



A Conversation with Researcher Zefitret Abera Molla

—[Priscilla Ankrah](#), Priority Africa Network

“The US -Mexican Border es *una herida abierta*, where the Third World grates against the first, and bleeds.”

—Gloria Anzaldua, Borderlands.

In 2019, before the start of the pandemic, [more than 5,000 African and Haitian immigrants applying for asylum, were apprehended at the US-Mexico border.](#)

Under the Trump Administration, with the implementation of Title 42¹ in March 2020, the rate of expulsion at the border for African and [Haitian immigrants rose to more than 28 percent.](#)

Despite these disturbing trends, the media’s singular narrative of Latino asylum seekers erases the equally significant story of African and Caribbean asylum seekers.

But one Ethiopian researcher, Zefitret Abera Molla, is daring to delve deeper, and to lift up the journeys and the stories of African and Haitian asylum seekers at the US-Mexico Border.

¹ [Title 42 was created to address public health and social welfare and grants the government the ability to take emergency action in numerous ways, including to “stop the introduction of communicable diseases.”](#) It is, in the words of Attorney Mulu Alemayehu, an “invisible wall,” allowing the U.S. to expel asylum seekers.

In 2020, at the height of the pandemic, while studying migration at the University of San Francisco (USF), she decided on her own to travel to Tapachula, Mexico and explore the stories of those who are seeking refuge at the U.S.' borders. She spent nine months in Mexico, interviewing Haitian and African asylum seekers.

PAN had the pleasure of speaking with Ms. Molla about what inspired her to begin this journey, how she navigated racism in Tapachula, how colorism led her to deeper commitment to Pan Africanism, and some of the hardest stories she encountered at the Border and in her career .

PAN: What were some of the tougher stories you have encountered in your research, and how did you navigate them?

Molla:

When I first arrived in Mexico, I would just talk to people who would tell me about this person, they knew, and that person. It was mostly men, so they knew and would refer me to more men.

It seemed like there were more men because of how expensive the trip was. They would often come from Cameroon in Africa to Ecuador; it's a dangerous and expensive route.

But there were women, especially Haitian women—I was only able to interview a couple.

Their stories revealed that at every point of their lives in Mexico, they were at a threat: from the time they arrived in Tapachula, they would have to navigate gangs. Then they had to deal with threats from the Mexican police, and then the threats from people in the town. So it's a never ending struggle.

There is one story of a Cameroonian man that I remember vividly. He needed money badly, so he worked at a construction site and he saved up money.

After working to save all his money to rent a place to live, he got robbed. The worst part was that the robbers insulted him, calling him "Negro," which is equivalent to "nigger." Even though he didn't fully understand Spanish, he could tell when someone was being aggressive. So he was robbed. And then when the robbers heard police sirens, they left him. Luckily, they didn't take him. He tried to explain what happened to the police officers, but they just could not understand what he was saying because he was speaking English to them. (This Southern Mexico. They don't speak English. It's not like Tijuana, you know?)

So after he was robbed, and lost his money that he saved, the cops just left him there.

Mexico's complicated History with Anti Blackness

PAN: Mexico, is a [nation that dealt in the global trafficking of African bodies](#).

Despite its nascence with its first president, [Vicente Guerrero, an Afro-Indian descendant of enslaved people](#), it remains a nation that continues to grapple with its own nuanced iteration of anti-blackness.

PAN: How did you deal with racism in Mexico?

Molla:

Overall, I felt pretty safe. But I always made sure I had my green card. I always made sure I would speak in my best American accent to anybody that was a police officer.

But there is one experience that I had, that really opened my eyes to racism. One day, I went back to the Southern part of Mexico on vacation, with some British friends and on our way back, we had to take a taxi.

In that one trip, I got stopped three times. None of my white British friends were stopped.

PAN: As an Ethiopian, woman, how did you arrive at this Pan-Africanist lens:

Molla:

In Ethiopia, there's a lot of colorism towards anybody who is perceived as darker with more "Black features."

There is no one way to be Black, but if you are considered to have more "Black features," then people will label you African. It's like "You" look African because apparently "We" are not: we are Ethiopian and then there's the rest of Africa.

I went to an international school, and it really shaped my understanding of Africa. I was around other people from Africa– people from Senegal, Cameroon, and the Central African Republic. It was great. I got a broader understanding of Africa.

PAN: What makes you interested in the lives of broken people?

Molla:

I lived in France for a while before I went to USF. I had an interpretation job for girls who were victims of human trafficking.

The hardest part was that there were a lot of young teenagers, which I could relate to because at the time, I was 18.

I was thinking about my experiences as a young teenager and how I would have fun with my friends on the weekends. But on Monday at 11:00 AM, I would have an interpretation call with a girl from Nigeria. She's 16, 17– close to my age– and someone had trafficked her.

I remember this one story where I broke down during the call. The girl was 16 or 17, and her mom had just passed away. She was from Benue state, which is where a lot of the girls came from.

Before the girl's mom died, she sent her to stay with a family friend who helped her cross half of Africa to the Mediterranean; she then crossed the Mediterranean, and came to Italy.

She came with the understanding that she was supposed to braid hair and go to school. That was the deal, but that's just not what happened.

She was raped and that's how she basically started working in the sex trade. She was told that she had to pay back this huge amount of debt for crossing Africa. She did that for a couple of months until she was finally able to escape. She escaped to France, and in France, she was in a shelter where she had to tell her story again and again and again, because she had to build her asylum case and get legal representation.

PAN: What is next for you?

Molla:

For now, I am working as a researcher at a think tank in DC. In the future, I may pursue a Phd focusing on the research I have done.

[Learn more about Zefitret Molla here.](#)
