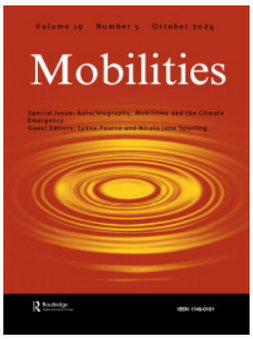

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Cabecitas Blancas: settler colonialism, racial capitalism and the (im)mobility of borders for Yucatecan migrant families

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I analyse the intersection of settler colonialism, racial capitalism and border violence by examining *Cabecitas Blancas* a project run by the Yucatecan government to reunite families divided by the US-Mexican border. A unique program in Mexico, *Cabecitas Blancas* helps elders who have not seen their children living in the United States for at least 10 years, due to their children's precarious immigration status, reunite for a short period of time. I have developed the term *tramitología* to show the way the settler colonial state monitors and restrict Indigenous mobility by designating who is "worthy" of government support. I demonstrate how the flow of mostly Maya elders via *Cabecitas Blancas* between borders is facilitated only because they become state commodities that sustain racial capitalism via tourism and multicultural policies. Ultimately, I argue that reform programs such as *Cabecitas Blancas* enable and (re)produce exploitation, settler colonialism and border violence. This paper draws on semi-structured interviews with government officials as well as YouTube videos and online news articles depicting different stages of the program.

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Introduction

This paper analyses the way Mexico -as a settler colonial state- enacts racial capitalism and borders by examining *Cabecitas Blancas* officially known as *Programa de Reencuentro de Personas Migrantes con sus Padres y* Madres (Program for the Reunion of Migrants with their Fathers and Mothers), a project run by the Yucatecan government to reunite families divided by the US-Mexican border. A unique program in Mexico, *Cabecitas Blancas* (literally meaning white heads, a term commonly used in Mexico to describe elderly people) helps elders who have not seen their grown children living in the United States for at least 10 years, due to their children's precarious immigration status, reunite for a short period of time (usually between 40 and 60 days). *Cabecitas Blancas* is the only program organised, financed and supported by a Mexican government office. It was created in 2016 by the *Instituto para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Maya* (INDEMAYA, Institute for the Development of the Mayan Culture of the State of Yucatán). The program has helped over 500 individuals from over 23 Yucatecan municipalities to obtain US temporary visas. Examining *Cabecitas Blancas* allows me to comprehend how settler colonial state sponsored reunification programs influence Indigenous mobility and continue to

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(re)produce mechanisms which reduce Maya immigrants as exploitable commodities on both sides of the US-Mexican border.

While applying settler colonial theory to Latin American countries remains a debated topic (Castellanos 2017b), I argue Mexico is a settler colonial state (Blackwell 2017). Settler colonialism contends that colonizers came to stay and appropriate land resources for extractivist purposes. Speed (2017) argues that Latin America countries are in an "ongoing occupation" (786). Concepts such as 'coloniality' are not enough to fully encapsulate the interconnections between race, colonialism, dispossession, displacement and extractivism which are currently expressed via neoliberal and multicultural policies (Gutiérrez Nájera and Maldonado 2017). I have discussed elsewhere the ways in which Maya politicians mobilise, resist and transform multicultural discourses and policies to assert Indigenous identity and rights and challenge the Mexican racist state in Yucatecan municipalities (Loyola-Hernández 2018, 2019). What this shows is that such relationships are fraught, complicated and at times contradictory. It is not my intention to portray the program beneficiaries without agency, rather to demonstrate how the Mexican settler colonial state is enacted at a local level via *Cabecita Blancas* and state employees' actions and how such programs manage the movement of Maya communities. Drawing on settler governmentality theory (Crosby and Monaghan 2018), I have developed the term *tramitología* to show the way the settler colonial state monitors and restrict Indigenous mobility by designating who is "worthy" of government support via bureaucracy. Settler governmentality argues Indigenous subjects generate anxiety and unsettle the state (Crosby and Monaghan 2018). Hence, the settler colonial state develops diverse forms of surveillance technology, discourses and practices to continue to (re)produce itself and control the population (Matsunaga 2021). *Tramitología* is a useful framework to show (1) how different forms of (im)mobility are racialised and (2) the implementation of diverse techno-bureaucratic tools used to police, surveille, detain and displace communities who threaten "extractive capitalism and settler colonialism" (Crosby and Monaghan 2018, 4).

A new field of Critical Latinx Indigeneity studies argue that it is essential to analyse Latin American migration to the Global North using settler colonial theory (Saldaña-Portillo 2017). Not doing so runs the risk of homogenizing migrants' experiences and invisibilsing the ways in which Indigenous migrants simultaneously experience anti-immigration sentiments in the US and racial and ethnic discrimination from Latinx mestizxs (B'atz' 2014; Urrieta 2017). Critical Latinx Indigeneity framework allows me to comprehend how settler colonial states like Mexico co-opt Indigenous culture and migrants for their own agenda and how Indigenous migrants are unwillingly themselves contributors to the US settler colonial state by migrating to First Nations occupied lands (Blackwell 2017; Castellanos 2017b). Such context demonstrates how Indigeneity is continuously shaped, challenged and transformed by Indigenous migrants as well as settler colonial states (Blackwell, Boj Lopez, and Urrieta 2017).

In recent years, research focused on the flow of migration between Yucatán to the USA and the effect of border separation amongst Yucatecan families has increased significantly (Barenboim 2016, 2018; Castellanos 2017a; Cornejo Portugal and Fortuny Loret de Mola 2011, 2012; Cruz-Manjarrez 2018; Cruz-Manjarrez and Baquedano-López 2020; Iglesias Lesaga 2011; Labrecque 2019; Solis Lizama 2017, 2018). These studies give a detailed picture of family experiences of separation, and the difficulties immigrant families face when leaving Mexico and living in the US. Significant as they are, these works often leave out the role of the state in creating the circumstances which force people to migrate. Furthermore, the majority of these studies do not contextualise Mexico as a settler colonial state. This paper adds to family reunification studies which tend to focus on Global North countries (Anschütz and Mazzucato 2022) by analysing the way Global South countries are complicit and entangled with settler colonial projects of exclusion and exploitation. I do this by examining the role the Mexican government has in (re)producing border violence and racial capitalism by controlling the movement of its citizens across borders (Carpio, Blu Barnd, and Barraclough 2022; Dyrness and Sepúlveda 2020; Geoffrion 2023). I do so by exploring the way in which 'mundane legal and illegal survival methods'

(Shewly 2016, 465) of undocumented families are played out in two settler-colonial states -US and Mexico-. People, territories, land and resources are politicised and taken advantage of through state boundaries. These delimitations -which historically have been transformed- reinforce specific notions of who and what (does not) belong in certain places and spaces. In this article, I show how programs such as *Cabecitas Blancas* do not question the power structures that (1) force people to migrate, (2) become undocumented and (3) exploit marginalised communities on both sides of the border. I demonstrate that settler colonial state reformist initiatives continue to establish parameters that dictate who is worthy of government support and mobility. Therefore, this research adds to mobility studies as it proves how the state dictates, monitors and promotes diverse levels of mobility (Sheller 2018; Toomey 2022).

Furthermore, most of the studies on family reunification focus on permanent resettlement (Liang, Li, and Yue 2022; Vathi and King 2011). Little is known about the process and emotional labour of temporary family reunification, particularly when the sponsors are undocumented. In a time where family reunification laws are becoming more restrictive, *Cabecitas Blancas* curtails this momentarily and seems to support vulnerable people unable to reunite with their families. However, as I will show throughout this article, this type of program ultimately contributes to the continuous labour exploitation of undocumented migrants and their families on both sides of the border through racial capitalism. Cedric Robinson argued that capitalism is rooted in the exploitation of ethnic and racialised communities (1983). Here race is understood not only as a social construct but a geopolitical and historical way in which power is distributed and enforced by one group over another. I show how the flow of mostly Maya elders via *Cabecitas Blancas* between borders is facilitated only because they become state commodities that sustain racial capitalism via tourism and multicultural policies. Ultimately, I argue that government programs such as *Cabecitas Blancas* enable and (re)produce exploitation, border violence and settler colonialism.

This article is divided into five sections. First, I explain the research context as well as the methodology used for data collection. Then, I explore how racial capitalism, the division of labour along ethnic and racial lines (Robinson 1983), is fundamental in the creation, maintenance and expansion of borders (Bradley and de Noronha 2022) and the creation of this one-of-a-kind program. The following section analyses how state bureaucracy is a fundamental technology of settler colonialism in the form of *tramitología* which dictates who is worthy of government support, in this case who gets access to *Cabecitas Blancas*. I then demonstrate how multicultural and neoliberal policies in the form of tourism are major contributors for the government to continue to fund and support this program. To conclude, I argue for the case of abolition of borders.

Research context

In order to understand the migration of Yucatecans to the United States, a brief contextualisation of the economic changes in Yucatan the XXth century is needed. I emphasise three points: land dispossession, neoliberalism and multicultural policies. The years that followed the Mexican Revolution (1920) saw several government programs rolled out in rural Mexico that appropriated communal land. This is important as many Maya communities in Yucatan relied on agriculture and cattle for their livelihood. The crash of the *henequén* industry (which sustained Yucatán's economy) in the decades that followed, forced people to migrate from rural Yucatán to the state capital, Mérida, as well as the neighbouring state of Quintana Roo, where the tourist industry had started to grow. It wasn't until the 1942 *Bracero* program that the first wave of Yucatecan people migrated to the US (Cruz-Manjarrez and Baquedano-López 2020). Some of the Maya elders who benefited from *Cabecitas Blancas* participated in the *Bracero* program when they were young. In the 80s, Governor Víctor Cervera Pacheco implemented a wave of neoliberal policies in

the region (Macossay Vallado 2010). Such policies involved the establishment of *maquiladoras* -manufacturing plants in Mexico that rely on cheap local labour to generate goods such as electronics, automobiles and textiles which are then shipped to the US duty and tariff free- especially in rural communities. Yet, instead of generating employment opportunities, these neoliberal policies forced many rural and Maya Yucatecans to seek job opportunities in the United States (Iglesias Lesaga 2011). In the 1990s, there was an increase of the number of Yucatecans migrating to the US due to the 1994 economic crisis, privatization and selling of communal land. The number of Yucatecans who continue to migrate to the US has increased ever since (Unidad de Política Migratoria 2022), most of them eventually become undocumented (Castellanos 2017b).

Research on this topic has usually focused on who Yucatecan migrants are, the reasons behind their decision to migrate, the effect of family separation across borders and what happens after migrants return (Cornejo Portugal and Fortuny Loret de Mola 2011, 2012; Cruz-Manjarrez 2018; Cruz-Manjarrez and Baquedano-López 2020; Iglesias Lesaga 2011; Labrecque 2019; Solis Lizama 2017, 2018). They have found that a very large proportion of those who have migrated to the US are from rural areas and grew up speaking Maya (Cornejo Portugal 2016). They are in the majority, young men with very few years of formal education (Solis Lizama 2017). Women who migrate tend to be spouses whose partners migrated before them (Cruz-Manjarrez 2018). The reasons for migrating to the US are seeking work (44%), educational opportunities (20%) and family reunification (17%) (Unidad de Política Migratoria 2022). These studies have demonstrated there is an increase in the number of Yucatecan migrants returning and a lack of government aid to support their resettlement. They have also shown the intricate and complicated ways in which citizenship and belonging are understood by children who were born in the US, migrated back to Yucatan and then following a few years chose to return to the US (Cruz-Manjarrez and Baquedano-López 2020; Solis Lizama 2018).

Since most of those migrating are Maya, the INDEMAYA, a state government institute created as a result of multicultural politics in 2000 to promote Maya culture- has had to develop a specific office to support them. INDEMAYA now has the Sub-directorate of Attention to Migrants which oversees *Cabecitas Blancas* as well as the Sub-directorate of Development and Organisation. The latter has one subdivision of interest for this research: the Department of Legal Assistance and Indigenous Rights which has an area of support for Yucatecan migrants. Among the Department of Legal Assistance's faculties are to support the recovery of bodies abroad and along the US-Mexican border, funeral arrangements, aid Yucatecans recently deported arriving in other Mexican cities, translation of official documents such as birth and death certificates from Spanish to English and vice versa, paperwork to obtain US social security number for children now living in Yucatán, international alimony payments, filing a missing person's report in the Foreign Relations Secretary and Mexican consuls abroad, and offering Maya-Spanish translation, among other things. All these services are free of charge. *Cabecitas Blancas* has become the number one program in terms of demand.

Methods

I have used a mixed method qualitative approach which involved 10 semi-structured interviews with state employees from INDEMAYA, National Migration Institute and the Human Rights Commission of the state of Yucatán during the summers of 2018 and 2019 in Mérida and three rural municipalities located in southern Yucatán. Informed consent was obtained via emails and by phone. Oral consent was obtained before the start of the interviewees which were recorded with permission and transcribed using the Word transcribe function. Even though the people interviewed are public officials, quotes have been anonymised to keep confidentiality, except when officials are giving public statements to the media. I carried out participant observation in INDEMAYA offices in Mérida and three other rural communities as well as informal conversations

with individuals who had family history of migration to the US. I received ethical approval from the University Ethics Committee. Finally, I did discourse analysis (Laurier 2016; Thorson et al. 2013) on 18 YouTube videos and 32 online news articles which captured state officials delivering Mexican passports and US visas to *Cabecitas Blancas* beneficiaries and family encounters in the US. Coding and analysis of qualitative data was done manually without the assistance of software. Five major coding themes emerged from the material: (1) reproduction of racial capitalism, (2) borders, (3) state bureaucracy (*tramitología*), (4) emotions and (5) beneficiaries seen as promotors of culture. These themes are explored throughout the rest of this article.

A large amount of this article's theoretical thinking is heavily grounded in the work of activists, artists and academics who have lived experience of being undocumented. I particularly centre the work of Alan Peláez López (2016, 2017, 2020a, 2020b), Sonia Guiñansaca (2019, 2021, 2022), Alonso Reyna Rivarola (2017, 2021) and Carlos Aguilar (2019) to show that even programs such as *Cabecitas Blancas*, that momentarily reunite families separated by the border, do not question larger forms of economic exploitation and the racialization of borders. While much has been written about migrant experience in the US and the US-Mexican border, those often centred as 'experts' and referenced are in academia and have little to no lived experience of being undocumented. Reyna Rivarola and López (2021) use the analogy of *la mosca* (the fly) stuck on Mike Pence's face during the 2020 vice-presidential debate to describe academics who carry out research within undocumented communities. They argue academics are like *moscas* extracting and exploiting lived experiences of people with precarious immigration status for career purposes and are not politically invested in border abolition. Rather than focusing on academics, I expand the analogy of *la mosca* to illustrate how local politicians and the media commodify the experience of Maya elders reuniting with their families to support their local goals and attract tourism to Yucatán.

My own positionality has influenced not only the theoretical framework within this article but also my ongoing commitment to border abolition. I've been a migrant in two countries at different stages of my life. When I was 5 years old, I moved to the US with my mother not knowing any English, and stayed in the country for five years before returning to Mexico. Since 2011, I have lived in the UK first as a PhD student and now as a lecturer at a university. It is through my experience in the UK having to navigate immigration policies that I became invested in border abolition activism. I've witnessed first-hand the violence border policies inflict in our communities and reached the conclusion many others have, reform approaches to sanitise state violence do not equal liberation. My privilege in terms of ethnicity (non-Indigenous), race (light-skinned) and job location (postdoc in a UK university) allowed me to interview multiple state officials involved in the program and migration policies in Yucatán. I became *la mosca* in the room, sticking to state policies and officials to better understand the role of the settler colonial state in enacting racial capitalism and borders.

Racial capitalism, precarity and forced migration

> Funny how in this empire, liquor can travel, but the indigenous and black body cannot. (Peláez López 2020a, 13)

The above quote is an extract of Alan Peláez López's poem *Mourning (v): the act of imagining and rebuilding home/family* (2020a). Throughout the poem Peláez López demonstrates the way in which Mexican and US settler colonial states have created notions of (un)belonging by exercising racial violence and class exploitation, and the emotional, psychological and physical toll border violence has on their body and community. As reflected in the quote above, Peláez López (2020a) pungently signals to the functioning of the neoliberal racial capitalist world order where products can travel in between borders but Indigenous and Black people cannot. In other words, racial capitalism is embedded in the US and Mexican economies which are designed to exploit

minoritised communities including undocumented migrants (Avalos and Moussawi 2023). The case of Yucatecan migrants is just one example of the way in which racial capitalism and precarious immigration status are interlinked.

In this section, I explore the ways in which racial capitalism is intertwined with the creation and maintenance of borders. Such boundaries delineate who does (not) belong in places along racialised, class and gender lines. Who and what determines movement in between spaces is influenced by the settler colonial state. Programs such as *Cabecitas Blancas* attempt to absolve those complicit in this cycle of racial and border violence. These types of actions seek to move us away from disruption and make us comply with the current racialised capitalist world order by applying 'settler common sense,' a way in which non-Natives occupying Indigenous territories continue to live and (re)produce settler colonial logics without questioning their positionality (Rifkin 2013). To counteract this, Indigenous communities have and continue to question diverse forms of power relations across multiple borders via scales of resistance (Blackwell 2023). Such framework shows how Maya migrants and their diaspora challenge notions of 'Latinidad unity' (B'atz' 2014) which is invested in 'settler colonial multiculturalism' (Boj Lopez 2017, 216). This demonstrates borders and sense of belonging are not static, rather they are a historical and socially constructed where racism is (re)produced (Ruiz , 2018). Borders are state-building projects created to exploit one racialised group over another, including land and resources that form part of said community. These geographies of racism rely on the creation and maintenance of borders and the state's implementation of racial capitalism. As seen in this article, the consequences of economic exploitation along racialised lines means racialised groups' mobility becomes policed and surveilled creating categories of 'illegality' (Carpio, Blu Barnd, and Barraclough 2022). Revising the ways in which liberal citizenship is entangled with settler colonialism allows me to understand how states perpetuate exclusion of marginalised communities within and outside their borders (Boatcă 2021).

It is important to highlight the ways in which racial capitalism had a direct impact in the creation of *Cabecitas Blancas* (Bello 2013). *Cabecitas Blancas* was born in 2016 after Doña Paulita from Oxkutzcab went to INDEMAYA to ask for financial support to repatriate her son's body. Her son was a chef in San Francisco who had left Yucatán at the age of 15. It had been 18 years since they had seen each other due to being undocumented. This signals to the ways in which US immigration laws are used to create low-working exploitative jobs along racialised lines (Vasquez Ruiz 2022). It was only *after* her son's death that Doña Paulita was able to seek government financial aid to help bring his body back. This tragedy compelled the then director of INDEMAYA, Rosario Zetina Maya, to advocate for the creation of a unique program that would help reunite Yucatecan parents with their undocumented children in the US: 'When she told me that we had to help her bring the body, I said that there could be no more Paulitas in the state' (Zetina Maya 2016; Senderos del Mayab, own translation). The absence of economic opportunities forced Doña Paulita's son to migrate to the US. Being undocumented allowed the continued exploitation of his labour and the inability for him to reunite with his mother because of a lack of papers on both sides of the border. We see how necropolitics functions to determine when bodies come to matter and become worthy of being grieved by the state (Butler 1993). The settler colonial project is invested in the carceral state which seeks to increase profits for the detainment and deportation of Indigenous and Black people (Sahhar and Griffiths 2018).

Becoming/signalled as 'deportable' allows for the continuous labour exploitation of migrants, usually from racially minoritised communities. The criminalisation of immigration generates racalised carceral economies, which puts value on people's (im)mobility and 'illegality' (Martin 2021). I see this not only with how undocumented workers sustain the US economy but the way in which this exploitation benefits the Yucatecan economy. Children send money via *remesas* (transfer of money by migrant to home country to contribute to household income) to their parents as well as to their local communities. This represents an important source of income for the Yucatecan government. Therefore, parents are constantly reminded during public events by local

authorities of how their children are a 'natural' source of investment for the state via the *remesas* they sent back home: 'Migrants are a natural source of investment. Migrants send money to their father, uncle, brother, and grandfather for the ranch, to buy cattle, to plant lemons, to plant habanero peppers, to buy boxes of honey. So they are natural investors' (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation). This is further emphasised during the ceremonies where parents receive their visas by the hands of the state governor, Mauricio Vila:

> I've seen them [undocumented Yucatecans] in the restaurant, they finish there and already have another job at night. There are those who have 2, 3 jobs, sometimes they don't rest a single day of the week. Why? Because they have to support their family in San Francisco, in Denver, in Portland. But also, many of them send money to Yucatan. True or not true? And that, in addition to helping you [parents/beneficiaries] a lot, helps the state's economy because there are more than 200 million dollars that migrants send you and with that, they help you out (Vila 2019, Social MID, own translation).

Migrants are seen as objects of neoliberalism (cheap labour) which allow the flow of capital and products across borders 'the *condition of deportability* makes migrant labour especially disposable, and thus desirable to employers' (de Noronha 2020, 7, emphasis in original). This message is also reinforced via the media with words like 'sacrifice' and 'effort' consistently used when describing the reason undocumented Yucatecans migrate to the US and the value they have: 'the efforts and sacrifices they [undocumented children] make to stay so far away in order to send money to their family and improve their quality of life' (Telesur Yucatan 2020, own translation). Racial capitalism functions along and through the state, in this case via countries' immigration systems to create crimmigration which seeks to control 'the poor, disposing of undesirables and maintaining the nation state's power' (Cradle Community 2021, 41–42). *Cabecitas Blancas* is seen as an incentive to motivate undocumented Yucatecans to continue to send money back home. Therefore, it seeks to maintain the settler colonial state's status quo on both sides of the US-Mexico border, instead of challenging the very structures that have created the conditions of 'illegality' and (im)mobility in the first place. During the ceremonies, parents are reminded by state officials that unlike past administrations, they have not abandoned their children and are supporting parents in reuniting them. Hence, they should encourage their kids to continue to send money to Yucatán. Here we see the way in which settler colonial states contribute to the maintenance and reproduction of racial capitalism through carcereal economies. In the following section, I explore other forms in which the settler colonial state deploys tools for the maintenance and (re)production of exploitation and border violence.

Tramitología as settler colonial technology

Overall, this section examines the intricate ways in which settler colonial states create bureaucratic procedures that help (re)produce racial capitalism and borders (Hawthorne 2022) via *tramitología*. *Tramitología* is a series of bureaucratic steps in which the settler colonial state determines a minimum threshold that must be met by marginalised individuals or groups via documentation to provide evidence of their worthiness of (limited) government support. The steps are intricate and rely heavily on state surveillance becoming part of the racial capitalist order and a tool for the creation and maintenance of borders. *Tramitología* can be seen as a way in which settler colonial states 'exercise "legal violence"' (Roth 2019, 2549) by delimitating who has access to reunification programs and under what conditions. As seen in this section, these type of reformist programs do not challenge wider structural inequalities which create conditions of 'illegality' nor push for wider social changes (Patler, Hamilton, and Savinar 2021). Using *tramitología* as a framework allows me to comprehend how the security state -composed of multiple state and non-state actors such as transnational companies- come together to surveille, detain and displace communities who threaten settler colonial logics (Crosby and Monaghan 2018). *Tramitología* is enacted via *Cabecitas Blancas* by INDEMAYA employees who first decide

who gets to be in the program and later on by US immigration agents who ultimately decide who is (not) granted a visa.

I see an example of *tramitología* in the way in which *Cabecitas Blancas* is set up. To apply parents must be from Yucatán, at least 60 years old and a minimum of 10 years of not seeing their children has had to pass. Their children must be undocumented. There is a maximum stay of 60 days during the first trip facilitated by the reunification program. US visas for Mexicans last up to 10 years. Parents can travel after the first trip on their own and stay up to 6 months in the US. You can see in Figure 1 what I have named as the *tramitología* of the program.

INDEMAYA relies on their Facebook page, word of mouth and monthly outings to municipalities to get information out on the program. All the financial burden (paying for passports, visas and travel) falls on migrant children. INDEMAYA just helps facilitate parents obtain a Mexican passport, a US visa and organise the first trip to the US. The first step requires migrant children in the US to contact the INDEMAYA offices electronically. Once they have received an acknowledgement from INDEMAYA, they send all the essential documents (see Figure 2). Analysing how Yucatecan migrants and their parents interact with *Cabecitas Blancas*, including providing their home address to both US and Mexican authorities knowing the risk of being deported, demonstrates how they deploy diverse often contradictory strategies to be able to briefly reunite. This seems at odds with what Barenboim (2016) has called "tactics of invisibility" amongst Yucatecan migrants in California, who actively use evasive tactics to avoid US government agencies including hospitals, the police and immigration officers.

Parents in Yucatán must physically go to the INDEMAYA offices in the capital. This can be very problematic as many municipalities are a long distance from Mérida and public transport is expensive. INDEMAYA relies on local municipal authorities to provide transport to the capital. As part of the process, INDEMAYA employees look at all the financial evidence, photos of where

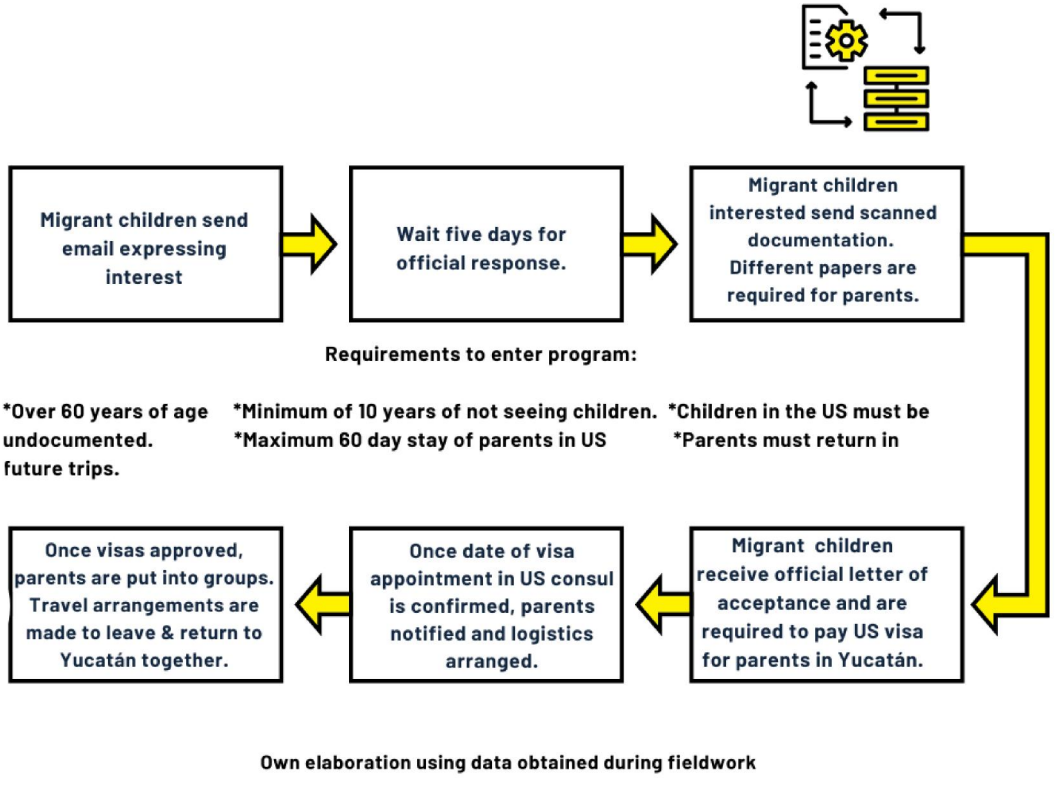

Figure 1. Tramitología *Cabecitas Blancas*.

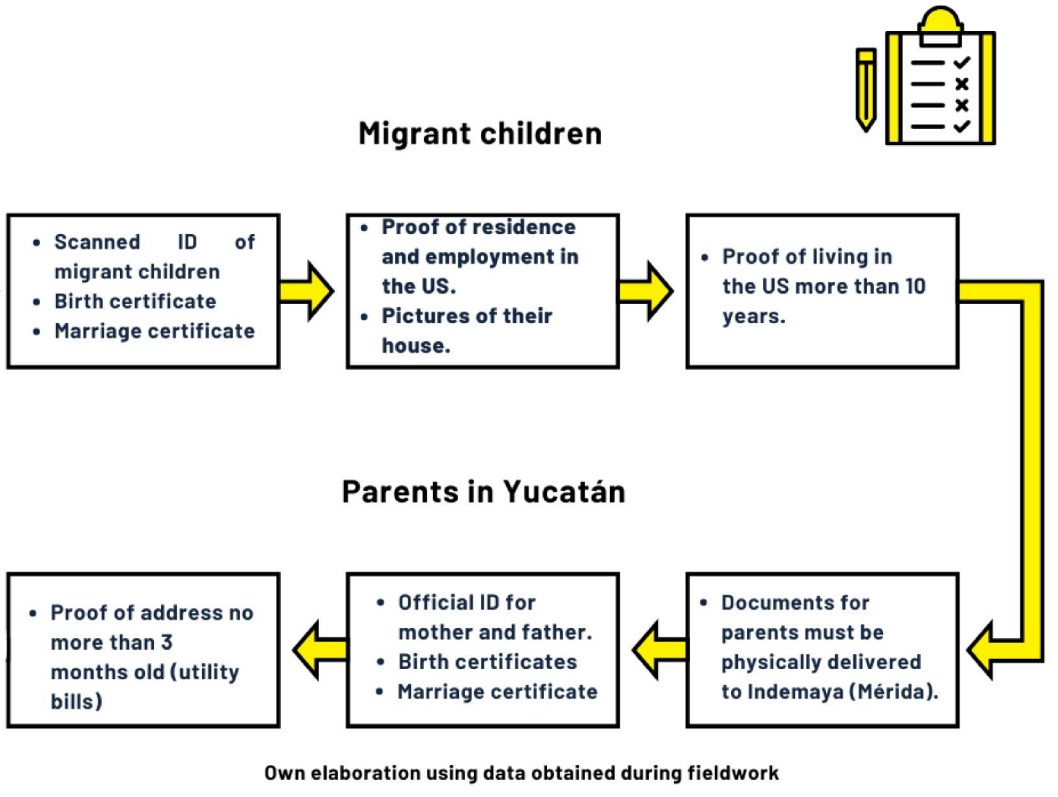

Figure 2. Documents for *Cabecitas Blancas*.

parents are staying in the US, birth and marriage certificates and proof of address. Then they decide which parents are approved for the program, this causes emotional distress as '"waiting" to be reunited can be a painful and uncertain process' (Bélanger and Candiz 2020, 3474). *Tramitología* has become essential to determine who is worthy of being part of the reunification program. It does not consider the invasiveness and exclusionary boundaries that state surveillance causes:

> We are not going to risk the integrity of the grandparents. We ask them for income, we ask them for photographs of the house, proof of residence of the children in the US. Many children, we understand they have the desire to see their parents. But there are Yucatecans abroad who do not have the conditions to receive their parents. (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation)

This type of reformist approach denies the opportunity to reunite families who are unable to provide paperwork, who don't have the finances or do not fit in the ideal heteronormative family portrait. This coincides with what Ochy Curiel calls the heteronation: 'how the nation and its imaginary construction are fundamentally based on the regime of heterosexuality, through the ideology of sexual difference, and this, in turn, in institutions such as the family' (Curiel 2013: 56, own translation). *Tramitología* procedures leave no room to acknowledge non heteronormative and more than human relations such as with the land, pets or physical communities (Bello 2014; Bradley and de Noronha 2022). This is also reflected in the official name of the program: *Programa de Reencuentro de Personas Migrantes con sus* ***Padres*** *y* **Madres** (Program for the Reunion of Migrants with their **Fathers** and **Mothers**), highlighting the nuclear heteronormative family element of *Cabecitas Blancas*. This differs from the more communal kinship and non-blood related relationships nurtured by Maya migrants and their diaspora (Barenboim 2018). This is supported by what others have found when researching family reunification programs. The

problem being that the nuclear family is taken as a legal and policy category (Anschütz and Mazzucato 2022; Olwig 2022) hence excluding other forms of care and kinship.

After parents have obtained their passport, INDEMAYA arranges groups of 25 people per day to visit the US consulate. First, they are taken downtown to have their photograph and biometrics taken. Then they arrive to the American consulate to have their visa interview. INDEMAYA personnel is allowed in the interview room. As stated earlier, some of the elders were migrants themselves at some point and were either undocumented and/or had broken the law during their time abroad. Therefore, they are fearful of interacting with the US government. This is a common feeling among undocumented communities (Aguilar 2019). This has caused some of the parents to not fully disclose their immigration history:

> Many of the parents of migrants were migrants 30, 40 years ago. […] Many of them deny the information out of fear. So, they see the consulate not as a friend, they see the consulate as an entity that can judge them or what they have done in their past could be critical so that they can grant them a visa. (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation)

On several occasions, INDEMAYA has tried to obtain humanitarian visas for parents in these cases and has been successful in obtaining them for a small number of beneficiaries. During fieldwork, not once was it mentioned these fears were justified as parents were appealing to the very state that deemed their children deportable and undesired in the US. Furthermore, there is a real fear of having their family's information shared with US government officials given their children's undocumented status (Mallet-García and García-Bedolla 2021). A contributing factor to such feelings is the constant emphasis by state authorities of parents not over staying their visas once obtained:

> We make a lot of emphasis regarding the use of the visa, regarding the regulations of the visa situation. Do not stay longer than six months in the United States even if you have a 10-year visa. […] They know that having a visa is not an easy matter, especially people from our communities. (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation)

This is a stark contrast from the tranquility they experience in their communities and a sentiment often longed by Yucatecan migrants in the US (Barenboim 2016). Throughout the interviews, INDEMAYA staff stated a lot of their time was spent "educating" beneficiaries to be honest during interviews as well as working alongside US consulate employees on the language used during the interviews. Often, elders were unable to comprehend the questions being asked and INDEMAYA employees helped to translate questions and answers in Maya.

The power to grant visas and allow for a momentarily family reunification ultimately falls on the US government, one of the main contributors to undocumented Yucatecan's status. This type of programme contributes to the (im)mobility and 'illegality' of diverse groups: those excluded from the programme, the beneficiaries and their children. This is demonstrated in the way state officials refer to undocumented Yucatecans trying to reunite with their parents:

> Not all of them are legal, in the first instance. From there we start, from the illegality of many of our Yucatecans. It is a program where the consulate is perfectly clear about what the grandparents are going for. The grandparents go to see their children and their children are illegal. (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation)

Immigration systems are designed to chip away and strip people of their humanity until there is nothing else to give. They give power to define and reduce to a single element, (not)having documentation (Guiñansaca 2019). To acquire papers which allow someone to move in between borders is to endure dehumanization (Peláez López 2016). It is a zero-sum game rigged against those that have been othered and it allows 'for the reproduction of the colonial structures of oppression' (Rivera Cusicanqui 2012, 97). In their work, Peláez López (2020b) shows how the fixation with documentation does not alleviate the trauma caused by settler colonialism, antiblackness, genocide, trans and homophobia as the power to name someone as illegal/legal always falls to the state. This naming is dynamic, violent and everchanging.

Many of the public statements given by local authorities emphasised how 'grateful' they were to the US government to allow for such a program to exist. With less frequency, government officials recognised the longing of undocumented Yucatecans to return home and the hopes for that to happen one day: 'And let's wait, right? That one-day things will improve and that they too can visit Yucatan and return to their town and show their children the places where they lived and where they grew up' (Vila 2019, Social MID, own translation). Yet little action has been taken to support undocumented Yucatecans to regularise their papers. At the same time, the biggest fear expressed by INDEMAYA employees was the danger of someone being deported back to Yucatán as a result of their participating in *Cabecitas Blancas*:

> No migrant has been deported by the *Cabecitas Blancas* program. I think the moment that happens, at that point we would cancel the program. The program cannot be an argument for someone to be deported or for someone to suffer from any immigration issue. (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation)

This demonstrates the way in which papers encapsulate 'the political-legal enclosure on mobility' (Shewly 2016, 466). That is, the way in which street-level bureaucrats 'the everyday actions of front-line public workers' (Mascia 2021, 2129) reinforce borders. The program offers no relief to undocumented families as it only momentarily reunites some families. Only after 10 years of migrants working and sending money back home (Mexico), are they acknowledged as having a family. Their condition of (im)mobility does not change. States define through citizenship who belongs/is allowed to stay within a specific geopolitical landscape. At the same time, those left out are othered and marked as undesirable. These types of programs will not liberate us from inequality because they uphold a system designed to exclude and exploit marginalised communities (Manzoor-Khan 2019). The next section demonstrates how this program has been commodified by the government to encourage tourism to the peninsula.

Cabecitas Blancas, touristification and family reunification

This section shows beneficiaries of *Cabecitas Blancas* as part of the carceral economies because they add value to the touristification of Yucatán. The program is a way in which 'aid' is offered to parents in exchange for encouraging children to continue to send money to Yucatán as well as for the *abuelitos* to act as promotors of the state in the US to increase tourism to the state. Power relations that perpetuate violence towards Indigenous people in Yucatán, are disguised by multicultural policies and institutions in the form of 'help' (Solis 2020). The state government colludes with private businesses that benefit from tourism and who are responsible for the ongoing dispossession of land, resources and the right to self-determination of Maya communities in Yucatán. The newest example of this is the so-called *Tren Maya* (Maya train), which provides transport to, mostly foreign tourists within the peninsula, destroying thousands of kilometres of natural habitat and displacing local communities (Koyoc Kú 2019, 2020; Hernandez 2022). It is imperative to comprehend the way in which Mexico's settler colonial project has displaced rural Maya communities (Maya K'ajlay 2020) while promoting a hypermobile subject in the form of tourists and global elite to come to Yucatán, creating diverse forms of (im)mobilities along the way (Sheller 2018; Toomey 2022).

A settler colonial framework is useful to understand multicultural policies as a mean to contain Indigenous demands for collective recognition (Hale 2002). In the early 1990s, neoliberal discourses emerged in Latin America regarding the recognition of Indigenous groups in diverse countries. With the modification of Article 2 of the Constitution in 1992, Mexico officially became a 'multicultural' country. This change acknowledged that Mexico was composed of diverse ethnic groups. In addition, the multiple Indigenous languages and forms of socio-political social organisation prevalent in Mexico were formally recognised (Blackwell 2023). Despite these legal gains, 'minority' groups were portrayed by the state and society in negative terms compared with white people or simply erased from national identity (Blackwell 2006). Multicultural discourses

produce disciplinary practices that shape the way race and ethnicity are understood and how subjects articulate their identities (Cannesa 2007; Radcliffe 2010; Segato 2007; Yashar 2005). In other words, *mestizaje* ideology has penetrated and moulded into multicultural discourses that have sustained racist beliefs in which one group is benefited over others. Yucatán did not implement many multicultural policies until 2000 with the creation of the INDEMAYA. This institute officially promotes Maya culture but has received accusations of appropriating Maya culture without supporting Indigenous right to self-determination (Barenboim 2018). In Yucatán, multicultural policies are closely bound up with government goals of promoting tourism in the peninsula.

Tourism in the form of archaeological visits, ecotourism, *hacienda* and gastronomy tours in the Yucatán Peninsula started in the 1970s and is currently the state's economic basis (Córdoba Azcárate 2019). Tourism has resulted in the appropriation of Maya traditions while promoting racial and ethnic discrimination and spatial segregation and the folklorisation of Maya culture for tourists' consumption (López Santillán 2011). As seen previously, parents are continuously reminded of the economic value they and their children represent to the Yucatecan government. Thus, they become part of the racial capitalist order which allows them to move in between borders because of the financial gain their mobility represents to those in power. Elders are seen as 'natural' promotors of 'Yucatecan' culture:

> That grandparents go to the United States, they are carriers of culture. They not only carry love and affection but they carry our culture with them. They carry our traditions with them, they carry our gastronomy, our clothing with them. When our older adults travel to the United States, they travel with their *huipiles* [traditional Maya garment worn by women] they travel with who they are and it truly means transporting our culture to such a diverse country. (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation)

Here, we see the ways in which Maya elders are symbols of regionalism (Yucatán) and nationalism when convenient to the government. It reinforces multicultural discourses which have co-opted Indigenous culture for economic and political gain without really supporting the right to self-determination and improved living conditions for Mayas in the region (Castellanos 2017b). Research among the Maya diaspora and Indigenous migrants contradicts this romanization of multiculturism, as they have demonstrated Maya migrants are subjected to racism and discrimination for expressing their identity via traditional clothes, language and food, among other markers by mestizx migrants and US authorities (B'atz' 2014; Castellanos 2017a). Despite this, parents are treated as commodities to serve the touristification of the state: 'It is a reason to rediscover our culture, the reason to rediscover our traditions and love for Yucatán' (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation). As seen previously, diverse forms of migration between Yucatán to the US produce 'circuits of value' which 'produce both migrant destitution and new forms of value production' (Coddington, Conlon, and Martin 2023, 1425). Under the state eyes, Maya elders become actual living promoters of attracting foreign tourists to the region. This is also expressed in the media discourse when reporting on the journey parents embark to see their children in the US: 'In their suitcases they carried not only clothes but also pride in the land of the Mayab, since the encounter will also allow them to share cultural identity' (Senderos del Mayab 2016, own translation).

For example, once visas are granted, elders do not directly receive the documents. Rather, US visas are given to the Yucatecan government, who then have a "handing out" ceremony to distribute them. During these ceremonies, parents are bombarded with interview requests by the media. They are asked how much time had passed since the last time they saw their children, where they are from, where they are going, among other things. A frequent dynamic during the interviews was asking mothers if they were going to cook for their children once they saw each other. The performance of traditional motherhood, particularly via cooking traditional Yucatecan cuisine, was a significant element in the footage reviewed and in the interviews: "He [the son] is emotional to eat the food that his mother makes at home [in Yucatán]. The food that perhaps

the son has not eaten for 20 years: mom's *frijol con puerco* (Interview INDEMAYA employee, 2019, own translation). There were clear expectations of how mothers needed to act once reunited with their kids to compensate for them not being with their children for so long. This reinforces gender roles by putting the burden on mothers.

These types of intrusive media interviews to elders during the ceremony remind me again of Reyna Rivarola and López (2021) *mosca* analogy but applied to local government authorities and the media. They stand on the bodies of elders, like the annoying fly that does not (want) to go away, extracting and exploiting the emotional experiences of families separated by the border for their own political and economic gain. This is amplified in the videos reviewed of family reunifications in the US via *Cabecitas Blancas*. Reporters get up close and interrupt families who are hugging and wiping off tears in the very moment they are seeing each other for the first time in years. Such an intimate moment becomes public in multiple ways. First by the media *mosca* intruding with their cameras and questions and second, by the actual disruption of the airport space itself. Airports are often seen as emotional sites as well as spaces of border surveillance (Adey 2007; Ramirez, Skrbiš, and Emisson 2007). Reunited families become 'nuances' within airports by physically occupying this space which is associated with racist and xenophobic border controls and surveillance. Large groups of Yucatecan elders are seen exciting the landing dock and have multigeneration family members waiting outside.

Discussion

This paper has demonstrated how settler colonialism plays a fundamental role in the articulation of border violence and the continuous exploitation of Indigenous communities. It shows how Mexico an active participant in settler colonial logics. Using a Critical Latinx Indigeneity framework allows me to see mobility as a "global Indigenous process of displacement" (Blackwell 2017, 158). Migration is fuelled by settler colonial dynamics that pushes and displaces Indigenous communities, creating different levels of 'illegality.' Settler colonialism is intertwined with carceral economies which benefit from the incarceration, detention and deportation of Indigenous migrants as well as the cheap labour of undocumented workers. On the one hand, this creates a situation where Indigenous migrants are unwanted, surveilled, and their movements policed by the security state. And on the other, hypermobile subjects such as tourists and global elites encouraged to visit Yucatán to continue to sustain the economy. Programs such as *Cabecitas Blancas* perpetuate the notion of having to be worthy of state aid in the settler colonial state's terms *(tramitología)*, an entity which has historically negated that very same support. Therefore, these programs represent state reform approaches which are hide the ways the state enacts 'daily exclusion and concealment of rights' (Rivera Cusicanqui 2010, p.34, own translation). They do not address and dismantle systemic violence which has located Indigenous communities at the margins of the state. In short, immigration documentation sustains a capitalist order (Castrellón, Reyna Rivarila, and López 2017). This then facilitates and justifies state violence in the form of necropolitics –who gets to live and who gets to die- (Mbembe 2019). Racism, particularly state sponsored, is a prime driver in determining who lives and under what conditions.

I have also examined the way *tramitologia*, street level bureaucracy and reform programs 'function to spread fear among undocumented immigrants' (Aguilar 2019, 154). I argue that having/achieving documentation does not transform structural inequalities because such a reformist approach does not deal with how neoliberalism, extractivism, racial violence and necropolitics displaces and harms marginalised communities (Bhattacharyya 2018). Borders and the subsequent consequences of their enforcement such as deportation are part of the state building continuous project to manage, distribute and safeguard resources from within those boundaries (Walia 2022). Although this type of program enables people to physically reconnect, it does not address the wider systemic issues of settler colonialism and racial capitalism which are entangled

with border violence. These programs do not represent liberation from state regulation and immigration surveillance (Olufemi 2020). What does home mean to people who are undocumented and their families? What does it mean to be temporarily reunited by the same forces/power structures responsible for that separation? What happens after the first reunification trip? Lack of resources excludes those not in financial position to qualify for the program on top of those who are initially excluded because they don't fit 'criteria.' We will not and cannot change the state. Border abolition seeks to dismantle systems which continuously perpetuate material and metaphorical violence towards marginalised communities and individuals. Abolition is about confronting and imagining alternative futures to current ones (Heynen and Ybarra 2020; Mei-Singh 2019). Abolition is the only way.

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