

CLAG Filed Study Report- Summer 2017
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Migrant Politics in the Global South City: The Political Strategies of Nicaraguan Migrants to Secure Housing and Basic Services in the Urban Informal Settlement of La Carpio, in San José, Costa Rica.

Last summer I continued my research in the urban informal settlement of La Carpio, in San José, Costa Rica. My dissertation research looks into the everyday political work of Nicaraguan migrants living in this informal settlement, particularly as they negotiate to obtain property titles and a number of urban services to improve their community. La Carpio was founded in 1993 after an organized occupation of land commanded by Aurelio Carpio, a Costa Rican activist (hence the name of the community). The two original *fincas* were divided into individual lots that poor families could easily afford. This newly available land provided a unique opportunity for families living in extreme urban poverty to have access to housing. Because Nicaraguan migrants occupy some of the lowest paying jobs in urban Costa Rica, they often fall within this category. Today La Carpio is a vibrant bi-national community of close to 50000 people that provides valuable resources to migrants and cheap labor to the Costa Rican economy. At the same time, hegemonic ideas in Costa Rica construct La Carpio as a place foreign to Costa Rican values and identity. La Carpio is perpetually framed as a locus of crime, violence, drugs, and “Nicas”! Hence, when the time came in the late 1990s to select a landfill site for the majority of the trash produced in the metropolitan area, La Carpio was the perfect place. A similar logic applied several years later with the inauguration of a water treatment plant on the opposite side of the community. Surrounded by trash, feces, and two of the most polluted rivers in Costa Rica, La Carpio is a unique case study of

environmental racism in an urban Global South context. It is also a unique place to explore the ways in which (insurgent) citizenships, political participation and migration experiences intersect in the struggles for urban justice in the Global South.

Thanks to funds provided by CLAG, I was able to spend my summer exploring these ideas further. I conducted interviews with community leaders, government officials and other actors involved in the everyday work to improve La Carpio. I explored issues ranging from how people negotiated their way into municipal water and electrical infrastructure, compelling the government to improve the precarious connections, to how flooding the “formal” city with trash by blocking the only road leading to the landfill can bring immediate attention from authorities, and to the street rap of el Transformer, a Nicaraguan migrant whose protest songs produce a counter-hegemonic discourse of what it means to live in this community. His hit song “Soy de la Carpio” (on youtube) has become a source of pride for these Carpianos who no longer feel the need to hide their place of residence to be respected. My fieldwork this summer was most certainly a success.

In the coming months I will continue to work on completing my dissertation. I look forward to seeing many of my fellow CLAGistas in Costa Rica in May. I hope that many of you take the time to visit this unique community while you are there.

Appendix 1- Photos from the Field



Figure 1. The main road to La Carpio. This is the only way in and only way out of the community. The road was paved to provide easy access to the dozens of trucks that take the city's trash to the landfill located on the other side of the community.



Figure 2. The protest rap songs of el Transformer celebrate the contributions of La Carpio and Nicaraguan migrants to Costa Rica and give Carpioanos reasons to feel proud of their community.



Figure 3. Self-provided electricity. Illegally extending the formal infrastructure from the main road allows these residents to eventually negotiate with the government for the provision of safer connections. This particular infrastructure in Calle Fildadelfia was recently replaced by the Compañía Nacional de Fuerza y Luz who also provided each household with their own electrical meter.



Figure 4. The leader of Calle Filadelfia, doña Ester, has fought to improve her street in La Carpio by bringing water, electricity, and paved passageways extending all the way down to the river.