

Migrant Waiting Territories in Emerging Urban Areas: A Theoretical Proposal and Analytical Perspective from Southern Mexico

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— Abstract —

This article proposes a theoretical, methodological, and conceptual expansion of the term territory of waiting, originally formulated by Alain Musset (2015), based on the analysis of the experiences of people on the move in emerging cities of southern Mexico. The objective is to highlight how, in non-border urban contexts such as Tuxtla Gutiérrez, migratory waiting becomes a structuring dimension of everyday life and precarious territoriality. Using a qualitative ethnographic approach, including semi-structured interviews and field observation, the study explores how the city has been reconfigured by recent migratory flows, such as the 2018 caravans and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, turning it into a space of forced immobility. The analysis reveals that waiting in these cities does not imply passivity, but rather an active process of transit reorganization, physical and emotional recovery, and the creation of support networks. The article argues that migrant waiting territories in emerging cities like Tuxtla Gutiérrez represent new forms of inhabiting, where people on the move exercise agency, resignify urban space, and produce temporary structures with symbolic density. This study proposes a reconfiguration of the concept of territory of waiting, extending it beyond border zones to include intermediate cities not designed for migrant reception. This allows for a critical, territorial, and situated understanding of mobility in southern Mexico.

Keywords:

Migrant waiting territories; emerging cities; people on the move; forced immobility; migrant agency; migratory waiting.

International migration in countries such as Mexico has historically been characterized by the transit of people on the move who seek to achieve the so-called “American Dream” in the United States. However, over the past decade, the country has ceased to be merely a transit zone and has also become a destination and a place of forced residence. This transformation has substantially reshaped the spatial, social, and political dynamics of the national territory, generating new geographies of containment and mobility.

In this process, a central paradox emerges: immobility within mobility. People in transit encounter bureaucratic, structural, or voluntary delays that force them to wait, transforming their migratory experience into a sequence of uncertain pauses. This waiting, far from being a mere interruption of physical movement, affects subjectivity, lived time, and everyday strategies. As Appadurai (2013) argues, waiting exacerbates the imagination of survival: that human capacity to project oneself toward an uncertain future. In these transitional territories, people on the move build connections, reorganize their trajectories, and redefine space through vulnerability and agency.

In particular, so-called “emerging cities”—towns that were not part of the traditional migration route—have begun to appear as strategic nodes on the migration map. Cities such as Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, have become areas where migrants wait following the tightening of immigration policies, the 2018 caravans, and the social effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In these non-border urban contexts, waiting is not a passive act, but a complex social practice involving adaptation, conflict, support networks, and new ways of living.

From this perspective, this article aims to expand the concept of the waiting territory, originally formulated by Alain Musset (2015), through an analysis of the experiences of people on the move in emerging cities in southern Mexico. Using a qualitative and ethnographic approach, the study seeks to understand these territories not only as spaces of bureaucratic containment but also as settings where subjectivities, forms of resistance, and forms of territoriality in motion are produced.

Thus, waiting emerges as a structuring phenomenon that redefines both migratory trajectories and the urban environments that host them. Through the concept of migrant waiting territory, this article offers a critical and situated analysis of forced immobility and its spatial, political, and symbolic implications in non-border contexts, with a focus on the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez.

METHODOLOGY

Design of investigation

This research adopts a qualitative, ethnographically oriented approach focused on understanding the experiences of people on the move in waiting territories that are emerging in non-border cities in southern Mexico. It is a case study conducted

in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, which has recently been recognized as an emerging hub on the new regional migration map.

The ethnographic approach made it possible to document the daily reality of waiting from a situated perspective, taking into account not only the narratives expressed by migrants but also the practices, silences, and spatial appropriations observed during their stopped transit. Fieldwork was conducted in 2024 and 2025, at different times of high migratory activity, in key areas of the city.

Participants and sampling

Four semi-structured interviews were conducted with people on the move from Venezuela who were selected through purposive sampling based on criteria of theoretical relevance. The sample included men and women of various ages, with diverse migration histories, living in makeshift camps and public squares.

The interviews were carried out in person, in urban transit settings, and had an average duration of 20 to 40 minutes.

Table 1

Characteristics of the individuals interviewed in the study

Country of origin	Age	Gender	Country of destination	Waiting territory
Venezuela	25	Woman	USA	Plaza Sol Parking Lot
Venezuela	28	Man	USA	Torre Chiapas Bridge
Venezuela	30	Woman	USA	Torre Chiapas Bridge
Venezuela	40	Man	USA	Torre Chiapas Bridge

Source: Author's own elaboration based on interviews conducted in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, 2024–2025.

Data collection techniques and instruments

Three main techniques were used:

- Semi-structured interviews, with emphasis on the meaning of waiting, stopped traffic conditions, support networks and the perception of urban space.
- Ethnographic observation, carried out in informal camps, streets, public squares, bus terminals and temporary shelters. Interactions, settlement dynamics and forms of collective adaptation to immobility were documented.
- Documentary review, including institutional reports, press releases, and social media material, which allowed for the triangulation of narratives and the construction of a broader contextual overview.

These techniques complemented one another to capture not only explicit discourse, but also the sensory, symbolic, and spatial ways of experiencing the wait.

Data Analysis strategy

The data were analyzed using a categorical thematic analysis approach, following the methodology proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). Based on an initial open coding, three broad analytical dimensions were identified: (1) subsistence strategies during the waiting period, (2) migrant solidarity networks, and (3) the precarious territorialization of transit.

For example, within the category of subsistence strategies, practices such as informal street vending, food sharing, and the shared use of public spaces for sleeping or personal hygiene emerged. The triangulation of research methods, combined with the use of field notes and analytical reflection, strengthened the interpretive validity of the study, enabling a situated and critical analysis of the phenomenon.

EMERGING CITIES: NEW SCENARIOS OF MIGRANT WAITING

The concept of waiting territories takes on a key dimension when analyzed in the context of so-called emerging cities—defined as inland towns that, beginning in 2020, began to undergo significant structural transformations due to a sustained increase in migratory flows. These cities, traditionally unaccustomed to the international movement of people, have become strategic hubs for temporary waiting, route reorganization, and bureaucratic processing, generating new social, economic, and territorial dynamics.

Historically, migration in Mexico has been concentrated in two major areas: the southern border, particularly Tapachula, and the northern border, including cities such as Tijuana, Ciudad Juárez, and Reynosa—linked by the well-known “traditional migration route” (Massey et al., 2005). This route, mainly used by Central American individuals in an irregular situation, provided a direct link to the United States via established transit corridors. However, several structural factors have disrupted this pattern: the tightening of United States immigration policies, the emergence of caravans beginning in 2018, and, most significantly, the COVID-19 pandemic.

Border closures and health restrictions imposed during the global crisis forced a shift in migration routes. People in transit began stopping in cities that had not previously appeared on the migration map. This territorial redistribution gave rise to new migrant centers, that is, inland cities that began to serve as places of waiting, containment, shelter or regrouping. In these places, streets, parks, sidewalks, public buildings, and low-cost hotels were converted into makeshift living spaces. Most of these spaces, streets, parks, sidewalks, public buildings and low-cost hotels were converted into improvised territories of stay (Escobedo et al., 2025).

In these scenarios, *waiting territories* do not solely constitute of involuntary detention, but rather living territories where migrants engage in daily activities such as informal work, intermittent access to health or education services, and interaction with local institutions. Initially, many of these cities responded with gestures of solidarity and humanitarian aid networks, especially from civil society. However, the breakdown of institutional capacities and the saturation of public services have generated social tensions, punitive responses, and even discourses of criminalization toward migrants (Silvey & Lawson, 2021).

Municipal governments, lacking prior experience in migration management, have improvised assistance mechanisms. A common strategy has been the installation of support offices for individuals in mobility, aiming to streamline procedures and reduce visible flows. However, these measures have generated a new form of waiting: *bureaucratic waiting*. Document processing can extend for weeks or even months, transforming these spaces into sites of forced temporary fixation (Escobedo, 2025).

Unlike cities historically linked to the migratory phenomenon, emerging cities present more fragile contexts: they lack institutional infrastructure, trained human resources, and specific regulatory frameworks to assist this population. Nonetheless, their consolidation as migratory nodes have been reinforced by the migrant networks themselves. Through 'word of mouth,' social media messages, or messaging applications, these cities become reference points where 'you can wait for a few days,' 'there are INM offices,' or 'you can reunite with acquaintances'.

Analyzing these cities requires moving beyond classical territorial frameworks. It becomes indispensable to incorporate variables such as local conflicts, racial or xenophobic tensions, institutional response capacity, as well as the ways in which migrants themselves reproduce, occupy, and resignify urban space. Waiting territories are not solely the result of state control or omission, but also of migrant agency—of their capacity to build ways of inhabiting the unstable and the contingent in the midst of a peripheral capitalism that marginalizes and invisibilizes.

Table 2*Comparison between border cities and emerging cities as territories of migrant waiting*

Dimension	Border cities	Emerging cities
Migrate history	Long-standing tradition of transit and migrant destination.	Recent addition to the migration map.
Institutional infrastructure	Presence of shelters, NGOs, and specialized government offices.	Limited or non-existent infrastructure for migrant assistance.
State response	Greater operational experience and established protocols.	Improvised responses and inefficient bureaucracy.
Habitability conditions	Greater reception capacity, although saturated.	Occupation of public spaces, extreme precariousness.
Type of waiting	Strategic containment, border waiting.	Bureaucratic, legal, and prolonged waiting in the interior.
Relationship with local population	Conflictual coexistence but stabilized in some cases.	Recent tensions, outbreaks of xenophobia, and stigmatization.
Role within the migratory system	Final point or crossing point toward the USA.	Intermediate node for regrouping or detention.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on Escobedo (2025), COMDHSM (2024), OIM (2024), Musset (2015), Silvey & Lawson (2021).

Emerging cities are now nodal scenarios for understanding the new geographies of human mobility in Mexico. They are unexpected points within the cartography of transit, where multiple forms of waiting condense: institutional, legal, economic, emotional. Within them, migrant waiting territories not only represent the forced displacement of bodies, but also profound social transformations that reconfigure both migrant communities and receiving societies. They can no longer be thought of outside the migratory phenomenon: in their streets, schools, hospitals, and markets, waiting resonates as a way of life, a structural tension, and a future possibility.

One: territory

"And perhaps the only way to begin to understand these dark years for migrants crossing Central America, Mexico, and the United States is to record as many individual stories as possible. To listen to them, again and again. To write them down, again and again..." — Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends*¹

1 Translator's note (T.N.): The source text cited the Spanish edition of this book (*Los niños perdidos*, Sexto Piso). This quote has been replaced here with the author's original English phrasing from Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in Forty Questions* (Coffee House Press, 2017).

Luiselli's words open an ethical and political dimension that runs through this discussion: understanding the waiting territory not only as a spatial category, but as a narrative device that demands memory, listening, and critique. This first section proposes a theoretical-conceptual reflection on territory, understanding that naming it as such implies recognizing it as an active, conflictual, and socially situated construction.

In the context of this research, a key question challenges us from the very beginning: is it legitimate and necessary to designate as a 'territory' the spaces inhabited by individuals in mobility during their transit? To answer, it is necessary to turn to a genealogy of the concept, which has evolved from classical physical geography to become an analytical tool in critical social sciences.

Authors such as Bosque Maurel and Ortega Alba (1995) remind us that there is no single geography, but rather a constellation of geographical knowledges that shape territory as something more than a natural delimitation. In the modern tradition, from Ratzel (1897) to Sack (1986), territory has been understood as a space appropriated by a social group to ensure its material and symbolic reproduction. This appropriation, which implies control, identity, and use, allows for a differentiation between a simple space of passage and a territory endowed with meaning.

The concept of territory has played a fundamental role in shaping the discipline of geography. However, it was in the 19th century that this concept underwent a significant transformation. Its emergence coincided with the advent of modernity, causing this disciplinary approach to territory to extend into other fields of study, thereby spreading its influence to various academic disciplines.

Every territory of a State is equally, as a portion of the earth's soil, a natural territory. Its natural properties associate with those of the nation and those of the State to form the sum of the general characteristics of the State [...] Each people applies to its territory the totality of its forces and resources in order to obtain the maximum possible benefit for its cultural and political development [...]. The ethnic collective tends to transform into a natural entity. (Ratzel, 1897: 158-159)

Sack, for instance, defines territory as 'any space whose access is controlled.' This is especially useful for understanding waiting territories as spaces where individuals in mobility manage their presence within geographical and symbolic boundaries marked by institutional control, but also by their own practices of subsistence and coexistence.

From this perspective, migrant waiting territories cannot be reduced to 'spaces of passage'; rather, they must be understood as lived spaces, however precarious, where social, affective, and political relations are formed. Musset (2015) emphasizes that these territories are 'constructed from below,' emerging from the practices of the migrants themselves who temporarily inhabit them. Within them, an ephemeral yet no less powerful territoriality is produced: networks of care, exchange, rest, play, faith, and agency. These are territories inhabited from a standpoint of contingency.

“We’ve been traveling for a month, I’m here with my husband and my children, we want them to sell us a ticket so we can keep moving forward, but they tell us they can’t sell it to us, and well, we’ve ended up staying here. We had to spend the night on the street, and right now the sun is really harsh and here we are, still waiting.” Hernández, M. (Personal communication, July 16, 2024).

By exercising control over the spatial and material access of various flows—whether of commodities, individuals, or capital—the formation of a territorial space is consolidated. This notion addresses the previously raised question regarding the distinction between waiting spaces and waiting territories (De Souza Miranda et al., 2025). Although similarities between both concepts may initially be perceived, their differentiation will become more evident as the subsequent analysis in the text deepens.

“It’s hard, especially for the children because we don’t have help from anyone; the children go hungry, sometimes people humiliate us, they insult us, but there are also other kind-hearted people. The only thing we are asking for right now is support to get to Mexico City.” Cruz, K. (Personal communication, January 30, 2025).

This experience reveals that, even in urban margins—parking lots, squares, under bridges, or in budget hotels—children and adolescents on the move engage in a form of spatial appropriation, generating meaning and minimal relational structures. As Haesbaert (2013) argues, territory is also a relational form, not merely a physical one, where the material and symbolic conditions of the subjects who inhabit it intersect.



Note: Author's own photography

Figure 1. Torre Chiapas Bridge in the City of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. Provisional Camp April 2025

The concept of heterotopia, introduced by Foucault (1984), is also key to this discussion. These "other spaces" operate as parallel realities within a city: spaces that, although locatable, do not entirely belong to the hegemonic order. In this sense, territories of waiting function as urban heterotopias: marginal places, simultaneously visible and invisible, where life in transit is experienced as a disruption of the normative order. They are not "non-places" in the sense of Augé (1992)², but rather "tense places" where life continues, albeit fragmented.

This testimony evidences the temporary suspension that defines the migrant waiting territory. This migratory waiting is not merely a pause, but a way of inhabiting time and space marked by uncertainty. As Santos (2000) points out, the territory is the foundation of life, work, and exchanges. And in this case, it is also the foundation of waiting as an everyday experience.

In short, the migrant territory of waiting must be understood as a social production that transforms the urban landscape. It is not solely a physical place delimited by borders, but a form of temporal organization of migrant life under adverse conditions. Unlike the "space of waiting" as a transitory notion, the territory

2 For Marc Augé (1992), "non-places" are spaces of transit characteristic of modernity—such as airports, highways, shopping malls, or stations—that do not generate identity, belonging, or lasting relationships. They are functional, anonymous, and depersonalized spaces where individuals remain temporarily without building deep symbolic bonds. Unlike the "anthropological place," the non-place is defined by the absence of collective memory, shared history, and rootedness.

of waiting consolidates itself through migrant agency, as it generates bonds, meanings, and symbolic structures that give sense to the experience of being stranded.

In more precise terms, territory—beyond its physical, abstract, or symbolic connotations—can be defined as a portion of geographic space that acquires social meaning when differentiated political, cultural, economic, or affective relationships are established within it, distinguishing it from surrounding spaces. These relationships produce both physical and symbolic boundaries, generating a differential appropriation of space. As Taylor (1993) points out, "not all territories are sovereign States," suggesting that territories should not be understood exclusively under institutional geopolitical frameworks, but also as dynamic social constructions that emerge from situated practices.

Spaces are transformed into territories when they are inhabited, lived, and resignified. This transformation gives rise to a territoriality, understood as the latent structure of everyday life, shaped by the interpersonal and social relationships that are reproduced within that environment (Bresso and Raffestin, 1982). In the case of migratory transit, the migrant territory is configured as a network of functional places—streets, stations, shelters, squares—where individual and collective practices give meaning to what is lived. However, territory transcends function; it also expresses systems of representation, symbolic disputes, and infrastructures of power. From this perspective, territory constitutes a dimension of space that gains relevance when analyzed through power relations, thus becoming a nodal concept in critical social geography.

In this way, migrant waiting territories are constructed through a constant tension between those who inhabit them and those who deny or regulate them. Their dynamics are not defined solely by their spatial location, but by the way in which time—that prolonged, uncertain, and forced migratory waiting—is inscribed into the everyday life of people on the move. Waiting is not neutral: it organizes life, reconfigures expectations, and redefines trajectories. Consequently, this paper proposes understanding the migrant territory of waiting in emerging cities as a relational and temporal production, where the invisible structure of daily life—its rhythms, bonds, and disputes—shapes the migratory experience. It is within this fabric that a migrant territoriality emerges, marked by containment, but also by migrant agency and social creativity.

Table 3
Typology of experiences in migrant waiting territories

Dimension	Description
Temporal	Prolonged or indefinite stay in non-border cities; bureaucratic waiting for migratory procedures.
Spatial	Occupation of parks, sidewalks, shelters, budget hotels, streets, and public squares.
Emotional	Anxiety, uncertainty, frustration, hope, nostalgia.
Social	Generation of support networks among migrants, tensions with the local population, social visibility and invisibility.
Political	Conditions of forced immobility; institutional containment and lack of full legal recognition.
Economic	Search for temporary income to continue migratory transit (informal sales, occasional work).

Source: Author's own elaboration based on observations and interviews conducted in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, 2024-2025.

Two: Transit and stay

The celebrated epic *The Epic of Gilgamesh* begins with the verse: “He who has seen everything the depths of things and of the earth, / and has lived all things to teach others, / will propagate his experience for the good of everyone.” This ancestral poem, considered one of humanity's earliest literary narratives, chronicles the journey of a man who, in his search for immortality, ultimately confronts his own vulnerability, his limits, and his relationship with death. Gilgamesh embodies a universal experience: that of those who are forced to leave the known behind to face the unknown and the condition of transit. This ancient and mythical figure resonates powerfully within the trajectories of contemporary people on the move, who, like him, leave their homeland not only in search of a destination, but as part of a journey where their identity, rootedness, and possibilities for the future are also contested.

Within the framework of this research, the dichotomy between transit and stay is revealed as a permanent tension. From a physical perspective, migrants are temporarily housed in waiting territories. However, in symbolic and emotional terms, their situation is deeply ambivalent: they live in transit, they think about movement, they plan the next step. As the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC 2020) warns, migration in transit implies a condition of constant mobility, where subjects are placed in an intermediate between departure and arrival. Waiting, then, does not deny movement: it suspends it.

“Migration, had been saying that they were going to evict us, but really here there are families who do not have to pay a rent, we want them to understand that the people

who are here are not bad ones, we do not want to harm the country, we want to reunite with our families in the United States”- Ramos, H. (Personal communication, January 30, 2025)

This testimony reveals how, even in spaces that are provisionally occupied, practices of temporary entrenchment develop: waiting territories become lived spaces where networks are built, resources are accessed, and survival takes place. Musset and Vidal (2016) propose to think of these territories as places where waiting itself gives rise to new territorialities. Whether institutional, such as hostels and care centers, or informal, such as squares, budget hotels or sidewalks, these spaces function as containment areas that structure not only mobility, but also everyday life.



Figure 2. Plaza Sol parking lot in the City of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. Provisional Camp July 2024. Source: Author's own photography

The notion of stay, in this sense, cannot be understood as mere permanence. It derives from the Latin *stare* (to stand, to remain), and refers to a way of occupying space that is mediated by power structures, access to resources, and agency capacity. Spíndola Zago (2016) points out that territories are not given, but managed, built and inhabited in tension. In the waiting territories, the stay becomes the space where migrants negotiate their existence: they rest, plan, care for one another, and resist.



Figure 3. Villaflores Highway in the City of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas: Provisional Camp, July 2024. Source: Author's own photography

However, traffic continues to operate as a horizon. As Carling (2002) points out, migratory transit is a process of displacement that is not limited to the geographical: it also implies a construction of meaning, an expectation, a promise. For people on the move, this promise is mediated by multiple factors, the economic one being one of the most decisive. Obtaining money for transportation, for the coyote, for the next passage, profoundly conditions the duration of the stay.

“We have a case, they grabbed one of the girls who is living under the bridge, the police took her and kidnapped her, we need our version to be heard, she is a mother of three children”. Ramos, H. (Personal Communication, March 28 2025)

Thus, waiting is not merely a suspension of movement. It is a state of vital reorganization, where the challenging present coexists with a longed-for future and an idealized or repressed past (Musset, 2015). In this sense, the waiting territories are spaces of transit where dwelling becomes a pedagogical and political act. As Gennari argues (Kaiser, 2001), “inhabiting the journey implies thinking of the place not as a mere stopover, but as a world-of-life”. This transformative experience configures a temporary territoriality, which is by no means superficial. Furthermore, it is important to emphasize that these experiences of transit and stay are not homogeneous. From a gender perspective, the experiences of migrant girls and women differ significantly from those of men. The so-called “feminization of migration” has

shown that an increasing number of women migrate alone or with their children, generating specific needs and exposing them to differentiated risks. According to data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM 2024), women represent 48% of the international migrant population, a reality that demands responses sensitive to gender inequalities in both transit and stay.

Living in the journey and during the journey, “inhabiting it for what it is and not for what it entails (...) implies thinking of the place as a world-of-life and not as a place of transit” (Gennari, in Kaiser, 2001, p. 57). It is through discovery that one is educated, an education that takes place within the embodiment related to the territory through which the journey unfolds (cited in Planella, 2006, p. 272).

In short, the duality between transit and stay should not be thought of as the opposite, but as complementary. In the waiting territories, the transit stops, but does not disappear: it is projected, it is planned, it is dreamed. The stay, on the other hand, does not imply definitive rooting, but a form of minimal, precarious and, nevertheless, significant habitability. Both processes coexist, and their analysis allows us to understand the migratory experience as a *continuum* in which movement and waiting, route and pause, desire and survival are intertwined.

Table 4

Comparative dimensions between transit and stay in migrant waiting territories

Dimension	Transit	Stay
Temporality	Continuous or planned displacement	Indefinite or prolonged permanence
Emotionality	Expectation, anxiety about the future	Frustration, adaptation, hope
Spatiality	Movement between territories	Partial appropriation of urban space
Social relations	Brief and mobile interaction	Construction of temporary support networks
Legal status	Temporary irregularity	Procedures before institutions or waiting for paperwork
Agency	Active search for next destination	Daily reorganization for survival

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the qualitative analysis conducted in Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas, 2024-2024.

Three: The waiting

The notion of waiting transcends its conventional meaning to become a central analytical category in the study of contemporary migrations. This article proposes to shift the axis of analysis from movement towards immobility, understood not as an absence of action, but as a complex state in which temporal, spatial, affective and political dimensions converge. Waiting, as a situated social practice, reveals an intense interaction between mobile subjects and their environment. More than a passive pause, it constitutes a scenario for the production of meaning and the reconfiguration of living.

Waiting implies anticipation, desire and projection of the future. It is closely linked to hope, as a symbolic justification of the present. This dimension is evoked in the poem by Luis Ángel Orellana Esquivel, a Salvadoran migrant, written during his stay in a shelter:

*“Between tears and hugs is difficult to forget
to my old lady that I had to leave my house...
I made a campfire, it’s a little warm.
I miss my dear little place, El Salvador...
I am comforted by the desire to see you again,
however, I have to escape from death”* (Orellana Esquivel, 2023)

This poetic testimony embodies the emotional and political experience of waiting: a suspended time that does not translate into inaction, but into imagination, resistance and the daily construction of precarious bonds. From phenomenology, Heidegger argues that Dasein, being-in-the-world, is always projected outwards, towards what is to come. Waiting, from this perspective, is not only a state, but a way of being: the subject is always "outside", inhabiting anticipations and uncertainties (Heidegger, 1927/2006).

During waiting, time acquires an elastic texture: it expands, becomes imprecise and ungraspable, while space contracts and is encapsulated. Einstein explained it metaphorically: “When you court a beautiful girl, an hour seems like a second. But if you sit on red-hot charcoal, a second feels like an hour.” In this experience, as Ana points out:

“When my sister came to the United States, she only lasted a week in Mexico, the appointment came out in 3 days, and she told us that it didn’t take long. We took the risk coming here without knowing anything and we have already spent 5 months here and the appointment does not come up. We stayed here.” Martínez, A. (Personal Communication, January 30, 2025)

Waiting affects body, mind and bonds. In the territories of migrant waiting, new forms of sociability, hierarchy, community and informality emerge. What is proposed is that these spaces are not just points of detention, but social scenarios where networks of affection, survival strategies and disputes for recognition are configured.

Waiting imposes a new management of time; an ephemeral society is temporarily built, based on the exchange of feelings related to boredom, interest, tiredness, anger or conflict, according to very peculiar modalities, since it is organized from cars, that is, private places immobilized in a public space (Musset, 2015).

In contrast to the "non-places" of Augé (1992) ³, waiting territories are inhabited spaces, full of symbolism and agency. In these spaces, life does not come to a standstill, but rather is reconfigured. As evidenced by the interviews and field observations, waiting becomes a form of territoriality in transit, where bodies, emotions, and everyday strategies occupy the space beyond its formal function.



Figure 4. Villaflores Highway in the City of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. Provisional Camp, July 2024. Source: Author's own photography

From an intersectional perspective, waiting also generates specific inequalities. The so-called "feminization of migration" makes visible the differentiated experiences of women, girls and adolescents, who face particular forms of violence, exclusion and risk during their stay. Far from being passive subjects, many of them articulate support networks between women, reconfiguring waiting as a space of affective containment and resistance.

3 In contrast, the migrant waiting territories —although they too are located in transit spaces —cannot be understood as non-places. On the contrary, they are intensely lived spaces, charged with emotion, conflict, memory, and the production of meaning, where waiting gives rise to form of territoriality that are precarious yet socially significant.



Figure 5. Plaza Sol in the City of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, Chiapas. Provisional Camp, January 2024. Source: Author's own photography

The question underlying this section is key: Can we consider those spaces frequented by individuals who know they are —or wish to be —in transit to be true territories? For Musset (2015), this paradox is precisely what gives the concept analytical density. Waiting does not deny movement: it transforms it into a way of dwelling. Finally, it is necessary to emphasize that people on the move not only go through waiting, but actively configure it. They are both actors and authors of the territories that waiting produces. By constructing, occupying, and re-signifying urban space, they transform the margins into social stages imbued with historical, affective, and political density. Territories of waiting, then, are not merely transitory: they are spaces of contention over the right to exist, to remain, and to continue.

Table 5
Analytical Dimensions of Migrant Waiting

Dimension	Description
Temporary	La espera se extiende de forma indefinida; se experimenta como suspensión del tiempo y de los proyectos.
	The wait drags on indefinitely; it feels like time and plans have come to a standstill.
Spatial	It takes place in makeshift shelters that lack adequate conditions: streets, bridges, squares, and overcrowded shelters.
Emotional	It evokes feelings of anxiety, hope, frustration, and fear, as well as solidarity and a sense of community.
Politics	The waiting process is managed by institutions, becoming a mechanism for controlling and obscuring rights.
Economy	It limits access to transportation, food, and resources; a lack of money prolongs the stay.
Social	During this waiting period, support networks, hierarchies, conflicts, and new forms of collective organization emerge.

Source: Author's own elaboration based on the theoretical-conceptual analysis of the *article Migrant Waiting Territories in Emerging Urban Areas: A Theoretical Proposal and Analytical Perspective from Southern Mexico*. 2024-2025

TUXTLA GUTIÉRREZ AS MIGRATORY WAITING TERRITORY: URBAN EMERGENCY AND SPATIAL RECONFIGURATION

The territorialization of space is an inevitable process for people in contexts of mobility and immobility. The spaces inhabited by people in transit are not given but constructed out of immediate human needs: the need to pause, to reorganize one's journey, and to withstand uncertainty. On Mexico's southern border, this process has generated urban enclaves that, though not planned for this purpose, have been transformed into temporary homes for people on the move. These are spaces born of waiting, of forced pauses, and of the structural absence of public policies designed to guarantee the right to dignified human mobility.

This phenomenon reflects a changing and complex reality: in the absence of designated institutional spaces, people on the move occupy a variety of areas—sidewalks, stations, overcrowded shelters, and seedy hotels—creating temporary arrangements that oscillate between visibility and neglect. The proliferation of these spaces is not the result of urban planning, but rather of a logic of survival that highlights the state's lack of or inadequate intervention in the territorial management of mobility.

In this context, Tuxtla Gutiérrez, the capital of the state of Chiapas, has emerged as a destination city for diverse migratory flows. Beginning in 2021, there has been a noticeable increase in the number of migrants arriving not only from the Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador), but also from Central Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. This diversification

of profiles has made Tuxtla a key city within the central migration corridor, where the migrant waiting period is marked by conditions of extreme precariousness.



Figure 6. OCC Bus Terminal Parking Lot. Provisional Camp in the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez, 2023.
Source: Author's own photography

The area occupied by people on the move within this city reveals serious shortcomings in shelter infrastructure. There are no adequate institutional spaces to guarantee rest, medical care, food, or information. The government's response has been partial or nonexistent, which has led to widespread homelessness, especially among families, women with children, and people seeking international protection. This situation is not only a social problem but also constitutes a public health emergency.

Various civil society organizations, such as the Colectivo de Observación y Monitoreo de Derechos Humanos en el Sureste Mexicano [Collective for Human Rights Observation and Monitoring in Southeastern Mexico] (COMDHSM), have documented this critical situation in municipalities along the Chiapas migration corridor, including Frontera Comalapa, Comitán, San Cristóbal de Las Casas, Chiapa de Corzo, and Tuxtla Gutiérrez. Their reports document multiple human rights violations: excessive use of force, arbitrary detentions, repression, institutional violence, and the criminalization of people on the move and their support networks.

At a regional level, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) has defined migration corridors as cumulative processes of population movements over time. In its World Migration Report 2024, it highlights that the Mexico-United States corridor continues to be the busiest on the planet, with more than 11 million people on the move. However, this global data renders invisible the intermediate points where waiting becomes a structural practice. Cities such as Tuxtla Gutiérrez, on the fringes of formal borders, transform into migrant waiting territories within a

non-institutionalized emerging city, where mobility is halted and life is reinvented under conditions of high vulnerability.

The research is relevant, since it makes visible the migratory routes, feelings and life within their stay in the Southern Border, as well as the perception of the city of Tuxtla Gutiérrez as a city that does not allow them to leave itself, which faces similar and even more complex challenges than the Darien jungle.

Hanny, a Venezuelan man who travels alone with his two children, says he feels confused under the context they are living in, since his destiny is to continue advancing to settle in a city where they can work and eventually reach the United States, bearing in mind that the misnamed “American Dream” has already vanished, it no longer exists.

In this sense, the waiting territory on Frontera Sur (Southern Border) is greater than those established, they are prolonged waits that the mobile population does not know in transit, but determines it in Mexican territory. Reaching people in these contexts was determined between the complexity and simplicity of the approach, from the need to listen, to express the feeling. The narrative was demonstrated in public spaces with greater traffic in the capital city, this made them feel in a “safe” space, under a bridge with children’s spaces or in parks in the center of the city, outside the Instituto Nacional de Migración [National Institute of Migration], developing their day to day, in that leisurely life, but happening.

“The only thing we were clear about, or half clear, was the jungle pass. That it was difficult, indeed it is difficult to cross the jungle, but not impossible, we are here. But what has been harder for us is not crossing the jungle, but the journey after the jungle through here. More than anything, here in Mexico. Because from Tapachula, they brought us all the way here, to Tuxtla. The biggest problem is here in Mexico, where they put up so many obstacles; from here you move forward and they send you back, because migration enforcement sent me back, they threw me back in Tapachula. In other words, the biggest problem is here in Mexico, and nobody tells you that. Because we went through other countries, but nothing compares to Mexico”. Cruz, K. (Personal communication, January 30, 2025).

Cruz, K.’s personal communication reinforces the idea that waiting is a deeply relational and affective experience. In his story, the place of stay, although transitory, is configured as a space where feeling, thinking, and inhabiting are articulated. Thus, waiting is not experienced solely as forced immobility, but as a form of territorial construction that, despite being precarious and temporary, produces meaning, momentary rootedness, and forms of collective care.

BORDER WAITING TERRITORIES AND EMERGING CITIES: GEOGRAPHICAL AND SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTRASTS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

The notion of waiting territory has developed widely in relation to traditional border spaces, such as the border cities of northern and southern Mexico. However, it is necessary to problematize and expand this concept to understand how waiting operates in non-boundary urban contexts such as the so-called emerging cities, which have recently begun to form part of the regional migration network. This differentiation is not merely geographical; it implies significant contrasts in terms of institutionality, social visibility, containment strategies and territorial configurations.

In border areas, such as Tapachula (south) or Tijuana (north), waiting territories are marked by greater institutionalization of migration containment. These spaces have the active presence of the National Institute of Migration (INM), migration stations, formalized shelters, offices of the Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a Refugiados [Mexican Commission for Refugee Aid] (COMAR), international agencies and civil society organizations with experience in humanitarian care (Casillas, 2020). This infrastructure has historically been shaped by sustained migratory flows, which has generated regulatory frameworks, reception protocols and institutional routines, although often insufficient or in violation of rights.

In contrast, in emerging cities such as Tuxtla Gutiérrez, migration is a recent irruption that has overwhelmed state and community capacity. These cities were not prepared to receive numerous and diverse flows, so the waiting territories are configured in an improvised, fragmented and vulnerable way. Spaces such as sidewalks, public squares, parks, road margins and bridge bottoms are transformed into temporary enclaves where containment occurs without formal structure, without legal accompaniment and with ambiguous visibility: migrants are both hyper-visible as bodies occupying public space and institutionally invisible as subjects of rights.

Martha, a woman traveling alone with her children, comments that:

“The situation is very difficult because we cannot rent a room, we have to sleep on the street and I am worried about the rental costs of public toilets that are \$20 or \$25 for one to bathe, for children, buy food, water because everything is bought. One did not come with a budget to get stranded, the idea was to follow the path, as we were doing right now. But well, it’s time to wait and hope that it’s many days of waiting”. Hernández, M. (Personal communication July 16, 2024)

At the northern border, waiting is usually linked to the expectation of crossing into the United States, which entails dynamics such as hiring coyotes, waiting for CBP One appointments, contact with family networks already established in the U.S. and greater circulation of economic resources. The wait in this area, although uncertain, is oriented towards the imminence of crossing. Meanwhile, in emerging cities in the south, such as Tuxtla Gutiérrez, waiting is longer, less articulated and

with less access to humanitarian infrastructure. In these contexts, waiting is mediated by bureaucratic migration procedures, arbitrary detentions and more severe precarious conditions (COMDHSM, 2024).

In addition, emerging cities in the global south face a double marginality: on the one hand, the institutional weakness to manage flows; on the other, their peripheral position within the national and international economic system. This generates contexts where government responses are late or punitive, support networks depend almost exclusively on civil society and migration is perceived as a disturbing phenomenon of urban “normality”. In Tuxtla Gutiérrez, for instance, the presence of thousands of people on the move has revealed a profound lack of public reception policies, highlighting the structural inequalities of the territory and the limits of the State in southern Mexico.

In short, while waiting areas in border regions tend to be more institutionalized, monitored, and well-known within the migration landscape, in emerging cities they take the form of unstable, invisible spaces that lack official recognition. This difference is significant: it radically transforms the experience of waiting, access to rights, and opportunities for agency for people on the move. Recognizing this distinction is crucial for understanding the new geography of migration in Mexico and for promoting territory-sensitive policies that recognize waiting as a structuring phenomenon rather than an accident of mobility.

MIGRANT WAITING TERRITORIES: CONCLUSIONS AND FINAL REFLECTIONS

This research has shown that migrant waiting territories in emerging cities should not be understood solely as transitory spaces or mere stopovers within migratory flows. On the contrary, they constitute complex environments, densely laden with meaning, where material, symbolic, social, and political dimensions converge, profoundly shaping the experience of those on the move.

Far from representing a passive phase of the journey, waiting reveals itself as an active way of inhabiting time and space. It is a social and vital practice, criss-crossed by uncertainty, but also by agency, daily reorganization, the production of bonds, and the emergence of precarious territorialities. In this sense, waiting becomes a form of resistance and of meaning-making, even within contexts of forced immobility.

The research carried out in cities such as Tuxtla Gutiérrez allows us to identify a key phenomenon: the displacement of the centrality of borders towards cities in the interior of the country, which until a few years ago did not appear as relevant points in migration routes. These emerging cities have acquired an unexpected role as nodes of reorganization of the journey, bureaucratic containment and territorial rearticulation, evidencing a reconfiguration of traditional migratory geographies.

In these non-border urban territories, waiting adopts multiple expressions: legal, emotional, economic, institutional. This plurality of forms makes visible the complexity of the contemporary migratory phenomenon, which cannot be understood without taking into account the structures of immobility imposed, but also negotiated along the way. Furthermore, it is observed that the migrant crisis not only transforms the experience of people on the move but also the urban dynamics of host cities, generating pressures on public services, social tensions, responses of civic solidarity, and territorial reconfigurations.

In theoretical terms, this work proposes an expansion of the concept of the waiting territory beyond its border-centric definition, in order to recognize its deployment within non-institutionalized spaces in the interior of the country. From this perspective, migrant waiting territories are relational and contingent constructions, generated by the social practices of the migrant subjects who inhabit them and by the explicit or implicit frameworks of containment that surround them. Waiting, as a multidimensional phenomenon, thus positions itself as a central analytical category for understanding how people on the move resignify space, transform cities, and reorganize their lives.

Finally, this study opens up several avenues for future research. Among them, the following stand out: (1) deepening the understanding of the relationship between migration policies and the territorial configuration of waiting; (2) analyzing the role of local governments and civil society in the face of the challenges of forced mobility; and (3) gaining a deeper understanding of the economic, affective, and political effects of waiting on both migrants and receiving communities. Advancing toward a critical, ethical, and territorially situated reading of these processes is urgent in order to design more humane and sustainable responses to the challenges of contemporary mobility in the Global South.

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