

# WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THE SEAWEED? The limits of imagination and the misallocation of labor

*¿QUIÉN ES RESPONSABLE DE LAS ALGAS?  
Los límites de la imaginación y la mala asignación del trabajo*

QUEM É O RESPONSÁVEL PELO SARGAÇO?  
Os limites da imaginação e a má alocação do trabalho

DOSSIE

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## Resumo

Desde 2011, o influxo de grandes quantidades de algas marinhas nas Caraíbas gerou graves perturbações ambientais e económicas nas comunidades locais que dependem do turismo. Os cientistas acreditam que o aumento de algas marinhas é causado pelo aquecimento das águas oceânicas e pelo escoamento excessivo de nutrientes do Brasil. Limitadas na sua capacidade de abordar as fontes do crescimento excessivo da planta, as comunidades investiram centenas de milhões de dólares e contrataram milhares de trabalhadores para mitigar os efeitos das algas marinhas. Neste artigo, examino como os moradores de Playa del Carmen, no México, lidaram inicialmente com a grande proliferação de algas marinhas que começou a inundar suas praias em 2018. À medida que a comunidade lutava com a planta, os moradores começaram a se perguntar: “quem é o responsável pela planta? algas marinhas?” Com base em três encontros em que diferentes residentes tentaram responder a essa questão, demonstro a capacidade imaginativa expansiva dos residentes impactados. O problema das algas marinhas continua, afirmo, não porque falte imaginação, mas porque a mão-de-obra está mal distribuída.

Palavras-chave: trabalho, turismo, meio ambiente



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## Abstract

Since 2011, the influx of large quantities of seaweed across the Caribbean have generated serious environmental and economic disruptions to local communities reliant on tourism. Scientists believe the increase in seaweed is caused by warming ocean waters and excessive nutrient runoff from Brazil. Limited in their ability to address the sources of the plant's excessive growth, communities have invested hundreds of millions of dollars and hired thousands of workers to mitigate the seaweed's effects. In this paper, I examine how residents of Playa del Carmen, Mexico initially dealt with the large seaweed blooms that began to inundate its beaches in 2018. As the community grappled with the plant, residents began to ask themselves, "who is responsible for the seaweed?" Drawing from three encounters in which different residents attempted to answer that question, I demonstrate the expansive imaginative capacity of impacted residents. The seaweed problem continues, I claim, not because imagination is lacking, but because labor is misallocated.

Keywords: labor, tourism, environment

## Resumen

Desde 2011, la afluencia de grandes cantidades de algas marinas en todo el Caribe ha generado graves perturbaciones ambientales y económicas para las comunidades locales que dependen del turismo. Los científicos creen que el aumento de algas marinas se debe al calentamiento de las aguas del océano y a la excesiva escorrentía de nutrientes de Brasil. Limitadas en su capacidad para abordar las fuentes del crecimiento excesivo de la planta, las comunidades han invertido cientos de millones de dólares y contratado a miles de trabajadores para mitigar los efectos de las algas. En este artículo, examino cómo los residentes de Playa del Carmen, México, lidiaron inicialmente con las grandes floraciones de algas que comenzaron a inundar sus playas en 2018. Mientras la comunidad luchaba con la planta, los residentes comenzaron a preguntarse: "¿quién es responsable de la ¿algas marinas?" A partir de tres encuentros en los que diferentes residentes intentaron responder esa pregunta, demuestro la capacidad imaginativa expansiva de los residentes impactados. Sostengo que el problema de las algas continúa no porque falte imaginación, sino porque la mano de obra está mal asignada.

Palabras-clave: trabajo, turismo, medio ambiente

## Introduction

“What do you hope for the future?” I ended each formal interview with this question thinking it might lend further insight into my interlocutors’ dreams and aspirations. I received a range of responses, though one answer was repeated the most.

Antonio, a Yucatec-Mayan taxi driver, wanted his children to live a better life than he did. He hoped the countless hours spent picking up and dropping off tourists in Playa del Carmen (Playa), a tourist city on Mexico’s Yucatan peninsula, would allow him to save enough money to send his children to college. Earning an education had been a dream of Antonio’s, but something he was unable to achieve because of his family’s limited resources. “I want my daughters to go wherever they like, to have a career that lets them see the world, see Mexico, and to learn as much as they want.” Even outside of interviews, I regularly encountered this sentiment. Tourism was perceived as decent enough work, but most workers I interviewed hoped their children would have the opportunity to choose their careers.

The two labor unions I studied supported this dream by offering scholarships to members’ children. In May of 2019, I attended a ceremony the headquarters of the resort worker union where I watched as dozens of scholarships of various monetary values were awarded. As the students’ names

were called, the event’s host also announced the colleges they would attend. Most headed to universities in Playa and Cancún to begin careers in administration, tourism management, or nursing. A smaller group would venture to Chetumal to study at the state university in careers like law, languages, and biology, and just a tiny handful would leave the state for school; two young women with Mayan last names would study medicine and engineering in Merida, and a young mestizo man with a boyish face would leave for Puebla to study law.

Listening to my interlocutors’ hopes for the future, I could not help but be reminded of my own parents’ aspirations for me and my younger brother. As working-class immigrants from Latin America, neither attended university. For as long as I could remember, both had worked multiple jobs so that our family could live in a middle-class suburb outside of Washington, DC known for its good schools. The life they built in the United States reflected a fragile but real sense of upward mobility that they dreamed might translate into greater opportunities for their children. Education symbolized choice, new horizons, and most of all, the chance to labor at something one loved.

My interlocutors’ own modest achievements working in tourism provided the evidence they needed that their hopes and aspirations were possible. This was not a

question of “cruel optimism”, Lauren Berlant’s (2011) term for the false hopes that drive capitalism’s unfulfilled desires. While many lived ordinary lives in Playa, most spoke of growing up in poverty and achieving economic security through employment in tourism. Taxi driving and resort work served as their gateways to homeownership, to sending their children to decent schools, to owning cars, and to living lives of relative abundance that made them confident such a future was possible if their children studied and worked hard. Indeed, many of my older interlocutors were already living this dream, pridefully sharing stories about their own adult children working as nurses, lawyers, engineers, resort managers, and business owners.

As unionized workers, my interlocutors represented what Lenin called a “labor aristocracy” (Hobsbawm 2012). Sian Lazar (2017) makes use of the concept to describe the relatively higher economic and social position occupied by Argentine public sector workers after decades of neoliberal economic policy hollowed out the country’s middle classes. Mexican workers experienced something similar (see Santos 2009), with some unionized workers in certain sectors able to retain an economic and social position that only appeared more privileged as time passed and fewer and fewer workers could count themselves as part of an effective union.

Unions that survive in the neoliberal era, argues Lazar (2017), often do so by actively defending their privileged economic position through tactics that can alienate non-unionized workers and leave intact the very system of labor stratification that threatens the long-term viability of organized labor. The unions I studied reflect, if not perfectly, Lazar’s observation. The taxi union maintained its monopoly over the taxi market through a hierarchically organization ready to defend its interests through any means necessary (including violence), while the hotel worker union used education and skill development training, member stratification, and cooperation with business to ensure its survival.

But the sense that one’s privileged position needed to be protected was not just confined to the tactics of organized labor but was present across the community. By the end of the 2010s, Playenses became concerned that tourism could no longer deliver the kind of prosperity and security it had brought them over the last 25 years. Tourists kept arriving in droves, but their numbers seemed outpaced by the arrival of thousands of new migrants each month. Long-time residents complained that the city now felt crowded and chaotic. Migrants from Southern and Central Mexico, many displaced by a precarious economy or the drug war (or both) now competed for what seemed like a dwindling number of good jobs

and a shrinking amount of city space. To keep up with demand, developers cleared low-lying jungle to the west of the city to make way for new housing subdivisions. Yet, even as more colonias were built, the margins of the city were the site of an ever-growing number of informal settlements comprised not just of poor and desperate Mexican migrants, but refugees and displaced persons from Central and South America and across the Caribbean.

Newer migrants were treated with suspicion, especially those from the urban centers of Central and Northern Mexico. Residents regularly trafficked in xenophobic rumors that the uptick in petty crime and the increase in the frequency of shootings between rival gangs was the result of urbanized Mexicans introducing violence and disorder to Playa. In 2016, then U.S. Presidential candidate Trump moaned about the “problems” Mexican migrants brought with them to the United States. In an unsurprising, though ironic twist, a similar refrain was echoed by established Playa residents against newcomers. “Southern Mexicans might be poor and rural,” stated Hector, a Mayan taxi driver from Yucatan state who had lived in Playa since the mid-1990s, “but at least we follow the law.” His statement inverted a racist stereotype heard in Mexico that rural and indigenous migrants brought problems to the country’s urban centers and instead echoed a shared sentiment

among other residents from the Yucatan peninsula that the malfunction of Northern and Central Mexican urbanism threatened a once idyllic Playa del Carmen.

After the Beats Per Minute (BPM) Festival shooting in 2017, Playenses worried they might become the next Acapulco, a once vibrant tourist destination whose decline was narrated as a tale of violence and corruption, unsustainable growth, and the over-exploitation of the city’s beaches and local ecosystem. Whether Acapulco had in fact declined, and whether that decline was in fact caused by those factors, was not important. The narrative stood ready as a framing device to channel individual fears of precarity and potential victimization at the hands of delinquents into a collective sensibility that the community’s sustainability was under threat. Guillermo, a friend and taxi driver, described the situation Playa faced as a paradox. The growth the city needed to sustain the livelihoods of those who depended on tourism required attracting more tourists to visit each year. But with more tourists came more migrants, and thus more labor, forcing the cycle to continue. “The golden age is over,” he would often remark while lecturing new recruits in the taxi driver training course, the dramatic comment both serving to manage new drivers’ expectations, while underscoring what Guillermo believed Playa had lost as it quickly transformed from a town into a city.

Rather than confront this paradox head on, city leaders turned their attention to the problem of crime and the presence of undocumented migrants from poorer regions of Latin America. Keeping the city safe for tourists and residents was believed to be the solution for dealing with the excesses of tourism's continued expansion and the troublemakers it attracted. Yet, what counted as criminal, namely the drug trade, ironically served as a key driver of the city's economic prosperity. Despite this truth, in 2017 and again in 2018, local politicians allocated more money to hire police, purchase new equipment, and they even persuaded the federal government to allow the navy to patrol the tourist heavy parts of the city. The police held regular press conferences to announce their arrests of local drug dealers while displaying the large quantities of narcotics they seized from those arrests. Even with the increase in law enforcement, the shootings continued. What surprised locals most was that despite the violence and negative press coverage, tourists kept visiting. Playenses soon realized a delicate balance could be struck between crime and tourism so long as one set aside the burdens that accompanied living amidst heavy policing and occasional violence.

In February of 2019, however, the community's fears about crime would be

replaced with a new existential threat—millions of tons of seaweed.

Playenses were no strangers to seaweed. The olive-green plant regularly washed up along the city's beaches from late January until early September, though in amounts that were easy to remove. The year before, unusually high levels of growth were reported across Quintana Roo's coasts leading vacationers to cancel their trips or shorten their stays. Residents initially assumed the exceptional growth was a fluke and that 2019 would see things return to normal. Instead, Playenses faced an even larger amount of seaweed that threatened both the local economy and the region's fragile marine ecosystem. News outlets reported that the large blooms originated from the "Great Atlantic Sargassum Belt" (Wang et al. 2019), a newly discovered area of seaweed growth in the Caribbean created from the potent mixture of warming ocean waters and huge deposits of agricultural runoff from Brazil. The phenomenon was first reported in the Eastern Caribbean and West African coasts in 2011, and over the course of the decade, seaweed growth intensified leaving seaside communities across the Caribbean in search of a solution.

Where vacationers seemed to tolerate crime, the same could not be said for seaweed. The plant's slimy, brownish-green appearance contrasted the white sandy beaches and

turquoise waters of the Mexican Caribbean. As it dried in the sun, the plant released a rotten egg smell that made beachgoers feel as if they were sunbathing next to a sewer. News of the seaweed spread across social media and travel sites like TripAdvisor and Airbnb, resulting in thousands of cancelled trips. Some rerouted their getaways to Pacific Coast destinations like Cabo San Lucas, while others stayed closer, finding seaweed-less beaches on the nearby islands of Isla Mujeres and Isla Holbox.

Because of the economic importance of the high season, the tight profit margins at resorts and restaurants, and the need for continued economic growth, the seaweed's effects on the local economy were felt immediately. At the taxi stands where I spent time with drivers, I listened to workers complain about the drop in traffic. "I'm working one more day a week and making the same money as before," stated Victor, a Yucatec Mayan who had lived in Playa since the late 1990s. Other drivers shared stories of having to spend more time on the road to make ends meet, some even working late into the night despite the risk of being robbed. Inside the resorts, the situation was no different. Hotels that normally kept 90%+ occupancy levels were now down to 80%. At community events I attended put on by the hotel worker union, women made beaded jewelry and shared complaints about receiving lower

monthly bonuses in their pay. Where jewelry making was once a casual social event, the women who attended now hoped to make enough pieces to sell to make up for the lost income. "At least there's less work to do," joked Amanda, a mestiza woman from Veracruz, "or else I would really be upset."

Worry and fear drove community members into action. As state authorities worked with the federal government to find resources to pay for cleanup efforts, local leaders channeled the shared sense of worry into a call for volunteers. Both unions took part in these efforts with varying degrees of success. At first, taxi union leaders found it easy to mobilize their members to help remove seaweed since less seaweed would mean more tourists. After several weeks, though, the number of volunteers began to decline until it seemed as if no one was showing up. Removing the seaweed was so draining that many workers reasoned it was not worth their time. On top of that, "the seaweed just returns the next day," observed Esteban when justifying his decision to stop helping. Volunteer labor was soon replaced by paid labor as the city, hotels, and other beach-facing businesses resorted to hiring workers to clean the shores. Despite the thousands of hours spent shoveling and transporting seaweed, the community's success over the mushy plant proved Sisyphean. The seaweed

could neither be ignored nor controlled, only struggled with.

For many of my interlocutors, the seaweed's imperviousness was just another piece of evidence that Playa was in a state of decline. Those who removed the seaweed were paid little, representing the precarity and exploitation of an increasingly oversaturated labor market. The harm the seaweed posed to the ecosystem highlighted the harm it had already undergone after years of tourism development and over-tourism. As the seaweed's stench wafted across the city, Playa no longer felt like a paradise, as depicted in advertisements, but instead smelled putrid and gross.

"This is the beginning of the end," Guillermo dramatically exclaimed over coffee.

It was May of 2019 and we had not seen one another since January. He explained that he was selling his rental property before the real estate market collapsed. He had seen enough and now concluded that tourism's best days in Playa were behind it. He would use the money from the sale to invest in his workshop and apiculture business located two hours inland from Playa. "Are you sure you don't want a two-bedroom house in the Ejido?" he inquired; a hint of sincerity detectable in his pitch. If Playa was on the decline, I thought, what would this mean for all my interlocutors' dreams for the future?

## Responsibility and Labor

Since 2011, the influx of large quantities of seaweed across the Caribbean have generated serious environmental and economic disruptions. While the precise causes of the seaweed are believed to be warming ocean waters and excessive nutrient runoff from Brazil, the general phenomenon is understood to be a symptom of climate change (Wang et al. 2019). Limited in their ability to address the sources for the plant's excessive growth, nations and communities across the Caribbean have sought solutions for capturing and removing the seaweed before and after it washes ashore. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been invested and thousands of workers have been employed in seaweed cleanup efforts, though often achieving only marginal success. Scientists expect those figures to rise in anticipation of increased seaweed growth over the coming decade (Ellsmoor 2019), burdening local communities and likely straining already limited resources.

Above average blooms were first reported in the Mexican Caribbean during the 2015 season (January through September), though they returned to normal levels in 2016 and 2017 (SEMARNAT 2015). When I arrived in Playa in March of 2018 to begin fieldwork, the sulfur-heavy stench of sun-kissed seaweed filled the air and Playa's famous turquoise waters were now brown and



obscured. Caught off guard, state and municipal officials scrambled to find resources to pay for seaweed removal. As the high season drew to a close, an estimated \$312 million pesos (about \$15 million USD) had been spent on cleanup and prevention efforts and thousands of volunteer hours had been worked. State officials reported removing nearly half a million tons of seaweed from local beaches (Gobierno de Quintana Roo 2019), a fraction of the 24 million cubic meters scientists estimated had washed ashore (SEMANAT 2018; Pérez Ortega, Toche, and Valero 2019).

Official statistics from 2018 revealed a small but significant drop in passenger arrivals at the Cancún airport and a nearly 10% decline in hotel occupancy levels across the Cancún and Maya Riviera region which industry experts attributed to the seaweed (Espinosa and Li Ng 2020). In the winter of 2018, an analysis of satellite imagery led researchers to predict that high levels of growth could be expected in the spring and summer months of 2019 (Boletín UNAM 2019). These predictions generated new fears among business leaders and policymakers that another season of high seaweed growth might spell disaster for Quintana Roo's coastal tourism market and present new ecological challenges to the region's already fragile ecosystem. Despite the concern among

experts, locals remained largely unaware that a similar level of seaweed was on its way.

The government of Quintana Roo calculated that prevention and cleanup programs would cost nearly \$1 billion pesos (about \$50 million USD), a figure larger than what the state allocated for its State Prosecutor Office that year (Gobierno de Quintana Roo 2019; Espinosa and Lin Ng 2020). The government of Quintana Roo announced it would commit \$15 million pesos (about \$750,000 USD) to the problem and solicit the federal government to commit an additional \$405 million (about \$80 million USD). The remaining sum would have to come from municipal governments, businesses, and donations. In the end, the federal government provided about half of what was requested (Espinosa and Lin Ng 2020), leaving Quintana Roo to shoulder the rest of the burden. The complexity of the problem and the reluctance of any social or political actor to take full responsibility for the cleanup effort led Playenses to ask, "Who is responsible for the seaweed?"

This essay is about how different interlocutors answered this question. Contained in their answers were not just different ideas about who was responsible, but different ways of thinking about responsibility, and in turn, about justice (Greenhouse 2011; Collins 2019; Young 2011).

Already underway is a lively normative debate between prominent environmental activists, philosophers, and even anthropologists as to what is the most just way to think about responsibility for the climate crisis and other environmental disasters. These debates follow the hard-won effort to build a consensus that humans are responsible for climate change. The significance of this consensus, however, has been quickly overshadowed by new normative questions about whether all humans share the same level of responsibility. One line of argumentation narrows the question of responsibility to the nation state and contends that rich, industrialized nations have more of a responsibility to reduce emissions than poorer countries. Others have argued that responsibility should be assigned to corporations, the global elite, or to historical and systemic social relations that contribute to the climate crisis like heteropatriarchy, settler-colonialism, and capitalism. Bessire and Bond (2014) note that while climate change is caused by excessive carbon emissions, some anthropologists have seized on the potential existential threat the crisis poses to insist society adopt new imaginaries and radically different ways of being with the environment.

Another way to frame the evolution of this debate is that it reflects a crisis of faith in the capacity of private actors, civil society,

and nation states to address this problem constructively. Even as corporations, states, and other social institutions have publicly claimed a responsibility to reduce carbon emissions, and even as scientists and engineers emphasize that we already possess the technology and resources to drastically reduce emissions to the levels needed to avoid long-term disaster, activists observe that neither has yet to translate into meaningful policy change. Emissions, they note, have only risen in the last decade and will continue to rise unless money and institutional energies can be directed at the problem. To make matters more challenging, the question of how to solve climate change has ignited new political conflicts within, across, and between nation states. Fights over how countries will reduce emissions and who will pay for those reductions have pitted different political and social classes against one another. Consequently, anti-environmental groups have successfully amassed a diverse coalition and deployed an assortment of tactics to undermine, sabotage, repress, or delay action. To make sense of these political tensions, scholars have shifted their focus to analyzing the underlying structures that shape the politics of climate change. The reluctance of state and corporate actors to move quickly on carbon reduction policy is thus reframed as a structural contradiction of capitalist relations which can only be addressed through the formulation of new politics (Haraway 2015).

Amid these debates and the “important insights” they have generated about the challenging politics of climate change, emissions continue to grow and already communities are beginning to experience the consequences of an altered climate. From forest fires caused by abnormal levels of drought (Petryna 2018) to rising sea levels (Lazrus 2012), the climate disruptions caused by a warming planet have brought the question of responsibility for climate change into peoples’ day-to-day lives. What is often highlighted in these accounts are how new relations of inequality manifest in these moments and exacerbate preexisting vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized people. Such accounts are meant to serve as sobering reminders that society’s most vulnerable are likely to experience greater suffering if states fail to take responsibility for the climate change and act. While Playa’s battle with seaweed in 2018 and 2019 certainly lent support to that uncomfortable truth, what also became evident was that the question of responsibility was not just about assigning obligation, it was also about the labor it takes to meet that obligation. To speak of climate change responsibility as a matter of state or corporate responsibility or even as a call to overturn various pernicious structural relations removed from view the throngs of workers and the countless acts of labor that would need to be performed to bring these new political and social relations into being.

Contrary to scholars predicting, or hoping for, a future where less time is devoted to work (Weeks 2011; Ferguson 2015), the seaweed crisis faced by Playa suggested that the opposite was on the horizon. New labor mobilizations will be needed to mitigate environmental disruptions. Under what conditions will that labor be performed?

The idea that climate change will grow employment is not a novel idea. Political and labor leaders around the world insist that climate change mitigation policies represent an enormous potential to reinvigorate the labor movement and provide millions of people with good jobs. Despite these claims, the growth of green energy jobs has yet to translate into new and robust labor movements, reformed labor laws, or even decent forms of employment for large numbers of people. The increase in climate disruptions, like the seaweed, has further evidenced this point. New jobs are generated, but the working conditions are highly exploitative. This is an unsurprising outcome given the weakened position of workers after countless years of concerted attacks against organized labor across the globe, as well as the continued dominance of an ideology that naturalizes the subordinate position of workers in a workplace (Anderson 2014). Thus, even as the climate crisis presents workers with a situation in which their bargaining power should, in theory, be high,

without a robust institutional voice, they are left without any real means to take advantage of the “opportunity” afforded by the climate crisis.

In making this observation, I draw inspiration from Penny Howard’s (2017) ethnographic research on environment-labor relations among Scottish fishermen in the North Atlantic. Howard’s ethnography demonstrates how the globalization of the fishing market has created downward pressure on fishermen, leading them to overfish against their long-term interests, as well as take serious safety risks to make ends meet. The uneven abundance of the international fishing market is made possible because it is both decentralized and loosely regulated, dominated by market forces rather than concerns for environmental sustainability or worker wellbeing. In this context, fishermen find themselves criticized by environmentalists and accused of not understanding the harm they cause to the environment. What Howard (2017) makes painfully clear is that her interlocutors are keenly aware of the effects of overfishing, their precarious position not the result of their lack of understanding, but their lack of organization. Within these constraints, Howard argues that fishermen have a role to play in making international fishing more sustainable but can only do so if they possess the organizational strength and institutional

power to play an influential role in regulating the global fishing market.

At a more abstract level, Howard’s argument (2017; 2018) builds on Marx’s observation that human-environmental relations are the product of labor, that is, humans performing some kind of work on the environment to extract resources to meet human needs. Capitalism distorts that relationship by mediating human labor and the environment through market relations that incentivize practices of extraction that exceed the natural cycles of resource rejuvenation in a particular ecosystem. Howard (2017) reminds us that it is workers who are on the front lines of these environmentally unsustainable practices, and because of their reliance on the wages they receive from their labor, they are often forced to defend their jobs against environmental regulation even when they are aware their labor is being exploited or that it is producing environmental harm. Howard contends that the knowledge workers accumulate about the environment through their labor is valuable and can contribute to important conversations at the international and transnational level about how to create a sustainable global economy. Denying workers the ability to represent themselves and exercise some degree of power over decision making, Howard (2017) warns, risks strengthening the economic conditions that often place the working-class

and capital in an uneasy alliance with one another to the detriment of the environment. The implication of her argument is that transforming global capitalist relations into something more environmentally sustainable requires organized labor.<sup>1</sup> There is no just alternative.

I extend Howard's argument in this essay by moving between three different ethnographic encounters I had with interlocutors during the 2019 seaweed season. In each encounter, the question of responsibility is taken up and answered differently. In the first, three taxi drivers identify the Mexican federal state as responsible and in doing so imagine a government capable of meeting their needs. Next, a senior lawyer for the hotel worker union argues that Brazil is responsible and insists that an international solution to the crisis be pursued. In this encounter, an international order capable of handling cross-border environmental contamination is imagined. Finally, I end with Raymundo, a local historian, who saw the seaweed as a collective problem in which Playenses were responsible too. He imagined a world where the labor needs of the tourism sector would be subordinate to more immediate social concerns, the seaweed serving as an invitation to rethink local economic and labor relations.

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<sup>1</sup> This is meant in two senses; first, as a call for transnational unionization across globalized sectors like fishing (and tourism), and second, to frame

By comparing these perspectives, my aim is not to determine which answer is the most just or correct, nor is it to equivocate and depoliticize. Instead, I want to highlight how each claim of responsibility relied on imagining a politics different from the status quo. The seaweed's impossibility, I argue, was not due to my interlocutors' inability to imagine a different kind of politics but was limited by various collective incapacities to make those politics material.

If Howard (2017) is correct that transforming capitalist relations into something more sustainable requires workers to be able to speak and act with a collective voice that can meaningfully reshape those relations, I build on that argument to claim that what is needed to make that world a reality is labor devoted to building the collective institutions that will allow that voice to translate into political power. In the absence of such opportunities, my own interlocutors, like Howard's, will continue to invest themselves in unsustainable capitalist relations. It would be easy to interpret this outcome as illustrative of the fact that my interlocutors are "stuck with tourism," that their "tragic" lives are overdetermined by larger structural forces at work, that they are pegged to a "predatory geography" where "predation and extraction are naturalized"

concerns for environmental sustainability through the conditions workers labor under.

(Córdoba Azcárate 2020). To reach that kind of conclusion would mean oversimplifying their lives and reducing their story to another narrative of capitalist complicity (victim or perpetrator?) in the era of the Anthropocene. Who among us is not stuck with capitalism? What is more challenging, I am suggesting, is to appreciate the important distinction between imagining an alternative world and building one.

In making this argument, I am responding to environmental anthropologists' recent obsession with locating new political imaginaries that might offer different ways of relating to the environment (Whittington 2016; de la Cadena 2010). Typical of this argument, western and indigenous thinking are posed as oppositional, the former representative of a politics that treats the environment solely as a resource for human use, and the latter as standing for a politics of human-environmental interdependence (de la Cadena and Blazer 2018). To survive on this planet justly, so goes the argument, requires everyone (or at least more "western" people) adopt the environmental politics of the Indigenous. Underlying this stance is a theory of change that insists on the power of ethnographic narrative to enlighten the ignorant Westerner to the multiple worlds contained in our shared world (de la Cadena and Blazer 2018). Ethnography's purpose, then, becomes about crafting and deploying

the right kinds of stories and ensuring they are heard and read by the right kind(s) of people so that the right kind of political change can be undertaken (Chao and Enari 2021).

Though I am sympathetic to the substantive political demands that buttress this position, namely the claim that we should treat the environment with greater respect, I find its reliance on a simplistic, racialized epistemic binary to be reductive and romantic, its theory of political change to be naïve and unworkable (largely unrealizable to date), and most importantly, it betrays a key premise of anthropology, which is that political difference is an inherent part of social life. All people, I argue, can imagine a world better than the status quo and this must remain a central premise of anthropology lest the discipline once again find itself confronted with the problem of reducing the complexity of social life into scholarly endorsements for preferred politics or peoples. To narrate the climate crisis as a conflict between the "west" and the rest is to simply reify overly determined categories of difference (Bessire and Bond 2014). Moreover, to flatten the complexity of various overlapping and ongoing struggles for political and social change into a meta-narrative of civilizational clash is to neutralize ethnography's subversive potential. In environmental anthropology, the tendency of some scholars to both consolidate the meaning of difference

and simultaneously heighten its stakes through the discourse of ontology has led to totalizing and increasingly speculative theoretical claims that often have little grounding in the messier, and more quotidian, political contexts in which many different groups of people inhabiting the same space confront environmental disruptions like the seaweed.

Assuming the “shared responsibility” (Young 2011) demanded by the climate crisis, as well as other forms of collective injustice, is to commit to the work of building coalitions across difference (Young 2011; Táíwò 2022). What various critical strands of feminist theory underscore is that this work is hard, fragile, and replete with the potential for disappointment and setback (Young 2011; hooks 2000). It requires, as anthropologist Juno Salazar Parreñas (2018) stresses, acknowledging our shared vulnerability and our distinct yet interconnected implications (Rothberg 2019) to injustice. From this standpoint, solidarity is better conceived of as a process, a set of individual and collective acts of labor that “forge and reforge its possibility” (Young 2011, 120).

Implicit in this argument, then, is not just the self-evident notion that different people must work together to survive the harmful effects of the climate crisis. What

ethnography can help to clarify is *how* particular groups might work together and towards what ends. This means shifting ethnography’s focus to ongoing struggles to build, rather than just imagine, justice (Morris 2023).

## The Mexican Federal Government is Responsible

In February of 2019, the Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) released a “plan of action” outlining the steps needed to effectively prevent and remove seaweed during the 2019 season. Unfortunately, the release of the plan came with little financial commitment to support its ambitious agenda. In December of 2018, the Obrador administration came to power promising to root out corruption and cut spending while simultaneously pledging to invest more in social programs for the working poor. In relation to Obrador’s “Cuarta Transformación<sup>2</sup>,” seaweed cleanup was not seen as a priority. Publicly, the President insisted the problem was “minor,” and that Quintana Roo possessed the resources to address the seaweed with minimal federal support, a stance he would hold over the course of 2019.

With the federal government dragging its heels, the governor of Quintana Roo called on public and private actors to provide

<sup>2</sup> This is Obrador’s term for a new period in Mexican politics focused on ending political corruption,

restoring the rule of law, and instituting popular democracy.

resources and volunteers to help with the removal efforts. As a result, thousands of Playenses were mobilized by environmental NGOs, religious institutions, community organizations, and labor unions over the course of the season. Eager to repair its damaged reputation with the community<sup>3</sup>, the 3,000 strong taxi driver union took an active role in “organizing” its members into volunteer groups. As a result, me and many of my interlocutors found ourselves arriving at the beach in the early mornings where we shoveled seaweed into large piles to be hauled away before beachgoers arrived to sunbathe and swim.

From 7am until around 12pm, volunteer groups scattered along the city’s beaches. Miguel (an interlocutor and close friend) invited me to volunteer with a group of drivers. When we began in mid-March, the early mornings were cool, but by 10am the tropical humidity saturated and thickened the air making the work burdensome. After half an hour of shoveling seaweed, all of us were covered in sweat. To protect my pigment-less<sup>4</sup> skin from the sun, I wore a long sleeve shirt that soon became heavy with perspiration. Older and less fit drivers provided about an hour of work before giving up, while younger

and healthier men endured for another hour before calling it quits.

After that first morning on the beach, it became harder to encourage drivers to donate their time. I stopped volunteering after three weeks. Miguel stopped after two. The work was onerous, exhausting, and ultimately futile. Since none of us were paid, the incentive to continue helping was low. While my time on the beach counted as fieldwork, for the drivers, cleaning up seaweed ate into their income. As the days passed, the mornings would begin with a flurry of text messages from drivers apologizing for not being able to make it because of some unexpected emergency. Eventually, I found myself sending a similar message, extending my regrets that I could not help because of an interview I had scheduled.

The mayor’s office expressed its appreciation by putting out a press release thanking volunteers for their service. The job, however, proved thankless. A large dispenser of ice water kept us cool, but no lunch, no snacks, “ni cerveza,” the drivers regularly joked. Despite gobs of sunblock and long-sleeved clothing, my exposed neck and ears burned. Sweat and sunblock pooled together along my forehead and trickled into my eyes

relations strategy meant to demonstrate its commitment to the community.

<sup>4</sup> Because I have albinism, it was especially important to stay “covered up” during fieldwork in a beach town.

<sup>3</sup> Taxi drivers in Playa had been accused of collaborating with local criminal organizations, harassing locals, and robbing or overcharging tourists leading some residents to demand rideshare companies be allowed market entry. The union encouraged its members to volunteer as a public



causing them to sting and become irritated. For many of the drivers, especially the older ones, shoveling seaweed was as a reminder of the jobs they had once worked in their youth like construction or groundskeeping. Returning to such work after years of taxi driving made them aware of their age and their *panzas* (bellies). Throughout the morning, taxistas teased each other as a way to share in the collective embarrassment of struggling against the slimy plant, hurling little jabs like, “you’re not young anymore, eh?” and “maybe it’s time to lose some weight, *gordo!*” One of the benefits of driving a taxi, I often heard, was that it meant drivers stayed out of Playa’s oppressive sun and worked in an air-conditioned setting, a privilege whose value I had failed to properly grasp until those mornings on the beach. Shoveling seaweed, even as volunteers, became a reminder of just how close drivers were to returning to a life many assumed they had left behind.

This was how Victor, a Yucatec Mayan driver I had befriended in the fall of 2018, interpreted events. Trained in watch and jewelry repair, Victor arrived in Playa in the late 1990s eager to open his own shop. What he soon discovered was that Playa had plenty of watch repairmen and that more money could be made working as a groundskeeper in

a resort. After a year of “working in the sun” Victor saved enough money to buy his own car which he used to become a taxi driver. By 2019, he was a respected veteran taxista who owned his own *placa* (taxi medallion) and led the union’s workforce development department. His eldest daughter was studying dentistry, while his two other children, a son and daughter, would soon graduate high school and begin studying at the local university. If the seaweed continued to affect the tourism sector, he worried he would be unable to help his children with their tuition which might derail their futures.

On a warm April evening while hanging out at Victor’s taxi stand in downtown Playa, he and two other drivers discussed the question of seaweed responsibility. They expressed dismay that the federal government minimized the problem and refused to offer sufficient financial support. All three had voted for Obrador in the general election the year before, and Victor had attended Obrador’s campaign rally in Playa where he listened to the candidate talk about the importance of the tourism sector in Mexico, his proposal for a “Tren Maya”<sup>5</sup>, and his commitment to supporting working families. To the drivers, removing the seaweed was the federal government’s

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<sup>5</sup> The Tren Maya (Mayan Train) is an infrastructure project linking coastal Quintana Roo to the interior of the Yucatan and Chiapas. It is designed to generate cultural and ecotourism in the interior of Southern

Mexico and develop rural indigenous areas. The project is controversial, but also receives high levels of support across the region.

responsibility given the importance of the tourism sector in the Mexican economy. As Victor explained:

Tourism employs thousands here in Quintana Roo and the money we send to the federal government in taxes is much more than we receive in support. The state government does not possess the same resources that the federal government has because of this reason. And it is not just people here who suffer if tourists cancel their vacations, the rest of the country will hurt too. People won't be able to send money back home and businesses will close, people will lose their jobs. I think the federal government *tiene una responsabilidad* to help us, especially since this problem is not our fault, it's a natural disaster, like a hurricane, but obviously less dangerous.

The other drivers nodded in agreement, with Esteban, a longtime resident and mestizo identified migrant from Veracruz adding, "if the seaweed were affecting the maquilas, the government would respond immediately, but because this is happening in Quintana Roo the [federal] government does not see it as a priority." Finally, Jesús, a Yucatec Mayan from Yucatan state, stepped in to point out that, "*Somos parte de México,*" after which he added enthusiastically, "most of the tourists who come to Playa are Mexican. *¡Esas playas son playas mexicanas!*"

Victor, Esteban, and Jesús were not the only drivers who felt the federal government should be responsible for the cleanup. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most of my unionized interlocutors expressed a similar sentiment, and many looked to the new administration to

intervene. Unpacking the above encounter, what is striking is the way the drivers frame responsibility in two related ways; first, as a matter of reciprocity, in economic and political terms, and second, as a rational economic decision stemming from the important role tourism plays in the local and national economies.

Underlying these interrelated arguments is an entrenched belief among locals that the federal government does not properly prioritize the tourism sector. Those feelings are rooted the way Playenses experienced the transition from state-led tourism development to a market-based model. The federal government shifted from directly overseeing urban planning and infrastructure development in Quintana Roo, to utilizing foreign direct investment, tax incentives, privatization, and non-governmental organizations to spur growth in the tourism sector. The model proved successful at attracting investment and led to the construction of countless resorts along the coast, which brought thousands of jobs to the state. However, in Playa del Carmen, the reliance on private financing to build and support city infrastructure produced an unevenly developed urban landscape that resulted in regular disruptions to city services. Poorer neighborhoods experienced heavy flooding during rainstorms, the city's water infrastructure regularly broke down or

underperformed, and power and internet outages were a normal part of life in Playa, just to name a few examples. The federal government's refusal to proactively address the seaweed crisis quickly fit into a prior set of grievances of state neglect that the drivers hoped the Obrador administration would reverse.

Characterizing the federal government as neglectful to the needs of its citizens is not unique to Playa and instead figures into a larger anti-neoliberal discourse that one encounters throughout Mexico. For Playenses, however, the state's neglect of Quintana Roo, and especially its tourism sector, did not seem to comport with the idea that the neoliberal state's mission was to support and foster economic growth (Córdoba-Azcárate 2020). In 2019, tourism accounted for 8.7% of the country's GDP, employed more workers than any other sector of the economy, and was the third largest source of foreign exchange behind oil and financial services. While scholars have noted that a large percentage of the profits from tourism do not stay in Quintana Roo but instead travel to other parts of the country (Castellanos 2010; Clancy 2001), Victor seizes on this fact to strengthen his case that the federal government has an obligation to remove the seaweed since the rest of the

country takes more from Quintana Roo's tourism sector than the state receives in federal support.

Esteban's rejoinder about maquilas adds to Victor's point, but in a different way. It reflects a local perception that national politicians mistakenly prioritize manufacturing jobs over tourism. The renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement in 2019 supported this belief, though it is important to mention that the preference for manufacturing jobs is found around the world. Politicians in the United States and on both sides of the political aisle traffic in the same stereotypes. Manufacturing is gendered as manly work, while service sectors like tourism are feminized, which leads to an erroneous belief that manufacturing jobs are more secure or better paying than tourism.<sup>6</sup> The preference is cultural rather than economic, and it obscures the fact tourism workers in Quintana Roo often earn on average as much or more as their maquila counterparts (Tamborini 2007). Moreover, while nearly 100% of tourism service exports are added in Mexico, Mexican manufacturing only adds about 10% of export value for products assembled in country (Wise and Cypher 2007), with that figure only representing the wages paid to industrial workers. Relatively speaking, the tourism

<sup>6</sup> As labor studies scholars have demonstrated, manufacturing jobs are only high quality when

workers in those jobs possess an active union (Walters and Mishel 2003).

sector is more valuable and less precarious than manufacturing in Mexico (though both are precarious), which is why from Esteban's point of view seaweed removal should be the priority of the federal government.

A second element of Victor's argument is a reference to the networked economic benefits of tourism, how it employs thousands, benefits small businesses, and most importantly, supports other parts of the country. In the 1990s and early 2000s, remittances from tourism were mostly sent back to Yucatec indigenous villages in Quintana Roo and Yucatan states (Re Cruz 2003) but shifts in migration over the last two decades have meant that remittances are now sent to places like Chiapas, Veracruz, Oaxaca, and Guerrero, urban communities in Central and Northern Mexico, and even to families across Latin America and in the United States.

Another way of interpreting Esteban and Victor's arguments is that both are demanding the state act in an economically rational manner. Tourism is profitable, the government collects huge sums of revenue from it, and it employs tens of thousands. A simple economic calculus should lead the state to do everything possible to ensure the industry is healthy and sustainable. For instance, the state's estimated cost for seaweed removal, around \$50 million USD, was much lower than the estimated one billion in losses from tourists canceling their

vacations (Espinosa and Ng 2020). Within the schema of a neoliberal state, the drivers' logic makes sense and mirrors a similar appeal made in the broader climate change policy debates about the imperative to act now to avoid future economic losses from climate disruptions. The Obrador administration responded to this argument by highlighting the fact that if the economic losses from the seaweed were significantly higher than future costs, resort companies had all the incentive they needed to justify paying for their own seaweed removal. As the crisis wore on, resort companies eventually heeded this advice and hired their own workers, but this was not a solution for dealing with the seaweed that washed along the shores of the city's public beaches, nor did this address the seaweed that floated just off the shore and damaged local coral reefs, threatened marine life, and disrupted snorkeling and scuba diving activities.

Jesús's comment that Quintana Roo is part of Mexico adds another rhetorical layer by highlighting the importance of Quintana Roo in the national tourism imagination (Salazar 2013). Since the early 2000s, Mexican tourist visits have increased from year-to-year, with a significant percentage of these tourists preferring Playa and other smaller towns along the coast over the American-saturated Cancún. Jesús's point is that Mexicans in other parts of the country

should care about what happens to Quintana Roo in the same way residents in Quintana Roo care about what happens in Mexico City. His final point about the beaches in Quintana Roo being “Mexican beaches” implies two things. First, it is an allusion to a common refrain heard in Mexico that the country’s coasts are public property and thus cannot be privately owned. Jesús uses this fact, and the deeply held nationalist belief that comes with it, to establish an obligation for the federal government to help clean the beaches. Second, it alludes to the history of indigenous separatism that characterized the Yucatan peninsula up until the state of Quintana Roo’s founding in 1974. As a Yucatec Mayan, Jesús might be expected to say these are “our beaches” as if to imply they belong to the Yucatec Mayans and not the federal government or the Mexican people. Instead, Jesús is making an argument similar to Bonilla’s (2015) interlocutors in Guadalupe by affirming Mexico’s sovereignty over the region, and the people who live there, as a means of inducing the federal state to act. It reveals the diversity of indigenous political perspectives in Mexico in which claims for autonomy from the Mexican state are contrasted by similarly potent demands for equal rights and a “thick” relationship of citizenship with the federal government.

Underlying the drivers’ argument that the federal government is obliged to help

Quintana Roo is the belief the federal government has, or should have, the capacity to help Quintana Roo. This may seem like a minor point, but in the context of Mexico it is quite surprising. Before the election of Obrador, many of my interlocutors did not trust the state to act on their behalf since they assumed (often correctly) that politicians at all levels were corrupt and that when state spending took the form of private contracting it mostly functioned as a way for elites to line their pockets. Such fears were not unfounded as evidenced by the litany of state corruption scandals across Mexico and within Quintana Roo. In 2016, Playenses watched the governor of the state flee after being charged with bribery, and in 2017, the mayor of Playa privatized the city’s water services, a move that led to higher water bills and worse service (and her ousting in the next mayoral election).

This sentiment changed rather abruptly in response to Obrador’s astounding political win in 2018. Many expressed optimism that the new administration would be better managed, more democratic, and less corrupt than its predecessors. As the 2019 season intensified, however, that belief would be tested since it seemed as if the federal government was either unwilling, or unable, to help Quintana Roo. Pressure by the governor and the business lobby resulted in additional resources for seaweed removal, but

the assistance ultimately proved too little and too late.

With the resources that were provided, the state implemented several strategies to deal with the seaweed, each achieving different levels of success. This included erecting barriers just off the coast designed to prevent the seaweed from coming ashore, though in practice this only slowed it down. Another focused on extracting the seaweed directly from the ocean using boats outfitted with special equipment. At a large enough scale, experts claim this is the most effective and least labor-intensive strategy for removing seaweed, though it is also the most expensive. A handful of boats were contracted by the federal government that removed thousands of tons of seaweed from the ocean, but the overall impact was negligible. In the end, workers hired by the city or private businesses removed the majority of the seaweed. Despite the importance of their labor, workers were not paid well. Hotels posted ads on Facebook promising \$1500 pesos (about \$80 USD at the time) a week for full days of backbreaking seaweed removal work while the pay offered by the municipal government was not much better. Under those conditions, most workers shoveled seaweed for a week before collecting their pay and never returning, yet despite the worker retention problems wages and working conditions failed to improve.

As locals started to feel the economic impact of the seaweed, a shared sense of frustration built up that was eventually taken out on tourists and Euro-American migrants. Taxi drivers reported charging even higher fares than normal to make up for their losses. Online forums for migrants from Europe and North America were filled with complaints of being swindled at restaurants, overcharged, and stopped by police who solicited them for bribes. During the summer of 2019, controversy erupted as tourists posted Youtube videos showing security guards at beach clubs in Playa shooing away Mexican tourists who set up in front of the clubs. The videos were meant to shame the beach clubs, and the residents of Playa, for allowing Mexico's coast to become semi-privatized. On social media sites, Mexicans from across the country berated the tourism sector for its greediness. The clubs defended their position, pointing out that they hired workers to clean the beaches in front of their clubs, and since the federal government had not helped, the clubs should have the right to profit off the cleaned beaches. When I talked about the controversy with Victor, he agreed with the beach clubs. He thought it was unfair for Mexican tourists to expect to come to Playa and enjoy the beaches without tipping a local or paying for a local service, especially when it was other Mexicans like him who were now being paid to remove the seaweed.

Those who criticized the actions of the clubs relied on a shared sense of national solidarity which from the perspective of Playenses like Victor only seemed to cut in one direction. If the coasts were public property, why had the federal government failed to provide the resources needed to clean them? For my interlocutors, the controversy did not highlight the greediness of the tourism sector, it instead reflected how the interests of middle-class Mexicans often function as a substitute for national interests. Workers like Victor found themselves on the same side as the beach club owners because their economic interests were tied together and no amount of public shaming from middle-class travelers living outside of Playa was going to change that. Even as local officials publicly condemned the clubs for their illegal actions, they did little to enforce federal law against them. If the federal government was incapable of finding the resources to pay for seaweed cleanup, how exactly was it going to prevent Playenses from laying claim to *their* beaches?

### **Brazil is Responsible**

When higher levels of seaweed growth first appeared in the Caribbean in 2011, scientists assumed it originated in the Sargasso Sea, a large body of water in the mid-Atlantic where huge floating forests of seaweed grow and occasionally drift into the Caribbean Sea. Through the use of satellite imaging and chemical analysis of seaweed

samples, researchers discovered that these new seaweed blooms originated off the coast of Brazil and were caused by a combination of warming ocean waters and nutrient runoff from the Amazon River flowing into the Atlantic Ocean (Wang et al. 2019). This new patch of seaweed growth was dubbed “the Great Atlantic sargassum belt,” and it extended from the west coast of Africa to the Gulf of Mexico. Tracking growth levels from 2015 to 2018 suggested the blooms were expanding, leading scientists to predict large seaweed blooms would persist and probably worsen without corrective measures (Wang et al. 2019, Figure C).

Elisa, a friend and lead counsel for the hotel work union’s Playa local, took an interest in the seaweed when it inundated Quintana Roo’s beaches in January of 2018. When the seaweed arrived the year prior, the union found itself caught off guard. As occupancy levels in resorts took a hit, managers began considering temporary layoffs to make up for the revenue loss. Elisa and her team worked with resorts to avoid layoffs, but in return the union agreed to reduce the “tip bonus” workers received until occupancy levels returned to normal. What Elisa soon realized was that if the seaweed became a regular occurrence, the union might be forced to agree to layoffs, salary cuts, and other sacrifices that would fall disproportionately on the union’s rank and

file. The lack of coordination and support from the government in dealing with the problem convinced Elisa that a sustainable solution to the seaweed would need to be found which led her to follow the issue closely.

Before the publication of Wang et al.'s (2019) study in July of 2019, the media reported that scientists hypothesized that the seaweed might be caused by climate change and nutrient runoff from Brazil. When Elisa heard these reports, she realized the only sustainable solution was to address the seaweed's root causes. As a result, she concluded that Brazil should be responsible for the seaweed. She made the case for me one May afternoon in her office:

Mexico should demand Brazil pay for the cleanup and the damages caused by the seaweed. Without their involvement in finding a solution, the problem will just continue and Mexico, as well as other poorer nations in the Caribbean, will be stuck with more seaweed. Honestly, it's not fair that Mexicans have to pay for this problem since this is a mess the Brazilian government made by letting agricultural companies do whatever they want without thinking of the consequences. Even if Mexico could afford to pay for seaweed removal, it is just not a sustainable solution. Maybe Brazil would rethink its agricultural policies if their companies had to pay for the negative consequences of the farming. Why should my *impuestos* [taxes] be spent on removing the seaweed when they could be spent on roads, schools, and healthcare that people in Mexico need?

What was immediately surprising about Elisa's answer was that it was the first time I had heard Brazil mentioned as a party

that bore responsibility for the seaweed. The Mexican media's coverage of the crisis largely focused on the government's response, or whether resort companies should pay for the cleanup. Caribbean nations affected by the seaweed earlier than Mexico had acknowledged the seaweed was an international problem, but this was largely framed as a matter of how affected states could cooperate to find a solution.

About a month after talking to Elisa about the seaweed problem, an international meeting was convened in June 2019 (and again in October 2019) in Cancún by the governor of Quintana Roo. Thirteen Caribbean nations, several Mexican politicians, and the Secretary General for the Association of Caribbean States attended the event. The goal was to establish the seaweed crisis as a regional and international issue and begin the process of coordinating public policy efforts between affected nations. Another concern raised by participants was the ecological costs of the seaweed, which poses serious threats to coral reefs and seagrasses in the Caribbean and thus triggers the Cartagena Convention, a UN brokered agreement between Caribbean countries establishing shared commitments to regional ecological stewardship. The meetings ultimately concluded with symbolic gestures for future joint coordination on public policy responses to the seaweed, though no firm



financial, legal, or policy commitments were made between the parties. Brazil did not attend the meetings, nor were there any formal calls to bring them into the discussion.

The lack of attention to the role Brazil played in the crisis could partly be explained by the fact that the political and legal mechanisms required to hold Brazil responsible for the seaweed were non-existent. The negotiation and enforcement of treaties to deal with cross-border environmental harms like the seaweed has some precedent, but no such treaty existed (or exists) between Brazil and the countries affected by the seaweed. While news outlets might have framed the absence of a treaty as an opportunity to negotiate one, the media instead concentrated its imaginative energies on the potential commercial uses of the seaweed. If the crisis offered an opportunity, it was an economic one, with news outlets featuring stories that described the seaweed's potential as a fertilizer, building material, and even cosmetic ingredient. Yet, despite the insistence that the market would transform the seaweed into something commercially valuable, none of the proposed ventures ever got off the ground or materialized into an effective solution.

As an experienced lawyer, Elisa was aware that holding Brazil responsible required the creation of a legal mechanism that did not exist. Before serving as lead counsel for the

union local in Playa del Carmen, she had spent several years at the union's headquarters in Mexico City working on their international portfolio. In that role, she drafted reports to international bodies like the International Labor Organization and the International Trade Union Confederation and became an expert in international law. She even accompanied the union's delegation to international meetings held in Geneva and in other parts of Latin America. From those experiences, she cultivated an appreciation for international law and transnational cooperation. Mexico's transition to neoliberalism had dealt serious blows to organized labor, but what she soon realized through her international engagement was that workers in other countries like China, the United States, and Canada were grappling with the same problems. Elisa began to understand the way globalization relied on a legal architecture that was friendly to capital and hostile to labor. Without cross-border cooperation between unions, and a strong international labor rights system in place, workers in different countries would be forced to compete against one another to the benefit of employers. The seaweed raised a similar concern and necessitated an international solution. Without one, workers in the Maya Riviera, and across the Caribbean, would suffer while Brazil's agribusinesses profited.

When we met in 2019, it had been fifteen years since Elisa worked in Mexico City. Burned out by the job's demanding hours and eager to raise her family outside of the chaos of the capital, she decided to transfer to the union's local in Cancún. She worked there for about two years before being offered a job as the lead counsel for the union local in Playa del Carmen. The move proved fortuitous since she arrived just before the Playa local made its rapid transition from a minor node in the union's vast constellation of regional offices, to one of its largest and most important hubs. These days, Elisa's work largely focused on negotiating and overseeing collective bargaining agreements, mediating and resolving worker grievances, and representing the union in federal, state, and municipal legal matters. Even though she now focused exclusively on local and domestic issues, the international perspective she developed stayed with her.

I viewed Elisa's preference for a legal solution as more than just a reflection of her legal training. It also signaled her status as a middle-class professional and part of a particular Mexican public (Yeh 2018). This is evident in the way Elisa talks about her taxes being wasted if Mexico takes responsibility for seaweed but is also reflected in how she describes the law as disciplining the actions of agrobusinesses in Brazil. Law holds a special place in the Mexican middle-class political

imagination, on both the right and the left. It functions as a symbol for order, while compliance with the law is treated as a sign of social development. Mexico is narrated as a uniquely lawless place in need of better police, stronger courts, and a renewed spirit of respect for the law. During fieldwork, I often heard Elisa speak this way when confronted with a local news story about crime. Like the drivers, she agreed with Obrador that Mexico's problems were the result of widespread corruption that could only be addressed through tough and consistent legal enforcement.

Over time, I identified several problems with this perspective; 1) it accepts the law at face value without offering a way to question the law's justness, 2) it fails to appreciate the generative role the law plays in facilitating the same corrupt practices that it purports to prohibit, and 3) finally, it has led to a dangerous fetishization of the law and resulted in an overzealousness by state authorities to use extreme forms of violence against lawbreakers. Over time, these tactics have undermined the law's legitimacy and efficacy, reducing it to a raw exercise of power.

Elisa's proposed solution to hold Brazil responsible for the seaweed highlighted another issue I had not considered, which is that legal fetishism occludes the labor it takes to both create and enforce the law. By this I do

not mean that Elisa overlooks the fact financial commitments must be made so that institutions can guarantee legal compliance. This idea is widespread in Mexico, often serving as the justification to pay police officers, judges, and others charged with legal enforcement the resources they need to avoid engaging in corruption. As Elisa noted in her argument, she would prefer her tax dollars be spent creating the institutions that would hold Brazil accountable rather than those resources being devoted to paying for seaweed cleanup.

Instead, Elisa drew my attention to the labor it would take to make her solution a reality. Assuming Brazil agreed to negotiate with Mexico and other affected Caribbean states, all parties would have to put together negotiation teams, establish places to meet, and carry out the arduous work of crafting a treaty all parties could agree to. Enforcing such a treaty would mean the establishment of an international regulatory body as well as coordination between domestic regulatory agencies, a system of arbitration and a team of arbiters to handle disputes, and potentially the creation of a police enforcement unit in Brazil that would have the power to monitor and effectively regulate the agricultural sector. Elisa's proposal does not just require money, it also requires hundreds of people from various professional backgrounds working collectively.

Elisa's solution is not impractical or impossible—the transnational legal system that has emerged through institutions like the World Trade Organization evidences its possibility—but rather that it is not just a question of whether it can be imagined but a matter of whether the collective labor needed to make it a reality can be coordinated and mobilized. Put another way, if the only practical solution for dealing with the seaweed is to pay laborers to physically remove it from Playa's beaches, what that signals is not a failure of imagination, but a misallocation of labor.

### **Everyone is Responsible**

Transforming the northeast coast of Quintana Roo into one of the world's most iconic and profitable tourism centers required a tremendous amount of labor and a violent reshaping of the land. From the beginning of the 1970s, when ground first broke in Cancún, up until the present, a continuous process of construction, demolition, and reconstruction has taken place. This history has become mythologized and subsumed into a broader global imaginary that depicts the beaches of Cancún, Playa del Carmen, and Tulum as once virgin paradises corrupted by the forces of capital. The empty, unclaimed beach, David Picard (2011) reminds us, owes its origins to European depictions of the Biblical paradise of Eden. Such depictions often shaped the way European colonists

encountered the tropics. For instance, it is rumored that Christopher Columbus initially believed he had found the Gardens of Eden when in a later voyage his ships came upon the coasts of what is today, Venezuela. In a globalized international tourism market, the search for an unclaimed beach paradise continues to capture the imaginations of travelers. In the 1990s, the cult classic, *The Beach*, starring Leonard DiCaprio, told the story of an American tourist who stumbles upon a hidden beach community on a remote island in Thailand. That same decade, the critically acclaimed Mexican film, *Y Tu Mama También*, revolved around a road trip to a remote beach in Oaxaca. In the 1980s, Playa was described as an untouched beach waiting to be “discovered.” Following its discovery, Tulum became Mexico’s best kept secret before that title moved on to places like Isla Holbox, Bacalar, and to west coast destinations like Puerto Escondido in Oaxaca.

Critics of this myth note that Cancún was not an empty beach before tourism developers arrived but was instead settled at various times by Yucatec Mayans who had left their own traces on the land (Castellanos 2020). The coasts of Quintana Roo served as important sites of economic production via activities like fishing while it is also known that many places carried, and continue to carry, spiritual significance for Yucatec Mayan communities. But another problem I

identified with this myth was that it rested on the false idea that before the commercial development of the region took place, what existed before was a pristine landscape already available for touristic enjoyment. Instead, what I learned while living in Playa, and that the seaweed reinforced, was that creating and maintaining “paradise” was the outcome of a continuous battle between locals and the environment. Nature could be managed, repressed, channeled in new directions, and even partly destroyed, but it could never be fully controlled. Capitalist development of the region was not a totalizing force or an unstoppable machine, but instead was a fragile assemblage of economic and social relations whose possibility was always under threat by other competing social, economic, and environmental forces.

At resorts, thousands of groundskeepers labored each day to prevent tropical vegetation from invading and destroying their manicured landscapes, capture small mammals who might bother guests, protect buildings and furniture from increasingly powerful hurricanes, and wage a futile war against the numerous species of insects that called the region home. In the city, similar battles with nature were underway. Restaurants and small grocery stores struggled to keep produce fresh against the various bacteria that thrived in the humidity, while in the evenings, trucks roamed the city

spraying special chemicals to kill mosquitos. More than just a nuisance, controlling the mosquito population became a public health priority following the 2016 Zika outbreak and the danger the disease posed to locals and tourists. On top of all that, there was the intense sun and heat which began in April and continued until November before the winter months offered a reprieve. Adapting to the sun meant regularly applying sunblock, hydrating, and staying in the shade when outdoors. In the summer, the heat would linger into the evening making it impossible to sleep, yet the high cost of running one's air conditioning during the night meant coming up with other ways to stay cool. For a good night's rest, interlocutors advised me to shower before bed and sleep on a slightly damp sheet. As the moisture in the sheet evaporated during the night, it would keep the bed cool. To tourists, the tropical climate found in Playa was rejuvenating, but for residents, especially Mexicans not from the Yucatan peninsula, it was a regular source of annoyance.

This was how Raymundo thought about the seaweed, as just one more addition to the long list of environmental forces residents regularly wrestled with to make mass tourism work. The problems it posed were symptomatic of the fact that something bigger than the seaweed was awry.

Unsurprisingly, Raymundo had little regard for Quintana Roo's commercial

tourism sector. He left Mexico City in the early 1970s after becoming disillusioned with urban leftist activism after the 1968 student movements. Arriving just as the construction of Cancún was underway, he used his skills as a writer to begin a career as a local journalist. This evolved to include radio and television and eventually he produced documentaries. These outlets allowed Raymundo to cultivate a sharply critical voice about politics, the economy, and social life in the Maya Riviera. As a committed Marxist, he found mass tourism wasteful, vulgar, and exploitative to the people it employed and the environment. Its survival was of little interest to Raymundo, which he was only too happy to share if asked. In January 2019, after Playa witnessed several back-to-back shootings, the media speculated whether the violence would scare away tourists as was rumored to have happened in Acapulco. "Do you think Playa will become the next Acapulco?" I inquired. Raymundo's answer was quick and blithe "probably, but who cares? We were poor before tourism, and we'll probably be poor after [it ends]."

As the seaweed intensified through the spring of 2019, Raymundo devoted his time to his documentary on the Colosio neighborhood, which was set to premier in May. For the three weeks leading up to the premier, we had not been able to chat, but a week after the screening he invited me to his office for coffee and catching up. He asked me

what I thought about the film, but into our second hour of talking the conversation made its way to the seaweed and the effect it was having on the community. “Who do you think is responsible for it?” I asked.

Like Elisa, Raymundo had also read that the seaweed was caused by nutrient runoff from the Amazon River, but this was not the only cause scientists had identified, there was also the issue of warming ocean waters caused by climate change which scientists also believed contributed to the accelerated growth. Raymundo drew on this the fact to conclude that “everyone was responsible.” As a swiveling electric fan struggled to keep us cool in his office, he explained:

They [scientists] say the seaweed has two related causes, warming ocean waters because of climate change, and shit spewing out of the Amazon River due to agricultural production in Brazil. And what we know is that climate change has a lot of factors like farming, deforestation, the burning of oil for cars and transportation, and some other smaller causes. What I find so curious is that the governor says we need to clean up the seaweed so that more people will travel to Cancún or Playa because if they [tourists] stop coming the economy will suffer. But when they travel here, they also contribute to climate change. Do you see what I am getting at? They want to clean up the seaweed but doing so will just create the conditions for more seaweed. *No tiene sentido!* (it makes no sense!)

<sup>7</sup> In Smith’s (2016) ethnography of anti-black racism in the tourism hub of Salvador de Bahia, the performance troupe she follows repeats the phrase

In response to the confused look on my face, Raymundo reiterated his point to me in a different way. He reminded me that Brazil exported beef and soy to Mexico, so it was not just Brazil who was to blame, as Elisa claimed, Mexican grocery stores and by extension Mexican consumers were also implicated (Rothberg 2019) in the Amazonian deforestation. Half-jokingly, he pointed out that Playa might be especially connected since the city was littered with so many steakhouses, many of which were Brazilian-themed and catered to the glutinous appetites of tourists. On top of that, the thousands of tons of CO2 emissions from planes bringing vacationers to Playa was just one of many examples of the ways the local tourism sector contributed to climate change and thus warming ocean waters.

While the connection between the seaweed and Playa’s CO2 contributions might seem tenuous, what I heard Raymundo saying was that the seaweed offered an invitation to “stop and think” (Smith 2016)<sup>7</sup> about sustainability. In Elisa’s framing, sustainability is about preserving a pre-seaweed tourism sector, a position not dissimilar to the drivers. Raymundo’s critique is that thinking about sustainability this way both neglects all the other ways mass tourism was unsustainable before the seaweed arrived,

“stop and think” as a kind of “chorus” meant to encourage the audience into critically reflect.

and all the ways mass tourism contributes to global climate change and thus plays a role in the seaweed's growth now. But the seaweed was just one effect of climate change, and Raymundo and I had discussed others in previous conversations like stronger hurricanes, lower rainfall in the interior of the Yucatan peninsula, and rising sea levels. Conservative estimates predict that by the end of the century most of Quintana Roo's beaches will be underwater, while other models forecast more severe inundations that might bring levels to the Quinta Avenida in Playa, completely submerge the "Hotel Zone" in Cancún, and lead to large losses of land on nearby islands like Isla Mujeres and Cozumel. Even if the seaweed were removed, Playa's days as a beach tourism destination were numbered.

To claim "everyone was responsible" was Raymundo's way of highlighting not just the collective challenges the seaweed represented, but the collective labor he thought was needed to address those challenges. It bothered Raymundo to see so much energy and resources being devoted to cleaning up the seaweed in the same way that it bothered him to see so much labor devoted to the never ending "desmadre" (wild party, chaos), as he called it, that was Playa's tourism sector. "There is nothing wrong with driving a taxi or working in a resort," he would say before rhetorically asking "but is

that the best use of peoples' time?" During another exchange, I asked whether he worried about climate change only to get the answer, "no" before morbidly jokingly, "I'll be dead soon anyway!" I first interpreted this answer as a snarky attempt to eschew responsibility for the environment, but when I asked if that was what he meant, his expression became serious and he immediately replied, "Of course not. We should do everything we can, but does it look like we're doing everything we can?"

At first, his question felt like an indictment that demanded I reckon with whether my own labor as an anthropologist and graduate student was doing anything to make the world better. But I realized his question was getting at something more profound than my personal insecurities about the value of academia. He wanted me to recognize and really sit with the fact that even as towns were engulfed by wildfires, hundreds of thousands of people were displaced by shifts in the climate, and millions of tons of seaweed now amassed on coasts across the Caribbean, the overwhelming majority of the world's labor was being devoted to activities that would only make these problems worse. Hope, concern, guilt, and even feelings of dread would do nothing to change that fact if those sentiments could not translate into collective social action.

The seaweed was symptomatic of the fact that something bigger than the seaweed was awry.

If for Raymundo that “something” was the unsustainability of capitalism, what I realized as I connected his piercing question to his thoughts on seaweed responsibility, was that for me that “something” was the fact that a collective capacity to change course seemed tragically out of reach. Even as I found myself agreeing with Raymundo that the seaweed problem was an invitation to rethink how the economy operated and where labor ought to be allocated, it did not appear as if such a world was on the horizon. This did not mean Raymundo’s perspective was wrong, or even impractical, but it underscored the gap between one’s ability to imagine a different world and one’s capacity to bring it into existence. The socialist politics that shaped Raymundo’s thinking imagined a future in which peoples’ material needs were met, where one could feel as if their labor mattered, and where one’s curiosity and passion might be aligned with the needs of one’s community. This was not a world without travel, but it was a world where the ostentatious luxuries of mass tourism would no longer be prioritized over more pressing social concerns. What Raymundo imagined was a world not far off from the one my unionized interlocutors dreamed their hard work in the tourism sector might provide for their children. And yet, as

the summer months brought more seaweed to Playa and threatened the economic livelihoods of workers, I wondered how many of those dreams would be realized and how many would dry up and fester, like seaweed in the tropical sun.

### **Essential Labor**

In the winter of 2019, the government of Mexico announced that Playa could expect an even larger influx of seaweed for the 2020 season. The news made locals anxious, but the early months of 2020 were mild, a blessing they hoped would last until after the busy Easter season in April. As one can probably guess, by the end of March Playa’s tourism sector had ground to a halt. The COVID-19 pandemic forced mass evacuations out of Mexico, imposed heavy restrictions on in-country and cross-border travel, and infected thousands of residents. By the end of 2020, hundreds of those residents would die from the disease.

For ecological reasons, the government continued to hire workers to remove the seaweed. A plant that once threatened to upend the economy was now a lifeline for those out of work. The irony was not lost on Victor, who did not shovel seaweed himself, but knew many who did. In the summer months, a small but much welcomed flow of tourists began arriving from the United States after the governor decided Quintana Roo could once again



welcome travelers. These Americans were eager to break out of the lockdown restrictions back home and many of my interlocutors shared stories of the “huge” tips they received from travelers who declined to wear a mask in their taxis.

By 2021, hundreds of thousands of recently vaccinated Americans who could afford to travel made their way to the Maya Riviera. Despite significant seaweed levels that year, and the Delta Variant still active, the Mexican government reported higher tourist visits in the summer of 2021 than the summer of 2019 (Rivera Maya News 2021). Playa’s reopening was not without controversy. Elisa thought the government should pay tourism workers to stay home until enough had been vaccinated, like in the United States, while Raymundo thought that any society that would weigh human life against the economy was deeply broken and in need of self-reflection. The drivers, however, were thankful for the business, its arrival seen as a sign that things might improve after such a challenging year.

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