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Public Carriers: Boredom among the Taxi Drivers in Playa del Carmen, Mexico

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By early March 2020, tourists had started canceling their plans to travel to Playa del Carmen, Mexico, and those already on vacation were panicking about getting to the airport. Miguel, a taxi driver in the area, wasn't too concerned. He remembered the H1N1 scare in 2009. He figured the crisis would last for a few weeks, and then things would return to normal. At first, in fact, COVID-19 was quite profitable. Miguel spent his mornings and afternoons rushing resort guests to the airport for a sizable profit of about seven hundred pesos from the thousand-peso trip. With only two trips, Miguel could meet his daily goal for income, but he was doing as many as six per day during that week—making it one of the most lucrative in his two and a half years as a driver.

More than four months into the pandemic, Miguel struggles to meet his daily quota. His usual clientele of wealthy tourists has been replaced by local residents who are just as strapped for cash as he is. “No tips, no long trips, it’s really tough,” he tells me in a WhatsApp message. “If I start at 8am, I’ll work until 10pm and only bring home five hundred pesos. At least gas is cheaper now.” Despite the long working days “fishing” for customers, Miguel, like many of the drivers still working in Playa del Carmen, finds himself bored. The irony of working less while being considered essential labor is not lost on him; indeed, in this new period of reduced work and heightened monotony, drivers have space to critically reflect on what might come next. Some desire a return to a booming tourism economy, but others see things differently. In their boredom, they question whether so many resources should be devoted to tourism at all.

One wonders what other essential laborers sat idle during quarantine. In Washington, DC, where I now live and write, the months-long citywide lockdown brought business activity to a standstill. Here, too, taxi drivers struggled to find customers, while the city buses and Metro rail system carried only a tiny fraction of their previous ridership. On my jogs in the evenings, I passed police officers guarding an empty Capitol Building, and around my apartment, restaurant workers spent the majority of the workday waiting for an order to come in. Some essential labor found itself busier than

As Miguel returns home from a day of work, he describes the dramatic slowdown in business activity in the resort community of Playacar, noting how a once busy and vibrant section of Playa del Carmen's nightlife scene is now quiet and desolate. Cell phone video by the driver identified here as Miguel, posted with permission.

ever, but other segments of the workforce lingered, the market signaling that perhaps they were not as essential as they had thought. With stay-at-home orders lifted, business is once again open, but still only at a fraction of what it was before.

Under the state of Quintana Roo's *Ley de Transporte* (Transportation Law), drivers in Playa del Carmen are designated "public carriers" and thus qualify as essential laborers who are allowed to work during the COVID-19 pandemic. This designation grants them special privileges in exchange for abiding by rules designed to serve the public interest. In Quintana Roo, the rules include prohibitions against passenger discrimination. Thus, in times of emergency, state authorities can mobilize taxis to transport goods and people, as they did during Hurricane Wilma in 2005, when drivers shuttled thousands of stranded tourists to the nearby city of Merida. In conjunction with a local *colectivo* system and a bus service known as the *tucsa*, taxis in Playa del Carmen are integral to the public transportation infrastructure. Newly imposed regulations limiting the number of passengers on buses, combined with low rates of car ownership in Playa del Carmen, mean that taxis are often the most reliable mode of transportation for locals who can afford them.

The "public carrier" designation is significant for taxi drivers in Playa del Carmen because it guarantees the taxi drivers' union substantial control over the local market. For drivers, it signals a special relationship to the public interest, particularly compared to ride sharing services like Uber and Lyft, which have openly (and legally) discriminated against passengers (Rosenblat 2018). In the context of a competitive transportation market—one in which drivers and their unions have fought hard to shut out ride-share companies (Hunter-Pazzara 2019)—these drivers and their unions have drawn a sharp contrast between the "foreign" interests represented by ride sharing services and the public good represented by taxis. In Quintana Roo, this public transportation good is administered through a municipality-specific union that works in conjunction with local and state governments to set fares, establish routes, and determine other labor conditions.

Before COVID-19, residents routinely complained that the taxi union was too powerful and that drivers shirked their duties to the public by mistreating local riders. So now, with the tourists returned home, transitioning to relying on locals for business is proving challenging. With schools closed, resorts and other businesses shut down, and residents carefully choosing when to leave their homes, there just isn't much work to go around. On top of that, many locals have left the city altogether. Extended-stay migrants from North America and Europe made their exit soon after the tourists.

Resort workers with ties to rural communities in Quintana Roo and nearby states were encouraged to wait out the crisis there, with their union providing modest cash payouts and subsidized transportation to help them get home. Being considered essential labor has kept drivers employed when so many others are out of work, but the lack of customers signals that even as their labor is deemed essential, it is not profitable. Miguel sends me videos as he drives around Playa del Carmen, his camera capturing the empty sidewalks and shuttered storefronts in areas of the city previously buzzing with activity. Plenty of drivers have quit the profession completely. Some rely on savings to get by, while others make their way to other parts of the country to look for work.

Those that remain suit up each day in their standard uniform of black slacks and a white *guayabera*, now accompanied with protective gloves and a face mask. Annette, a single mother and one of a handful of women drivers, shares a photo of her pink face mask decorated with a pair of puckered red lips in the center. She captions the photo *lista para trabajar* (ready to work). Online, drivers express concern about their safety, hoping that the only thing they pick up is a passenger; tips are shared about the best and least expensive methods to sanitize one's vehicle after a ride. Despite Playa del Carmen's reputation for high tourist traffic, its COVID-19 infection and mortality numbers are low, and it appears to be faring better than the rest of the country. As a result, the worry among my interlocutors is their economic future as the reality of a sustained drop in tourism into the fall sets in.

In the midst of this uncertainty and with fewer passengers to transport, drivers now experience a profound sense of boredom. This is new for drivers, having less to do with the spacing of customers over a workday (a common part of being a taxi driver) and more to do with the fact that life has slowed down, perhaps never to pick up speed again. Since the turn of the century, this region of Mexico has been noted for its exponential pace of economic growth. Tourism development accelerated as investment moved south along the Caribbean coast, transforming once sleepy seaside villages into world-renowned tourist destinations. Those who arrived at the beginning of the boom profited immensely from the growth, with older drivers often describing those initial years as a golden age for taxis. Even as growth decelerated, it remained consistent, with each year marking a new record in the number of foreign arrivals. Taxi driving, more than any other profession, held the promise of middle-class status for working-class migrants, thanks in part to the protective efforts of the union and to the seemingly endless potential for further expansion and development.

Now drivers wonder what the future might bring. With the arrival of a vaccine uncertain, drivers and the communities they live in speculate about what a return to tourism might look like. Will it mean hotels and restaurants at half-capacity? Less volume but more high-spending travelers? Or something else not yet imagined?

COVID-19's devastating impact on the tourism sector means that taxi drivers in Playa del Carmen now live in a present darkened by the shadow of an ominous and uncertain future (see Frederiksen 2013). Their boredom manifests itself as the affective register of their marginality, as waiting (for relief, for tourists to return) itself becomes a practice of social suffering (Auyero 2012). For the anthropologist Bruce O'Neill (2017: 4), boredom is "[a] feeling that time has slowed down and that one is stuck in place," as a result of "a brutal politics of displacement within the global order." This applies in no uncertain terms to drivers considered essential by the state but not by the market, a contradiction that underscores the incongruence between valuations of labor.

Inquiring via text about what my interlocutors think might come next, I learned that many have little faith that political systems in Mexico will deliver needed support. They instead place their hopes in the prospect that the business community, with its billions invested in local resorts and theme parks, will offer a solution that lures travelers back and that sets the stage for a revitalized tourism economy. "But even if we [the city of Playa del Carmen] come back, it won't be 100 percent, not like before," suggests Ulyses, an older driver and senior member of the union. "Lots of people who left to Chiapas or Veracruz to wait this out won't get their jobs back and so they'll go somewhere else, maybe to the U.S., who knows?"

A post-pandemic world characterized by slower growth appeals to some of my interlocutors. Sebastian, a veteran driver of ten years, now spends more time by the beach. He tells me that the drop in tourist traffic has given the local ecosystem a chance to *respirar* (breathe)—though I suspect he's also talking about himself. Prior to quarantine, drivers usually worked six days per week during the high season from December to early April and kept regular schedules during the rest of the year. Drivers would complain about having to work harder to secure their income as the region's economic success attracted more workers and, in turn, created more competition between them. For many, the slowdown initially offered a much-needed vacation, but as it has lingered, some use the boredom to rethink their priorities. Annette now spends more time with her two children, something she already anticipates missing should the economy bounce back. Minolo, a musician turned driver, sends me songs that he's recorded during his downtime. Miguel now questions whether using state

resources to keep tourism afloat is the right course of action, echoing similar remarks made by Mexico's president. "Maybe it's time to focus on putting investment in other areas of the economy and other social problems, like climate change. If the world doesn't get to zero emissions, then there won't be a Quintana Roo at the end of the century. Where will my grandchildren go for vacation?" he asks.

One consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic has been to highlight, for taxi drivers in Playa del Carmen, the strange organization of the global economy. The tourism industry is one of the world's largest employers, a trend that accelerated after the 2008 financial panic, especially in Mexico. Its emergence as a key economic sector speaks to the intensification of global consumerism, driven in large part by reduced state employment, eroded conditions of labor in the manufacturing and construction sectors, and educational barriers that keep many Mexicans locked out of the information economy and white-collar employment. Tourism work is decent work, it can pay well, and it is satisfying enough for millions, but is it essential? Calls to return to normal—which is to say, to hyper-consumerist practices like all-inclusive resorts and unnecessary, environmentally destructive travel—risk calcifying the feeling of boredom I have described. Taking a cue from the bored taxi drivers in Playa del Carmen, perhaps we should sit with our own boredom, using it as an opportunity to imagine what could come after.

Author Bio

Brandon Hunter-Pazzara is a PhD candidate in the Department of Cultural Anthropology at Princeton University. His research explores the multiple meanings of solidarity through a comparative ethnographic study of two labor unions representing workers employed in Mexico's tourism sector. His research has received support from the National Science Foundation, as well as a Fulbright-Hays Doctoral Dissertation Research Abroad award.

Preview Image

Courtesy of [Gilbert Mercier](#).

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