited financial resources. This tense reaction to border security measures appears to be a theme in interview data as in the case of the September 2021 port-of-entry closure and with newer protocols. Overall, members of the Del Rio-Acuña propose diverse arguments as to why these measures are needed (or not) while also pointing to the challenges they encounter and often overcome when crossing the Texas-Coahuila border.

Figure 9. A typical line of vehicles passing multiple checkpoints before entering into Del Rio through the port-of-entry (photo by author, August 2023).

[193] "Secure Electronic Network for Travelers Rapid Inspection," U.S. Customs and Border Protection, last modified March 7, 2024, https://www.cbp.gov/travel/trusted-traveler-programs/sentri.

3.4 Law Enforcement and Military Deployment

As Customs and Border Protection shut down the official port-of-entry in reaction to the Haitian migrant influx of September 2021, various state and federal agencies called for the deployment of additional law enforcement and military personnel to the Del Rio area. Already home to a local police department, a Border Patrol headquarters location, as well as the Laughlin Air Force Base, this deployment not only increased the number of official personnel in the community but also created opportunities for new operations altogether. In continuity with their narrative focus on the larger-scale and official intervention aspects of the migration event, study participants detailed the overall scope of this law enforcement and military deployment, local efforts to provide material aid and resources to responding personnel, as well as the layered social and economic impacts of integrating this new population into the Del Rio community. For the most part, residents viewed the increase in law enforcement and military in a positive light in their efforts to "protect" public safety and contribute towards growing the local economy; however, the ramifications of amplified surveillance measures on public behavior and mindset did not go unnoticed. Overall, study participants' perceptions of these authorities reflect complex community experiences, including tensions, and impacts that evolve over time and are cemented in the aftermath of migration phenomenon.

In discussing the overall scope of new law enforcement and military deployment to Del Rio during the Haitian migrant influx, study participants specified which branches and agencies were present and responding at the time, their roles and activities, and also judged the way in which they handled the situation at-hand. Starting at the state level, residents noticed the near-immediate flooding of Department of Public Safety (DPS)

officers and state trooper units to the area. Apparently, this not only included personnel from other parts of Texas itself, but also brought officials from other states such as Illinois, Florida, and Mississippi. Expanding on this, Jaden stated that "it all happened so quickly. We got so many strict state troopers that came in from different places. They were not from anywhere near here! I guess they came because they were really worried about the Haitian immigrants."[194] Study participants claimed that out-of-state troopers came to "help" Texas DPS officers in protecting national security and interpreted their response as quite "aggressive." Normally, state-level law enforcement would not be involved in matters of national security, however their deployment to Del Rio aligned with the goals of Operation Lone Star, launched by Texas Governor Abbott in early 2021, which utilizes Texas DPS as a response to the ongoing "border crisis."[195]

Aside from state officials, residents also noted the increase in federal authorities responding to the migrant arrival at this sector of the Texas border. Study participants again labeled their reaction as "aggressive," as apparently hundreds of additional Border Patrol agents surged into Del Rio to assist in apprehending Haitian migrants on the banks of the Rio Grande and subsequently initiating their asylum processing. Verónica shared her mixed feelings about the Border Patrol presence, stating that "it was necessary for them to be here because there was panic under the bridge. But that also meant that other places nearby were neglected, like the highway that goes to Eagle Pass and the security checkpoints in Sonora and Uvalde. They took the officials out of those places and sent them all to Del Rio!"[196] She subsequently explained that sufficient staffing is necessary

[194] Jaden, Interview by author.
[195] "Operation Lone Star," Office of the Texas Governor, accessed September 26, 2024, https://gov.texas.gov/operationlonestar.
[196] Verónica, Interview by author.

for these interior checkpoint stations (located about hundred miles north of the border and therefore falling within the jurisdiction of Border Patrol) to deter unauthorized migration further into Texas. This reflects a tension between employing a full-force response to the migrant influx in Del Rio at the cost of leaving other areas unattended and at-risk of allowing other persons to pass through unnoticed. Even though certain border sectors were stripped of their regular resources and manpower during that time, residents overall applauded personnel for their "good job" and success in keeping the local community safe. They also supported the arrival of National Guard units in the area as their strengthened presence would help to install "order" (*poner orden*) in the chaotic environment. Overall, this increase in personnel and implementation of new operations in Del Rio provide further evidence of border militarization and enforcement tactics which continues to be a favored policy trend in controlling migrant crossings into the United States.[197]

As law enforcement and military responded to the mass arrival of Haitians migrants and the camp forming under the International Bridge, the Del Rio community carried-out a material aid response to support officials on-the-scene. This collective action mirrored the aid distribution activities on the Mexican side of the border described in the previous chapter, but these two situations developed rather unevenly as Del Rians' efforts focused on powered and paid authorities while *Acuñenses* concentrated on migrants who were in transit and fleeing difficult conditions in their home country. Michael detailed how the Del Rio community "showed up" for law enforcement who were working to detain and process migrants under the bridge. He stated: "community

[197] Dunn, *Blockading the Border and Human Rights*; Nevins, *Operation Gatekeeper and Beyond*; Cantú, *The Line Becomes a River*.

members, non-profit organizations, and families came and set-up canopies outside the border fence and brought their grills to make barbeque sandwiches for the CBP agents. I was very impressed with all the support!"[198] While many study participants discussed the aid distribution efforts for law enforcement in this positive and favorable light, one resident provided a critical assessment in detailing the scope of this collective action. Alejandra shared:

> The Civic Center had a huge drive asking for hygiene products, food, snacks, and other "goodies" because our "poor" law enforcement officers were dragged from their cities and states and had to come take care of the issue with the Haitians. But those officers were getting paid for a job! Our town was so focused on the law enforcement but with the migrants they were like "just send them away." It made me sad.[199]

Alejandra's criticism of the aid distribution for law enforcement reflects nuanced perceptions and experiences as well as community tensions relating to resource allocation. Nonetheless, these collective efforts reflect some of the ripple effects of migration to Del Rio and reflect the ways in which people react to official deployment on a local level.

In their support for law enforcement and military, Del Rio residents provided justifications as to why these officials deserved to be helped and connected this to their roles, activities, and interactions with migrants under the bridge. For the most part, study participants clearly recognized that authorities were working to contain or "hold" migrants within certain physical boundaries but due to the large quantity of detainees present, they viewed officers as feeling extremely overwhelmed in carrying-out these tasks. Other studies and first-hand accounts of Border Patrol activities have also noted the

[198] Michael, Interview by author.
[199] Alejandra, Interview by author.

heavy burdens of this job position, however, most discuss the physically dangerous aspects of work in the field or, more recently, the tedious paperwork and data processing that is often required of them.[200] Perhaps it is then understandable why local residents, such as Shon, sympathized with responding personnel. He recounted his own experience and participation in the material aid response and rationalized his actions, stating: "my team was able to take pallets of Gatorade to the DPS and Border Patrol. We fed the officers by giving them meals from Chick-fil-A. We were just trying to lift their morale and meet their needs because they had a lot of their plate. The community fully supported and backed them."[201] As with the collective efforts for migrants across the border in Acuña, Del Rians perceived law enforcement as especially "vulnerable" in their position and therefore in need of immediate assistance. Other study participants mentioned officers' struggles in maintaining their physical and mental health during this timeframe and pointed to the community response as a positive and effective way to help offset these difficulties. This display of sympathy towards Border Patrol aligns with other studies of United States border cities that have found that local residents often trust and respect these federal officials as they are perceived to be an accepted and integrated part of the community as a whole.[202]

Even after Haitian migrants left Del Rio for interior cities in the United States, or in some cases returned to Ciudad Acuña to live and work for a period of time, law enforcement and military personnel remained and continued to increase their presence in this border zone. This demonstrates how impacts of migration evolve over time and also

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[200] Cantú, The Line Becomes a River; Robert Lee Maril, *Patrolling Chaos: The U.S. Border Patrol in Deep South Texas* (Texas Tech University Press, 2004).
[201] Shon, Interview by author.
[202] Dunn, *The Militarization of the U.S.-Mexico Border*.

how related changes are "cemented" as a result of these influxes. Residents discussed some of the social impacts of incorporating this demographic into their community with a mix of enthusiasm, frustration, and ambivalence, again reflecting multi-layered and varying perceptions and experiences. As such, the deployment of additional Border Patrol, state troopers, and army guard has prompted visual changes in Del Rio which include new infrastructure and surveillance measures to support job functions. At the city-level, study participants have noticed the recent "militarization" of residential neighborhoods, especially those in close proximity to the border fence. For example, armored vehicles such as tanks and hum-vee's are now permanently parked along La Frontera Road with military personnel actively manning this station in plain view of adjacent homes and church facilities. Alejandra, who also criticized the community's material aid response for officials, also regretted this change in scenery, sharing: "that area used to be so beautiful. There was a swimming pool there where the community would go to socialize and have parties. It changed after the Haitians were here and now it just looks scary."[203] The military's installment of heavy-duty equipment, surveillance technology, and personnel furthermore extends outside of the city limits as these sights are increasingly seen on the border highways connecting to Eagle Pass and Comstock. Aside from these semi-mobile operations, residents mentioned the installation of a new Texas Army National Guard base just north of Del Rio which opened at the end of 2021 and houses up to one thousand troops at a time.[204] The scene under the International Bridge has also changed, as a line of large canvas tents used for military exercises now

[203] Alejandra, Interview by author.
[204] Joel Langton, "New Broke Mill RV Park Owner Shares Plans," *830 Times*, October 17, 2021, https://830times.com/news-new-broke-mill-rv-park-owner-shares-plans/.

inhabits the space of the previous migrant camp that was non-existent prior to the influx. For the most part, study participants connected new operations to the importance of securing the border and praised these efforts for "making things better" in terms of impeding unauthorized migration through the area. This exemplifies the community's grappling with tensions associated with becoming more militarized in exchange for heightened protection measures in Del Rio and the surrounding areas.

In addition to contributing towards visual changes in Del Rio, increased law enforcement presence has impacted public behavior and mindset with some residents recalling direct and repeated interactions with officials in the surveillance setting. Study participants described scenes of "state troopers lining the roads" of this border city and traced this phenomena back to the time of the Haitian migrant arrival to the International Bridge. As a result of having more vehicles on patrol, troopers have been "chronically" pulling people over at a rate that residents had not previously experienced. Jaden recounted her own frustrating encounters with law enforcement, sharing: "I got pulled over three times within the span of two weeks. They didn't search my car or give me any tickets. It was just a verbal warning. They would stop me and ask a lot of questions for no reason. Lately, I've been asking my mom for rides because I feel nervous driving myself around."[205] After these incidents, Jaden felt the need to change her normal behavior so as to avoid any future run-ins with state troopers which is problematic because this limits her mobility and freedom in having to be dependent on other people for rides. Likewise, Eduardo, a business manager in his sixties who was born in Acuña and moved to Del Rio

[205] Jaden, Interview by author.

as a young adult, has been extra vigilant with the increase in law enforcement officials in Del Rio, relaying:

> We have to watch what we're doing when we go out. I went to dinner recently with a coworker where there were so many police vehicles parked outside the restaurant. I told my coworker, "it's probably a bad idea for anybody to do something bad right now because they'd definitely get caught!" I think it's a good thing to provide extra security in the community, though.[206]

Simultaneously, and also contradictorily, Eduardo alluded to the caution he felt while surrounded by police officers in a public place while also reiterating his support of this force in keeping the community safe. When asked about the increase in law enforcement and military presence in Del Rio, other study participants appeared more ambivalent about these changes, claiming it was "just something to get used to." These complex and layered responses to law enforcement surveillance also presented themselves in an ethnographic study carried-out in Nogales and Tuscson, Arizona, where local residents concurrently expressed fear of these practices while also showing signs of becoming accustomed to them.[207] This infers an underlying tension of increasing law enforcement and military presence at the border, however, at least in the case of Del Rio, residents have come to embrace these officials and have also welcomed them into the community.

Mirroring local perceptions of Haitians integration into the Acuña community, participants in Del Rio perceived an ongoing and positive economic impact from increased law enforcement and military presence, as well. While Haitians found employment opportunities and in some cases experienced discrimination in this realm, officials' contribution in Del Rio appears to be purely commercial (and therefore uneven)

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[206] Eduardo, Interview by author, Val Verde Public Library in Del Rio, August 26, 2023.
[207] Adriana C. Núñez, "Collateral subjects: The normalization of surveillance for Mexican Americans on the border." *Sociology of Race and Ethnicity* 6, no. 4 (2020): 548-561, https://www.asanet.org/wp-content/uploads/attach/journals/oct20srefeature.pdf.

but is widely-accepted and appreciated by local residents. In discussing this, study participants detailed the types of businesses in which law enforcement and military have frequented, both existing and new, and also described their overall economic impact in more generalized terms. From the onset of the Haitian migration event, residents' perceived the hospitality and service industries in Del Rio as experiencing the biggest boost from this official presence and their spending activity. Local hotels were (and continue to be) at-capacity with their parking lots full of state trooper vehicles and bars and restaurants also remained busy with this new clientele. Jaden noticed the direct impact this had on service industry workers, sharing: "my friend was bartending at the time and she was making about three hundred dollars in tips per night with all the officers coming in, which was way more than what she normally makes. The troopers definitely helped the economy here!"[208] Del Rio residents expressed their enthusiasm for incorporating this new customer base into small local businesses as they perceived profits increasing for both employees and establishments alike.

In the years following the Haitian migrant influx to the Texas-Coahuila border, study participants have observed more law enforcement and military personnel have moved to Del Rio not just alone but with their families, as well. This perceived population growth has apparently created opportunities for economic development as new businesses have recently opened to cater to these families. Study participants noted the building of chain stores and restaurants such as Five Below, McAllister's Deli, and Arby's, which Jaden viewed as "suitable for northern demographics."[209] As residents generally viewed relocated law enforcement officials as "big city" people from major

[208] Jaden, Interview by author.
[209] Ibid.

commercial zones such as Dallas–environments that contrast the small town feel of Del Rio–the construction of these new businesses aimed to accommodate newcomers who would be remaining for the long-term. Participants also positively perceived these new families as contributing towards a boom in real estate and home building and property value increases across the city.[210] When asked about Del Rio's recent economic growth, Seferino shared that "guardsmen bring their wives and kids and buy homes here. Their kids are enrolled in the school district or receive childcare. These families invest in our community and that has been very good for the economy. "[211] As with the case of Ciudad Acuña, city financial assets increased from 2021 to 2022 in Del Rio, however, at a much smaller rate of only 8% compared to the 36% jump seen across the border[212] This disparity could perhaps lead to unanswered questions about law enforcement and military personnel tax-exemption status, which may mean that this official presence and integration into the community has not boosted the local economy in the significant ways in which residents have initially perceived. It should furthermore be mentioned that Haitian migrants, as well, apparently spent some money during their brief time passing through the city in September 2021 but this was limited to a few businesses surrounding the Greyhound bus station including a Stripes convenience store, McDonald's, and Motel 6, demonstrating the uneven economic impacts of the migrant influx on either side of the border. Though a few study participants noticed the migrant presence within this small radius, it did not appear to have as much as a strong or durable economic impact in

[210] From 2023 to 2024, the average home value in Del Rio increased by nearly 5%; "Del Rio, TX Housing Market," Zillow, accessed October 22, 2024, https://www.zillow.com/home-values/38170/del-rio-tx/.
[211] Seferino, Interview by author.
[212] Ayuntamiento de Acuña, Coahuila, "Informe de avance gestión financiera 3er trimestre 2022;" Finance Department, "Annual Comprehensive Financial Report, 2022," City of Del Rio, Texas, accessed October 20, 2024, https://www.cityofdelrio.com/home/showpublisheddocument/8217/638186254768970000.

comparison to officials' deployment to Del Rio from that time on, according to local sources.

Figure 10. Armored vehicles which are actively-manned and provide surveillance outside of the border fence along La Frontera Road located in a residential neighborhood (photo by author, August 2023).

Figure 11. The newly-erected Texas Army National Guard base camp, Alpha, just north of Del Rio (photo by author, August 2023).

Figure 12. State trooper vehicles from Florida and other states parked at Best Western Inn during their ongoing deployment in Del Rio (photo by author, August 2023).

3.5 Chapter Conclusion

As Haitian migrants crossed the Rio Grande, camped under the International Bridge, and swiftly departed Del Rio by bus in September 2021, local residents perceived, interpreted, and reacted to the community-level impacts of this event in including aspects such as media reporting, the port-of-entry closure, and law enforcement and military deployment to the area. In interacting with these diverse factors, local residents contributed towards shaping new social and economic circumstances at the Texas border as well as added more nuance to U.S. media's portrayal of an ongoing "crisis" in this region. Study participants from Del Rio commented on the impressive international reach of news reporting but nonetheless found that traditional outlets "exaggerated" events happening on-the-ground, as with the Horse Patrol Unit story, while prominently featuring political voices such as Texas Governor Greg Abbott. Not covered in media reporting was border residents' resilience and problem-solving methods in meeting challenges related to the closing of the International Bridge although they generally disagreed on whether or not this was a necessary measure in responding to the migrant arrival. As for the addition of law enforcement and military personnel to the Del Rio community, including more Border Patrol, Texas and out-of-state troopers, and army guard troops, residents showed their support of this group by carrying-out an ad-hoc material aid response and furthermore appreciated their contributions to boosting the local economy but were sometimes wary of resulting visual changes and increased surveillance measures. When examining local perceptions and experiences with the Haitian migrant influx to Del Rio, it appears that impacts are layered and reflective of a wide range of views that continue to evolve over time (in which the same argument can

be made for Ciudad Acuña). The differences between these two cities lies in the unevenness of impacts on either side, as Del Rio and Acuña residents tended to emphasize distinct topics and occurrences in interviews. In the following conclusion to this thesis, I will explore these uneven aspects further as well as theorize their broader significance in the realm of border and migration studies, policy, and also the world at large.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the Haitian migrant influx of September 2021 to Del Rio, Texas, and Ciudad Acuña, Coahuila, relative to how border residents reacted to, adapted to, and navigated this event on a local level, actively shaping the borderlands in complex ways. I employed a transborder and multi-methods approach to amplify the voices of twenty-four members of this binational community, whose perceptions reflect the diverse experiences and interactions that resulted from this migration phenomenon. Calling into question the one-dimensional Mexican and United States media reporting that painted Haitians as "vulnerable" and the Texas-Coahuila border as in "crisis," the present study uncovered much more layered and nuanced impacts of the migrant influx that evolved both immediately and over time. Perhaps most notably, this work revealed uneven impacts and starkly different stories on each side of the border, as the Del Rio community did not experience these events and their aftermath in the same way as the Ciudad Acuña community. While this thesis acknowledges the cross-border connections maintained by many local residents, as emphasized in borderlands scholarship, it argues that focusing on shared experiences across border communities can overlook how increased border enforcement, asylum protocols, and migration management strategies shape differing narratives and outcomes on either side of the national divide.[213]

From the outset of this project, I adjusted and modified the objectives of my research so as to remain adaptive to changing conditions in Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña. It

[213] Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]framing the "Bad Woman": Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui, and Other Rebels with a Cause*. (University of Texas Press, 2014); Cherríe Moraga, *The Last Generation: Prose and Poetry* (South End Press, 1993); Emma Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary: Writing Chicanas Into History* (Indiana University Press, 1999); Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (Aunt Lute Books, 2021).

was my original intent to interview not only local residents for this project but also Haitians who stayed after the initial influx to find out how this population integrated and what life was like for them at the border. However, upon my arrival in the field in July 2023, I found that migrants had either become less visible in the community or had largely departed the region altogether. This unexpected outcome led me to shift focus, solely centering local residents' perceptions and experiences to determine any immediate and ongoing impacts that had evolved from the migrant influx on either side of the border. While the Haitian population had largely moved on, residents shared a wealth of stories about how they reacted to and navigated any related challenges and other developments in their communities from that time period. As such, their narratives illustrate how local residents continue to process the impacts and meanings of this migration event in the long-term, even as memories of the initial and short-lived "crisis" fade from popular consciousness. Study participants furthermore contributed differently positioned perspectives on the Haitian migrant influx, largely tied to which side of the border they lived on. While residents of Ciudad Acuña shared accounts of past interactions and daily life alongside Haitian migrants, Del Rians described these events through the lens of navigating ongoing U.S.-led border enforcement responses. In providing a "thick description" representative of this transnational community, the present study uncovers distinct narratives on both sides of the border that move beyond more limiting assumptions of migration and the region as a whole.[214] While media often rely on simplified "crisis" and migrant "vulnerability" frames, borderlands scholars tend to homogenize border communities, and national advocacy groups focus on migrant

[214] Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (Basic Books, 1973).

abuse, my research challenges these reductive narratives by foregrounding the complexity and nuance of on-the-ground realities within this highly contested geopolitical space.[215]

In amplifying local voices and perceptions, this study sheds light on how borderlands residents interpret and react to migration through the region and also reveals new and layered cultural, social, and economic dynamics in connection to these movements. Certainly, the Haitian migrant influx and border closure of September 2021 resulted in various and complex immediate and long-term impacts in both Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña, but my interview data suggests that these have manifested rather unevenly on either side of the border. Based on participants' narratives, it appears that Acuña residents experienced more concrete changes in daily life from the outset of Haitians' arrival in the community and throughout the subsequent months as these newcomers maintained a temporary presence on the Mexican side of the border. Examples of their adaptability and navigation of these changes were apparent in the community's ad-hoc material aid response for migrants, cross-cultural and social interactions between these groups, and incorporation of Haitians into to the local economy as both consumers and workers–in which residents and migrants actively co-shaped new conditions at the border. It should be mentioned that these local perceptions sometimes revealed a racist and xenophobic undercurrent, as participants relayed stories of residents opting not to occupy the same public spaces as Haitians or businesses barring migrants from entry, for example. However, as migrants gradually departed the city, these impacts largely faded away and life in Acuña mainly returned to "normal." Notable long-term developments in

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[215] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera;* Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]framing the "Bad Woman;" Haitian Bridge Alliance*, "Beyond the Bridge;" Moraga, *The Last Generation*; Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*.

the city include the over thirty percent jump in municipal financial assets from 2021 to 2022 along with the recent building of new chain stores and municipal facilities, though it remains unclear as to whether Haitians' spending (leading to tax increases for businesses) or labor (particularly in construction) directly correlates to these instances.[216]

As for Del Rio, local perceptions indicate that immediate impacts were not as great, but instead residents are reacting to, adapting, and navigating subtle changes that have been incorporated overtime and remain ongoing. Though study participants discussed the media's role in tarnishing Del Rio's reputation, painting the town as an "unsafe" place and negatively tying it to the Horse Patrol Unit incident, the increased and sustained presence of law enforcement and military personnel in the area is likely the more direct impact. It is true that community members attended to these authorities' perceived material aid needs in the moment of the migrant arrival, but residents' interactions with officials notably extend into the present day, as well. As more law enforcement and military move in, they integrate socially into the community, contribute towards population growth and economic development, and furthermore protect public safety, according to participants. However, these local perceptions also reveal an underlying tension between residents and official personnel. While many study participants relayed their support and welcoming of law enforcement and military forces in Del Rio, they appeared to be simultaneously and subtly aware of associated issues of surveillance, border militarization, and unequal power relations which continue to inconvenience, cause problems, and disrupt daily life for residents. Similar dynamics are playing out at the port-of-entry as well, where, in the aftermath of the ten-day closure of

[216] Ayuntamiento de Acuña, Coahuila, "Informe de avance gestión financiera 3er trimestre 2022."

the International Bridge at the end of September 2021, Customs and Border Protection have implemented stricter security measures and regular border shutdown simulation exercises. In regards to this, local perceptions of past and ongoing border closures reflect more evenly spread community-level impacts that affect cross-border travelers from both Del Rio and Acuña in similar ways. These changes, while becoming more normalized over time, may ultimately have negative ramifications on local residents whose agency and privacy could problematically be compromised in the name of "national security."

Although this study did not include Haitian migrant voices and therefore could not contribute details about their journey or experience in Del Rio-Acuña from their own perspectives, local perceptions still provided important insights that can add to and complicate ongoing discussions about migration to the U.S.-Mexico border. Historically, narratives about this region have focused predominantly on Mexican-origin "economic" migrants, particularly single men in search of either agricultural work in the United States, exemplified by the Bracero Program in the 1940's-1960's, or manufacturing jobs in Mexican border towns following the enactment of NAFTA in the 1990's which also attracted single women.[217] More recently, however, this discourse has evolved to include an increasingly diverse population of migrants from various Latin American and Caribbean nations, such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Venezuela, and Cuba, who are often fleeing repressive political regimes or systemic violence at home, among other serious issues. As such, there has been a notable uptick in entire family units emigrating from these countries which include mothers and children but also

[217] Ronald Mize and Alicia Swords, *Consuming Mexican Labor: From the Bracero Program to NAFTA* (University of Toronto Press, 2010).

unaccompanied minors.[218] The emergence of highly visible groups known as "caravans," which the media often depicts as consisting of mainly Central Americans traveling on foot through Mexico, furthermore marks newer shifts in migrant transit modes and strategies.[219] Whereas many of these caravans initially arrived in more major and urban Mexican border cities, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's implementation of Migrant Protection Protocols (MPP) in early 2021 may have instigated a shift in migrant trajectories to more rural crossing areas which, for example, designated the Eagle Pass-Piedras Negras port-of-entry as an official asylum processing point for users of the CBP One mobile application.[220]

As we have seen in the present study, participants' views of the Haitian migrant influx to Ciudad Acuña and Del Rio in September 2021 remain largely consistent with these aforementioned contemporary changes and patterns with the exception of following MPP guidelines. In this particular case, migrants instead utilized "irregular" crossing channels between ports-of-entry (the Rio Grande) and then surrendered themselves directly to Border Patrol upon reaching Del Rio while forming a rare migrant camp on the U.S. side of the border as they awaited processing or deportation. Additionally, unlike previous portrayals of Brown and Spanish-speaking migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border, this instance highlights the experiences of Black and Haitian creole or French-speaking migrants, thereby challenging preconceived notions about asylum-seeker

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[218] "Latin America and the Caribbean," Migration and Migrants: Regional Dimensions and Developments, International Organization for Migration, accessed October 28, 2024, https://worldmigrationreport.iom.int/what-we-do/world-migration-report-2024-chapter-3/latin-america-and-caribbean.

[219] Noor Wazwaz, "Thousands Swell Ranks of U.S.-Bound Migrant Caravan in Mexico," *NPR*, October 21, 2018, https://www.npr.org/2018/10/21/659327955/migrant-caravan-grows-to-5-000.

[220] Texas Impact, "Migrant Protection Protocols Update."

demographics and Haitian migration trajectories altogether. Rather than reinforcing the common image of migrants leaving Haiti and arriving to the Florida coast by boat, my research findings suggest a different route in which Haitians first travel by plane to South America and then continue the journey north on foot to seek asylum in the United States– more accurate and representative of the current state of Latin American and Caribbean migration in the Western Hemisphere.[221]

By examining this unique case of the September 2021 Haitian migrant influx, we can furthermore derive insights and lessons relevant to migration and cross-border issues worldwide. In an era marked by political instability and climate change, which significantly contribute to human displacement, there exists an urgent need to address global migration challenges not only at the U.S.-Mexico border, where asylum claims increasingly include arrivals from Africa, South America, South Asia, Russia, and Ukraine, but also in relation to recent mass movements to Europe from African and Middle Eastern countries, among other contexts. It appears that all too often, governments' answers to these phenomena have been to tighten border security and immigration protocols as well as to establish military operations in these zones.[222] However, the implementation of such strategies often disproportionately marginalizes migrants and residents of border communities alike, who are rarely considered in policy discussions. While right-wing politicians and pundits might point the finger at migrants themselves as the cause of various problems or paint border regions as inherently

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[221] Jacqueline Charles, "50 years of Haitian migration to South Florida: A story of protests, detention and triumph," *Miami Herald*, December 12, 2022, https://www.miamiherald.com/news/nation-world/world/americas/haiti/article269765082.html.

[222] "Europe's Migration Dilemma," Council of Foreign Relations, May 31, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/article/europes-migration-dilemma.

conflicted or dangerous, this current study discredits these notions entirely.[223] Rather, it posits that the aggressive and continuous deployment of law enforcement and military forces in response to migration, along with the strengthening of border enforcement methods, creates challenges for local communities, as seen in Del Rio, for example, where these strategies have become largely normalized and accepted by residents, albeit accompanied by a sense of unease regarding their surveillance and personal autonomy. By incorporating the points of view of people on-the-ground, as this study has strived to do, and furthermore centering and including their voices in decision-making processes, we can work towards creating more equitable solutions and beneficial outcomes for those living out current and future migration and cross-border realities.

Notably, my research does not fit into a neat disciplinary or methodological box. Though more traditional academic approaches are certainly still valid in tackling or understanding many different questions and problems, the strength of the present study lies in its' employment of multiple methods as well as its interdisciplinary nature. This approach evolved organically over the course of the project and served me well in my unique objective of examining a specific moment in recent history and memory (the Haitian migrant influx of September 2021) two years after the fact while also taking into account all that happened since that time as well as all that continues to occur in the present day in relation to that initial event. All in all, this work pulled from fields such as anthropology, public history, and media studies and also utilized a combination of

[223] Adam Shaw, Garrett Tenney, and Patrick McGovern, "Haitian migrants overwhelming small Indiana town: 'It's just overrun,'" *Fox News*, October 24, 2024, https://www.foxnews.com/politics/haitian-migrants-overwhelming-small-indiana-town-its-just-overrun; Aimee Picchi, "JD Vance says immigration is to blame for high housing costs," *CBS News*, October 4, 2024, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jd-vance-debate-immigration-housing-prices-real-estate-federal-reserve/.

ethnography, oral history, and researcher-generated images and photographs to provide a robust description and analysis of local perceptions pertaining to migration and how border communities navigate these special contexts. A topic that is so dynamic and relevant requires and deserves to be examined in ways that are also dynamic and relevant. This approach will not only provide a more comprehensive understanding but also allows for enhanced critical thinking and paves the way for innovative planning and decision-making in addressing migration and U.S.-Mexico border issues.

Although I find it difficult to "box" myself into one traditional field or methodology, I can say with certainty that this research is truly transborder in nature.[224] Too often, studies about the U.S.-Mexico border region remain constricted to just one side without considering the fuller picture or how the effects of certain phenomena play out on the opposite side of the national dividing line. I agree with borderlands scholars that border communities are interconnected and integrated culturally, socially, economically, and otherwise, and, therefore, that which impacts one side will invariably impact the other.[225] Regardless of this notion, I find that the value and perhaps irony of employing a transborder approach is the revelation that local residents' perceptions of a singular event can differ significantly depending on which side of the border they reside on. Not only that, but perceptions within a single community itself are also representative of a broad spectrum of borderlander experiences. These realizations allow us to go deeper and expand beyond the narrow uniformity of the borderlands theoretical framework or the tendency for scholars from Mexico to only study the Mexican side while scholars

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[224] Deeds, Ochoa O'Leary, and Whiteford, ed. *Uncharted Terrains*.
[225] Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*; Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]framing the "Bad Woman;"* Moraga, *The Last Generation*; Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary*.

from the United States study the U.S. side. Recognizing that constraints around cross-border movement, resource accessibility, or bilingual proficiency may limit some scholars' ability to conduct true transborder research, I fully acknowledge the privilege I hold in being able to undertake such an ambitious project. However, to begin to fill some of these gaps and overcome barriers to transborder academic study, cross-border collaboration and advocating for researcher needs will be necessary to ensure the success and impact of future endeavors.

As this study has shown, local perceptions of the Haitian migrant influx to Del Rio and Ciudad Acuña and its' aftermath do not represent a typical story of the United States-Mexico border. Rather than emphasizing migrant vulnerability or abuse or depicting the borderlands as homogenous or in constant crisis, my research reveals much more nuanced and complex views of these topics from the community-level. I have employed an interdisciplinary and transborder approach that can be used in future studies following shifting migrant trajectories and demographics through other border towns, for example, examining the migrant influx of an estimated 6,000 Venezuelans that arrived in Piedras Negras and Eagle Pass in November 2023 that led to a partial and extended port-of-entry closure in this zone.[226] Of course, future research directions will need to consider any changes in political administrations in both the United States and Mexico, requiring scholars to remain flexible in their work around migration and the border. Ultimately, as migration patterns evolve, it is essential to amplify the voices of those directly impacted in border communities, allowing research to capture not only these shifts but also the resilience and adaptability of those who live them firsthand.

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