

Tinker Grant Field Report

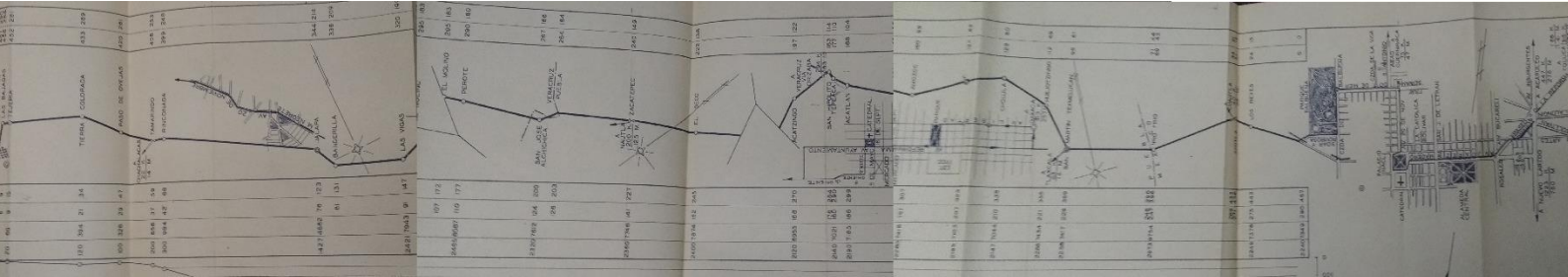
In Mexico, the recently completed *Autovía del Mayab* stretches for 241 kilometers through the Yucatán Peninsula, from Mérida to Cancún, uniting with concrete, tarmac, and shiny glass tollbooths locations that – while they may exist at the periphery of the nation state of Mexico – have long stood at the center of a greater Caribbean world. The ubiquity of semi-degraded plastic bottles, cigarette butts, and bilingual road signs throughout the Mayan Riviera gives the lie to the claims made by countless travel boosters that the jungle intersected by the *Autovía* is ‘virgin’ (and therefore presumably awaiting ‘discovery’ and ‘exploration’ by so-minded tourists), and indeed we have only to look to the route taken by Hernán Cortés nearly half a millennium ago to see that this is well-covered terrain even for Europeans. Far older than this, the rectilinear white paths characteristic of the Mayan settlements throughout the region indicate that road-building in the jungle is anything but new. It is true, though, that the construction of the *autopista sustentable* (as the *Autovía del Mayab* has been called) has disrupted local wildlife habitats – as much is evidenced by the rope bridges slung across the highway at intervals to allow monkeys to pass over the tarmac unmolested. (There are subterranean routes for fauna, too, although the success of this conservationist infrastructure is questionable; roadkill is a common sight, and arachnophobic motorists should take note that the tarantulas native to the region have yet to adjust their migration paths to avoid the highway). But the construction of communications and transportations infrastructure throughout the region – and across the Caribbean – has a long history, and understanding what such modern-day technologies for people and for the environment means situating them in this longer history.



A road sign in the Sian Ka'an biosphere – a protected habitat in Quintana Roo's Zona Maya – instructs visitors to look out for wildlife. Here, the Maya population has responsibility for conservation. The roads are poorly maintained, in part to deter traffic. Some few hundred kilometers to the Northeast, the recently constructed *Autovía del Mayab* – a so-called *autopista susentable* – has carved up monkey habitats but facilitates faster transportation between two important port towns: Mérida and Cancún.

It is ironic, though perhaps inevitable, that to understand the infrastructural integration of the greater Caribbean we have to turn our backs on the coast and towards the sprawling metropolis that is Mexico City, where the historical documents relating to the project of state-building in the Yucatán Peninsula have accrued. More specifically, these documents have ended up in the Archivo General de la Nación, a pantopticon boasting a huge Mexican flag that announces to any visitor who may have been in doubt that it is the archival material not of any region or state but of the nation writ large that is housed in the walls of this former prison. Thus it is among the papers of the *Secretaría de Comunicaciones y Transportes* that are found plans for the construction and enlargement of docks in Vera Cruz; discussion of the militarization of radiotelegraphy throughout the Caribbean in the 1930s; proposed flight paths uniting population centers in Baja California and Quintana Roo; blueprints for docks, lighthouses, and roads across the Yucatán. It is these documents – and others like them – that I hope to use to better understand the integration, disintegration, and reintegration of communications and

transportation infrastructures across and around the greater Caribbean, and what these processes have meant for local autonomy, national state power, and human and non-human ecologies.



Composite image showing a map of a proposed road from Mexico City to Vera Cruz (AGN, Mexico). Such a two-dimensional rendering of this project of national consolidation glosses over the complex, on-the-ground realities of infrastructural engineering. **(Don't publish photo without permission)**

Federal infrastructure projects have long stood at the center of relations between nation states and indigenous polities, as recent controversy over the Dakota access oil pipeline demonstrates. It is in the construction of pipelines, roads, pylons, and canals that the imperatives of state-building and consolidation abut against local autonomy (which, in many areas, is synonymous with indigenous autonomy). This is true throughout Latin America. In Bolivia, for example, the proposed construction of a superhighway from Villa Tunari to San Ignacio de Moxos through the TIPNIS reserve galvanized protest among the Tsimané, Yuracaré, and Mojeño-Trinitario peoples of the Bolivian Amazon. Even when such projects aren't resisted – or are actively welcomed – it is important to appreciate their longer history, and the fact of their embeddedness in human society.