

UC San Diego

UC San Diego Previously Published Works

Title

Rethinking Tourism Reform: Territorial Politics and Maya Alternatives to Capitalist Recovery in Southern Mexico

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0zr5z51m>

Journal

Geopolitics, ahead-of-print(ahead-of-print)

ISSN

1465-0045

Authors

Azcárate, Matilde Córdoba

Castellanos, M Bianet

Publication Date

2026-06-19

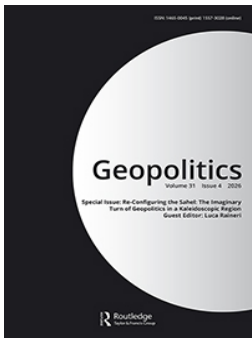
DOI

10.1080/14650045.2026.2685599

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed



Rethinking Tourism Reform: Territorial Politics and Maya Alternatives to Capitalist Recovery in Southern Mexico

Matilde Córdoba Azcárate & M. Bianet Castellanos

To cite this article: Matilde Córdoba Azcárate & M. Bianet Castellanos (17 Jun 2026): Rethinking Tourism Reform: Territorial Politics and Maya Alternatives to Capitalist Recovery in Southern Mexico, *Geopolitics*, DOI: [10.1080/14650045.2026.2685599](https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2026.2685599)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2026.2685599>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.



Published online: 17 Jun 2026.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 354



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

RESEARCH ARTICLE



Rethinking Tourism Reform: Territorial Politics and Maya Alternatives to Capitalist Recovery in Southern Mexico

Matilde Córdoba Azcárate^a and M. Bianet Castellanos^b

^aCommunication Department, University of California San Diego, La Jolla, California, USA; ^bAmerican Studies, University of Minnesota United States, La Jolla, California, USA

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the fragility of tourism-dependent economies and intensified calls for sustainable transformations. This paper examines state-led post-pandemic tourism reforms in Mexico's Fourth Transformation, particularly around the Maya Train project in the Yucatán Peninsula. Drawing on critical approaches to reformism and J.K. Gibson-Graham's diverse economies framework, we discuss Mexico's post-pandemic tourism initiatives as conventional tourism reforms: incremental changes towards capitalist recovery that treat tourism as an unquestioned engine of growth and deploy infrastructure as a geopolitical technology of territorialisation over Indigenous space. We contrast this state-led approach with two Maya-led initiatives that exemplify paths for alternative, anti-colonial reforms and territorial politics. First, *ser camaleón* (chameleon) practices in community-based tourism cooperatives, where participants strategically leverage Maya identity and understandings of solidarity while redefining community boundaries in rural inland settings threatened by tourism growth. Second, housing strategies that reject mortgage indebtedness and formal housing markets in the tourist city of Cancún. Both cases show existing community economies working within and at a distance from capitalist structures as modalities of Indigenous geopolitics reconstituting the terms of land, labour, and democracy towards emancipatory horizons that challenge tourism's conflation with extractive growth.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the vulnerabilities of tourism-dependent economies, intensifying debates over sustainable transformation. While some called for a fundamental rethinking of tourism, others prioritised quickly reviving it. This tension between transformation or preservation,

CONTACT Matilde Córdoba Azcárate  mcazcarate@ucsd.edu  Communication Department, University of California, San Diego 9500 Gilman Dr. La Jolla, CA 92093, USA

© 2026 The Author(s). Published with license by Taylor & Francis Group, LLC.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

reform or revitalisation, sits at the heart of ongoing tourism policy struggles in tourism destinations across the world.

In this paper, we address this ambivalence by building on broader critical approaches to reformism and Gibson-Graham (2006, 2008) diverse economies framework. We contribute to an emerging critical geopolitics of touristic governance that interrogates how Indigenous communities navigate the boundaries between conventional tourism reforms and anti-colonial transformations – not from outside capitalism, but from within the very structures they continue to resist. In doing so, we join broader conversations on infrastructure as a geopolitical technology of territorialisation (Blanchard and Flint 2017). Touristic infrastructure operates as a distinctively settler-colonial variant of large-scale infrastructural work that deploys heritage and indigeneity as mechanisms to legitimise territorial control and to foreclose alternative imaginaries (Aiku and Gonzalez Vicuña 2019; Mostafanezhad, Azcárate, and Norum 2021; Sheller 2018). We look at state-led tourist mega-infrastructure projects in Mexico, with particular focus on the Maya Train – a controversial 1,500-kilometre railway connecting major tourist destinations and archaeological sites across the Mexican Southeast, launched in 2019.

Promoted as a redistributive and sustainable tourism project, the railway is part of broader neoliberal, state-led reforms. We consider these conventional reforms because they reinforce extractivist capitalist land and labour relations in Southern Mexico, particularly on the Yucatán Peninsula. This is a leading global tourism destination, where state-led extractive tourism development has overshadowed alternative, non-extractive understandings of land, labour, and culture since the 1970s. These alternatives hold the potential to generate systemic change. They demonstrate that communities can make tourism work redistributively – on their own terms, through their own definitions of value, solidarity, and need, rather than those prescribed a priori by the state or the market.

Alternatives to extractive tourism development invite researchers, policy-makers, and developers to challenge the fundamental equation of tourism with positive economic growth. They also centre Indigenous perspectives in the formulation of equitable tourism economies – not as a corrective afterthought, but as a starting point. In so doing, they become alternative tourism reforms that highlight that Indigenous efforts towards self-determination are negotiated geopolitical practices (Gibson 1999; Macaspac 2023; Nicol 2017). This negotiation is relational. As Yee Chin (2025, 41) suggests, ‘Indigenous geopolitics should not be considered independent of or in opposition to the settler state’, but must work within and against it simultaneously (Nicol 2017, 797).

Here, we focus on two examples of contemporary Maya-led pathways towards equitable tourism economies: *ser camaleón* practices in inland community-based tourism cooperatives and housing initiatives that address a housing affordability crisis along the coast. Both show how Maya peoples

heterogeneously navigate and adapt to capitalist tourism development while maintaining their identities and agency. *Ser camaleón* refers to the learned strategic ability to shift and adapt the meaning and practices of Maya identity and solidarity for diverse tourism audiences, functioning like a chameleon across changing contexts (Córdoba Azcárate 2023). Located in the rural hinterland of the Cancún-Riviera Maya tourist corridor – a zone of intensified real estate speculation further accelerated by the Maya Train – these cooperatives leverage Maya referents of identity and place as both cultural resources and sites of struggle. The housing strategies we discuss are mostly articulated in coastal urban tourist centres. They connect contemporary resistance to mortgage debt with broader historical Maya autonomy movements centred on communal land rights (Castellanos 2021). Together, both initiatives reflect distinct yet related place-based critical awareness regarding the commodification of Maya identity within a heavily touristified region. We suggest they exemplify Indigenous-led geopolitical processes of active refusal, negotiation, adaptation, and/or creative production through which Maya communities forge an alternative approach to post-COVID tourism reform, one that moves beyond the mainstream binary of transformation versus preservation.

The paper is structured as follows. We first introduce reformism and a diverse economies approach to tourism as our analytical frameworks and describe tourism's inclusion in these broader debates. We then engage Indigenous and anti-colonial literature to help us rethink tourism reform in capacious ways that avoid binaries. We situate this discussion in relation to Mexico's Fourth Transformation and its limits. Through this analysis, particularly regarding the Maya Train project, we demonstrate how the state's role as entrepreneur and banker systematically converts Maya territories into frontiers of accumulation while disciplining Maya labour through encroachments via tourist infrastructure development. This dynamic is representative of how large-scale infrastructure, touristic and otherwise, functions as a geopolitical technology of territorialisation by spatialising state sovereignty claims over contested Indigenous space (Blanchard and Flint 2017). Following this, we analyse the failed promises of redistributive growth along the Maya Train in both coastal and inland areas of the Yucatán peninsula, revealing how a historically produced profit-generating spatial differentiation between profit-generating tourist-attracting coastal zones and labour-supplying inland hinterlands operates not as policy failure but as a structural logic of capitalist tourism development. Finally, we engage with our two empirical cases – *ser camaleón* practices in inland Yucatán and housing strategies in coastal Cancún – to show how Maya inhabitants adapt to, negotiate, or resist the commodification of their land, labour, and culture, while creating and reconstituting autonomous relationships to their territory as well as to the state's vision of extractive growth.

Our positionality as authors with long-standing relationships in the region shapes this analysis. Both of us have conducted and published extensive collaborative long-term ethnographic research in the region: Córdoba Azcárate has focused on state-led touristification in areas of outward migration in coastal and inland Yucatán, while Castellanos has focused on tourism economies and Yucatec Maya migration in urban centres, like Cancún.¹ In our respective research, we have documented how tourism in Yucatán functions as a key site where capitalist states manage the contradictions between accumulation imperatives and Indigenous demands for land and autonomy. In this shared research, our complementary perspectives enable us to trace how local communities across different socio-geographical and economic contexts, even within the same region, articulate diverse yet related strategies for reimagining tourism governance, territorial control, and resource management.

A Diverse Economies Approach for Tourism Research and the Language of Reform

A diverse economies framework is ‘a performative ontological project’ that re-reads for difference, cultivating creativity and ‘contributing to repopulate the economic landscape as a proliferative space of difference’ by ‘making the choice to bring marginalized, hidden and alternative economic strategies to light in order to make them more real and more credible as objects of policy and activism’ (Gibson-Graham 2008, 614–615). It responds to wider efforts to represent and document ‘the huge variety of economic transactions, labor practices and economic organizations that contribute to social well-being worldwide’ (Ibid. 615).

Specifically, a diverse economies framework invites research that does not simply document resistance or how people and communities succumb to capitalist economic realities, but that names and recuperates “what has been rendered ‘non-credible’ and ‘non-existent’ by dominant modes of thought” (Ibid. 623). It understands the goal of theory to be ‘not to extend knowledge by confirming what we already know that the world is a place of domination and oppression’, but ‘to help us see openings’ (Ibid. 619).

Building on this approach, we experiment with constructing a model of a diverse reforms approach to tourism that is not solely oriented around capitalist projects of expanding growth but incorporates community economies organised around ‘economic spaces or networks in which relations of interdependence are democratically negotiated by participating individuals and organizations (...) that can be constituted at any scale’ (Ibid. 627). Through this approach, we endeavour to describe existing social projects that aim to build new tourist economies grounded in Indigenous ethics of care and relationality.

André Gorz, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, and Anna Akbar describe an array of reforms that point out these potentialities. Gorz (2000) distinguishes between ‘reformist reforms’ operating within system parameters and ‘non-reformist reforms’ conceived in terms of what should be made possible in terms of human needs and demands rather than what’s possible within given systems. Building on Gorz’s capacious view on reform, Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2007) and Anna A. A. Akbar (2023, 2497) define non-reformist reforms as revolutionary, alternative, or abolitionist reforms, as reforms that are intended ‘to reconstitute the terms of life, death, and democracy’ and ‘to undermine the prevailing political, economic, social order’ while building towards emancipatory horizons.

For Gilmore and Akbar, non-reformist reforms address the root causes of systemic issues through comprehensive rather than superficial change. They challenge mainstream institutional actors, vocabularies, and governance mechanisms and seek to redistribute power and resources in ways that fundamentally transform – rather than merely ameliorate – conditions of exploitation and domination. For A. A. Akbar (2023, 2497), non-reformist reforms provide a competing language that aims ‘to have fundamentally different people at the helm’, ‘to hold in view bold and radical horizons’, and ‘to build popular power to govern’.²

This language has travelled widely. Debates about reformist and non-reformist reforms have been particularly salient in struggles over policing, prisons, education, and housing in the United States, as well as in Latin American struggles over land, territory, and resource extraction – where agrarian and land reforms have long promised redistribution but often reproduced liberal property frameworks. In both contexts, activists and scholars distinguish between transformations that entrench existing systems and those that build the capacity for more radical transformation. Tourism, however, has been conspicuously absent from these theoretical conversations – a gap this article seeks to address.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought this absence into sharp relief. Tourism scholars, states, institutions, media, and the public debated whether the tourism industry needed ‘reform’ or ‘recovery’ (Higgins-Desbiolles 2020). Their positions depend on whether they saw the pandemic as a warning calling for a serious reorganisation of the industry (how to transform tourism?) or as a prompt to advocate for its rapid recovery (how to sustain tourism?).³

Yet, this struggle between tourism recovery and reform remains under-theorized, and its binary conceptualisation problematically acts as a given. Framed this way, both sides stay within the boundaries of what Gorz, Gilmore, and Akbar would recognise as reformist reforms, leaving intact the hegemonic model where tourism serves as a favoured economic growth driver and leading geopolitical tool (Duro et al. 2021; Nash and Smith

1989). This model relies on mainstream global vocabularies that reinforce travel as freedom, as a right, while obscuring connections to localised uneven processes of capital accumulation, land dispossession, and everyday power dynamics (Córdoba Azcárate 2024; Gillen 2025; Milano, Novelli, and Cheer 2019). This is the model that informs what we refer to here as conventional tourism reforms: frameworks that recover tourism as business as usual.

Tourism Reform Fails to Include Indigenous Perspectives

Conventional tourism reform does not seriously consider Indigenous perspectives (Whitford and Ruhanen 2016) or acknowledge the emancipatory potential of Indigenous-led anti-colonial, worldmaking projects in tourism destinations and beyond.

Indigeneity in our article emerges as a ‘site of capitalist governmentality’ as ‘part and parcel of the capitalist production of nature and space’ (Anthias and Kiran 2024, 18). As we show through empirical examples, this does ‘not downplay the agency of Indigenous constituencies in strategically using the category of Indigeneity as a site of cultural affirmation and territorial struggle’ (18), but it does recognise its limitations as part of their entanglements with colonial capitalism (Coulthard 2014). This governmentality partly explains why, despite tourism’s significance for Indigenous communities worldwide, international attention to Indigenous rights in tourism policy and research remains limited (Hutchison, Movono, and Scheyvens 2021).

To date, institutionalised tourism frameworks tend to incorporate Indigenous demands only insofar as they are legible within existing market and governance logics. The 2007 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples marked the first instance where Indigenous tourism, or tourism to Indigenous areas, received formal international institutional attention, laying the groundwork for the 2007 Larrakia Declaration on the Development of Indigenous Tourism – still the main official international declaration focused on safeguarding the rights of Indigenous peoples within the tourism industry.⁴ The Larrakia Declaration formally acknowledged the devastating impact the tourism industry can have on Indigenous communities. It urged governments to consult and incorporate Indigenous knowledge before making tourism-related public policy decisions and advocated for equitable partnerships that prioritised cultural awareness and Indigenous well-being.

The Larrakia Declaration marked a significant milestone in the advancement and enhancement of Indigenous tourism worldwide, notably leading to the creation of the 2012 World Indigenous Tourism Alliance (WINTA), the first global network led by Indigenous peoples. Yet, the distance between these ambitions and the current reality is telling. WINTA operates today as a non-

profit entirely managed by volunteers, supporting just six Indigenous tourism associations in Australia and Canada (S. Akbar and Sharp 2023; Córdoba Azcárate 2023; Scheyvens 2025) which is emblematic of the reformist limits we aim to transcend.

In October 2020, seven months after the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD (2020), 5) called for tourism that was ‘more sustainable and dependable in the future’. In Latin America, the 2020 economic loss from the pandemic exceeded 110 billion dollars. In their report ‘Rebuilding Tourism for the Future: COVID-19 Policy Responses and Recovery’, the OECD evaluated the unprecedented disruptions in global tourism created by the pandemic and proposed a series of immediate responses, strategies, and policy recommendations ‘to support the recovery and transformation of the tourism sector’. Similarly, the UNWTO (2020) and the IMF (2021) identified the pandemic moment as a prime opportunity to reshape tourism for greater efficiency, sustainability, and innovation (Hutchison, Movono, and Scheyvens 2021).

Critically, these proposals failed to consider Indigenous concerns, and whilst important, they too remain emblematic of Gorz’s ‘reformist reforms’: institutional recognitions that operate within existing system parameters without challenging the structural conditions that render Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy vulnerable to tourism development in the first place and leave intact the hegemonic model of tourism as economic growth driver.

In the next section, we expand on these arguments by exploring beyond this conventional binary framework of recovery versus reform. We propose to think about tourism ‘reform’ broadly and inclusively – by placing Indigenous-led social projects in conversation with state-led reforms – to start to think and theorise, as J.K. Gibson-Graham suggest, ‘a condition of possibility of new economic becomings, rather than a condition of their impossibility’ (2006; 2008, 619).

Anti-Colonial Approaches to Tourism

We do not presume that anti-colonial projects exist outside of capitalism. Instead, we examine how these projects seek to create what Nick Estes (2018) calls ‘liberated spaces’ within colonised territories and consider how Maya communities – enmeshed in capitalist structures since colonisation – navigate and resist from within these very structures. We aim to contribute to a critical geopolitics of touristic governance that interrogates how Maya communities navigate the boundaries between conventional reform and anti-colonial transformation – not from outside capitalism, but from within the very structures they continue to resist. Ser camaleón and debt refusal can be understood as modalities of Indigenous geopolitics, practices that simultaneously perform

legibility within settler colonial state logics and sustain autonomous territorial relations (Coulthard 2014; Simpson 2014; Yee Chin 2025).

Anti-colonial approaches to tourism development proposed by Maya scholars and activists are not homogenous responses conceived with a binary logic or pro/or anti-tourism. Rather, they offer glimpses into diverse, place-based refusals that adapt to, negotiate, and challenge the capitalist status quo while navigating the uneven material conditions of tourism-dependent economies.

Indigenous scholars spotlight how Indigenous peoples unsettle colonial and development narratives, creating frameworks and practices centring Indigenous ways of knowing that invite radical reimagining of societies capable of meeting plural Indigenous needs on their own terms (Aiku and Gonzalez 2019; Estes 2019). Maya scholars exemplify this. Duarte Duarte (2022) underscores building on Indigenous frameworks like *k'ax*, a vernacular architecture of ritual practices that enable Yucatec Maya survivance against colonial and neoliberal policies. As Yucatec Maya communities face greater encroachment on their territories and the government expropriation of communally owned *ejido* lands wrested for megadevelopment projects like the Maya Train and mass housing projects, land loss and land grabs undermine efforts towards survivance. In Maya cosmologies, land is sacred and is a physical representation of the cosmos. Time is also cyclical; what is past is never past and thus informs the present. Colonial logics of extraction and practices of servitude through peonage, Duarte Duarte asserts, are not remnants of the past but practices that have been modified by modern-day governments to fit a present of capitalist extraction. Under these circumstances, preserving land-based knowledges and practices is crucial for survivance and resistance. Likewise, Maya environmental scholar Pedro Regalado Uc Be (2022) cautions against naturalising Western capture logics, calling for frameworks that revalorise connections to environmental resources and traditions, transcending extractive megadevelopment logics.

LaDuke and Cohen (2020, 245) conceptualisation of railways as 'alimentary infrastructures' that are 'life-giving in their design, finance, and effects' offers a splendid example of Indigenous pathways for building spaces for alternative societal relations. Infrastructures, they argue, do not need to be inherently colonial. Theirs is a distinctly Indigenous geopolitical imaginary grounded in relational and land-based practices that exceed extractivist settler-state logics. Bauder and Mueller (2023) have defined this Indigenous geopolitics as a form of sovereignty that recognises the interdependencies between political actors and relationships to land, rather than fixed territorial control. Railways that historically played a key role in destroying Indigenous lands could transform economies if reimagined by asking critical questions like "Can trains save salmon? Such an approach redirects how we imagine infrastructural planning, especially in the Yucatán Peninsula. How would tourism projects change if

they took Maya concerns seriously? ‘Can the Maya Train save water, man-groves, and cenotes?’ ‘Can it work towards empowering our communities?’ ‘Can the train help to build housing security, and provide just mobility systems that do not prioritize tourists’ desires over local needs?’

Tourism economies are well situated to address these possibilities. On the one hand, they are invested in fixing Indigenous peoples in the global imagination and perpetuating colonial relations in capitalist economies. On the other hand, they simultaneously create spaces for Indigenous agency and resistance. In our previous research, we have documented how tourism functions as a key site where Maya communities negotiate autonomy, resource control, and cultural self-determination under capitalist conditions (Castellanos 2021; Córdoba Azcárate 2020). Here, we contribute to a growing field of critical tourism scholarship that has long called for revisiting the mainstream models and hegemonic development paradigms that underpin mass tourism. They propose alternative, polycentric tourism models that account for the role of NGOs, civil society organisations, and embodied gendered practices in shaping tourism policy and governance (Becklake and Wynne-Hughes 2024; Duffy and Moore 2011). A tourism geopolitics lens adds to this critique by attending to how power operates across scales – from international institutions to everyday community practices (Introduction to special issue, Mostafanezh Mostafanezhad, Azcárate, and Norum 2021). We take up these questions in the contemporary Mexican context, where conventional tourism reform illuminates both the promise and persistent limits of such approaches.

Conventional Tourism Reform in Mexico’s Fourth Transformation and Its Limits

Theoretical insights on tourism reform take on particular urgency in the Mexican context, where the state functions as both entrepreneur and banker in tourism development, creating tensions between sustainability discourses and capitalist practices that privilege tourism trends and corporate power over local needs (Barkin 2012, 2019; Castellanos 2010; Clancy 2002; Córdoba Azcárate 2022). State-led tourism initiatives have relied on conventional reforms – even after the pandemic – to emphasise tourism’s positive economic role, even as they construct Mexican geographies as fragile landscapes for consumption – fragile because state and corporate international funding drives uneven infrastructure growth while treating Indigenous culture purely as economic assets. These dynamics intensify under megaprojects like the Maya Train, where infrastructure growth accelerates land dispossession, environmental degradation, and Indigenous cultural commodification.

Against this backdrop, Maya communities have long questioned the equation of tourism with growth and manoeuvred conventional reforms to move

beyond a politics of recognition to engage decolonial and anti-colonial approaches centring community, land, environment, and traditional knowledge (Duarte Duarte 2022). We consider these initiatives to be examples of Indigenous geopolitics that build on alternative or diverse reforms to provide new ways of thinking about how tourism is being and could be governed, and, ultimately, transformed. Our goal is to read ‘for difference rather than dominance’, ‘for possibility rather than predictability’ (Gibson-Graham 2008, 62).

To do so, we place them within the political formation that has shaped recent Mexican tourism reforms: Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s (AMLO) presidency (2018–2024) and the inauguration of the ‘Fourth Transformation’ (4T) which frames this moment as ‘the fourth era of reform’—following three previous transformative periods in Mexican history: the Independence Movement (1810–1821), the Liberal Reform and the War of the Reform (1857–1861), and the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920).

According to official documents, the 4T aims to significantly alter the country’s governance and societal structures. It declares a strong commitment ‘to preserving and promoting Indigenous cultures, languages, and traditions’ and emphasises the need for consultation with Indigenous communities regarding projects that affect their lands and resources.

While Indigenous communities are diverse and have pressing needs that are not singular or homogenous, land rights and the quest for self-determination remain core issues, which are stated as goals of the 4T. In practice, the 4T’s approach to these commitments has been contradictory. While the administration has privileged reforms in government transparency, reducing inequality through social welfare programmes, economic and infrastructure development in underserved regions, strengthening state-owned enterprises, improving public services, and reforming the justice system, many of these initiatives – particularly large-scale infrastructure projects – have proceeded without meaningful Indigenous consultation or consent, undermining stated commitments to self-determination.

These contradictions are not policy failures but reflect the structural role of the capitalist state in creating new frontiers of accumulation: the state must initially mobilise social support and legitimacy for infrastructure projects that facilitate capital flows, then, once the conditions for profitable private investment are secured, these same constituencies become marginalised because their vision for self-determination does not align with private industry. Indigenous communities have responded to these reforms in heterogeneous ways, including challenging tourist mega-infrastructural growth and its associated developments (West 2023).

AMLO’s presidency made tourism central to Mexico’s economic development agenda, with the Maya Train as its flagship project. The government frames tourism as ‘a vital industry’ for its tripartite capacity to drive economic growth, generate employment, and safeguard cultural heritage – positioning

the Maya Train as simultaneously advancing economic objectives and protecting Maya culture, even as the project proceeds largely without Indigenous consent. The COVID-19 pandemic sharpened these tensions. It caused a steep decline in tourism that resulted in Maya migrants in Cancún struggling to pay rent or mortgages while inland communities faced devastating income losses (Castellanos 2023b). In a context of widespread suffering, AMLO's 4T framework initially promised transformative interventions to create 'a modernity from below' (*modernidad desde abajo*) through two key initiatives: promoting community-based tourism along the new railroad in inland Yucatán and providing affordable housing for migrant labour in coastal tourist centres.

Early on in the project, community-based tourism cooperatives located near projected Maya Train stations received increased state support, including inclusion in route consultations (Almeida Poot, Jouault, and Rodríguez Martínez 2022). This inclusion momentarily enabled cooperatives to strengthen their regional reach and envision, even if briefly, autonomous futures that move beyond mass tourism's hegemonic and stereotypical vision of Maya cultural representation (Almeida Poot, Jouault y, and Montañez 2024).

Simultaneously, in urban areas, the 4T responded to pandemic-related housing precarity by promising to increase support for social programmes, including a greater investment in social housing. AMLO's government initially regularised informal settlements and reinstated land redistribution programmes, empowering collectives advocating for debt refusal and mutual aid housing. AMLO demanded that the Instituto del Fondo Nacional de la Vivienda para los Trabajadores (Infonavit) implement loan moratoriums and renegotiate debts, which enabled Maya families to avoid eviction (Forbes Mexico 2020). This pause opened spaces for Maya families to imagine alternative solutions, such as demands for informalization, mutual aid, and land redistribution (Castellanos 2021, 2023a). However, the government's overemphasis on tourism economic growth has made it difficult for real changes to be implemented.

The 4T's early development agenda includes community economies, like community-based tourism and affordable housing initiatives. However, AMLO's 2020 transfer of the Maya Train's management to the military signalled a shift away from a systemic transformation and an end to discursive gestures to move away from tourism models based on extraction (Gasparello and Núñez Rodríguez 2022).

Since 2020, the accelerated schedule for railway construction – the Cancún-Palenque corridor was inaugurated on December 15, 2023—has paved the way for corporate real estate companies in search of extractive opportunities along the Cancún-Riviera Maya coastline and in the rural hinterlands made up of Maya communities whose residents participate in labour migration to the coast (Jouault 2021). This sequence – initial

inclusion of community cooperatives in planning, followed by militarisation and corporate real estate influx – is emblematic of the Mexican state's systematic approach to development and conventional tourism reforms. The state's role is to create the infrastructural and social conditions necessary for private accumulation, including securing legitimacy through consultation processes. Once the groundwork for profitable extraction has been laid, the state then transfers control to military and corporate actors. The conversion of communal territories into landscapes of tourism consumption, the separation of Indigenous populations from traditional means of subsistence, and the forced integration of Maya labour and culture as raw materials for accumulation are capitalist undertakings. These are the processes at the core of heightened Indigenous concerns about conventional tourism development. The proclamations 'Todo está en venta' (Everything is for sale) and 'Train Maya does not represent us' capture this shift among the region's inhabitants who self-identify as Maya.

Tourism under AMLO operated within reformist parameters: tourism is employed as a state development tool guided by capitalist growth imperatives that require the ongoing conversion of Indigenous territories, labour, and culture into commodities for accumulation. In the Yucatan peninsula, this manifests as more than state neglect but as a historically informed, and profit-driven, systematic territorial differentiation: a spatial strategy where inland Maya areas function as labour reserves and repositories of authentic culture that service high-profit coastal tourism zones. We see this current institutional embrace of post-pandemic tourism reforms with scepticism.

When tourism is employed as a state development tool, it is important to question the institutional actors, narratives, forms of knowledge production, and governance mechanisms in light of the colonial logics guiding development narratives and the global competitive impulse of postcolonial states (Becklake and Wynne-Hughes 2024). Equating tourism with economic growth and its modus operandi sustains affective and materially uneven geographies of leisure rooted in violence, grief, and contradictions (LaDuke and Cohen 2020).

A closer look at the failed promises of redistributive tourism growth along the Maya Train route gives us new ground to call into question these models. It not only shows us the limits of conventional reform but also the conditions under which alternative possibilities might take root.

The Failed Promises for Redistribution Along the Maya Train and Existing Real Possibilities

The Maya Train could have been designed differently: in 'design, finance, and its effects' (LaDuke and Cohen 2020). Almeida Poot, Jouault y, and Montañez

(2024) show how the train commodifies stereotypical representations of Maya culture, mirroring, we argue, the logic of U.S. railroad capitalism, where physical and affective rail infrastructures enabled settler colonial expansion. The Maya Train similarly reinforces colonial ideas of Yucatan as an extractive frontier and ‘gringo tourist playground’, ideas long advanced by capitalist tourist expansion in the region.

The Maya Train was presented by the Mexican state in 2019 as a comprehensive project for land planning, infrastructure, economic growth, and sustainable tourism, promising to ‘connect the main cities and tourist circuits of the region to integrate territories of great natural and cultural wealth into the region’s tourism, environmental, and social development’. However, the rail infrastructure participates in the hegemonic and stereotypical narratives of Maya peoples globally circulated by the tourism industry since the 1970s. These narratives purposefully flatten the physical and social space of the Yucatán Peninsula through settler tourist logics based on profitable colonial imaginaries that depict coastlands as global, urban, and modern, and inland areas as local, rural, and Indigenous (Castellanos and Córdoba Azcárate 2021).

Since Cancún’s take-off as a leading Caribbean tourism destination, state-led tourism has advanced in a predatory fashion. Cultural practices, nature, and Maya populations across the region have been incorporated into state tourism governance models, which treat them as exotic resources to be managed for economic gain, entrapping populations in sacrificial logics that make extractive practices necessary to get ahead (Córdoba Azcárate 2020). Cancún offers a prime example of this entrapment.

Cancún is known for its beach tourism, but it is also a modernist project intended to urbanise Latin America by settling ‘untouched’ spaces (Castellanos 2021; García de Fuentes 1979). Its origins are grounded in settler colonial fantasies of empty lands and vanishing Indians. The city was built on land that was and continues to be the homeland of Maya peoples, and yet Maya families lack affordable land and housing. To promote affordable housing, the government has invested in developing tract housing and providing mortgage loans to purchase these homes, as well as making microcredits available to stimulate microenterprises amongst Cancún’s working class (Castellanos 2021). These efforts come with the loss of Maya land-based autonomy. To build mass housing, the Mexican government expropriated the land surrounding the periphery of Cancún, *ejido* land that was formerly held and worked collectively. Under the settler colonial logic of improvement, collectively owned lands are ‘unproductive’ because they do not create surplus value, unlike mass housing with its associated mortgage debt (Ibid.). To buy into the dream of social housing and a culture of leisure and consumption that are considered indispensable to tourist economies, Maya families have become increasingly indebted to government programmes, making their desire for

autonomy a receding reality. National debt, as David Barkin (2012, 2019) points out, crippled Mexico in the 1980s; building a thriving economy entailed investing in rural communities and supporting traditional lifeways. Now it is individual debt (via the mortgage) that is posited as Mexico's vision towards financial 'progress'. This indebtedness is structurally necessary for capitalist reproduction. Mortgage debt serves dual functions: it disciplines labour by binding workers to ongoing employment in precarious tourism sectors, and it extracts value through interest payments that flow to financial capital. The state functions as both entrepreneur and banker, creating housing markets that simultaneously absorb surplus capital, generate new debt instruments, and ensure a stable, immobilised workforce for tourism enterprises. The loss of autonomy becomes an intended outcome of accumulation strategies that require the conversion of land and housing from use-values into financial assets.

Since its launch, the Maya Train has amplified these representations, deepening the colonial logic of tourism by linking inland Maya populations to the past through superficial and nostalgic early explorers' accounts of Maya archaeological heritage sites. In this association of the Maya with the past, scholars have noted the rhetorical revival of Indigenous issues in state politics, or *neoindigenismos* (Gutiérrez Chong 2010), where the state revitalises official discourse while maintaining an indigenist perspective focused on modernisation rather than political autonomy or economic redistribution, resulting in a series of 'policies of assistance' (*políticas asistencialistas*), that treat people as objects of government actions, rather than as subjects with the right to self-determination. This is not unique to Mexico but reflects a shared geopolitical tourist governance logic described by Becklake and Wynne-Hughes (2024) as characteristic of 'postcolonial zoo-managing states' that commodify Indigenous peoples and territories as tourist attractions while perpetuating colonial hierarchies of control and extraction.

Recently, Tren Maya protests have led the Mexican state to change projected routes in the Yucatán Peninsula, particularly in Section 5 of the so-called Caribbean beach route, where Cancún is located. These protests brought together heterogeneous constituencies with contradictory yet convergent interests against the state's extractivist tourism governance model. Maya scholars and environmental activists criticised the project for displacing Maya populations and dismissing ways of knowing and living; artists, scholars, and common citizens denounced biodiversity threats and the train's impact on cenotes – the region's unique source of water and underground cave systems; and politicians, businessmen, and real estate hoteliers feared the train would democratise access to the de facto privatised beaches of the Caribbean coast.

In Cancún, ongoing Maya protests over the lack of affordable and sustainable housing illustrated that state-planned infrastructures do not necessarily respond to Indigenous needs and demands for autonomy. While social

housing has been touted as affordable and sustainable, the reality is far different in tourist cities like Cancún (Castellanos 2021). Now home to over 800,000 people, Cancun has expanded through ecologically devastating tract housing built on razed forest. Construction has at times been substandard, resulting in homes with floors that are buckling. Moreover, these units are not quite affordable. When social housing developments like Paseos Kabah were first developed in 2005, consumers were allowed to partner their government-issued Infonavit loan with a loan from a non-bank lender to pay for the cost of the home. After the 2008 financial crisis, many working-class consumers ended up defaulting on their loans because the non-bank loans were subprime, resulting in an unprecedented number of foreclosures and evictions. Social housing is intended to replace self-built housing and provide dignified housing for tourist workers in Cancún. Maya migrants, however, equate social housing with debt (a mortgage), which forecloses on autonomous futures that are land-based and a repudiation of a history of servitude and peonage in the peninsula. Although well-intentioned, state-led development projects are still fomenting indebtedness and thus reinforcing precarity for Maya migrants in Cancún (Ibid.).

In the hinterland of the Cancún-Riviera Maya tourist corridor, community-based tourism cooperatives have historically contested the state's reproduction of Cancún's socio-spatial segregated tourism model and its uneven outcomes. Initially invited to design the railway's routes, these cooperatives were later abandoned and ignored. Scholars and activist researchers Almeida Poot, Jouault y, and Montañez (2024, 183) have documented the unanticipated impacts of the Maya Train project on tourism-based cooperatives, particularly through the Alianza Peninsular para el Turismo Comunitario (APTC), a network of 24 cooperatives in Yucatán, Quintana Roo, and Campeche. Initially, APTC members saw the railway as 'an opportunity to strengthen community tourism in the region' (ibid., 171), hoping to 'domesticate' it for local benefit while respecting Maya culture and environmental conservation. Their efforts culminated in the pioneer 2021 TC-100 Strategy, a collaborative agreement promoting community tourism across the peninsula. However, a 2022 leadership change at Fonatur and the railway's militarisation ended this commitment, and tourism development shifted back to 'business as usual' (Ibid., 173). Community tourism was 'first ignored, then considered, and finally relegated' (Ibid., 183). Almeida Poot, Jouault y, and Montañez (2024, 184) conclude that 'for the Tren Maya to become a catalyst for well-being in the region, it is essential that Fonatur awakens from its stressed lethargy, remembers its vital commitments to the local population, and fulfills these commitments in a genuine, not simulated, manner'.

The post-pandemic moment not only aggravated Maya cultural commodification, uneven mobilities, and environmental deterioration, but it also opened the window to do things otherwise. Maya communities along the

Maya Train inland routes and Maya migrant workers in Cancún now have a deeper awareness of the value of their land and culture for the tourism economy. The widespread national and global attention garnered by the train has created new opportunities for Maya inhabitants to dialogue with the state, NGOs, and the broader public about how to promote sustainable tourism and *buenvivir* for Maya inhabitants in the peninsula.

In the next two sections, we present two specific examples of ongoing initiatives that show this increased awareness: 1) *ser camaleón* practices in inland areas, 2) housing practices such as informalization, debt refusal, and land redistribution in coastal cities. Both are legible as Indigenous geopolitical practices comparable to dynamics documented among Indigenous communities in the Caribbean, the Pacific and East Asia that are also navigating sovereignty within settler-state frameworks (Aiku and Gonzalez Vicuña 2019; Bauder and Mueller 2023). These examples should not be read as exhaustive or as a fixed typology but as ethnographic vignettes of alternative, diverse, place-specific, and emergent alternative reforms that reflect diverse Maya responses to capitalist extraction shaped by regionally different socio-geographical contexts and interests. These alternative reforms do not exist outside capitalism but constitute alimentary rather than extractive approaches to land and cultural stewardship. We bring them to the fore, like Gibson-Graham (2008, 618) invites us to do, ‘to make them more real, more credible, more viable as objects of policy and activism, more present as everyday realities’.

Shifting without Surrendering: Ser Camaleón and Maya Autonomy in Inland Tourism Encounters

Community-based tourism (CBT) in inland Yucatán offers an interesting example of alternative reforms in the making – not outside of capitalism but actively reconstituting its terms from within. Since the mid-1990s, the Mexican state has formally recognised CBT cooperatives as legitimate tourism providers yet systematically abandoned them in favour of high-profit coastal models. This was not policy negligence but state-organised abandonment: a predictable expression of uneven capitalist development that renders inland Maya territories useful primarily as reservoirs of cultural authenticity and cheap labour for coastal zones (Hale 2008; Harvey 1989). This abandonment appeared to be re-addressed with AMLO’s attention to ‘the Indigenous question’ but quickly bounced back to business as usual (Almeida Poot, Jouault y, and Montañez 2024).

As a result of this history, Maya communities near Maya Train stations are deeply aware of the predatory nature of state-led tourism development, especially regarding their cultural practices. Generations of witnessing uneven growth have equipped younger Maya with strategic tools to navigate the train’s

arrival while keeping spaces like the milpa (traditional agricultural system) and cenotes (sinkholes) under community control. *Ser camaleón* is such a strategy.

Ser camaleón refers to the strategic and performative practice of adapting to and selectively engaging with Maya identity in the presence of state and corporate tourism frameworks, while maintaining autonomous control over community space, priorities, and forms of solidarity (Córdoba Azcárate 2023). Like a chameleon changing colours to navigate its environment, Maya inland inhabitants working for CBT cooperatives shift between different modes of visibility and engagement: appearing as legible ‘Maya communities’ to access state resources while simultaneously pursuing anti-colonial agendas that fundamentally aim to redefine land, labour, and life on their own terms. We read this as a modality of Indigenous geopolitics: a set of practices through which communities perform territorial legibility within settler-colonial state logics but maintain autonomy in the definition and practice of spatial logics (Bauder and Mueller 2023; Yee Chin 2025). This is a conscious political practice – what Gibson-Graham (2008) would recognise as a performative move that makes alternative economic relations more real and more viable as objects of policy and activism.

Ser camaleón directly challenges three of capitalism’s core logics: the reduction of solidarity to market exchange, the conflation of Indigenous value with cultural commodification, and the subordination of Indigenous mobility to labour extraction. Rather than accepting tourism growth as the metric for success, chameleon practitioners redefine success as maintaining control over how Maya identity, territory, and futurity are constituted.

Nowhere is this more visible than in the milpa. The milpa is described by Terán and Rasmussen (1994) as a sophisticated, diverse agroecological system that Maya communities have practiced for millennia, which involves long-cycle rotation. It is a counter space where Maya land relations, food sovereignty, and collective memory making persist outside of tourism commodification. When CBT initiatives centre the milpa rather than staging it as a spectacle, *ser camaleón* becomes emancipatory in its use of tourism’s visibility to protect the very practices the state would otherwise erase. Solidarity here is not economic exchange but continual struggle; and community is not an administrative unit or a romanticised container, but an active terrain of self-definition.

For example, during a community visit organised by a CBT cooperative near Valladolid in 2024, a local middle-aged tour guide met a group of U.S.-based tourists early in the morning. They biked from the small eco-cabins where they were being hosted to the milpa. Once there, the tour guide explained the milpa’s planting cycles in English, performing the role of a legible traditional Maya farmer that the tourism industry expects, and the one the state has long marketed. Yet, what is not visible is the family’s investment in this performance and the cooperative’s role in collectively

deciding the itinerary, the duration of the visit, the price of the tour, and crucially, whose milpa and what parts of the milpa were shown and which ones remained off limits. When state tourism officials later asked for reports on the visit to assess the cooperative's eligibility for further funding, the tour guide and organisers, with the support of the APTC, submitted a report using the hegemonic language of cultural heritage tourism and sustainable development, making them legible to the state. They received the funds, but what their report did not mention is that the same milpa the tourists visited and photographed is also where the community holds its seed exchange, where decisions about land use are made collectively, and where younger members are trained not just in tourism performance, but in polyculture farming as a way to achieve food autonomy.

In a nearby CBT cooperative, its members have resisted repeated attempts by corporate and private investors – emboldened by Train Maya development – to commercialise the community cenote located on communal land adjacent to their community. Members of this cooperative, also performing milpa tours, explicitly connect milpas and cenotes: the milpa's long-term cycle of rotation, they argue, depends on the cenote's groundwater quality, which is often contaminated by runoff from mass tourism construction and large industrial farming. To protect one space is to protect the other. When state environmental officers visited the community in late 2024 to assess the cenote's potential for community-based tourism, cooperative members performed the role of willing cultural guides, showing officials the cenote's open-air unique morphology and strategically moving conversation away from its hydrological connection to the milpa and agricultural land. Previously, they had coordinated with Maya environmental activists fighting against pig mega-farms and APTC networks to document these connections as grounds for an autonomous territorial management plan. Here, *ser camaleón* operates at its most expansive expression. The cenote was simultaneously a tourist attraction and hence a community economic resource, a sacred space, a hydrological network, and the only source of potable water for Maya territorial sovereignty.

For chameleon practitioners, like milpa and cenote tour guides, local students, scholars, and Maya activists, this is a political, not just economic, movement. They leverage tourism's idealised representation of Maya rurality for economic gain while controlling times, schedules, itineraries, and stories on their own terms. This is what Gorz (2000), Gilmore (2007), and A. A. Akbar (2023) would recognise as non-reformist reforms: changes that reconstitute the terms of land, labour, and democracy towards emancipatory horizons rather than merely ameliorating conditions within the existing system. It embodies the possibility to conceive of the Maya Train – not as an inevitable imposition to be merely endured or resisted – but as the APTC did: as a potentially life-sustaining tool, an opportunity 'to make the Tren Maya "Mayan"' and to ensure Maya people are directly considered and not just

treated as its secondary beneficiaries (Almeida Poot, Jouault y, and Montañez 2024, 171).

Ser camaleón opens paths into alternative tourism reforms in the context of the Maya Train because it entails a conscious political practice that allows Maya local inhabitants' groups to remain in control of land and to determine what constitutes community and solidarity and how they are to be achieved. This dynamic is not exclusive to Yucatán, and we can find Indigenous communities worldwide engaging tourism economies on their own terms while asserting place-based visions that refuse full absorption into them. For this reason, they are expressions of a broader Indigenous geopolitical imaginary that refuses the settler-state equation of territory with fixed borders and sovereignty with state recognition. Instead, they insist on land as relational, nonlinear temporalities, and the removal of capitalist enclosures (Bauder and Mueller 2023; Coulthard 2014; Nicol 2017). Ser camaleón gives renewed performative power to inland Maya inhabitants to claim their territory, define themselves and their priorities collectively within a touristified region that was not always so, but has become a historically contested territory that commodifies their traditions in blatant neoliberal ways (Castañeda 2012; Taylor 2018).

Housing Initiatives in Coastal Cancún

Similarly, in urban centres dominated by mega-infrastructure like Cancún, Maya-led alternatives to conventional tourism are not always visible. The first of five tourist centres built by the Mexican government with the financial backing of the Inter-American Development Bank, Cancún itself is a mega-infrastructural project. Its goal was to attract foreign dollars through beach and heritage tourism and better integrate and modernise Indigenous communities in the region (Castellanos 2010). As a planned city, Cancún was expected to grow into a bustling tourist centre. However, the initial plans for this city did not encompass affordable housing. The city addressed this housing crisis through land redistribution programmes that formed part of the *tierra y libertad* (land and liberty) mandate of the Mexican Revolution. When land redistribution programmes were scuttled after the implementation of the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement, social housing was considered the affordable alternative option. The state argued that social housing would provide dignified housing for its working class and thus reforming housing policies to expand social housing was necessary. These 'housing reforms' failed to make housing affordable because the non-bank bank loans were subprime (Ibid.: 8). These developments have also been heavily critiqued for being shoddily constructed and located along the city's periphery, accelerating social atomisation and segregation, and increasing indebtedness through subprime mortgages (Monkonnen 2012; Soederberg 2014). Nonetheless, social housing has remained central to the amplification of the 4T. Given these shortcomings,

what alternatives for affordable housing are possible under these conditions? What alternative 'housing reforms' are needed?

Maya migrants have engaged in three housing initiatives that are based on a quest for Indigenous autonomy from the state and that exemplify Indigenous resurgence beyond capitalist recovery in post-pandemic Mexico. The first initiative is debt refusal. The practice of debt refusal, as Noelle Stout (2019) has shown, becomes morally salient for mortgage borrowers when all options are foreclosed. For Maya migrants, debt has long been associated with servitude. Maya migrants have resisted the state by participating in debt refusal, even as they participated in land redistribution programmes. Like *ser camaleón*, debt refusal operates as an Indigenous geopolitical practice by which Maya inhabitants perform engagement with state financial frameworks, while refusing their underlying logic of land-as-commodity and labour-as-servitude. Refusing to pay their loan forced the state to renegotiate the terms of their loan. When Maya migrants were forced to purchase a home with a loan because the land redistribution programmes had been terminated, debt refusal became another way for Maya migrants to challenge and 'wait out' the state (Castellanos 2021). Debt refusal also became a practice by which Maya migrants hoped to force the state to renegotiate subprime loans. Unfortunately, although the state was deeply invested in social housing, it was not interested in becoming involved in creating solutions for subprime debt. AMLO's administration did intervene by placing a moratorium on evictions, but this approach did not address the escalating debt created by subprime loans, the 2008 financial crisis, and the pandemic shutdown.

The second initiative deployed by Maya migrants was to exit Cancún's formal housing market, which, as a tourist city, has highly inflated prices. As Kipfer and Sotomayor (2024) argue, market housing has been touted as a solution to affordable housing, but it is unable to move us towards non-extractive futures. Squatting or purchasing land in an informal settlement (*colonia*) has been the most affordable housing option for many migrants, albeit a precarious solution. Colonias are carved out of *ejido* land, land that used to be held communally but that has now been reallocated amongst *ejido* members, who then parcel out their land allotments into smaller individual plots for sale. In informal settlements, *colonia* residents must rely on each other to meet their basic needs, from procuring electricity to water, because these settlements are not yet hooked up to the electrical grid or a municipal water plant. Colonias are tight-knit communities where members share resources, from food to childcare. As Cancún has grown, colonias that were located along the city's periphery have been absorbed into the city's borders, transforming the real estate value of these lots. As a result, land ownership in colonias has become highly contested. It has also made *colonia* residents reimagine what affordable housing looks like. For example, to stave off

eviction, residents in Colonia Mario Villanueva sought the help of Antorcha Campesina, a grassroots organisation that promotes peasants' rights through political machinations and that has historically been aligned with the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (PRI). Antorcha helped them lobby to renegotiate the terms of their loans. When this failed, Antorcha demanded a plot of land where the colonia residents could form a housing mutual aid collective (Castellanos 2021).

The third initiative proposed by Maya migrants as a solution to the housing crisis is to reinstate land redistribution programmes and regularise informal settlements, and thus rectify the omission of housing for working-class residents in the city's original urban plan. This approach builds on pre-existing infrastructures that accommodated Indigenous ways of communal living with each other and the land, and that are grounded in revolutionary ideals of landholding as collective and inalienable. It reimagines housing infrastructure as alimentary because it is life-giving in terms of design, finance, and effects, as LaDuke and Cohen (2020) posed. Self-built housing has been classified as undignified housing because houses are built with found materials and lack potable water and access to electricity. Restructuring these programmes with the intent to create dignified housing would entail creating programmes to speed up formalisation, provide adequate access to potable water and electricity, and make housing materials affordable and accessible.

These cases show the limitations of government-mandated reforms in touristified territories. They fail to account for Indigenous perspectives and demands for their own territories, long commodified by the industry. Instead, these cases offer examples of calls to action that are land and community-based and grounded in anti-capitalist and anti-colonial frameworks that prioritise collective organising and reciprocity. Glen Coulthard (2014) reminds us that Indigenous resurgence is based on this type of 'grounded normativity' among Indigenous peoples in North America, 'struggles oriented around the question of land – struggles not only for land, but also deeply informed by land as a mode of reciprocal relationship' (Ibid., 60). Both *ser camaleón* in inland areas and debt refusal in coastal zones exemplify this grounded normativity, demonstrating how Maya communities in the Yucatan peninsula craft situated alternatives to conventional reforms that centre Maya autonomy, land-based relations, and collective survival beyond the state's vision of capitalist recovery.

Conclusion

Maya alternative reforms provide one path towards rethinking and restructuring hegemonic tourism governance models. Unsettling contemporary conventional tourism reforms as business as usual requires dismantling mainstream narratives and policies of tourism as positive economic growth, while actively

engaging Indigenous knowledge systems and practices in envisioning systemic transformations that strive to move beyond the liberal framework of tourism reform dominated by capitalist extractive relations.

Through our analysis of housing and community-based tourism initiatives, we have described how Maya epistemologies of practice – particularly *ser camaleón* and housing initiatives like debt refusal – offer concrete pathways for anti-colonial initiatives within tourism’s capitalist structures. The state has promoted tourism mega infrastructures, such as Cancún and the Maya Train, in the name of ‘el pueblo’ even as these reforms transform land relations and labour organisation that negatively impact Maya communities. These reforms advance an uneven territorial vision rooted in a market model that recreates and maintains ideas of indigeneity as a resource that can be monetised for national development plans. This market logic, as A. A. Akbar (2023, 2503) argues, veers towards ‘wealth-maximizing outcomes’ and ‘narrowly defined differential treatment of individuals, especially by the state’, which are problematic for envisioning real transformations for post-capitalist and post-viral tourism futures (Fletcher et al. 2023; Tzanelli 2021).

State discourses surrounding tourist mega infrastructures in Yucatán problematically anchor tourism change in existing institutional configurations that reproduce unequal power relations and socioeconomic and racial inequities, unevenly affecting Maya populations. These inequities drive conventional tourism reforms, an approach that is more concerned with how to sustain tourism than how to transform it. This is, at its core, a geopolitical struggle in which the Mexican state deploys tourism infrastructure as an instrument of territorial control, shaping who belongs, who benefits, and whose demands are legible within conventional reforms. *Ser camaleón* and debt refusal offer a counter-geopolitics: Indigenous practices of territorial self-determination that exceed the state’s spatial logic while remaining legible within it. Conventional reforms inhibit the re-imagination of Indigenous participation in tourism governance in any radical way, reinforcing depictions of Maya peoples as bound to tradition and rural spaces, and as a source of cheap labour. Our examination of the Maya Train as a flagship post-pandemic conventional tourism reform under Mexico’s Fourth Transformation reveals how these reforms can, despite well-intentioned discourses, reproduce extractive relations while failing to centre Indigenous demands for sovereignty and autonomy.

There are other paths towards transformation. Maya-led initiatives exemplify alternative, anti-colonial reforms that centre Maya relational and place-based practices within broader models of tourism governance that move beyond empty discourses of Indigenous recognition. Instead, they conceive of tourist infrastructures as life-sustaining projects that strive towards systemic societal change. Two cases – *ser camaleón* practices in inland community-based tourism cooperatives and housing struggles along the coast – exemplify

a diverse reforms' approach. These initiatives do not conform to or agree with the state-led definitions of Indigenous identity, housing, solidarity, or labour, nor do they commodify Maya communities. They exemplify diverse economies existing simultaneously, sometimes strictly limited, but always adapting to, negotiating, or contesting state impositions.

Maya inhabitants of the Yucatán peninsula have been painfully aware of the touristified representations of their culture and landscapes for decades. In the context of the Fourth Transformation and the post-viral moment, these initiatives speak of collectives that refuse the connections enunciated by state tourism governance as usual: not just opposition to the Maya Train, but resistance against the extractive re-articulation of their territories and uneven access to housing and transportation. Their refusals are grounded in a long history of resistance towards colonial practices of labour and land extraction, servitude, and peonage, and exemplify what Coulthard (2014) terms 'grounded normativity' – struggles deeply informed by land as a mode of reciprocal relationship. Both *ser camaleón* and housing initiatives demonstrate how Maya communities craft situated alternatives that centre Indigenous autonomy, land-based relations, and collective survival beyond the state's vision of capitalist recovery. They remind us that Maya notions of land – as life-sustaining, relational, and encompassing non-human beings and the cosmos – offer an alternative vision for building autonomous futures and help us reimagine what equitable and just tourism reforms might look like. Rather than existing outside capitalism – an impossibility given Maya communities' colonial incorporation into capitalist structures – these alternative reforms represent potentially 'new economic becomings' from within (Gibson-Graham 2008, 619): efforts to reconstitute the terms of life, land, and democracy while building towards emancipatory horizons that fundamentally challenge the positive equation of tourism with growth.

Notes

1. Castellanos (2010, 2021, 2023a, 2023b); Castellanos and Córdoba Azcárate (2021); Córdoba Azcárate (2020, 2023, 2024).
2. See also Engler and Engler (2021).
3. Higgins Desbiolles (2020) provides a genealogy of the binary between industry recovery and reform, tracing back to a discussion in TRINET and social media about Butcher's (2020) piece on 'the war on tourism'. In this piece, Butcher criticised certain tourism scholarships for using the COVID-19 pandemic to attack the industry, ultimately harming businesses, workers, and tourists in already difficult times (Higgins Desbiolles 2020: 551).
4. Earlier advocacy efforts, including Indigenous Tourism Rights International and the Rethinking Tourism Project (RTP), addressed Indigenous tourism rights primarily in

the Americas, though much of this work has since disappeared from accessible records (Whitford and Ruhanen 2016). The RTP was an early collaborative work between Indigenous organisations and advocacy groups focused on rethinking tourism's impacts on Indigenous communities. A particular case in Pastaza, Ecuador, is documented at the University of New Mexico's digital repository. See <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/lhnac/140/>. Last Accessed 8th October 2025.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Aiku, H. K., and V. Gonzalez Vicuña, eds. 2019. *Detours. A Decolonial Guide to Hawai'i*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
- Akbar, A. A. 2023. "Non-Reformist Reforms and Struggles Over Life, Death, and Democracy." *The Yale Law Journal* 8:2497–2577.
- Akbar, S., and A. Sharp. 2023. "The Growth of Aboriginal Tourism in Remote Australia: Indigenist Method for an Operator Perspective." *Tourism Recreation Research* 48 (6): 871–884. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2023.2180724>
- Almeida Poot, M., S. Jouault, and Y. Rodríguez Martínez. 2022. "Las Vías de la Mayanización: Turismo, Tren Maya y Representaciones de la Mayanidad en la Península de Yucatán." *Maya America: Journal of Essays, Commentary, and Analysis* (2)n.p4 (2). <https://doi.org/10.32727/26.2023.5>
- Almeida Poot, M., S. Jouault y, and A. Montañez. 2024. "El Turismo Comunitario: ¿Un No Pensado Del Tren Maya?" In *Tren Maya. Impactos Territoriales y Escenarios de Cambio en la Península de Yucatán*, edited by J. GASCA. Zamora, 169–186. Coyoacán: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México.
- Anthias, P., and A. Kiran. 2024. "Indigenous Natures and the Anthropocene: Racial Capitalism, Violent Materialities, and the Colonial Politics of Representation." *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* 58 (1): 1–22. <https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.13078>
- Barkin, D. 2012. "Communities Constructing Their Own Alternatives in the Face of Crisis." *Mountain Research and Development* 32 (S1): S12–S22. <https://doi.org/10.1659/MRD-JOURNAL-D-11-00088.S1>
- Barkin, D. 2019. *Distorted Development: Mexico in the World Economy*. London: Routledge.
- Bauder, H., and R. Mueller. 2023. "Westphalian vs. Indigenous Sovereignty: Challenging Colonial Territorial Governance." *Geopolitics* 28 (1): 156–173. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2021.1920577>
- Becklake, S., and E. Wynne-Hughes. 2024. "The Touristic Transformation of Postcolonial States: Human Zoos, Global Tourism Competition, and the Emergence of Zoo-Managing States." *Tourism Geographies* 26 (5): 778–795. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2023.2231410>
- Blanchard, J. M. F., and C. Flint. 2017. "The Geopolitics of China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative." *Geopolitics* 22 (2): 223–245. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1291503>
- Butcher, J. 2020. The War on Tourism. Spiked Online. Accessed May 26, 2026. <https://www.spiked-online.com/2020/05/04/the-war-on-tourism/>.

- Castañeda, Q. 2012. "The Neoliberal Imperative of Tourism: Rights and Legitimization in the UNWTO Global Code of Ethics for Tourism." *Practicing Anthropology* 34 (3): 47–51. <https://doi.org/10.17730/praa.34.3.w0251w655647750j>
- Castellanos, M. B. 2010. *A Return to Servitude: Maya Migration and the Tourist Trade in Cancun*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Castellanos, M. B. 2021. *Indigenous Dispossession: Housing and Maya Indebtedness in Mexico*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Castellanos, M. B. 2023a. "Indigenous Organizing for Housing Justice: Lessons and Challenges." *Radical Housing Journal* 5 (1): 271–279. <https://doi.org/10.54825/KXJU5752>
- Castellanos, M. B. 2023b. "Indigenous Urbanisms in Pandemic Times: Countering Settler Violence with *Convivencia*." *Mexican Studies/Estudios Mexicanos* 39 (1): 145–172. <https://doi.org/10.1525/msem.2023.39.1.145>
- Castellanos, M. B., and M. Córdoba Azcárate. 2021. "Guardians of Tradition: The Affective and Popular Geopolitics of Yucatec Maya Women on Tour." In *Tourism Geopolitics: Assemblages of Infrastructure, Affect, and Imagination*, edited by M. Mostafanezhad, M. Córdoba Azcárate, and R. Norum, 312–340. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Clancy, M. 2002. *Exporting Paradise: Tourism and Development in Mexico*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing.
- Córdoba Azcárate, M. 2020. *Stuck With Tourism: Space, Power, and Labor in Contemporary Yucatán*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Córdoba Azcárate, M. 2022. "Mexico." In *Tourism Governance. A Critical Discourse on a Global Industry*, edited by A. Gohar, 137–160. Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Studies in Tourism.
- Córdoba Azcárate, M. 2023. "Ser Camaleón: Indigenous Community-Based Tourism for Emancipatory Futures." In *The Routledge Handbook of Indigenous Development*, edited by K. Ruckstuhl, I. A. Velásquez Nimatuj, A. Mcneish, and N. Postero, 316–324. London: Routledge.
- Córdoba Azcárate, M. 2024. "Tourism Geopolitics: Routes and Worldings." *Tourism Geographies* 26 (5): 814–832. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2387211>
- Coulthard, G. S. 2014. *Red Skin White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Duarte Duarte, A. R., ed. 2022. *Descolonizar los Saberes Mayas: Diálogos Pendientes*. Mérida: Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán.
- Duffy, R., and L. Moore. 2011. "Global Regulations and Local Practices: The Politics and Governance of Animal Welfare in Elephant Tourism." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 19 (4–5): 589–604. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2011.566927>
- Duro, J. A., A. Pérez-Laborda, J. Turrión-Prats, and M. Fernández-Fernández. 2021. "COVID-19 and Tourism Vulnerability." *Tourism Management Perspectives* 38:1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2021.100819>
- Engler, M., and P. Engler. 2021. "André Gorz's Non-Reformist Reforms Show How We Can Transform the World Today." Jacobin, July 2022. Accessed May 26, 2026. <https://jacobin.com/2021/07/andre-gorz-non-reformist-reforms-revolution-political-theory>.
- Estes, N. 2018. "'Freedom Is a Place': Long Traditions of Anti-Colonial Resistance in Turtle Island." *The Funambulist* 8 (29): 2018.
- Estes, N. 2019. *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance*. New York: Verso.
- Fletcher, R., A. Blanco Romero, M. Blázquez Salom, E. Cañada, I. Murray, and F. Sekulova. 2023. "Pathways to Post-Capitalist Tourism." *Tourism Geographies* 25 (2–3): 707–728. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2021.1965202>

- Forbes México. 2020. "No se desalojará a trabajadores que le deban al infonavit, anuncia AMLO. February 19, 2020. Last Accessed May 26, 2026 <https://www.forbes.com.mx/no-se-desalojara-a-trabajadores-que-le-deban-al-infonavit-anuncia-amlo/>.
- García de Fuentes, A. 1979. *Cancún, Turismo y Subdesarrollo Regional*. Mexico: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Geografía.
- Gasparello, G., and V. Núñez Rodríguez. 2022. *Pueblos y Territorios Frente al Tren Maya. Escenarios Sociales, Económicos y Culturales*. Oaxaca: Bajo Tierra Ediciones.
- Gibson, C. 1999. "Cartographies of the Colonial/Capital State: A Geopolitics of Indigenous Self-Determination in Australia." *Antipode* 31 (1): 45–79. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8330.00092>
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2006. *A Postcapitalist Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2008. "Diverse Economies: Performative Practices for 'Other Worlds'." *Progress in Human Geography* 32 (5): 613–632. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132508090821>
- Gillen, J. 2025. "Tourism Geopolitics: Roots and Branches." *Tourism Geographies* 27(3-4): 631–641. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2332354>
- Gilmore, R. W. 2007. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Gorz, A. 2000. *Strategy for Labor: A Radical Proposal*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- Gutiérrez Chong, N. 2010. "Los pueblos indígenas en los nacionalismos de independencia y liberación: el colonialismo interno revisitado." In *Independencia y Revolución. Contribuciones en Torno a Su Conmemoración*, edited by María Luisa Rodríguez-Sala. México: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México-Instituto de Investigaciones Sociales.
- Hale, C. R., Ed. 2008. *Engaging Contradictions. Theory, Politics and Methods for Activist Scholarship*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Harvey, D. 1989. *The Limits to Capital*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Higgins-Desbiolles, F. 2020. "The 'War Over Tourism': Challenges to Sustainable Tourism in the Tourism Academy After COVID-19." *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 29 (4): 551–569. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2020.1803334>
- Hutchison, B., A. Movono, and R. Scheyvens. 2021. "Resetting Tourism Post-COVID-19: Why Indigenous Peoples Must Be Central to the Conversation." *Tourism Recreation Research* 46 (2): 261–275. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02508281.2021.1905343>
- International Monetary Fund, IMF. 2021. *Tourism in the Post-Pandemic World, Prepared by Manuela Goretti and Lamin Leigh*. Washinton DC: International Monetary Fund.
- Jouault, S. 2021. *El Traspas de Cancún-Riviera Maya: Lugares, Actores y Dinámicas*. Mexico: Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México y Centro de Estudios Mexicanos y Centroamericanos (CEMCA).
- Kipfer, S., and L. Sotomayor. 2024. "Housing Beyond Land Rent? A Critique of Market Housing Solutionism." *Radical Housing Journal* 6 (1): 33–61. <https://doi.org/10.54825/GQAU9087>
- LaDuke, W., and D. Cohen. 2020. "Beyond Wiindigo Infrastructure." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 119 (2): 243–268.
- Macaspac, V. N. 2023. "Indigenous Geopolitics: Creating Indigenous-Spaces of Community Self-Protection and Peace Amid Violent Conflict." *Journal of Pacifism and Nonviolence* 1 (2): 181–207.
- Milano, C., M. Novelli, and J. M. Cheer. 2019. "Overtourism and Tourism Phobia: A Journey Through Four Decades of Tourism Development, Planning and Local Concerns." *Tourism Planning & Development* 16 (4): 353–357. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21568316.2019.1599604>

- Monkonnen, P. 2012. "Housing Finance Reform and Increasing Socioeconomic Segregation in Mexico." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36 (4): 757–772. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2427.2011.01085.x>
- Mostafanezhad, M., M. C. Azcárate, and R. Norum, Eds. 2021. *Tourism Geopolitics: Assemblages of Infrastructure, Affect and Imagination*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Nash, J. 1989. Tourism as a Form of Imperialism. In *Host and Guest: The Anthropology of Tourism*, edited by V. Smith 33–46, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Nicol, H. N. 2017. "From Territory to Rights: New Foundations for Conceptualising Indigenous Sovereignty." *Geopolitics* 22 (4): 794–814. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2016.1264055>
- OECD Tourism Papers. 2020. Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism and Supporting Recovery. Accessed May 26, 2026. https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/industry-and-services/mitigating-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-tourism-and-supporting-recovery_47045bae-en.
- Regalado Uc Be, P. 2022. "La Lucha Comunitaria contra el llamado 'Tren Maya'." *The End of Tourism Podcast*, Season 2, episode 3, 28th September. Last Accessed May 26, 2026 At: <https://www.theendoftourism.com/episodes/la-lucha-comunitaria-contra-el-tren-maya-muuch-xiinbal>.
- Scheyvens, R. 2025. "International Development and Tourism Geographies." *Tourism Geographies* 27 (3–4): 620–630. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616688.2024.2330579>
- Sheller, M. 2018. *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in an Age of Extremes*. New York: Verso.
- Simpson, A. 2014. *Mohawk Interruptus. Political Life Across the Borders of Settler States*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Soederberg, S. 2014. *Debtfare States and the Poverty Industry: Money, Discipline and the Surplus Population*. New York: Routledge.
- Stout, N. 2019. *Dispossessed: How Predatory Bureaucracy Foreclosed on the American Middle Class*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Taylor, S. 2018. *On Being Maya and Getting By: Heritage Politics and Community Development in Yucatán*. Albany: Institute for Mesoamerican Studies.
- Terán, S., and T. Rasmussen. 1994. *La milpa de los Mayas: la agricultura de los mayas prehispánicos y actuales en el noreste de Yucatán*. Mérida: Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán.
- Tzanelli, R. 2021. "Post-Viral Tourism's Antagonistic Tourist Imaginaries." *Journal of Tourism Futures* 7 (3): 377–389.
- United Nations World Tourism Organization, UNWTO. 2020. Tourism in the 2030 Agenda. <https://www.unwto.org/tourism-in-2030-agenda>.
- West, S. B. 2023. "U Jeets'el Le Ki'ki' Kuxtal: A Hemispheric Meditation on Abolition and Autonomy." *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 122 (3): 660–669. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-10644132>
- Whitford, M., and L. Ruhanen. 2016. "Indigenous Tourism Research, Past and Present: Where to from Here?" *Journal of Sustainable Tourism* 24 (8–9): 1080–1099. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1189925>
- World Indigenous Tourism Alliance. 2012. The Larrakia Declaration on the Development of Indigenous Tourism. March. <http://www.winta.org/the-larrakia-declaration>.
- Yee Chin, T. 2025. "A Negotiated Sovereignty: Surfacing Indigenous Geopolitics Within Settler Colonialism." *Environment and Planning C* 43 (1): 40–57.