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Scholars in COVID Times

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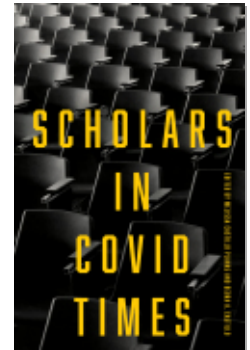
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Part 3

LOSSES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

COMMUNITY ENGAGED MIGRATION RESEARCH

Robert McKee Irwin and Juan Antonio Del Monte

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented unprecedented challenges for the practice of community engaged scholarship, especially with regard to projects aimed at collaborating with vulnerable groups such as migrants. Fundamental public health protocols such as sheltering in place and social distancing indeed present major obstacles to realizing the direct and personalized contact that the concept of engagement generally implies. These obstacles may be more pronounced with vulnerable migrants who are less likely to stay for very long in one place or to have regular internet access and therefore may be difficult to locate or to reach through distanced means. At the same time, the already precarious living conditions of migrants in cities with historically large migrant flows, such as Tijuana, are likely to become even more so in the context of a pandemic, when the delivery of all kinds of cross-border or even local aid is impeded by public health restrictions. Meanwhile, potential migrants themselves weigh a range of threats to their well-being, of which COVID-19 is one of many, in deciding whether to leave their homelands; even as borders officially shut down, migration continues unabated.

We believe that a pandemic is not a time to institute inflexible institutional policies that leave no option but to abandon community engagement but rather one that calls for the development of new strategies to facilitate partnerships with members of vulnerable groups that guarantee their health and promote their welfare. Here we review some of the special difficulties that the pandemic has presented for migrants in Tijuana during its first two years, our attempts to document them, the challenges we have faced in our improvised endeavors in

community engaged scholarship during the pandemic, and some of the positive outcomes we have nonetheless obtained.

Community Engagement in Times of COVID-19

We have been working, separately and in collaboration, for numerous years in Tijuana on several different community-based projects with migrants. Del Monte is co-director of the documentary film *Bad Hombres*, filmed mainly in a camp of deported migrants in Tijuana's Matadero Canyon. Irwin has, since 2016, coordinated the Humanizing Deportation/Humanizando la Deportación digital storytelling project,¹ in which Del Monte has been a participant. Both projects involve close interactions with migrants, whom we treat not as research subjects but as experts on the human consequences of contemporary migration control regimes, knowledge producers whose stories we help to disseminate. In addition to facilitating the production of nearly 150 audiovisual testimonial narratives of migrants in Tijuana (over three hundred in multiple sites across Mexico and California), the Humanizing Deportation project has also engaged in multiple outreach events in the city, often in collaboration with community organizations such as Dreamers Moms International and the Border Line Crisis Center.² We have also participated in projects that foster engagement of university students in Tijuana, including a separate digital storytelling project documenting the contributions of migrants rights defenders coordinated by the legal advocacy group Alma Migrante, with participation of undergraduate students from the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California and the University of San Diego.³ In early 2020 each had plans to continue community engagement in Tijuana through digital storytelling and outreach projects with students.

We were alarmed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, both the implications of the disease and the measures being implemented to contain it on vulnerable migrant populations in Tijuana, including migrants in transit from Central America and elsewhere and Mexicans arriving from the United States. The former included (1) migrants whose asylum applications to the United States were already being processed under the Migrant Protection Protocols program and whose case reviews were suspended from late March 2020 through late February 2021 and (2) newly arrived migrants who reached Tijuana to find a border that was closed to all but essential crossings in March 2020. The same border remains closed to most asylum seekers over two years later. Meanwhile, deported Mexicans continued to arrive in Tijuana. The United States did not suspend deportations during the pandemic, even when evidence surfaced of COVID-19

outbreaks at the immigrant detention facilities from which migrants were being deported.⁴ In addition, both Mexican and Central American migrants, including asylum seekers, caught by Customs and Border Protection officers crossing into the United States without documents have been subject, since March 2020, to immediate expulsions, with tens of thousands arriving in Tijuana over the course of the pandemic.⁵

These expulsions have been carried out under the invocation of section 265 of Title 42 of the US Code, a World War II era health regulation that was never intended to prevent admission to the country. In March 2020 it was implemented by the Donald Trump administration to expeditiously remove unauthorized border crossers including asylum seekers. This measure, put into effect by the Centers for Disease Control, purports to protect public health from the arrival of large numbers of potentially infected migrants. However, critics have argued that Title 42 has, particularly with the widespread availability of vaccines over the course of the pandemic's second year, served less to safeguard public health than to radically obstruct access to the US asylum system.⁶ Inconsistent application of the policy further buttresses this argument. For example, in April 2022 Tijuana witnessed the rapid processing of almost fifteen thousand asylum requests from Ukrainian citizens for whom Title 42 was not applied,⁷ even as thousands of asylum seekers from places like Central America and Haiti, some waiting two years or more at the border, continued to be turned away. Unfortunately, even as the Biden administration has sought to relax the order, it remains in effect due to an April 2022 federal court ruling blocking its revocation.

Large portions of migrants from both groups (those moving toward the north, and those being expelled from the north) rely heavily on migrant services organizations, including those offering food, shelter, logistical orientation, and legal advice, among others. These institutions were impacted by the measures introduced to control the pandemic. The border shutdown of March 2020 kept volunteers and donations from the United States from arriving in Tijuana. Shelters were forced to limit admissions. Food kitchens accustomed to serving a thousand or more meals a day in large dining halls had to recalibrate. Shelter-in-place orders made it difficult for even locals to help out. These are only a few of the complications service providers faced for the first year or more of the pandemic. Meanwhile, migrants continued moving northward unabated, regardless of shutdowns happening around them.⁸ We felt a great urgency to both find out how migrants in Tijuana were being impacted by the pandemic and related public health measures and to devise ways to offer help by deploying university resources.⁹

We were accustomed to working directly and closely with migrants and were deeply concerned that we could not be on the ground interacting with migrants, helping directly to identify problems and find solutions. We felt helpless: the

University of California prohibited nearly all international travel, and stay-at-home orders in Tijuana in the spring of 2020 essentially shut the city down even to local residents. Just as instruction moved to remote formats and researchers reformulated or postponed research projects, we had to reconsider our approaches to community engagement, which at first seemed impossible. But the urgency of the presumably dire ramifications of the pandemic for migrants staying or arriving in Tijuana drove us to begin exploring options.

Approaches to Publicly Engaged Scholarship

Diverse terms name research projects developed from a public interest in transforming the living conditions within the contexts of social realities from which these projects emerge.¹⁰ Here we employ the term “engaged scholarship”¹¹ to imply linking educational and research processes with direct community collaboration. The methods applied under the rubric of engagement aim to reduce the gap between academic research and applied knowledge that can be used to solve problems in the community.

In engaged scholarship there is a demand for reflexivity regarding the place scholars occupy in the world, our place of enunciation, and the responsibilities of transformation that our practice implies as we study the effects of structural inequalities and systems of oppression. A key element of engaged scholarship in the context of migration is the commitment to the idea that migrants carry a firsthand embodied knowledge, a bottom-up and heterogeneous knowledge that is as important as other kinds of knowledge.¹²

This encourages us to think in terms of collaborative and dialogic knowledge that requires making an effort to horizontalize the relationship between researchers and research communities.¹³ We have long recognized that we cannot research migrant communities without their participation in the process. Therefore, we have not been interested in seeking answers through academic theories but rather in finding them through dialogue and encounters with migrants.

On the other hand, some scholarly approaches are helpful in understanding the dynamics of migration from the perspectives of migrants, including those that study “mobile commons,” that is, knowledge shared and deployed by migrants along travel routes, political mobilizations among migrants, and the “willfulness” of migrants as they assume that migrants are not mere victims, escaping from one system of oppression to another, but rather autonomous agents.¹⁴ These approaches to migrant knowledge are often clustered together under the rubric of “autonomy of migration.”¹⁵

We should emphasize here that our experience and expertise as engaged scholars is in recording and disseminating migrant stories via various forms of audiovisual production. Our research focuses not on traditional methods of ethnography but rather on deeply collaborative methods, in which rather than try to find answers to specific research questions, we offer platforms for migrants to tell their stories, which then becomes material for analysis. While we recognize that any collaborative process is necessarily co-creative in some ways, our chief concern has always been in “story catching,” in recording community stories, while minimizing our role in determining or shaping their content.¹⁶ What we most wanted to do was to collect and learn from stories about the experience of migrants in Tijuana during the pandemic.

Experiments in Direct Community Engagement Remote Digital Storytelling

Irwin looked to use the Humanizing Deportation platform to record some stories of COVID-19-era Tijuana and was hopeful that a digital storytelling component of a project Del Monte was launching through Universidad Iberoamericana and El Colegio de la Frontera Norte would work out. He also thought about attempting to move Humanizing Deportation forward by remote means, even as working remotely is antithetical to the deeply personal collaborative methodology that the project has employed, with our academic facilitators frequently meeting a half dozen or more times face-to-face with community storytellers during the production process.¹⁷ While with some migrants we have been able to shift part of the process to exchanges via messaging applications, most collaborations entail hours of time spent meeting directly with storytellers.

However, for a few cases prior to the pandemic, we adopted a methodology that was entirely remote, working via an agent. This method came about organically when one of our Tijuana-based community storytellers, Esther Morales, suggested that we produce a digital story with a friend of hers who was living in Durango. While normally face-to-face meetings are key in establishing confidence in the project and in our fieldwork teams, in this case the remote storyteller, Ana María Arroyo, came to trust us because of our strong relationship with Morales, with whom we had first worked in 2017 (producing a three-part story, *Guerrera incansable [Tireless Warrior]*), and who recorded a new story with us in 2018: *Estoy en el lado de los Valientes [On the Side of the Brave]*.¹⁸ Arroyo worked with team member Ernesto Zarco Ortiz through an entirely remote process in the production of her digital story *Uniendo a través del corazón lo que la*

deportación separó [Uniting through the Heart That Deportation Separated].¹⁹ Just before the pandemic hit, again working with Morales as our field agent, Irwin collaborated with Marcia Yadira Durón, producing her story *Deportación, violencia, discriminación en Honduras* entirely via text messaging between Sacramento and Tegucigalpa, respectively.²⁰

We decided to try and apply this method more broadly, and it sometimes worked—but it has been hard to accomplish much. One problem is that this method is not comfortable for everyone. Some migrants who were already familiar with Humanizando la Deportación and had previously been in dialogue with Irwin about publishing their stories balked at working remotely. Some were migrants that already knew Irwin well, so the issue was not one of confidence or trust but rather of discomfort with the depersonalized connection via the screen. Four different storytellers who had already expressed strong interest in contributing to the archive dropped out early in the pandemic when it became evident that there would be no face-to-face meetings with team members in the foreseeable future.

Even among those that were not discouraged by remote collaboration protocols, the additional layer of mediation slowed things down considerably. Although during the first eighteen months of the pandemic, we added some forty new digital stories to our archive, the vast majority of them (thirty-two) were begun prior to the onset of the pandemic through our standard face-to-face collaboration method. Only eight involved a completely remote process carried out fully during the pandemic. And of those, three were stories told by collaborators that members of our fieldwork teams already knew well.

The other five were digital stories created by migrants whom none of our team members had met prior to the pandemic, most of whom signed onto the project thanks to the help of agents in the field in Tijuana. Two feature the stories of a Guatemalan migrant named Ludvin that we met through Esther Morales. With the exception of its recording (realized thanks to Morales and another local agent, journalist Sandra Dibble) his story, *Dos separaciones familiares* [Two Family Separations], was produced entirely through exchanges of text messages. After the initial contact and recording with Morales and Dibble, Irwin managed all communication with Ludvin (in Tijuana) from northern California, while two team members working remotely, Jesús Galán (in Davis, California) and Yunuen Gómez (in Guaymas, Sonora), created the audiovisual montage and edited it.

Two others are stories of Honduran migrants introduced to us by another agent in Tijuana, Jocelín Mariscal, who recorded their audio, took some photos, and filmed some brief video segments with them. Mariscal managed all direct communication with the migrants with remote assistance from Irwin, while

Ernesto Zarco (living in Davis) carried out the production of the videos, which were published as *Cambio de plan: realizando los sueños en México* [*Change of Plan: Making Dreams Come True in Mexico*] and *Tijuana tiene muchas oportunidades* [*Tijuana Has Many Opportunities*].²¹ The fifth case was quite exceptional: Carlos Manuel Ramírez, a deported Mexican who discovered our website on his own and was eager to participate. Experienced in audiovisual production, he was able to produce his digital story almost completely by himself, in dialogue with Irwin and Yunuen Gómez.²²

Regarding the first four cases mentioned previously, under usual working conditions, our audiovisual production teams would also maintain all contact and communication with community storytellers. Under our remote method, we were adding two additional layers of mediation: the roles of community-based agents, and that of Irwin, who stepped in to coordinate production in order to get an idea of the dynamics and complications that may arise with these remote collaborations. Working in this way felt odd to us, but as these migrants had never worked with us before, it is possible that it all may have seemed all right to them—certainly they never complained, nor did they pull out, as they were free to do at any moment. But the process did take a long time. When we work in the field, the production of a digital story might typically take about a month or maybe six weeks from the first introductory meeting to the final edits and publication of a digital story. Ludvin's story took roughly three months to produce, while the stories of the two Hondurans took five. Without a doubt the added layers of mediation, as well as the mainly remote methods of communication, slowed down our process significantly.

In August 2021 travel restrictions had finally loosened enough for several team members to begin working in the field again in Tijuana. Since that time production has taken off. With thousands of migrants stuck waiting at the border for so long, we found that many were anxious to make their experiences known. While we no longer need to use the remote methods we improvised earlier in the pandemic, we continue to draw from the experience, turning to social messaging media with much greater frequency. We realize that certain applications have become the primary communication means for many migrants, who might prefer, even if only for convenience, to follow most of the production process with us remotely.

INSIGHTS INTO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THROUGH DIGITAL STORYTELLING

Even though we did manage to keep the project going during the pandemic, we did not have much success in documenting the experience of migration or deportation during the first year of the pandemic.

It is important to understand that among Humanizando la Deportación's community collaboration protocols is a fundamental practice of avoiding, or at the very least minimizing, interventions into the content of the digital stories by members of our teams.²³ While we recognize that any collaborative process of this kind is necessarily co-creative,²⁴ and that our particular adaptation of digital storytelling fieldwork methods presents power dynamics that we cannot completely overcome,²⁵ we seek to minimize our team members' inevitable influence in story content through an intensely personal collaborative process.²⁶ However, one of our guiding principles, reiterated on multiple occasions in our fieldwork training, is that our role is not to mediate but to facilitate the realization of the vision of community storytellers.

Therefore, in the application of this method, scale is important. If we have a very specific question we would like to explore, we have no way of ensuring that migrants who have experiences relevant to that question will opt to talk about them in their five-minute digital story. Therefore, if we have only a few stories, the question may go unanswered. On the other hand, if we have several dozen or several hundred stories, it is much more likely that the archive will contain some robust data, including possibly some that are generalizable.

In the case of COVID-19, our inability to maintain the scale of our production of previous years (an average of close to a hundred digital stories per year over the first three years of the project²⁷) worked against us with regard to learning about the effects of the pandemic on migrants. We made the effort to keep production going during the pandemic because we were concerned about conditions for migrants in Tijuana during the pandemic. However, of the digital stories produced during the first eighteen months of the pandemic, only one refers to it at all, Esther Morales's *Comida calientita en plena pandemia* [*Nice Hot Food in the Midst of the Pandemic*]. Morales was deported to Tijuana over ten years ago and has become well known for her success with La Antigüita, a small restaurant located in downtown Tijuana specializing in tamales. She is no longer the kind of vulnerable migrant that we worried might be living in perilous conditions during the pandemic. Her digital story does shed some light on the city during the early months of the pandemic, when she was forced to close her restaurant and began offering free food and water to homeless migrants. Eventually she ended up teaming up with Al Otro Lado, a legal services organization that has sponsored a program, managed by Morales, to deliver meals to migrant shelters around the city (the endeavor parallel to Del Monte's project described later).

However, the three Central Americans who offered to record their stories through the Humanizing Deportation project during that period told not of the pandemic conditions but of the reasons for leaving their homelands, the diffi-

culties that they face in trying to migrate legally to the United States, and their decisions to settle, whether short or long term, in Tijuana. *Cambio de plan* and *Tijuana tiene muchas oportunidades* focus very specifically on establishing residency in Tijuana, where their authors have found relative safety and prosperity. The former, Ludvin's *Dos separaciones familiares*, tells of a longer migration history, including a deportation from the United States, and his hopes for reuniting with loved ones in the United States, even as he realizes that he cannot legally enter the United States and must make do temporarily with his options in Tijuana. None refer to difficulties in obtaining food, shelter, or medical care and, even as they appear with mouth coverings in some of their stories' visual materials, there is no reference at all to COVID-19.

The lack of attention to the pandemic raises some interesting questions. Many people chose not to travel internationally prior to the widespread availability of COVID-19 vaccines, whether out of fear of infection or as a civic contribution aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19; the University of California went so far as to forbid nearly all research-related travel for the first 18 months of the pandemic.²⁸ Travel came to be seen as socially irresponsible: "non-essential travel is now associated in some quarters with a degree of social stigma."²⁹ Any story of long-distance travel during the pandemic among many in our privileged sector would necessarily include discussions about COVID-19 testing, quarantines, strategies for minimizing risks of infection, feelings of apprehension, and, in many cases, justifications or rationalizations to counter criticisms of interlocutors who themselves cancelled trips and believe that it is everyone's duty to do the same. This was clearly not the thought process of many migrants.

Yet without a doubt, the pandemic altered the living conditions of migrants in Tijuana. Unfortunately, due to institutional restrictions on pandemic travel, we were not able to engage in fieldwork in Tijuana or anywhere else for eighteen months. This required that we try to fill in the blanks to document the difficulties faced by migrants, whether those in transit heading to the United States or those being sent from the United States into Mexico. During that critical period our improvised methods did not permit us to collect enough data to draw meaningful conclusions.

Hot Food for Homeless Migrants

Very early in the pandemic Del Monte began strategizing to carry out community engaged research through a university-based project, working with undergraduates from the Universidad Iberoamericana's Tijuana campus and with graduate students from El Colegio de la Frontera Norte, to deliver food to homeless migrants. Unlike the Humanizing Deportation team at UC Davis, for

whom travel to Tijuana was forbidden, Del Monte was able to find student volunteers and obtain university support, applying strict protocols designed to protect both project volunteers and community members, for a program designed to meet immediate and urgent needs of some of the city's most precarious residents. Many of the city's homeless, traumatized after being deported from the United States, suffer from mental illness or addiction to alcohol or drugs and depend greatly on charitable organizations for food, clothing, and hygiene products.

As a working team, two things worried us with the onslaught of the pandemic and the imposed restrictions on movement and mandates to shelter in place. The first was that the shelters and community kitchens (some serving more than a thousand meals to homeless and migrants in Tijuana every day) were having difficulty getting supplies and many were closed; the second thing was that these people were unable to shelter in place because they didn't have a place for sheltering according to the healthy protocols: they were homeless.

We came up with the idea of *Comida Calientita* (Hot Food) in collaboration with local entrepreneur and activist Esther Morales (mentioned previously). Although she was ultimately unable to work with us at that time, that didn't stop us from launching parallel projects with the same inspiration and under the same name and motivations. Our university-based *Comida Calientita* sought to meet immediate community needs, while at the same time introducing opportunities for academic team members to carry out qualitative research in the community. This latter research was meant to offer insights regarding the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the measures taken to control it on this vulnerable group based on the firsthand experience of these populations.

In a pandemic context, it was imperative for us not only to generate a project with the necessary protocols to ensure the health of all the participants but also to ensure a degree of direct contact sufficient to avoid what local communities have called "academic extractivism,"³⁰ which consists of extracting information in the study of communities without generating any benefits in return. With this approach, we couldn't merely allude to the social responsibility of scientific research. Responsibility in these matters implies not only the methodological consistency between techniques, data, interpretation, and theory, which would be part of scientific responsibility, but also a commitment to the content of what is analyzed and the construction of a research plan that generates concrete forms of social impact.

In this sense, our first goal was to contribute to alleviating hunger as a way to mitigate, albeit modestly, the vulnerability of homeless migrants in Tijuana. Thus, our top priority was food delivery. But the project also sought to make a longer-term impact. This meant learning more about the characteristics and needs of this community in the context of the pandemic by establishing respect-

ful forms of research with the communities in question to ensure that our project team was not merely thinking about the needs of the community but rather was thinking with the community to strategically use this collaborative knowledge construction to influence or effect social change in ways that would be meaningful for the community.

Therefore, from the start social research methods would not determine the path of our program; on the contrary, it was the food assistance project that was going to determine the steps for social research. Thus, we gave centrality to the general objective of the project—to provide food to the deported population living on the street during the pandemic—and prepared to improvise our research from there.

We initially designed a program to conduct research using collaborative visual methods in which community volunteers would collaborate by offering their vision of the situation. Two lines of highly collaborative research were envisioned: first, these collaborators would document community food practices during the pandemic using photoelicitation, a method in which community participants are given digital cameras and asked to take photos from their daily life practices and encounters.³¹ From there, we would work with community collaborators to produce digital stories, following the protocols of the Humanizing Deportation project, with the aim of publishing some of these stories and the photos in the Humanizing Deportation public online archive.³²

Although the research design initially seemed reasonable (even regarding funding), we soon discovered some flaws during its piloting that forced us to modify our research procedures as we continued with the food delivery. The problems were related to the unstable conditions in which this population lives. It was very difficult to follow up with each person because the same people did not attend every time we offered food, nor were many of them able or willing to follow through with the collaboration as we had expected.

Basically, we had distributed fifteen disposable cameras. Of these, few returned to our hands, either because they were lost, stolen, or sold, or simply because we lost contact with community volunteers, none of whom had a stable address, telephone, or other means of contact. The material from the two cameras that were returned has been developed and reviewed with the community members, with whom we remain in contact.

After a couple of weeks, it was very clear that it was impossible to carry out an investigation of this type in these conditions. We really needed to spend more time working directly with the community storytellers and to realize a much more detailed follow-up than we could without risking becoming a vector of exposure to the virus for these populations—or for our team members, including many students.

We therefore decided to recompose the research component of the project, opting to apply a more conventional (and unfortunately less horizontal) method: a questionnaire that could help us to assess the needs of the homeless migrant community during the pandemic. The survey was focused on four main things: to know who the street dwellers are (sociodemographic data), where they come from (migratory experience), how they live (living conditions), and what they eat (food and health conditions). The application of the questionnaire turned out to be much more practical as we could do it while community members were standing in line, from an adequately healthy distance. Thus, we applied more than one hundred questionnaires during our food deliveries.³³

INSIGHTS INTO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC THROUGH COMMUNITY FOOD DELIVERY

Although we could not consolidate the research project linked to photo elicitation and digital stories, we do not think that this was a failed project. On the contrary, we have learned a lot about working on an engaged research project in the midst of a pandemic with migrant and vulnerable populations. One of the first lessons was the importance of prioritizing the community food assistance project as the guiding principle for our work. On the one hand, this allowed us to meet urgent community needs, and on the other hand, it required us to make our proposal methodologically flexible from the beginning. In the end, our survey on the characteristics of the homeless deported community during the pandemic was highly productive.

The food delivery project was a success. It allowed us to deliver directly to the community between 150 and 200 plates of freshly made food by various local chefs during the months of June to December 2020, as well as two portable sinks where community members could wash their hands before eating the food. These were delivered to a highly visible location near the border, in an area in which an estimated seven hundred people were living in the street. Moreover, our *Comida Calientita* project served as a vehicle for community organizations looking to devise creative and safe ways to assist vulnerable populations in the city. Tijuana Food Bank, Espacio Migrante, Innova Dental, Menstruación Digna, Distribuidora Zamora, and Eraboy were all eager to help, many donating supplies to prepare the meals or providing urgently needed personal hygiene products that were distributed along with the food. In other words, the project became a mechanism that attracted various entities interested in helping these populations but who had not found a way to do so. Since our return to Tijuana, Humanizing Deportation has partnered ever more frequently with Esther Morales, delivering food to migrant shelters and other similar spaces where we have sought

to meet migrants to help document experiences on the migrant trail and at the border over the entire pandemic period.

Finally, the results of the survey allowed us to identify areas in urgent need of attention and were useful to propose a series of lines of advocacy and action. These included carrying out a systematic and consistent statistical registry at national and local level on the homeless population; promoting the documentation of homeless people so that they might access government-sponsored programs for vulnerable populations; implementing COVID-19 vaccination campaigns among these populations; supporting civil society organizations dedicated to the food supply of these populations; promoting human rights campaigns among police forces to reduce the inhumane treatment and arbitrary detentions they carry out. We have promoted these recommendations in both written form and in a well-attended public form that we presented via Zoom in March 2021. While noting that precarious situation of homeless life in Tijuana is the product of a sum of disadvantages that are framed in a structure of criminalizing migration policies and deep social inequalities in Mexico, we believe that these actions could begin the process of breaking the precarious situation in which the homeless of Tijuana have been immersed for many years.

Engaged Scholarship and Essential Research

In retrospect, it is interesting to observe that the United States-Mexico border closure of 2020 inhibited the movement of both migrants and academics alike, with both migrants and US-based academics trapped on one side of the border. Humanizing Deportation was seriously disabled and had to catch up and fill in the blanks. It is sad that communities that might benefit from ongoing collaboration and support from engaged scholars, perhaps even more during a pandemic than at other moments, are kept at a distance because of institutional constraints: universities that won't allow their scholars to travel. Certainly, it is understandable that institutions must take responsibility for supporting public health efforts. However, it is a shame that communities with multiple urgent needs are cut off from some engaged scholars who might be able to safely help them in some way but cannot due to the inflexibility of institutionally imposed travel restrictions.

Notably, both Universidad Iberoamericana and El Colegio de la Frontera Norte permitted carefully designed, community-oriented projects as part of their own institutional commitment to the communities in which their faculty and

students have established relationships during the pandemic. They allowed and even funded community aid projects carried out by faculty and students to help groups living in heightened precarity during the pandemic. Many scholars, long encouraged by their home institutions to think globally, felt confident in developing programs and platforms for transnational public engagement. We now find our own ethical commitments to community in conflict with institutions that recoiled in fear, essentially withdrawing their commitments to the global, entertaining no discussion for creative ways of safely realizing transnational projects in the face of COVID-19, and essentially assuming a conservative approach that extended travel restrictions for months beyond the time in which they presented an obvious danger, whether to researchers or to communities abroad. Universities that we thought were committed to global engagement are actually distrustful of it.

For us, engaged scholarship is a form of essential academic labor as far as it is designed to identify, comprehend, and perhaps meet urgent needs of vulnerable populations that are not being otherwise adequately addressed. Ultimately, these are scientific efforts that seek to contribute to the improvement of the living conditions of the population under consideration. Here we envision the need to design institutional protocols for engaged scholarship that are feasible in both ethical and public health terms to deal with community commitments in pandemic emergencies such as this one.

We did carry out some interesting remote research regarding the conditions in Tijuana during the pandemic, including research for two reports and two academic articles. One of the latter, based on interviews with migrants carried out by telephone and social media, identified a range of actions that show migrants to be “a willful social force in Tijuana” in the face of the pandemic, manifestations of what has been called “the autonomy of migration.”³⁴ The will of migrants, we observe here, is ultimately much more robust than the institutional will of academia to assist migrants. Sadly, for academia, engaged transnational scholarship is considered nonessential business.

NOTES

1. Humanizando la Deportación. <http://humanizandoladeportacion.ucdavis.edu/en/>.

2. See “Diffusion Beyond the Web” in Irwin, “Humanizing Deportation Archive.”

3. “Soul of a Migrant,” <https://almamigrante.org/causes/historia-de-defensores/>.

4. Miller et al., “Immigration Policy and Justice.”

5. See http://www.politicamigratoria.gob.mx/es/PoliticaMigratoria/Boletines_Estadisticos.

6. Del Monte, “El Título 42.”

7. Del Monte, “Contrastes.”

8. See Martínez y Quero, *Nuevas dinámicas migratorias*.

9. See Del Monte and Irwin, "Migrantes en Tijuana."
10. See Doberneck, Glass, and Schweitzer, "From Rhetoric to Reality."
11. See Van de Ven, *Engaged Scholarship*.
12. See Mignolo and Walsh, *On Decoloniality*.
13. See Francés et al, *La investigación*, and Corona Berkin, *Producción horizontal*.
14. See Papadopoulos and Tsianos, "After Citizenship"; Varela Huerta, "Movimientos sociales"; Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*.
15. See Papadopoulos and Tsianos, "After Citizenship"; Scheel, *Autonomy of Migration*; De Genova, *Borders of "Europe."*
16. For "story catching," see Lambert; for minimizing our role, see Román Maldonado, "Reconfiguración metodológica."
17. See Irwin, "Digital Resources"; Román Maldonado, "Reconfiguración metodológica."
18. Morales, *Guerrera incansable [Tireless Warriors]*; Morales, *Estoy en el lado de los Valientes [On the Side of the Brave]*.
19. Arroyo, *Uniendo a través del corazón lo que la deportación separó [Uniting through the Heart That Deportation Separated]*.
20. Durón, *Deportación, violencia, discriminación en Honduras*.
21. Una Migrante Hondureña, *Cambio de plan*, and Fúnez, *Tijuana tiene muchas oportunidades*.
22. Ramírez, *No todo está mal [It's Not All Bad]*.
23. See Irwin, "Digital Resources."
24. See Worcester, "Reframing Digital Storytelling."
25. See Lizarazo, et al, "Ethics, Collaboration, and Knowledge Production."
26. See Román Maldonado, "Reconfiguración metodológica."
27. See "Development of the Archive" in Irwin.
28. See, for example, Zheng, Luo, and Ritchie, "Afraid to Travel"; Neuberger and Eger, "Travel Risk Perception."
29. Flaherty and Nizrull, "Reiseangst."
30. See Pueblos, *Recuento Movilización Estatal*.
31. See Van Auken, Frisvoll, and Stewart, "Visualizing Community."
32. See Irwin, "Digital Resources"; Román Maldonado, "Reconfiguración metodológica."
33. See Del Monte and Bautist, "Persistencia de la precarización."
34. See Irwin and Del Monte, "Migrant Autonomy"; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, "After Citizenship."

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