

Narco-Violence, Korean-ization, and the “American Dream” in Mexico’s Industrial Capital

A Reflection of Refugees in Towns Monterrey, Mexico

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Cover photo: Monterrey, Mexico skyline. Photo by Jorge Aguilar, <https://www.britannica.com/>

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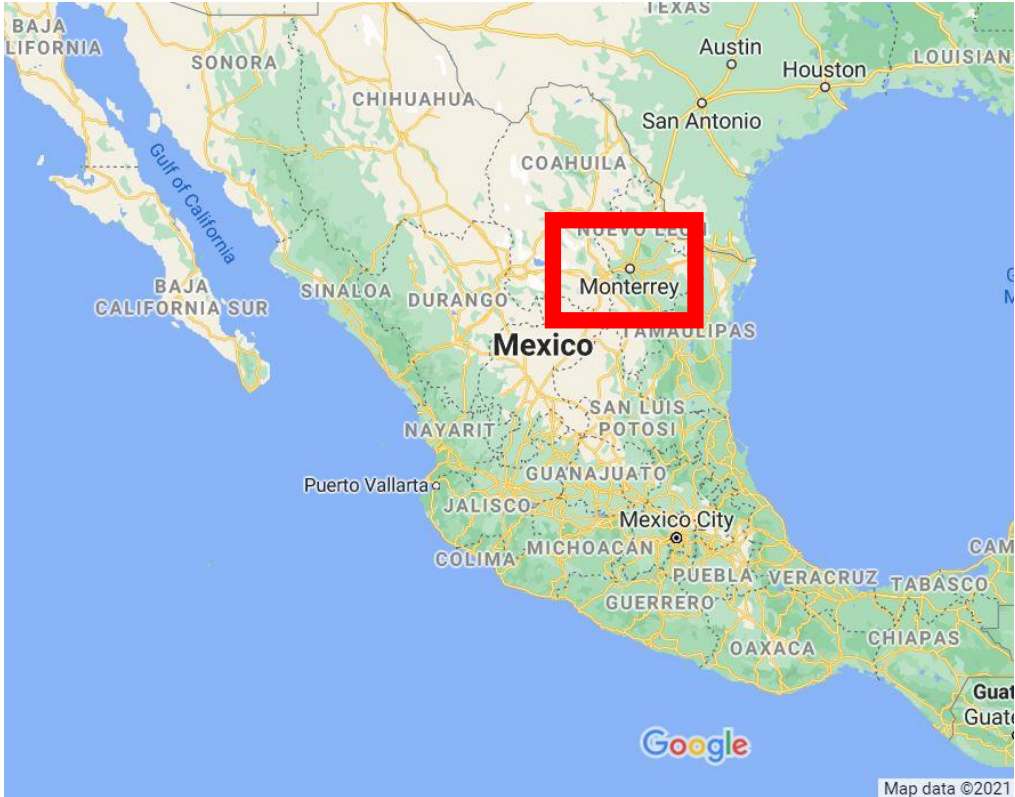
About the Author

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Introduction

I am an architect and researcher in the history of Mexican architecture, especially in the northeast region. Although I was born in Mexico City, I have lived in Monterrey for more than thirty years. My taste for history and the social dynamics in which it is woven has led me to research displacement and integration in Monterrey.

“En los pueblitos del norte, siempre ha corrido la sangre.” (In northern small villages, blood has always flowed) – Lines from the third verse of the northern Mexican *corrido* song “Pistoleros Famosos” (*Famous Gunmen*).¹

Since the northern border of Mexico was set at its current location in 1848 as a consequence of the Mexico-United States War (1846-1848), the city of Monterrey has remained only 150 miles from its northern Anglo-Saxon neighbor. This closeness, in addition to its strategic geographical location, has turned the area into a nerve center in Northeast Mexico. In the 19th century it was a focal point of goods smuggling; today other more sophisticated forms of illegal trade have led to violence hardly seen before.

This is not a simple paper; it has different impressions from me at different times in my life, which have in common the sensation of Otherness, that is, the feeling when one realizes they don't belong anymore, at least, in the comfy way they used to think they did. From this theme, I get a glimpse at some of the societies coexisting in the city of Monterrey that have had to move in and out, mostly due to wealth inequality or violence.

The Author's Position in Monterrey

I graduated with a degree in architecture in 1998 from UANL, Monterrey, which fostered my appreciation for the urban landscape and how it has been changed over the years by the comings and goings of new residents. My father decided in 1983 to leave Mexico City—our hometown—fleeing from the rising street violence, but I did not come to understand what it felt like to be Other-ed in a new place until I went to study for my Ph.D. at the University of Buenos Aires, in Argentina from 2012-2015.

I was born in 1972 to a middle working-class family in Mexico City. My father was the first in my family to gain university education (1976), and my father's father was a merchant who sold handicrafts to tourists. My mother and the other women in our family were all housewives. My ancestors lived in big cities (Mexico City and Guadalajara) -- no one recalls the last relative that lived in the countryside so we don't know the reasons why they migrated to the city, though economic improvement is likely. My father moved our family to Monterrey in August 1983. This city is only 143 miles from Laredo and 150 miles from McAllen, both in Texas, USA. Monterrey and its people were very close to the USA literally, culturally, and

¹ Written by Julián Garza, a.k.a. “Viejo Paulino” (Los Ramones, Nuevo León, 1935 – Monterrey, 2013). First released on the self-titled LP “Pistoleros Famosos” (1978) performed by the famous and well respected vernacular band Cadetes de Linares. “Pistoleros Famosos” is a very classical northern tune. This kind of folk northern accordion music has its roots deep in the 19th century; evolved and transformed, nowadays is still in good shape and have millions of followers.

economically. Until the 1980s, the upper and middle classes of Monterrey were used to going to the US border cities to buy clothes, electronic items, toys, and their weekly groceries. The sharp devaluation of the Mexican peso in 1982 (470%), together with the nationalization of the Mexican banks and restrictions on the use of US dollars, all ended this habit of visiting US border towns, although northern Mexicans have never severed their links with "the other side" of the border.²

My wife is Colombian. We've lived in Monterrey since 2015. The immigration process for her to become a permanent resident has been an example of absurd bureaucracy, but also the chance to witness a small part of the drama that foreigners, especially Central Americans and Venezuelans, have been going through since the crises in their countries began. I had been to Venezuela as a visitor in 2013,³ and am amazed how the fates have changed of the people I met there and the ones in Mexico asking for permission to stay, just two years later.

Writing this text has made me rethink the dynamics of our complex social networks. But it has been revealing, as some kind of mirror where I could sadly see our preconceptions about Others, long before we have a chance (if ever) to reflect on them. Some parts of this text were unpleasant to write, for I had to not only recall hard times, but also conduct some research to provide my words with sources linked to narco-violence journalism.⁴

I had no clue about forced migration until my early thirties when I learned about it firsthand. First, in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where a large number of immigrants from Paraguay, Bolivia, and Peru—chased away by poverty and hunger—tried to make a living while having to deal with a menu of harassments. I witnessed racism and classism there. Back in Mexico in the 2000s, a new phenomenon: now we also have an immigration issue in the hundreds of Central Americans fleeing from violence and poverty in their countries. That's when a couple of Tufts University scholars working on the RIT Project came to do a workshop in Monterrey, in the spring of 2018. One asked me if I could be their urban guide...and here I am now, trying to make some sense out of these words.

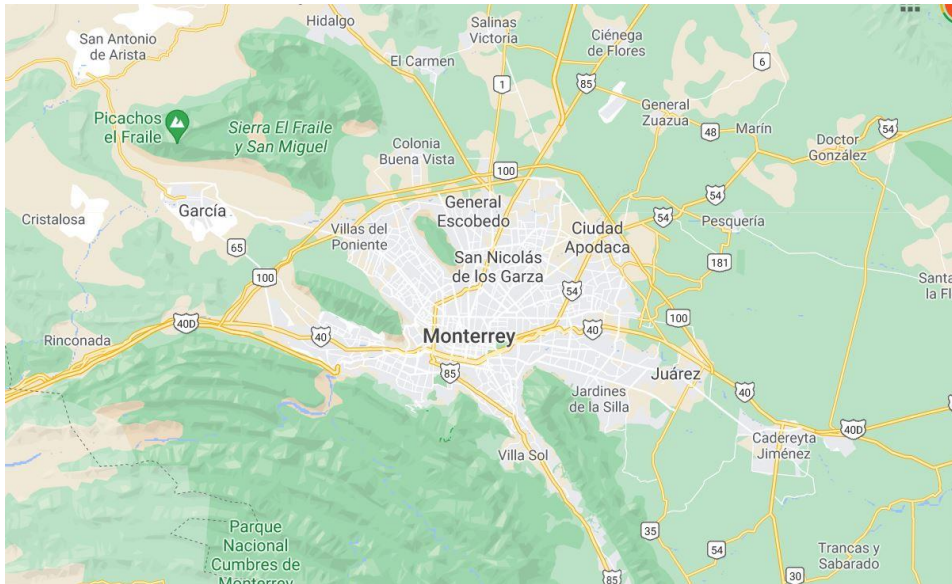
² In the colloquial language of northern Mexico, the phrase "the other side" (*el otro lado*) is often used to refer to the United States; clearly, it means "the other side of the Rio Bravo/Grande" or simply "the other side of the border", e.g.:

– What a beautiful blouse! Where did you buy it?
– On "the other side."

³ I was disembarking on Margarita Island when we heard on the radio about the official death of Hugo Chávez. Although by then a major economic crisis was taking place in Venezuela, some parts of the country, such as Margarita, were somehow "safe areas." However, in that news, most of the merchants feared riots and looting from the populace, and decided to remain closed for a couple of days. Back in those days, no one in Venezuela could have guessed the even more dreadful times to come just as quick as the following months.

⁴ I happen to have, among several friends and acquaintances, a journalist who has been following the tracks of these disturbing and sad stories.

Location



Base map imagery © Google 2021.

Mexico is a bunch of cultures put together by the chance events of history. It didn't exist as a nation before the Spanish conquest in the 16th century. Until then, the most direct link to current Mexicans were the old Aztecs, just one in tens of other original nations, with their own languages and their own cosmogonies. During the 300-year colonial period, the name of this land was New Spain, and it was more than twice the size it is today. Only the capital had the name "Mexico." The modern country was born after its independence from Spain in 1821, when it was officially named Mexico. Its painful growth since then has happened under a constant tension between all the Mexicos packed into the bag labeled "Mexico."

It was then that regional stereotypes took form: the miser northeastern, the arrogant Mexico City chap, the lazy southerner, the hard-working northerner, the ignorant southerner, the devious central Mexico country person, the barbarian northerner, the baroque-talking capital citizen, the too easy-going coast inhabitant, etc. Particularly, there is a big cultural difference between what is called "the South" and "the North," perhaps linked to the fact that deep-rooted cultures developed much more in that "South," while in the "North," the lack of those cultures allowed "unprejudiced," "open minded" people from everywhere to give a big boost to regional economy. That "South" is the cultural area that the German ethnologist Paul Kirchhoff defined as "Mesoamerica" back in the 1940s. That's the Mexico everybody has heard about pyramids, colonial towns, ancestral indigenous traditions. The North, known as "Aridoamerica," that big area, which is not Mesoamerica, often boasts of its alleged superiority. The constant migration from south to north, mainly in search of economic improvement, only reaffirms that perception.



Left: *Aridoamerica*. Morelos St. and chapel of St. Elijah, village of García, State of Nuevo León. Right: *Mesoamerica*. Chapel of Our Lady of Guadalupe and church of St. Mathew the Apostle, village of Huichapan, State of Hidalgo.

“We are all Mexicans”

As members of the working middle class, my maternal and paternal families were not used to seeing or dealing with foreigners, except for my father's father, who sold Mexican handicrafts for tourists. Historically, there has been a general perception that in Mexico "we are all Mexicans." We came to believe this so deeply that many people who are not Mexican have come to believe, for instance, that while "Argentines are [a mix of] Italians, or Spaniards, or Poles, or Germans, or *etcetera*, [but] you Mexicans are all Mexicans."⁵ Nothing is farther from reality. The word "Mexican" was adapted to cover a reality for the majority of Mexicans: their indigenous origin. Most Mexicans would prefer the imaginary label "Mexican" than have to discover the "misfortune" of the fact that his great-grandfather was actually Zapotec and never spoke Spanish, and that his grandmother was Mayan and did not speak another language until she was a teenager while working to clean rich houses. Nobody wants to hear these truths in Mexico. Our ancestors were all migrants; all came from places where indigenous people were almost 100% of the population, but when they arrived and settled in big cities like Guadalajara, Puebla, or Monterrey, they rushed to learn Spanish and forget their original language. Achieving this dictated their survival and acceptance in the urban amalgam.

The only white "ethnic group" that has been historically ever-present (and more or less accepted) in Mexico is the Spaniards. Although in the 1810s and 1820s, during the independence process, they were harassed or murdered and many fled to Spain, others remained and many more continued to immigrate. The Spaniards who arrived after

⁵ This was told to me by the prestigious Hungarian-Argentinian academic Marta Zátanyi (Budapest, 19?? – Buenos Aires, 2019) during one of her PhD seminars in her study in Buenos Aires, around 2013, when talking about the issues of identity. Even she was surprised when I replied and explained the complexity of that assertion. Strong-willed and of solid ideas, she stared at me and remained in silence for a while, as if she was having some sort of epiphany about something of which she wasn't aware, though, as it was stated, it made all the sense in the world.

independence were engaged in trade, and there is a widespread perception that everyone did well in business; that is, Spanish immigration has been linked to the mythos of the Spanish merchant (grocer, baker, bartender, etc.) and a certain degree of wealth. In the worst case, Spaniards never experienced abject poverty. But this wave of Spanish immigration was a slow process which took place throughout the 19th century.

The great wave of Spanish immigration of the 20th century in Mexico happened in the period 1939-1950, when, thanks to the liberal policy of President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940), some 20,000 refugees fleeing political persecution from the Spanish Civil War were received in Mexico. Many had a high level of education, and they enriched diverse areas of Mexican culture and the economy: architects, artists, poets, writers, scholars, engineers, jurists, etc. all integrated to Mexico. Spanish citizens continue to migrate to Mexico, but there is always a special distinction when speaking of the "Republican Spaniards" who arrived during that historic episode.

One of the most notorious characteristics of Latin American migration in the 19th century was the open-door policy for Europeans. Similar policies can be found from the Rio Grande to Tierra del Fuego. If success was measured by the number of immigrants, the most successful countries with these policies would be Argentina, Chile and Brazil. Mexico attracted lower numbers of Europeans. For example, the people of Chipilo, in Puebla, or of Nueva Italia, in Michoacán, are marked by Italian culture and heritage from large numbers of Italian immigrants settling during the Porfirian era (1876-1911). Mennonites, a community of peasants of Dutch origin, settled in the state of Chihuahua in 1922. The Seminole Muskogees, a tribe from the United States, were received as refugees in the state of Coahuila in the 1850s. Each of Mexico's 32 states has a history of immigration, but not of such a magnitude that it is the dominant feature of any state. Domestic rural-urban migration plays a much more significant role in Mexico's cities.

The Transformation of La Alameda

The oldest public park in Monterrey is the Alameda Mariano Escobedo, known as *La Alameda*. It was created in the early 1860s, and from 1940 to 1960 was the meeting place for young people from the middle and upper classes. But as the city grew, wealthier people left the area for the new suburban neighborhoods. In the 1980s the Alameda began to be a meeting place for immigrants, perhaps because it was connected to all corners of the city by a multitude of bus lines, or perhaps because it looked like the parks and squares of their hometowns.



The Alameda in the early 1900s. Source: "Presas de un lente objetivo." Elizondo, Ricardo. 2001. Tecnológico de Monterrey.

In the 1990s, migrants came to Monterrey from small villages with strong indigenous identities, mainly from the Huasteca, a geo-cultural region shared by the states of Tamaulipas, Hidalgo, Veracruz, and above all San Luis Potosí. At some point in the '90s many *regiomontano*, i.e people born in Monterrey and those who adopted the city (like me), just stopped visiting the Alameda, although it's not clear why. Maybe one reason was the emergence of malls (the first ones being Mall del Valle, 1982; then Gallerias Monterrey, 1983; then Plaza Fiesta San Agustin, 1988), spaces of consumption where we could walk and see imported fashions while blessed by air conditioning.

On a walk to the Alameda in 1997, I witnessed many things that amazed me. It was no longer a public space used by *regiomontano*, but by immigrants. One could hear them chatting in their native languages; mainly Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs. The people who consider themselves *regiomontano* say that the Alameda was "abandoned." However, the park hasn't been "abandoned" -- its current users are now indigenous Mexicans. This creates attitudes ranging from simple lack of understanding to open racism. Fortunately, there has been no official policy of eviction. Nowadays, the Alameda identifies with immigrants more than ever. There are stalls selling goods and foods from their hometowns, and the atmosphere is that of a small Mexican town rather than urban industrial Monterrey.

In 2010, "Zihuakali" (House of Women, in Nahuatl) was established in Alameda. It is a civil association organized by indigenous women to give direct support to their peers right where they are concentrated; they give advice on gender and labor abuse, among other matters. Although they work with their own resources and do not receive support from any government institution, the place is still active.⁶



Left. Northeast entrance to Alameda Park, 2003. Right. Alameda Park. Mexican immigrant girls hanging out in their day off, 2012.

Us and the “Others”

“Why don’t they integrate? Why don’t they get involved in this city’s dynamics? Why are they so impatient/weird/unfriendly?” Questions like these used to be asked by many in Monterrey. Until the ‘80s, it was unusual to see foreigners in public places like plazas and malls. Immigrants were the occasional university teacher, a diplomat, or a businessman; people of our age and economic status were unlikely to meet them. After the ‘90s, things changed. It could be linked to NAFTA, which went into effect on January 1, 1994. Ever since then, it’s become common to see not only US citizens, but also Chinese people working in Chinese food restaurants, Indians buying stuff at the supermarkets or, more recently, Koreans shopping in the malls.

Meeting the Aliens

The first time I encountered foreigners was around 1979, when I was seven. My mother, brother and I were standing in the crowded Mexico City subway. Suddenly mum said quietly: “Hey, look,” pointing with her eyes towards a couple of guys who seemed very weird and threatening. Seeing my astonishment, mother added, “Those are Americans.” They might

⁶ More about *Zihuakali*: Fernández G. Saravia, Morales Rivera, Sinquin. *Visibilización y prevención de la violencia de género que se ejerce contra mujeres indígenas en situación de migración. Diagnóstico participativo con la Casa de la Mujer Indígena Zihuakali, Monterrey, Nuevo León, junio – diciembre de 2013.* Red de Mujeres del Bajío, A.C. PDF version currently available on the internet.

have been in their late forties, but to me they looked decrepit and ancient. Bald heads, sleeveless black leather jackets, black jeans, heavy industrial boots and, what held my attention, loose arm muscles full of wrinkles. Now I realize they probably belonged to one of those white urban tribes that ride big motorcycles all across the USA, but back then I was terrified and also felt somewhat sorry for them. In Mexico City, until the 1980s, the Mexican middle and lower class had little or no contact with foreigners; these were concentrated in tourist sites, several of which (especially beach destinations) discriminated against Mexicans. This was the case throughout the country, except at the borders.

Narco-violence and Displacement

There has been drug trafficking in Mexico for a century. It was not noticeable until the '80s, when the prosecution and capture of some of the *capos* (Rafael Caro Quintero was the most notorious) began to be discussed on national television. Rural people had long suffered violence related to drug trafficking, but that was invisible to urban inhabitants. We learned through television of narco-violence in Colombia and consoled ourselves with the idea that Colombia was a "poor banana republic," and their underdevelopment was the reason for their perdition. We believed what the Colombian people were suffering could never happen in Mexico.

"We are better organized. We have more education. Our level of corruption is not as high as theirs. We are too close to the United States; they would not let something like that happen," were common refrains. We could not have imagined what would happen here 15 years later.

In 2007, narco-violence ceased to be abstract and became grotesquely visible in our own city, and proud Monterrey ("The industrial capital of Mexico; nothing like that would ever happen here") was paralyzed by fear. No such bloody and brutal things had been seen since the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921). Urban dwellers had lived without the shock of extreme violence and the absence of the rule of law. With the violence everything changed: the city stopped having a nightlife, the bars closed, and if night fell while we were still in the house of a friend, we would spend the night there instead of venturing into the streets. The city imposed a curfew. During the peak of this violence (2007-2012), soldiers in the streets and *narcoblockings*⁷ were common. Those who had money and other resources fled to Texas, especially to McAllen, where they could still attend to their interests in Mexico. The violence is no longer as bad as it was then, but I do not know how many of those people returned to Monterrey. By March 2010, the "fire" had spread across the Monterrey Metropolitan Area. Politicians called in the military, and they only sprayed more lead anywhere the flames appeared.⁸

⁷ Checkpoints or barricades set by narcos randomly on major streets.

⁸ J. Alberto C. Guerrero. *Ibidem*, June 28th 2020. Recovered: July 4th 2020.



Left. Colonia Independencia, one of the largest Monterrey slums. The soldiers come down after a confrontation and coroners go up to collect the corpses. Photo and caption by journalist Juan Alberto Cedillo Guerrero. No date specified, but pretty much somewhere around 2010. Posted on <https://www.facebook.com/juan.a.cedillo> July 3rd 2018. The slum, actually called “La Campana”, is high in the long hill that is right in front of the old downtown area of Monterrey, with just Santa Catarina river in between.

Right: A narco-incident in a very important central Monterrey avenue. Facebook post: April 25th, 2010 <https://www.facebook.com/juan.a.cedillo>. On the left side of the picture is the “Monumental Monterrey”, an old bullfight ring. Since 2017, I’ve been living just less than half a mile from this place. Photos used with permission.

The Long, Silent Internal Displacement

You do not need to experience direct physical violence to feel threatened. My father's family was originally from an iconic lower-class neighborhood, adjacent to today's Historic Centre of Mexico City: Tepito. He was born there, as well as his father. It has always been a tough place, but respect for family values ruled. All that changed gradually in the 1960s; by 1968 the quality of living in Tepito showed such a decay that it made my father convinced his parents and the whole family (seven siblings) to look for another place to live. "When LSD arrived, everything just broke down," dad used to say. To the old traditional marijuana supply was added synthetic drugs whose psychological effects and trade caused violence never before seen. Thus, this family left that neighborhood where they had lived for three generations and moved in 1969 to a new town beyond the urban sprawl of Mexico City.



Left: The happy old days. Dad's family celebrating a grandparents' wedding anniversary at the family home in the Tepito neighborhood, somewhere around 1966. Still wouldn't imagine they'd leave this place three years later chased away by the growing insecurity related to the smuggling and the drug trade. Right: The Newcomers in Villa Coapa. In 1969, the authorities of Mexico City sold to the public the housing venues cleverly built to accommodate the journalists and staff during the Olympic Games of 1968. These recently arrived migrants moved from Guadalajara to Mexico City during fall 1969, in search for better opportunities. The picture, taken in 1973, shows what Villa Coapa was like in its early times. There are two kids (my uncles), me as a toddler hold by mum, who met dad in that new neighborhood in 1970.

For my father, that stability only lasted barely more than ten years. In the '80s, chatting about violence and crime in Mexico City was the favorite pastime of all Mexicans. I do not remember having witnessed violent acts in the streets, and until then none of us had been robbed yet. But the feeling of insecurity was very high, so we left in 1983. Thus, we went from living in one of the most violent and populated cities in the world to the smallest provincial capital of Mexico at that time: La Paz, Baja California Sur. Then came the move to Monterrey, where we settled in August of 1983. Although this city was the famous

The Unwanted

Until the early 21st century, there was a strong animosity in Mexico towards the people from Mexico City. It has not disappeared, but it is not as heavy as it used to be. In the best case, people from Mexico City were criticized as arrogant, thought of as talking baroquely, and were believed to be deceitful and fraudulent in business. At worst, they were seen as thieves. There is a very famous expression that emerged in Chihuahua in the '70s: "Make country, kill a chilango" (*Chilango* is the name for people from Mexico City). Not exactly a demonym (that would be "capitalino"), but it became an alternate name. Until the '80s, it was definitely offensive, but now it's been roughly more than 20 years since it has been adopted as a regular and acceptable (yet unofficial) way to address a national capital resident, even used by themselves. My brother and I used to be bullied by other students for being *chilangos*, mostly by imitating (ridiculously) our strong Mexico City accent. In my case, I had to go through this a whole year. They would also hide my stuff, trip me, and challenge me to fight (which I had to do twice, despite my nerdy genes and looks). After facing this, I kind of earned everyone else's respect and became friends with most of my classmates. After living for years in the same city, I became a part of it. Now it was "us," and the newcomers were "the Others."

"industrial capital of Mexico" and the third largest city by population, the tranquility with which we lived here 35 years ago just cannot be believed now.

The Newcomers

Accompanying my Colombian wife, Valentina, through the bureaucratic process of receiving her permanent resident ID in the years 2015-2017, we noticed that the overwhelming majority of other applicants were Koreans and Venezuelans. This observation, I later learned, illustrated two types of newcomers in Monterrey who were arriving for completely opposite reasons: economic opportunity or violence and economic collapse.

Arriving for Economic Growth

It was at the Starbucks in the *Metropolitan Center*—right in the heart of the San Agustín neighborhood, the most expensive commercial and financial district of Monterrey—that I started asking questions about Monterrey's booming economic migrant population. There were, uncommonly in Monterrey, Asians of many ages and nationalities. "Who are all these people? What are they doing here?" my wife and I thought. Through conversations and exploring the economic development of the city, we learned that in 2014, the Korean company KIA Motors signed an agreement with the government of Nuevo León to build a large car assembly plant 28 miles northeast of Monterrey. In 2016 that contract was reformed and, since then, there has been a "Korean-ization" in certain places of the city. People who travel to the county of Pesquería, where the KIA plant is, tell me that there are shops there with Korean signs that sell only Korean products.⁹ What I have witnessed is the unusual abundance of Koreans in the cafes and malls of the most expensive district of Monterrey. These migrants are emblematic of a class of new arrivals transforming the city with wealth and affluence.

Arriving from Socioeconomic Collapse

For years upon our arrival in Monterrey, my wife and I lived in a small studio located in a neighborhood that, in the past, was high class. The flat next to ours was very large, and the owner decided to subdivide it to obtain greater profits from its lease. We were not comfortable with the kind of people who went to live there at the beginning; they were young women who would go to work around nine or ten at night in an outfit unusual for an office. It was not hard to imagine what their jobs were, but that was not the problem. Although their workplace was somewhere else, sometimes they would organize noisy parties that attracted bad people, very likely narco-linked.

Fortunately, that lasted less than a year, and after that, a family of four Venezuelan women moved in. Only one woman had a job and it was clear she came to this city with the contract ready. She had to earn a lot, since their flat was worth about USD 430 per month (us, for half of that space, paid only USD 100). In addition, she had to support her mother, her sister,

⁹ There is a now a colloquial pun to describe this Korean-ization: the old municipality of Pesquería (literally "place to fish") is now called "Pescorea."

and her daughter. We used to see her going out to work when it was already night, always very well dressed. The times we met her in the stairs, she would greet respectfully, but we never saw her smile. We wondered: what kind of job can be done during the night, that makes an income of at least about USD 1,500 per month, without any known qualifications? The answers we never got for sure, but our imagination barely gave us one or two possible jobs that, perhaps, could not be confessed to her little daughter. In May 2018, they left that flat; undoubtedly the rent was too expensive, and the job perhaps was no longer as profitable as it was two years ago. I understand that they moved to another city in Mexico. We felt very sorry for them; we know they hadn't many choices in Venezuela or here in Mexico. They did what they could.

I spoke to a Venezuelan mother in 2018 named Andrea. She used to live with her family and other relatives in a small town called Villa de Cura in Venezuela. They moved back and forth between Venezuela and Mexico since 2011 as the political and economic situation in Venezuela became increasingly hazardous. Finally, in 2015 the situation in Venezuela had become volatile enough that they landed in Monterrey for good. They did not arrive facing the dangers of crossing borders on foot or walking through jungles, deserts, or violent cities. They took a plane and even had the opportunity to make a brief stopover in Miami to meet some relatives. As soon as they settled in Monterrey, her husband got to work; they were able to open a mechanical workshop with their savings. Once Andrea and her family (husband, daughter, and mother-in-law) got settled, they invited more people to come, this time hired as workshop assistants. Most of them decided to live in nearby neighborhoods and maintain themselves as a kind of small Venezuelan colony in middle working-class districts on the west side of the city.

[Arriving from Pure, Harsh Violence](#)

In Monterrey in 2015, I found myself seeing on the streets a social phenomenon that I had not witnessed before: African American beggars. "Who are these people? Where did they come from?" I thought. It's not that seeing beggars at street crossings was weird; I've been a driver since 1991 and I've always seen them wherever there are traffic lights. There are men who clean windshields, sellers of Chinese-made trinkets, or people with only empty hands asking for a few coins. What I had not seen were *foreigners* asking for money.

After some conversations, I learned what was happening; they were Central Americans, but with Africanized features tracing back to the black slaves who arrived in the Americas during the Spanish colonial era and mixed with natives. Today, only a few towns in Guerrero and Veracruz (south Mexico) have an Afro-descendant population, but these are practically "invisible" in the Mexican collective imagination. But these men were being displaced by violence in Central America and arriving to the streets of Monterrey.

In 2010 in Alameda Park, I spoke with a man of an unclear age, maybe 30 years of hard life. Or maybe 40? I learned that he was Nicaraguan, that he had left his town because of the harsh conditions of violence and lack of jobs, that he had struggled a lot to get to Monterrey, and that what he feared most was that he would be discovered by the people of "La Letra"

(literally, the letter). He wouldn't dare to say, "Los Zetas," name of a very well-known violent and dangerous drug cartel. He said that if the people from "the letter" learned about his whereabouts, they would rob him, kidnap him, torture him, and force him to work for them where he would risk his life.

The issue of Central American migration has been noticeable in Monterrey for at least five years, yet the city has not taken any notable actions. So far, it has been average citizens who have organized themselves into independent support centers, working with their own resources and the support of a few volunteers. Sociologist Pablo Landa works to devise programs to keep Central American migrants occupied while they wait: "The long waits of weeks or months make them terribly desperate," he told me. Other programs are described in our [other RIT case report on Monterrey by Victoria Ríos Infante and Cordelia Rizzo](#).

Some of these sites are right on the edge of railroad tracks. One is adjacent to the old Monterrey train station, opened in 1960 and abandoned since the closure of all passenger stations was decreed in 1998. Next to the train tracks, many Mexican citizens have found a new common and identifiable enemy: it is universally believed that those who are stealing their cars "are Central Americans," as one resident told me.

Conclusion

Since Monterrey's modern neighborhoods on the periphery of the city became more popular in the 1960s, downtown Monterrey began to witness its abandonment. More and more families began a slow exodus. Some of the houses they left were turned into offices, schools, small workshops of all kinds, but many of those houses were simply abandoned. By the 21st century, Mexico's drug violence sunk the downtown further to the very bottom. From 2007 to 2012, the hardest period of narco-violence in Monterrey was felt by ordinary residents like me. This was the lowest point in the center of the city.

In the historic district of this city, where most architectural heritage is located, law became meaningless. Narcos took great care to let the people feel that this was a territory of danger. Central Monterrey was neglected, and city mayors did nothing about it: hundreds of empty houses vandalized, cracked sidewalks, craters in the streets, and low quality public lighting defined the urban landscape for years. It was then that "the saviors" appeared to teach the new gospel of territorial occupation: by 2015, there were ten new real estate developments of homes, offices, commercial buildings, and parking lots. They were built under a motto "go back to live in the center again." But prices are now unaffordable to the former residents of downtown. Gentrification and the demolition of historical heritage has completely transformed the city center. Today in 2020 there are already around 50 new buildings downtown, all enormous. There are millions of dollars of investment here, but still it is possible to find accommodation for anyone who is not fussy about basic housing requirements. For these residents, one can spend the equivalent of 130-180 USD per month on basic rent. Certainly, the wealthy ones don't even bother to consider these pockets of the city.



The Messiah Effect. Step One: Do nothing about the phenomenon of abandonment of homes in the city center for about four decades. Let the usual inhabitants move out and let their houses decay. Step Two: Take advantage of collective psychosis during the worst years associated to drug violence. Let the whole area fall into "hopeless" neglect and let as many neighbors flee as possible. Step Three: Present yourself as a savior whose real plan is to "overdensify" the central district with "new urban concepts," mixing workplace, housing, and shops. Charge prices that the former inhabitants and working-class people cannot afford. Regard the destruction of the old historic cityscape as "collateral damage" in exchange for the "great benefits", and just carry on.

For "the invisible ones"—foreign arrivals from violence and economic collapse, mostly from Central America—even an affordable 130 USD a month is too much. For them, settling in Monterrey is purely dependent on the charity and effort of independent social organizations, usually located near the train tracks. Part of the old Union Station used to serve that purpose, but since it was officially converted into police academy in January 2020, it now appears that the church of Santa Maria Goretti eight blocks north is taking the baton. I can't help thinking how easily those people, in their extreme vulnerability, could be recruited as cannon fodder by drug lords. Is it happening already? I honestly don't know, but I'm aware how tragically real life can exceed our wildest fantasies.



Left: Part of the former Union Station of Monterrey (1960-1998) used to be a handy shelter to the immigrants on their way to the USA. Since the beginning of 2020, the building has been turned into a police academy. Right: Getting everything ready since early in the morning. The church of Santa María Goretti, nestled in the middle of working-class neighborhoods, warehouses and factories, lacks all the "charm" expected of a traditional Mexican Catholic church. It has been built in pieces over the years with the scarce resources they've been able to gather. But its fame comes from the charity work that Father Roberto Infante (1925-2009) started in 1961, with his *Comedor de los Pobres* (Soup Kitchen). Now, this social work alleviates a bit the need of foreign immigrants that happened to land here by chance.



Left: Time to eat. The main meal in Mexico is eaten sometime between 12:00 PM and 4:00 PM, depending on custom and schedules. This time the food stalls are not that crowded. Right: In the vicinity of the church of Santa Maria Goretti, immigrants rest while doing everything possible to avoid direct punishment from the sun.