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## Professor Fran Ansley's Comments

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## PROF. FRAN ANSLEY'S COMMENTS

PROF. FRAN ANSLEY

*"That video we just watched never fails to move me, no matter how many screenings I was at back in the day ..."*

Don't listen to Luvernel about how little she does these days. If you could see what she is up to with her church, what she did for her husband who died of cancer just this past year, and the way her double extended family revolves around her, you would see that she is still a force in this world.

Now we want for all of you to have a chance to see something of those trips more directly, not just to hear about them.

We are about to watch a video called "From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras." The video came about in the first place because TIRN was contacted by WGBH, the public television station in Boston, in connection with a program they have called Nova. They had heard that TIRN was going to do this trip, this unusual trip, and they called to see if they could come along. It was going to be part of a series they were doing on the global economy, and they told us how much they wanted to include a workers'-eye view of that reality.

We were a little nervous about the idea—probably not near as nervous as we should have been. But the deal we eventually reached was that the crew could come if they agreed to let us have all of the raw film footage once the trip and their own show were done.

There is a long story that Susan and Luvernel and I could tell about what it's like for a bunch of people—folks who don't all yet know each other that well—to go off on a challenging international adventure with a film crew. But we did it, and I think eventually we all came to agree that it's a good thing we did. We lived through various highs and lows, and much learning about film-making took place.

More importantly, we did finally end up with the raw footage, and at that point we had to figure out how we could use it to create a video that would help with the outreach work Luvernel was just describing. Luckily, we made the decision to contact filmmaker Anne Lewis.<sup>1</sup> She

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1. Anne Lewis created various documentary products related to TIRN's trips to Mexico. Among them are the video screened at our symposium, "From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras: A TIRN Educational Video," focused on TIRN's first southbound trip in 1991. It can be viewed at: <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/sfc/id/99128/rec/1>. Anne also put together a series of interviews with Tennessee workers and Mexican workers called "Morristown Video Letters." A copy is located at the

was then working out of Appalshop, a regional arts treasure located in eastern Kentucky, and she agreed to edit down the footage we had down into this 20-minute video we are all about to see.

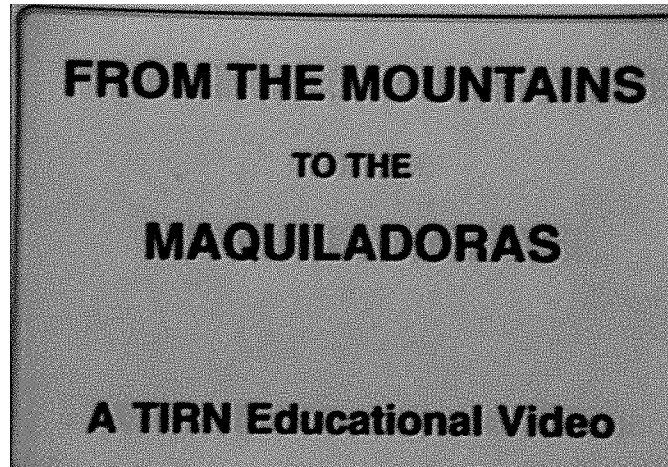
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University of North Carolina Southern Folklife collection among Highlander materials there and can be viewed at <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/98554/>.

We screened these video letters multiple times for workers in both countries.

Finally, Anne also made "Morristown: In the Air and Sun," a feature-length documentary. It included footage from trips to Mexico, as well as later scenes and interviews with immigrant workers in Tennessee. Among the people and events covered are a successful union organizing drive at a majority-immigrant poultry plant in Morristown, as well as interviews with union organizers and pro-NAFTA business leaders in both Mexico and Tennessee. The documentary can be purchased on DVD from Appalshop in Whitesburg, Kentucky, <https://appalshop.org/shop/morristown-in-the-air-and-sun>.

The opportunity to work with Anne Lewis on these projects was a gift. TIRN and Highlander folks knew of Anne through previous films she had made or helped to make about labor and community efforts in Appalachia. (For only a few examples, see, "Harlan County, USA," "Justice in the Coal Fields," "On Our Own Land," "Fast Food Women," and "Shelter"), but we did not foresee what a productive partnership we would enjoy with her over many years, beginning with her skillful editing of the footage from TIRN's 1991 trip. See also Anne's and my multi-media essay describing some of this collaboration, *Going South and Coming North: Migration and Union Organizing in Morristown, Tennessee*, part of a series on "Migration, Mobility, Exchange, and the U.S. South" published in *SOUTHERN SPACES*, an interdisciplinary on-line journal, May 2011, <http://southernspaces.org/2011/going-south-coming-north-migration-and-union-organizing-morristown-tennessee>.



Title Screen of *From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras*<sup>2</sup>



Opening Frame of *From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras*

Whew. That video never fails to move me, no matter how often I was present at screenings back in the day. The 1991 trip now feels both a world away and like it happened yesterday.

Because of the unexpected opportunity I was given to speak in the opening segment, I do not plan to talk long now before turning things

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2. Anne Lewis, *From the Mountains to the Maquiladoras: A TIRN Educational Video*, TIRN, <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/sfc/id/99128/rec/1>.

over to Jennifer Gordon. But by way of transition from the video to what Jennifer is going to share with us, I do want to say a little about what it was like to come back home after seeing what we saw, and what TIRN tried to do with the experiences people had on that 1991 trip as captured in the video and otherwise, as well as the multiple other exchanges the group organized between Tennessee and Mexico, in both directions, in the years that followed.

As any good organizer will tell you, you don't ever want to organize some big educational project and not have something for people to do afterwards with what they learn. At least that is the case when the point of your educational program is to advance a movement for social change.

But despite the power and drama of what TIRN travelers encountered on these trips, it was not easy to figure out what to do with these ventures into another land. For one thing, the distances were so great between life at home and life at the Mexican border – the miles between, the differences of language and culture and age, the shocking gap in pay and in levels of consumption. Sometimes those distances felt almost impossible to convey. Even more daunting was a question of power. What could TIRN, this small organization in an obscure corner of East Tennessee, actually hope to do about these massive economic shifts were we beginning to grasp as we tried to follow the flight of industrial capital to Mexico? How could we get any kind of an organizing handle on forces so privileged and unaccountable – and often so invisible to the general public -- under existing law?

To our good fortune, it turned out that a handle of sorts was available when we returned from that first trip. George H.W. Bush's administration was negotiating the terms of NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, a plan that would build on the existing U.S.-Mexico *maquiladora* program to write free-market ideology, including boldly expansive legal rights for multinational corporations, into international trade rules. Because this deal would involve governmental action and because it would eventually require a green light from Congress, it put the economics of off-shoring and deindustrialization squarely into the domestic political agenda. TIRN was quick to join others in trying to take advantage of this unusual opportunity to talk about the need for greater democratic control over capital, and to do so in a way that did not demonize Mexican workers, or workers anywhere.

For the next several years TIRN members agitated on the question of NAFTA – first under the Bush administration as it negotiated with Mexico and Canada to craft a deal, and then under Bill Clinton who took office before the pact was approved but threw his full support behind a slightly amended version dressed up with

toothless “side agreements” on labor and environment. By 1993, Congress approved NAFTA, and in 1994 the deal went into effect.

So the campaign against NAFTA went down to defeat. But it gave us a way to mount a real fight. Luvernel talked about all the work that she and other TIRN travelers did, speaking to meetings of union members, church people, and community groups. Some people in those meetings got mobilized to contact elected officials. They made calls and wrote letters and joined delegations that met with Congressional reps for conversations like the one Susan talked about with a Tennessee Congressman. Other people wrote letters to the editor or went on subsequent TIRN trips to Mexico. Others gave press interviews, told stories, showed their slides, collared their friends, passed around petitions. More took part in motorcades, protest demonstrations and marches.

In other words, the existence of this terrible proposed trade agreement, and the paltry thread of thin accountability that connected the proposed agreement to Congress, opened a path, however narrow, for broad-based democratic action. Many of the workers on our trips were not part of any union, just like the majority of their fellow workers in East Tennessee. But some like Luvernel were, and those folks were more likely to know already how to do citizen lobbying. Further, because union workers were part of an organized group that was known to pay attention to elections and to watch the behavior of politicians, they could often get meetings that solo individuals or more isolated groups were unable to achieve. I remember Luvernel talking about how the union would sometimes pass out stacks of quarters on the shop floor so that workers who wanted to could use the pay phone to call their local, state or federal representative about some policy question that mattered to them. (Sounds like another world, right? The operator used to chime in and tell you it was time for another quarter or two.)

Anyhow, we got back from that first trip, and tried to look for these opportunities. The testimony you heard Luvernel Clark and Shirley Reinhardt giving toward the end of that video was one such opportunity. Apparently somebody in Congress had at least managed to impose a requirement that the U.S. Trade Representative must hold hearings around the country to hear from members of the public about their views on NAFTA. Nobody thought for a minute that testimony at these hearings would by itself change things. But the hearings did represent a public moment for us to tell about what we had seen and to sound the alarm about what this proposed “maquiladora style” NAFTA was likely to mean for working people in the U.S. and in Mexico. At least there was going to be this occasion when a set of guys in suits were going to have to sit up on a platform somewhere and act like they were listening to people. So when we

learned that one of these hearings was going to take place in Atlanta, we decided that some of us from the trip should make ourselves heard. A few of us jumped in a car and drove down there to give our testimony, carrying with us and submitting to the panel written testimony from others as well.

Through the campaign we got to be part of this raggedy effort attempting to counter the huge economic shift that was then taking place under our feet. It was kind of an amazing moment. In 1999, a TIRN delegation went to Seattle to join other labor and environmental groups (“Teamsters and Turtles” someone dubbed the assemblage) protesting the first meeting of the World Trade Organization to be held in the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Through our interaction with Mexican counterparts, we came not only into a deeper understanding of our own economy, but also into a deeper understanding of the destructive ways our government’s policies and the practices of multinational companies based in the U.S. were harming economies and people elsewhere. For instance, we learned from some of the groups who hosted us during trips to Mexico that in their view the *maquiladora* program was hurting the very Mexican workers and subsistence farmers that the program’s promoters claimed it would help.

Eventually we got to meet activists from around the world. We were fighting against these kinds of trade deals at a hemispheric level at some moments. For instance, in 1994, Bill Clinton hosted a Summit of the Americas in Miami, fast on the heels of his administration’s triumphant completion of the NAFTA deal. It was billed as the launch of a grand new Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), like a NAFTA on steroids. Then in 1998 a second FTAA summit was held in Santiago, Chile in 1998. Opponents of this deal from all over the Americas called for a parallel gathering of FTAA critics in Santiago, and a small delegation from TIRN attended. There we met South American trade unionists, indigenous leaders, and environmental groups. The resources for a horizontal, international network open and accessible to grassroots people from around the Americas, let alone around the world, were certainly not in place to sustain TIRN’s on-going participation in such conversations. But we learned a great deal from them that still calls out for more education and action.

I lift up these details about TIRN’s advocacy on trade agreements and its too-brief experiences in internationalist arenas in part because those things were such a profound and unique aspect of TIRN’s work and because they highlight the democracy deficit that continues to

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3. See, e.g., Harold Meyerson, *The Battle in Seattle*, AMERICAN PROSPECT, Nov 29, 2019, <https://prospect.org/power/the-battle-in-seattle-origins-21st-century-left/>.



mark the global economy today. But I also see those matters as a well-suited handoff to my sister Jennifer Gordon, whose own work on international trade and on what I will loosely call “the international work force,” has meant so much to me. By that term I mean a workforce whose members are employed in their native settings around the world in different nations, but also the thoroughly internationalized set of migrants – employees, gig workers, and guestworkers, and more – now so evident in settings *within* most countries around the world, including, of course, our own.<sup>4</sup>

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4. See, e.g., Jennifer Gordon, *In the Zone: Work at the Intersection of Trade and Migration*, 23 THEORETICAL INQUIRIES IN LAW 147 (2022); *Regulating the Human Supply Chain*, 102 IOWA L. REV. 445 (2017); *People Are Not Bananas: How Immigration Differs from Trade*, 104 NORTHWESTERN UNIV. L. REV. 1109 (2010); *Rethinking Work and Citizenship*, 55 UCLA L. REV. 1161 (2008) (with Robin A. Lenhardt); CONFLICT AND SOLIDARITY BETWEEN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND LATINO IMMIGRANT WORKERS, PREPARED FOR THE CHIEF JUSTICE EARL WARREN INSTITUTE ON RACE, ETHNICITY, AND DIVERSITY, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY LAW SCHOOL (2007) (with Robin A. Lenhardt), <https://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/GordonLenhardtpaperNov30.pdf>; *Transnational Labor Citizenship*, 80 S. CAL. L. REV. 503 (2007); and SUBURBAN SWEATSHOPS: THE FIGHT FOR IMMIGRANT RIGHTS (2005).

