On the border between Southern Mexico and Northern Guatemala runs the river Usumacinta, a liquid border legally known as a ‘shared basin’. There are 58 shared basins in Latin America, and every country in Mesoamerica shares a boundary river or other significant water resource. Much attention has been given to the border between the US and Mexico, particularly the Rio Grande river, which has spawned the pejorative word *mojado*, Spanish for the derogatory term ‘wetback’; in other words, for ‘illegal’ immigrants to the US who have had to swim across the border. Many of these people have had to cross several shared basins on their long and arduous trip northwards to the perceived land of opportunity. They are driven by what are known, in the discourse of migration and demographics, as ‘push factors’, such as underdevelopment, poverty, corruption, exploitation, low wages or political strife; likewise, ‘pull factors’ lure migrants towards more prosperous terrain with a promise of higher standards of living.¹

The immigrant trajectory northwards runs perpendicular to these rivers, transforming the flowing water into a succession of natural barriers. This was not always the case, as originally the Usumacinta river was one of the main trading routes for the Mayans. It is still used to transport *chicle* (the gum obtained from the latex of the sapodilla tree; also known as *oro blanco*, ‘white gold’) and logs downstream. But for the contemporary immigrant, the river is a formidable obstacle, draining 42% of Guatemala, with an annual discharge of 105,200 million cubic metres into the Gulf of Mexico.²

The area of this shared basin is among the poorest in Guatemala and Mexico. The Peten, Guatemala’s northernmost district, was until recently a centre for armed conflict between

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**GuateMex: No-Man’s-Water**

*MARCOS LUTYENS*
guerrillas and government troops. Even now, certain areas of the bordering Lacandon forest are held by a group of freedom fighters known as the Zapatistas, following their 1994 uprising which aimed at shoring up the eroded rights of the local indigenous Mayan population. Mayans make up 60% of the Guatemalan population, and constitute the majority of immigrants who head north across the river. However, immigrants from El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, who over the years have been affected by a variety of problems (including drought, earthquakes and social revolution), significantly increase the flow.

Thus, the region has become a volatile transit zone, unofficially known as the ‘Rear Guard’ in the US-backed fight against illegal immigration. Other than the 250,000 or so ‘illegal aliens’ (as these immigrants are known in the US) who attempt to enter that country from Central America each year, this area is also the western terminus for the annual immigration of approximately 100,000 immigrants from Asia.

The US response has been to endorse, or should one say enforce, the ‘Southern Plan’, which led to the deportation in 2001 of over 6,000 Central Americans from Mexico, back across the Usumacinta. In short, the river has been a major hurdle to immigrants on an already daunting trip, ‘pushing’ themselves away from hunger and being ‘pulled’ towards a higher standard of living.

Initiated in 2005, GuateMex is a project that aims not just to help ease the problems of crossing this specific border, but also to enable the would-be immigrant to deal with immigration goals and challenges down the line, such as better-paid jobs, and protection from the risk of being persecuted by the US Department of Homeland Security (formed post-9/11), as well as by newly formed citizen vigilante groups such as the ‘Minutemen’. GuateMex is a ‘raft’ that attempts to counter the political and physical hurdles present at the border, through offering internet access and basic internet/computer education to immigrants on their journey. The ‘raft’ is a 6 metre x 4 metre structure, with a base composed of 55 gallon drums and a superstructure made with modular tent-like material that both shelters and ventilates as the need arises. Inside, there is a bank of computers hooked up to the internet. Immigrants can anonymously draw up to the docking platform, where they are then guided through simple Internet procedures and given advice about how and where to access the internet down the line.

The simple key to this process is a pragmatic sleight-of-hand that places the project in the ‘no-man’s-water’ between the two countries. Thus, the raft becomes an autonomous zone, independent and sovereign to itself. The raft transforms the river from a hurdle into a conduit, decreasing the turbulence of human traffic created by xenophobic local resistance, political red tape and US border-patrol oppression.

The raft is an outgrowth of a relatively long tradition of clandestine or non-sanctioned broadcasting, otherwise known as ‘pirate radio’, that blossomed in the 1960s in Europe, particularly in the form of the offshore radio station, Radio Caroline. Other ‘freebooter’ broadcasts include ‘border blaster’ stations that transmit programmes in violation of US law across the US-Mexican border, although in this case the stations are on Mexican soil, and thus not as autonomous as those stations or hubs in international waters. Not surprisingly,
international waters have been effectively used as a propaganda tool by countries such as the US as in the case of Radio Swan, which transmitted pro-US messages to Cuba off the island of Swan, a territory disputed between the US and Honduras.

The raft itself is a powerful symbol of the plight of immigrants, being a rudimentary, precarious (and sometimes the only) way of travelling across water to reach the desired country. Most notable is the Cuban balsero (rafter) phenomenon, which has lead to the death at sea of approximately 70,000 Cubans of all ages in the last four decades. However, in the case of GuateMex the raft becomes a tool of support and hope, more akin to American writer Hakim Bey’s concept of the Temporary Autonomous Zone (TAZ).

Bey describes the socio-political tactic of creating a contingent domain that eludes formal structures of control, a new territory on the boundary line of established regions. He kicks off his explanation of the TAZ by describing the social formation of the ‘Sea Rovers and Corsairs’, who lived outside the law and set up an "information network" that spanned the globe. He then goes on to draw parallels between these societies and the potential of the Web. In effect, GuateMex bridges the romantic, literally ‘offshore’ notion of a completely autonomous community such as the Corsairs, and the ‘autonomous zones’ offered to us through the useful flow and supply of information that can be accessed through the internet.

The internet raft helps build a community among this tenuous, constantly trickling flow of immigrants who have passed through, helping to weave a wider fabric of support, as successive immigrants can inform newcomers of what lies ahead. At a more profound level, the raft becomes a vehicle that starts to give this vulnerable population a sense of group solidarity and self-awareness, which can only add to its existing strengths.

Needless to say, the internet is increasingly becoming a war zone for the advocacy and rejection of humane immigration policy. Beginning in April 2005, the Minuteman Project (co-founded by Jim Gilchrist and Chris Simcox, and self-defined on its website as "a citizen’s vigilance operation monitoring immigration, business and government") has drawn thousands of Americans to the Mexico-Arizona border, to seize immigrants trying to get across into the US. On 30 May 2006, in their latest effort to block illegal crossing, a cadre of ‘Minutemen’ began building a 10-mile-long fence of barbed wire, razor wire and steel rails on private land in south-eastern Arizona. The estimated time for completing the fence: three weeks. The estimated cost: $100,000.

According to Gilchrist, “if I didn’t have the internet, the Minuteman Project probably wouldn’t have happened”. All his volunteers are assembled and coordinated through his website. On the other side of the coin, organisations that defend the rights of immigrants are generally outgunned and outclassed by their opponents. According to human rights advocate Armando Navarro, professor of ethnic studies at the University of California, Riverside: “There is no doubt [the vigilantes] are winning the internet battle”. Part of the problem is that immigrants and their supporters are generally less well off and have far less access to computers, and hence limited access to the potential for grassroots organising enabled by internet communication.
In its own particular way, GuateMex helps to introduce the benefits of the internet to those who have very little digital access; it thus begins to level the playing field between those who aim to block the flow of immigrants and the immigrants themselves. The ultimate goal of GuateMex is to place these rafts on most of the shared basins in Central and South America and perhaps even in other parts of the world, wherever there is a perceived need to ensure the safety and knowledge of would-be immigrants as they traverse new territories that present challenges, dangers and opportunities. These mobile rafts would thus act as an extended nervous system that transmits valuable information to people who need it for literal and psychological survival. And perhaps the rafts would also be able to provide the assurance of at least one stable link in the 'push' and 'pull' of the migrant's turbulent and changing world.

GuateMex is directed by René Hayashi and Eder Castillo, with inputs from Marcos Lutyens, Freyja Bardell and Blair Ellis.

NOTES
5. William Finn Bennett. 'Internet a key tool for immigration issue organisations'. NCTimes.com, 11 June 2005.
6. Ibid.