**Leave if You're Able:**
**Migration, Survival, and the Everydayness of Deportation in Honduras**

by

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## DEDICATION

Para el poeta que no sentía y el sicario que sentía demasiado, que descansen en paz.

For the poet who didn’t feel and the hitman who felt too much. May you rest in peace.

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**ABSTRACT**

Drawing from 21 months of fieldwork in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, *Leave if You're Able* focuses on the experiences of young men deported back to neighborhoods labeled as among the world's most violent. I argue for understanding deportation not as rupture but, rather, I place it within a continuum of exclusions and displacements, examining what it means when deportation becomes an ordinary and traumatic experience, routine and catastrophic. Clandestine migration and deportation are positioned here not as exceptional, spectacular events in a life of otherwise stability but are instead shown to be the extension across national boundaries of the marginalization, criminalization, and displaceability of a population who is always already excluded, deportable, before ever leaving their country of citizenship.

From 2015 to 2019, Honduras saw nearly 400,000 people deported – mostly from Mexico and the United States. With a population of just over 9 million, this means that more than four percent of Hondurans were deported over just five years. Through stories of deportation and displacement, I trace the legal violences employed to detain young Hondurans, the legal and illegal violences poised to harm them in their home country, and the circulation of violence through circuits of clandestine migration and re-migration. The first generation of deportation studies literature revealed deportation to be a process of rending, exiling people back to countries of citizenship that are unfamiliar and do not feel like home. This was a crucial turn, but a study of Honduran deportation today tells a different story than most of the existing deportation-as-exile centered ethnographies. While there is a small percentage of Hondurans who are deported after growing up in the United States, the majority of Honduran deportees were

caught and deported before ever settling into life in the United States, many after having a claim for asylum denied, many before they ever reached the U.S.-Mexico border. Understanding post-deportation life in these circumstances is crucial, as this kind of engagement with migration and deportation is likely to become increasingly common, as borders harden even further while many people all over the world find life in their country of citizenship to be too hard to survive.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

## The Ordinariness of Deportation

When Ulises was deported the second time it took him longer to recover. He was depressed, broken-hearted at the prospect of being back in Honduras, and traumatized from the three months he'd been held in detention in the United States. He laughs, without mirth, when he compares this with his first attempt to migrate a few years earlier. That time, he'd been kidnapped by a drug cartel in northern Mexico and held for three months, unsure each morning whether he would be killed or allowed to live another day. Still, he came back mostly unchanged after that experience, more or less ready to try again. This time, though, he found himself unable to sleep, or sleeping too much. He lost a lot of weight. He wandered between his mother's house in a rural region, where he could not find work, and the city where he'd grown up, where he feared for his life. Despite feeling broken by this last attempt, migration still seemed like the only way out of this dilemma, so he was considering trying a third time to get to the United States. Moving between bad options, Ulises is adrift both within his country and outside of it.

Ulises's story is not remarkable or exceptional. He is one of hundreds of thousands of young Hondurans who have left their homes multiple times and been forced back. Drawing from 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork in and around San Pedro Sula, Honduras, this dissertation focuses on the experiences of people like Ulises. I argue for conceptualizing deportation not as rupture but, rather, placing it within a continuum of exclusions and displacements. I examine what it means when deportation becomes an ordinary and traumatic experience, routine and

catastrophic. I suggest that clandestine migration – with all its attendant risks – and deportation are not exceptional, spectacular events in a life of otherwise stability but are instead the extension across national boundaries of the marginalization, criminalization, and displaceability of a population who is always already excluded, deportable, before ever leaving their country of citizenship. Deportability and illegality (De Genova 2002), I suggest, begin at home.

The core argument of my dissertation, then, is a simple one: that we are dealing with a new kind of deportation, a new experience of removal, and, consequently, a new meaning of this process in the lives of those who are being deported (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of the previous kinds and experiences of deportation). I position deportation to be at once violent and mundane, connected, consistent, and coherent with the violence of daily life for young Hondurans. Being deported, for the young Hondurans with whom I work, is not a singular experience of exceptional rupture. They are not sent to places with which they are unfamiliar. This is, however, precisely the problem. They are returned to the familiarity of desperation, of poverty, of violence, of exclusion, of – in many ways – an unlivable life. Deportation in this context is not about pulling people out of the worlds they knew and sending them "back" to someplace strange but, rather, foreclosing the possibility of escape from a place they know too well. Consequently, this propels further migrations, and further deportations. Deportation here is not exile, but it is still violent.

As I review in Chapter 3, Deportation Studies has mostly focused on the experience of those who are sent back to countries with which they are largely unfamiliar, places where they were born but did not grow up, where they hold citizenship, but do not feel that they belong. Scholars have likened this experience to exile (Coutin 2016) and banishment (Zilberg 2004) and have done the important work of revealing deportation in this context to be a process of violent

rending, rather than a logical, simple one of returning people to their "rightful" place in the liberal democratic international order. Showing the upheaval and trauma inherent in this process was a critical contribution to push against an idea that deportation, if orderly, could be just.

There is, however, an issue with the now substantial body of literature on deportation-as-exile that forcefully shows, again and again, how deportees who grew up in the United States (or elsewhere in the global north) are profoundly harmed by being returned to countries of citizenship that they do not feel to be their homes. While pushing against a discursive fiction that deportation is "not punishment" and simply administrative by chronicling the rupture it entails, an inference could be made that, absent that rupture, deportation *could* be purely administrative, humanitarian even. If people are deported before they have time to settle, before they even have a chance to enter the country of their destination, does that solve the problem of the violence of deportation? If aspiring immigrants are not able to build families and communities, will deportation be more effective at curtailing subsequent migrations? This is where my work comes in, demonstrating how deportation, even when it does not entail rending or social dislocation, continues to be violent and, also, fails to deter continued cycles of migration.

More broadly, this project raises questions about the nature of mobility, why people move, and what it means for them to do so. Thinking about deportation beyond the event of it, my approach revises the geography, the temporality, and the nature of the trauma associated with being removed and returned. It also suggests a blurring of an idea of mobility as either forced or chosen, understanding a kind of freedom to move and being made to move as nested, connected, and simultaneous conditions. This troubles an association with mobility as the domain of the privileged and immobility as the condition of the subaltern. Throughout this dissertation, I present multiple scales of inclusion and exclusion, overlapping regimes of mobility control, and

layered sovereignties that push and protect, that constrain and coerce movement. Hondurans, like people everywhere, turn to migration as one method of navigating these intersecting power dynamics, both challenging them and being channeled by them.

**Situating Honduras**

Honduras is a country of just over nine million people, located in the eastern part of the Central American isthmus. After receiving notably less attention than its neighbors from the international community (scholars among them) for decades, in the twenty first century Honduras has attracted much more scrutiny due to a 2009 coup d'état, a shockingly dramatic increase in the murder rate, the presence of street gangs known as *maras,* its growing importance in the international drug trade, and being the starting point of massive migrant caravans in 2018 and 2019 that garnered the ire of then U.S. President Donald Trump.

Honduras's rate of intentional homicide continues to be among the highest in the world, and San Pedro Sula and Choloma, co-urban cities in the northern department[1] of Cortés, together have the highest murder rates within the country. See Table 1.

*Table 1: Honduras Homicide Rates per 100,000 People, 2011-2019*[2]

| | **National** | **San Pedro Sula** | **Choloma** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *2011* | 86.5 | 166.4 | 94.5 |
| *2012* | 85.5 | 173.6 | 78.3 |
| *2013* | 79 | 193.4 | 68.7 |
| *2014* | 68 | 142 | 62.4 |
| *2015* | 60 | 110.5 | 90.5 |
| *2016* | 59 | 107 | 92.7 |
| *2017* | 43.6 | 47.8 | 86.5 |
| *2018* | 41.4 | 47.1 | 77 |
| *2019* | 44.7 | 56.7 | 96.7 |

As can be seen in Table 1, the homicide rate has decreased dramatically from its height in 2011 and 2012, though there is widespread and well-founded doubt that the precipitous drop truly reflects the levels of security in the country.[3] Even if we believe the homicide numbers to be wholly accurate, however, the homicide rate has remained devastatingly high; the World Health Organization classifies any homicide rates in the double digits as an epidemic (WHO 2014). Furthermore, especially in the urban zones of Choloma and San Pedro Sula, as Table 1 indicates, the homicide rate is often nearly double that of the national average, and the experience of those on the urban margins continues to be one of insecurity.

Over the last two decades, Honduras has seen massive outmigration – sometimes dubbed an exodus (Frank-Vitale 2018) – and a corresponding increase in the numbers of Hondurans who are deported. The numbers are inexact, but, essentially, since 2016, Honduras has seen nearly 300,000 people deported.[4] In 2019 alone, nearly 100,000 Hondurans were returned to their country of citizenship.

*Table 2: Honduras Deportations by Country 2016-2019*[5]

| | **United States** | **Mexico** | **Guatemala** | **TOTAL** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| ***2016*** | 20159 | 31886 | 0 | 54427 |
| ***2017*** | 19790 | 24178 | 0 | 44067 |
| ***2018*** | 30319 | 42819 | 0 | 73650 |
| ***2019*** | 41045 | 56166 | 553 | 98094 |

This means that more than three percent of Hondurans have been deported over the space of four years. Deportation in Honduras, however, looks substantially different from other countries where this phenomenon has been studied. While mass deportations in the mid-1990s had profound effects on society in neighboring El Salvador (Zilberg 2011), and Mexico has long

dealt with the ramifications of waves of deportees (Boehm 2016; Caldwell 2019; Anderson 2015), in Honduras this is a relatively new phenomenon. Substantial outmigration really began in the late '90s here, spurred by a devastating hurricane, increasing after the 2009 coup d'état, the rising murder rate, and continued political, social, environmental, and economic instability. The increase in Honduran outmigration in the last two decades coincides with a hardening of borders in the United States and Mexico and a growing focus in the region on migration as an issue of security, much of which has been directed at keeping Central Americans from even getting to the U.S.-Mexico border (see Vogt 2018; Galemba 2018; Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias, and Pickles 2015, among others, for more on this externalization of the U.S.-Mexico border). While there is a small percentage of Hondurans who are deported after growing up in the United States, the majority of Honduran deportees today were caught and deported before ever settling into life in the United States. One clear indicator of this, as can be seen in Table 2, is that more Hondurans are deported from Mexico than the United States now.

### ***Maras, Pandillas*, and Gangs**

Estimates vary and there is little consensus as to how many people are gang members in Honduras. A widely cited figure comes from a 2006 report by USAID indicating that there are 36,000 active gang members (USAID 2006). Many years later, this number has likely grown, however there are no more recent, reliable statistics (Pachico 2016). The Honduran government has incentives both to overestimate and underestimate the prevalence of gangs in the country, but in the urban and semi-urban neighborhoods of Honduras, the presence of *maras* is undeniable.

In this dissertation, I will use the terms *maras, pandillas,* and gangs interchangeably. There are subtle differences as to their meanings in the Honduran context, but for the discussion

here, they all represent the same thing: groups of young people, mostly men, who exercise control internally, within their own neighborhoods, through lethal violence and a strict enforcement of their rules. They impose order on their neighborhoods and understand themselves to be protectors, engaged in an eternal, existential, war with rival groups who would take over their territory and their people (Frank-Vitale and Martínez d'Aubuisson 2020). Honduras is home to a variety of gangs, the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) and Barrio 18 being the most famous and numerous, but smaller, more local gangs also operate including, but not limited to, the Vatos Locos, the Aguacates, the Olanchanos, the Tercereños, the Terrazeños, the Chirizos, El Combo Que No Se Deja, the Tacamiches, and the Benjamins. In Chapter 2, I will discuss the gangs, their social importance, and their geography of control in more depth.

In this dissertation, however, I am not going to use the real names of any of the gangs that I make reference to, as their relationship to the *colonias* that they control is easily identifiable for anyone familiar with Honduras. Consequently, I have endeavored to de-identify people, neighborhoods, and gangs as they relate to each other in order to preserve the safety of the people whose stories appear in these pages. I find it prudent to obscure not just names but names and neighborhoods and gangs, because it is precisely the relationality among them that could lead to identification. I call the four gangs that appear throughout the dissertation Los Naranjos, Los Verdes, Los Morados, and Los Amarillos. I have decided to use neutral color terms as the pseudonyms for the gangs because I want to decouple my names and their counterparts as thoroughly as possible. These color choices, Orange,[6] Green, Yellow, Purple do not have any relationship to any of the symbols associated with any of the gangs.

**Research and Writing Methods**

The arguments offered in this dissertation derive from ethnographic fieldwork conducted in and around the Sula Valley, in Honduras's northern coast, from 2017-2019. The majority of my research took place in the poor and working-class neighborhoods of San Pedro Sula, Honduras's second largest city and economic capital, and Choloma, the *maquila*-oriented neighboring municipality that bleeds into and overlaps with San Pedro Sula's periphery. I spent time in many parts of the Valley's urban and semi-urban periphery, including Villanueva, Potrerillos, Cofradía, and La Lima. I also made research visits to El Progreso, Yoro; La Ceiba, Atlántida; Juticalpa, Olancho; and Tegucigalpa and Comayagüela, the twinned municipalities that make up the capital city. The circle in Image 1 roughly indicates the Sula Valley, with San Pedro Sula in the center.

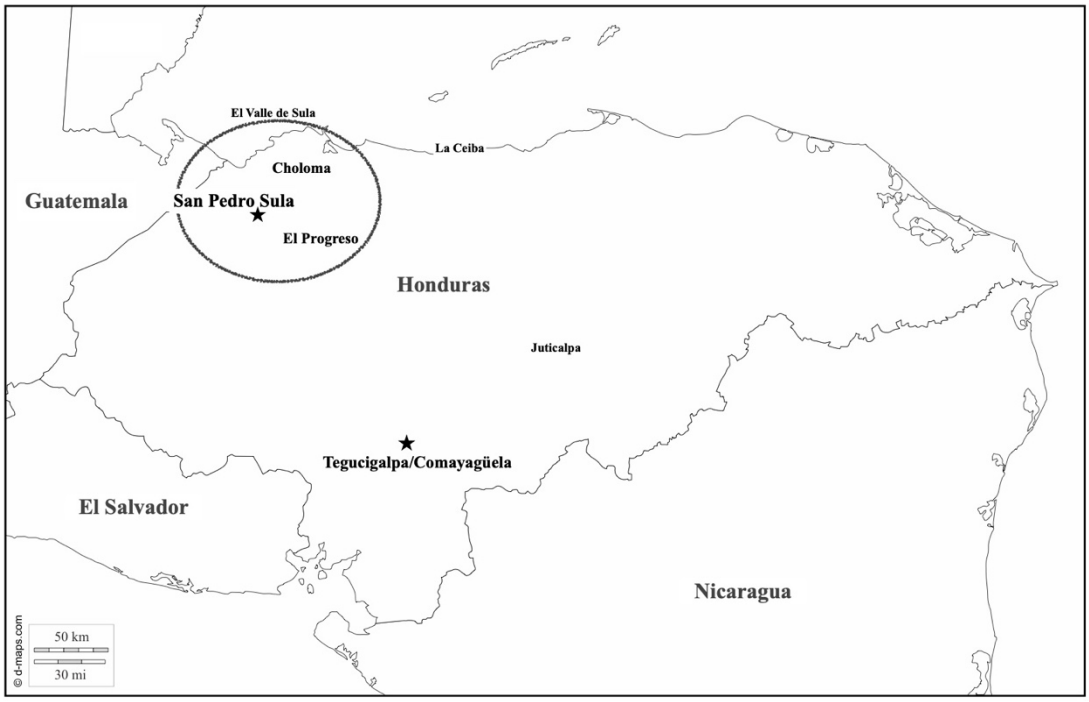


*Image 1: Map of Fieldwork Sites in Honduras*

While this project's focus is Honduras, it builds upon work I've been doing since 2010 on transit migration of Central Americans through Mexico. At migrant shelters and along freight train lines, I documented the multiple kinds of violence that migrants face and the various strategies of survival and resistance they employ. That research sparked the initial interest in studying Honduras, as I saw firsthand a dramatic increase in the numbers of people leaving Honduras and discovered how little had been written about the country in comparison to its better-studied neighbors, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. Drawing upon networks and contacts I had developed while in Mexico, I traveled to Honduras first in 2013, then again to conduct exploratory research for what would become this project in 2015 and 2016.

Finding Deportees: NGO Affiliation

*Fieldnotes: April 1, 2019*

La Libertad. Interview with Pedro. After a while other guys started to come by who I know. Anderson sat down next to me and starts riffing. One of the other ex-*pandilleros* (maybe current *pandilleros*?) kind of sidles up and is quiet but hangs. Ramón comes by and Checho and they're just kind of sitting around, chatting, telling stories. It was a jovial atmosphere. I buy everyone coke and potato chips. At one point Ramón says:

Look! Everyone here is *deportado*. All *deportados! Deportado, deportado, deportado*, he says, pointing at each person in our little circle. Except for the 17-year-old kid. The rest of them have all been deported, at least once, many of them multiple times.

In San Pedro Sula, like many parts of Honduras, people who have been deported are everywhere. Everyone has a family member or a neighbor or a friend who has been deported. Deportation is so common, however, that having been deported is no longer really a defining characteristic or a public identity of much weight. This ubiquity and lack of stigma meant it was, in theory, easy for me to find people who had been deported to speak with; it also meant that I had to get into communities and neighborhoods to reach them because deportees are not marked or separated out from the rest of society in any meaningful way.[7]

Because of this methodological challenge, my initial research plan involved affiliating with a Honduran NGO, the *Comisión de Acción Social Menonita* (CASM), which offers programming for deported youth and young adults in the Sula Valley. From 2014 until the summer of 2017, their *Programa de Apoyo al Migrante Retornado* (PAMR) had a presence in each of the three deportee processing centers in Honduras.[8] They were one of a handful of NGOs that were there each time a plane or a bus of deportees arrived, offering their post-deportation services to everyone who wanted to listen. The PAMR director was eager to have a graduate student get involved in their program and analyze what was happening with deportees.

Through PAMR, then, I was going to have access to the population of people being deported, as they arrived in Honduras. This seemed crucial to me, because I knew from my years of working on transit migration in Mexico that many people arrive and leave again, without even trying to settle into the country first. One aspect of my plan to access this population, then, was to strike up initial conversations in CAMR (the processing center for adults deported by plane at the San Pedro Sula airport), distribute my contact information liberally, and see who would subsequently reach out to me to speak further. From preliminary research in the past, this had been a fruitful method. I would also be able to be present in the ongoing programming that PAMR offered deportees, which would give me another opportunity to make connections with individuals who had been deported and were, at least temporarily, staying in Honduras.

However, just before I arrived in San Pedro Sula in the fall of 2017, the Honduran government kicked all the Honduran NGOs out of the deportee processing centers. The official rationale was that the whole procedure had developed haphazardly, and the government wanted to review everything, streamline it, and make sure that the privacy of the deportees was fully protected. The decision was made, however, after an NGO that specialized in offering services to

deported minors, *Casa Alianza*, kept issuing reports that contradicted the government's official discourse regarding migration and security.[9] This was also a moment when the sitting president, Juan Orlando Hernández, was ramping up a reelection campaign and there was a general retreat from transparency. It's also worth noting that while Honduran NGOs like CASM and *Casa Alianza* were expelled, the operations of the three processing centers were still run by *international* NGOs, the Scalabriniana order of nuns, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), respectively.[10]

This decision meant that I would not have regular access to the deportee processing centers like I had planned. It also meant that PAMR had an increasingly difficult time locating enough deportees to fill the slots it had available in its programs. Through a colleague with one of the international NGOs, I was able to surreptitiously be present in one of the centers on two occasions early on in my fieldwork, but after a surprise visit from *Cancillería*, the nun who ran the center at the time got nervous that my presence might be discovered. I tried, then, to go through the official channels and get access to the centers from *Cancillería*, but, after much time and vague reasonings, my request was denied.[11] Just before I left Honduras in 2019, I was able to be inside the deportee processing center in San Pedro Sula one final time, on a day when the nuns were sure that *Cancillería* would not be there. Still, just in case, they put a vest on me so that it appeared like I was just a regular volunteer.

Despite this scenario, I maintained my affiliation with PAMR, and, especially during the first period of my fieldwork this was essential as, through them, I was able to meet an initial group of deportees, conduct a first round of interviews, and begin to get to know some *colonias*. I also conducted two focus groups in collaboration with PAMR. The first was with a group of young people who had been deported and/or displaced internally and was focused on their

perceptions of safety and danger in Honduras. The second focus group was with a group of deportees who had been recipients of assistance from PAMR to begin microenterprises and the focus there was to evaluate the long-term effects of that assistance after the program had ended. Having PAMR as an institutional affiliation during my time in Honduras was useful methodologically, but it also proved to be an important choice because of the outsized role that NGOs play in the country.

Over time in Honduras, I came to understand that analyzing the state and institutions requires entangling with NGOs. Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández speaks, with pride, about the *tercialización* – the "third-party-ization" or outsourcing – of government functions. I thought this was just another example of the neoliberalism of Honduras, the idea that everything is better done through the private sector. The roots of this, however, are not just in current initiatives like the public-private partnerships to build roads but also stem, as anthropologist Daniel Reichman shows, from the post-cold war turn in Honduras towards the NGO-ization of governance, particularly in the realm of social welfare (Reichman 2011). Even the government, Reichman suggests, gave up on government in Honduras, and NGOs and foreign aid increasingly replace what would be functions of the state. Consequently, in the following chapters, the language and programming of NGOs figure prominently into my analysis. Migration, among many other aspects of life in Honduras, is almost entirely "managed" by NGOs.

Participant Observation: México, López Arellano, and Rivera Hernández

When it became clear that I was never going to be able to secure regular access to the processing centers, I had to rethink my methods. This led to two shifts: first, I incorporated trips to southern Mexico, where I had a long history of conducting migration-related research, and

where I had a deep network of colleagues and contacts. By returning to Mexico periodically, I intended to connect with Hondurans before they were deported and, I hoped, I would be able to follow up with them after deportation. This was only mildly successful, though I was able to develop a more fully grounded understanding of the process of seeking asylum in Tapachula, Mexico, which had been a relative weak spot in my knowledge, and I was able to interview several Hondurans in transit at a shelter in Oaxaca, Mexico. My plans to return to Mexico in this fashion evolved, however, once the caravan of mostly Honduran migrants emerged in October of 2018. Rather than conducting subsequent independent research trips, I joined the caravan three times, once in October 2018 as it moved across southern Mexico and then in November and December 2018, in the caravan-turned-refugee-camp in Tijuana. I was, then, able to follow up with deported *caravaneros* back in Honduras (see chapter six for a longer discussion).

The other way in which I adapted my methods in Honduras was by digging in ethnographically to two primary areas of the Sula Valley. I chose Sector López Arellano in Choloma because I had a handful of contacts to begin with there and, in many ways, López Arellano seemed like a microcosm of Honduras. López Arellano has been one of the primary sites for internal migration, as people from across the country move there in search of job opportunities in the *maquila* sector. In large part because of this, Choloma had recently become Honduras's third largest municipality. At the same time, López Arellano is a site of substantial outmigration (and consequently has a high incidence of reception of deportees). In addition, while the murder rate in San Pedro Sula declined, Choloma's was rising. I started focusing on interviewing people from La López in particular; I connected with a women's rights organization there and spent many afternoons sitting and chatting with folks in the narrow streets of La López.

I chose La López but my other primary site, Sector Rivera Hernández, chose me. I had initially avoided focusing on Rivera Hernández because it was the part of the Sula Valley that had seemed to get the most attention from journalists.[12] However, through PAMR I happened to meet a local pastor, Pastor Luis, in Rivera Hernández at a meeting at the public high school. Pastor Luis had himself been deported, and he was eager to introduce me to his community. Through him, I met Ramón and Benjamín, residents of different Rivera Hernández neighborhoods who became two of my primary interlocutors and important gatekeepers, introducing me to their neighbors and facilitating the closest access I could have to the rhythms of daily life in their *colonias*. Eventually, I became an unobtrusive, unremarkable presence in their neighborhoods, and, by the second half of my time in Honduras, I was referring deportees who I met through my network to the PAMR program.

Participatory Photography Workshops

I also conducted a series of participatory photography workshops as part of my fieldwork. One of the questions that concerned me from the outset was how the country and its residents were depicted as exceedingly, inherently violent and I wanted to explore photography as a potential way to counter that narrative. I conducted multiple workshops in collaboration with PAMR and one workshop independently, through Benjamín in his *colonia*, Vista del Cielo. My first two workshops used disposable film cameras and involved just two sessions. I taught the participants the basics of photographic composition and we discussed the value of photographing everyday life. I was delayed in developing the film from these workshops because of the upheaval in Honduras that followed the fraudulent election in November of 2017. Once we were finally able to reconvene with photos in hand, much of the momentum had dissipated.

In 2018, I reviewed my methods and made substantial changes to the workshops. First, developing film was complicated, expensive, and disappointing. Finding a place to develop film was difficult in San Pedro Sula, and although I did eventually find a studio that was able to do it, it took a very long time to get the printed photographs. In addition, the quality of the images was poor, flecked, and grainy, and frequently only a fraction of the total shots on each roll were able to be developed. I suspect these problems were because of the quality of the film in the cameras, rather than the expertise of the photo studio, but the results were frustrating. The texture of the developed photos was reminiscent of nostalgic, old-fashioned images, and I did not want to present visuals that would somehow suggest that Honduras was less "modern" than anywhere else. And the photographers were frustrated when some of their favorite shots were absent from the printed collection of photos I returned to them.

I also came to realize that one of my initial reasons for using disposable cameras proved to be unfounded. In part, I chose to use these cameras for my workshops because I did not want to hand out electronics to young people who might be subjected to assault. I did not want the youth in my workshops to be targeted for carrying cameras, and I did not want them to feel like that had to protect those devices should they be targeted. I quickly realized that these fears were unfounded for two reasons. First, nearly everyone carried a smart phone with a camera and was accustomed to snapping photos with their phones frequently. While there was a robust market for stolen cell phones, small digital cameras were not particularly interesting or valuable. Second, as the workshop participants lived in gang-controlled neighborhoods, they were extremely unlikely to be subjected to assault or theft within their neighborhoods and they knew, much better than I did, where and when they could take photos without concern for safety.[13] Consequently, I shifted to incorporating digital photography into the next round of workshops.

I also decided to extend the length of the workshops and add a session on photographic storytelling. Ultimately, my final two workshops (one in 2018 and one in 2019) were four weeks each and used a mix of disposable cameras and digital cameras. Drawing from these workshops, in collaboration with the participants, we built two exhibits that were shown at the Museum of Anthropology and History of San Pedro Sula. Most of the participants from every workshop enthusiastically consented to allowing me to use their images in subsequent writings and in an exhibit which I still intend to build in the United States. The young photographers with whom I worked developed an archive of photos that reflect an intimate encounter with daily life in Honduras and, taken together, these photos present a stark distinction to the hyper violent images that tend to get circulated about Honduras and Hondurans. The photographers didn't shy away from the difficulties and violence around them, but their choices present a nuanced and careful depiction of life in San Pedro Sula. This echoes my own ethical sensibilities as an ethnographer and, accordingly, informs the kinds of images I choose to share. While I make reference to these workshops throughout this dissertation, a full analysis of this as method and data will be the subject of a separate, subsequent project.

## Safety and Access

*Fieldnotes: January 5, 2019*

Today the police stopped me on my way into Rivera Hernández. They ask for my license and the *revisión del carro* and they're very confused about who I am and what I'm doing here, and the police says, the older police officer says:

> *Do you know where you're going?*
> Yeah, I said
> *Have they told you what this place is, what Rivera Hernández is like?*
> Yeah, I say, I come here a lot.
> *Aren't you afraid? Aren't you scared to go in there?*
> No, I say.

*You're not afraid?*

He warns me that the *mareros* might try to use me, take advantage of me. Then he asks if I don't happen to have any heart medication to give them because they work so long, so many hours, they only get two hours of sleep.

I try to be friendly. "Right? It's a hard job," I say. "I just came from the caravan and there's police officers who are part of it, who just couldn't take it anymore."

Now the younger officer pipes up for the first time "*SI OMBE*!" he concurs, in the caliche of Honduran youth.

Ah the police. Asking me if I'm afraid to go into Rivera Hernández. And then asking me for stuff.

In many ways, I embarked upon this project because, when people tell me that a given place is *really violent,* my reaction is generally to want to go directly to that place and to speak with the people who live there. Frequently, places that are poor and marginalized for a host of other reasons get labeled as violent by those who don't live there. I know that *really violent* places are also places where people live full lives, and my intention in Honduras from the beginning was to get past the police checkpoints and stigma, and get to know the neighborhoods that, like those of Rivera Hernández, had a reputation for violence.

At the same time, I did take the context of violence seriously, and I took a number of measures to try to ensure my safety and that of my interlocutors while I was in Honduras. I began this project in Honduras with substantial experience, both among Central Americans in transit in Mexico and from multiple exploratory visits to Honduras. I had a solid network of connections on the ground in Honduras when I moved there, and I had a general familiarity with the situation of the neighborhoods where I expected to conduct research. That said, I am aware that no matter how much we might believe ourselves to be prepared to undertake research in contexts of violence, there are always unexpected elements and we cannot fully protect ourselves

or those who choose to speak with us (Slack 2019, 209). Additionally, methods we think will assist in cultivating safety may not actually prove to be effective.

One example of this, for me, is that I collaborated with two research assistants, Javier and Sandra, for short periods on specific projects. Javier was on staff with PAMR and his job and my research agenda dovetailed perfectly. He helped me set up some of my initial interviews and helped me learn the geography of the Sula Valley. Sandra, a sociologist, is a friend and colleague who had long ties to the women's organization in La López. She was instrumental in beginning the process of developing familiarity in La López. However, while I had expected having local research assistants would facilitate access, I quickly learned that my status as outsider was actually helpful, rather than a hindrance. As an outsider, I did not, nor could I, figure into the gang-related landscape of domination and control, which made my presence less suspicious. At the same time, I was far less likely to be somehow connected to the government or political parties, which made people more willing to trust that I did not have some ulterior motive for wanting to speak with them.[14]

Consequently, it was both safer and more productive for me to conduct research on my own. After the first few months in Honduras, I purchased a used car, a two-door hatchback with nearly 200,000 miles on it, that was a bright, distinct shade of orange-red. Getting into and out of neighborhoods in my own vehicle was far safer than relying on taxis, hiring a driver, or using public transportation. As an outsider, I could move in and out of neighborhoods controlled by different groups and I could better resist efforts by police to solicit bribes. My car became a known entity in many of the neighborhoods and this hypervisibility was one essential factor in conducting research as safely as possible. I knew from previous trips that upon entering a neighborhood you must roll your windows down and put your flashers on (*bajar los vidrios y*

*hacer cambio de luces*) as a signal to those in charge that you are not hiding anything or anyone in your vehicle and you present no threat to their authority. This disposition, of being distinctly *not* of the neighborhood, working alone, and being hypervisible and open, proved to be the key to cultivating as much security as possible.

From Recording to Writing

Ultimately, my participant observation took me to kitchens, churches, prisons, classrooms, and hospitals; I visited entrepreneurial education programs, protest barricades, tin roofed barbershops, and soccer matches played under the searing sun. I conducted 120 semi-structured interviews with migrants, their families, their neighbors, pastors, police officers, prosecutors, community leaders, government officials and current and former gang members. Just over half of these interviews were recorded using a small voice recorder or a cell phone. Most of these interviews happened in people's homes, but frequently they preferred to leave their *colonia*, and I would offer to treat them to a coffee or a meal while we spoke. Quite a few interviews were conducted in Pizza Huts and Denny's. My approach to interviewing leans heavily on establishing rapport, and frequently I would sit down to record an interview only after multiple interactions with the same person. Although I have a general sense of the kinds of questions I intend to ask, I also tend to allow the person I'm speaking with to take the interview in another direction, if there are other things that they wish to discuss or topics that they'd prefer not to speak about. As I am frequently asking people about difficult experiences, I try to avoid retraumatization as much as possible by giving people the space to speak about what they wish, as they wish. One woman I interviewed, who ended up telling me much more about her

childhood than her deportation experience, looked up at me afterwards and asked, “What are you, a psychologist or a witch? I feel so much better now!”

Whether or not I was able to audio-record the interview, I took notes afterwards, often in the form of voice notes to myself on my cell phone. While I sometimes also produced written fieldnotes, frequently, rather than waiting until I returned to my apartment, I would record my reflections of an interview or an interaction as soon as I got in my car and could roll my windows up. These audio fieldnotes are punctuated by reggaetón on the radio, the ding ding ding of the car telling me to put my seatbelt on, and short interactions with windshield washers at intersections.

I used a combination of Trint, Express Scribe, Atlas.ti, and Scrivener to transcribe, code, and organize the data that I collected. This process was very slow but also generative because each time I re-read a note or listened to an interview, I stopped for a moment and thought about where that person was when I was writing, if we were still in contact, and how I might contact them again if we’d lost touch. Facebook and WhatsApp have facilitated my keeping up with many of the people who appear throughout this dissertation, and Javier and Sandra, my two short-term “official” research assistants, and Benjamín, have been very helpful in updating me or providing me with current phone numbers when possible.

This constant process of revisiting has made turning notes into this text tedious at times, but truly delightful at others. Sometimes it has resulted in finding out that people have won an asylum case or reconnected with family. Sometimes it has made me aware of a death, imprisonment, or a disappearance. Sadly, while writing this dissertation, I learned that two deported young men with whom I interacted as part of this research were killed. And while I am in contact with people from Honduras nearly daily, whether or not I am writing, the process of pausing writing to reach out pulls me back into the worlds I was a part of there and reminds me,

always, of the urgency of the stories that people shared with me. And the responsibility I have to try my best to tell them well.

**A Note On Gender**

Two *colonias* of Rivera Hernández figure prominently throughout this dissertation, places I call Vista del Cielo and La Libertad. I want to emphasize here the unexceptional nature of the dynamics that I discuss in these neighborhoods across this text. These are the places that I came to know the best, but I know enough about many other gang-controlled neighborhoods to know how the patterns of in/security I detail here are replicated across Honduras. As I'll demonstrate in Chapter 2, while gang control is violent and can be ruthless, it is also navigable and survivable for many residents. This varies depending on the character of the gang leaders, the relationship between the individual members of the gang and their civilian neighbors, and whether or not the *colonia* is being fought over, among other factors. The point I want to emphasize here, however, is that the neighborhoods I profile most closely here, and the people who inhabit them, are not outliers in the relationships they demonstrate among police, gangs, and residents. Many people can and do live full lives in tandem with the competing powers of organized crime and state forces around them.

Essential for this discussion, however, is making clear how patterned that is, how much it is not simply left to chance. It is primarily young men who are most at risk, both from the violence of the gangs and that of the state, in these neighborhoods. Older men – like Benjamín and others – have mostly aged out of the category of people seen as risky, as long as they abide by the general rules of life in the *colonias.* Women, even young women, are not targeted in the

same way as young men for murder and disappearance (though they are subjected to other kinds of violence, especially sexual and intimate partner violence, at much higher rates).

While I interviewed both men and women during my fieldwork, my dissertation primarily focuses on the experience of poor, urban young men like Ulises. This was not my primary intention when I planned this project, but it responds to both the conditions in Honduras as I came to understand them and the gendered dynamics of immigration enforcement in the United States. Both sociologists and historians have found the same pattern: that the constructed "immigrant threat" in the U.S. was previously gendered as female – taking advantage of social services, having too many babies, possibly engaging in prostitution – but that shifted in the late twentieth century (Golash-Boza and Hondagneu-Sotelo 2013; Goodman 2020). Since then, due to a combination of economic changes in the labor market and the fallout of the "war on terror," immigrant men in particular have become the target of both anti-immigrant rhetoric and heightened immigration enforcement (Lopez 2019). In the case of Honduras, while women are migrating in increasing numbers as compared to previous generations, the vast majority of those seeking to migrate–and being deported–continue to be men (See Table 3).

*Table 3: Honduran Deportees by Gender 2016-2019*

| | **Men Deported** | **Women Deported** | **Percent Men** |
|---|---|---|---|
| *2016* | 42298 | 12129 | 77.72 |
| *2017* | 36850 | 7217 | 83.62 |
| *2018* | 60106 | 13544 | 81.61 |
| *2019* | 75878 | 22216 | 77.35 |
| *Four Year Total* | 215132 | 55106 | 79.61 |

While Honduran men make up a higher percentage of those deported in general, they are also less likely to win asylum cases, even though their lives are those most in danger upon return.[15] Young Central American men in particular are frequently cast as exceedingly, inherently, violent and criminal. This informs policing practices in Honduras, shapes the contours of young men's lives, and is replicated in regimes of international protection. As Central American women and children are more likely to be cast as sympathetic victims in need of protection – or saving (Abu-Lughod 2002; Spivak 1988) – the unspoken perpetrator is, always, Central American men. While I do not wish to minimize the profound problem of gender-based violence in Honduras (see Menjívar and Walsh 2017), I do argue for the importance of focusing on the life chances of the young men who are not viewed sympathetically. While violence is high across the board in Honduras, it is poor, urban, young men who are dying at alarmingly high rates. In the years for which data was reported, around 90% of homicide victims in Honduras have been male;[16] nearly half of all homicide victims were between the ages of 15 and 29 (see Table 4).

*Table 4: Honduras Homicides by Gender and Age 2011-2019*

| | **Percent of Homicide Victims that are Male** | **Percent of Homicide Victims aged 15-29** |
|---|---|---|
| *2011* | 93 | 47 |
| *2012* | 92 | 48 |
| *2013* | 91 | No data |
| *2014* | 91 | No data |
| *2015* | 90.7 | 49.1 |
| *2016* | No data | No data |
| *2017* | 89.7 | 47.1 |
| *2018* | 90 | 46.1 |
| *2019* | 90 | 42.8 |

The essentialized gender categories that get reinforced through the process of asylum adjudication – men as criminals, women as victims – are inextricable, one from the other. By challenging the men as criminals, men as violent (and therefore of less value) category, I also challenge a paradigm of women as victims, women as passive, and, yes, women as inherently non-violent. I consider this to be a study focused on men from a feminist epistemological perspective, in its approach to power, subordination, and agency (Babb 2013), and its attention to the everyday experience of marginalized, gendered people (Davis 2013). To that end, the experience of the young men discussed in these pages is emphatically *not* meant to be taken as a universal exploration of the experience of all migrants. Women who migrate face a variety of different challenges and threats and kinds of violence; they also have distinct opportunities and strategies available to them.[17] The same is true for members of the LGBTQ communities who migrate; they suffer particular violences and have a different array of survival mechanisms and support networks. Additionally, the migration experience of the coastal Afro-Indigenous Garífuna population is also distinct and layered; they are frequently targeted even more directly in Mexico and face the unique intersection of anti-Black racism and anti-immigrant policing in the United States. Their experience is also not the one chronicled here. I am not interested in constructing a hierarchy of suffering among migrants and deportees; this is simply to say that this study is *particular* in its focus on young urban male deportees.

**Leave If You're Able**

Lenín had been deported four times by the time I meet him. He is a tall and thoughtful young man, slowly making his way through university, with hopes of becoming a journalist one day. When I interview him, Lenín stirs sugar into his black coffee – the typical way coffee is

drunk in Honduras – and waxes on for nearly three hours about politics and philosophy and life in his country. Mostly he talks in metaphor, rather than details. But when he talks about how limited life is, how circumscribed choices are for youth like him, here he gets specific.

"Here there are neighborhoods, where, you know what they say? *Dentre si quiere, salga si puede.*[18] And the neighborhood where I live, they have this rule. Enter if you wish, leave if you are able."

I'd hear this phrase, or some close variation of it, frequently in Honduras.[19] It is a shorthand that people use to describe how a certain neighborhood is, "you know," they would say, "it's one of those '*entra quien quiere, y sale quien puede*' kind of neighborhoods." Anyone who wants to can enter, but only those who are able to can leave. Or, more succinctly: enter if you want, get out if you can. Neither translation is elegant, but they capture the meaning. These neighborhoods, controlled by one kind of organized crime group or another, are easy to get into. Anyone who wants to can walk down the streets. There are no gates or guards or clearly marked entrances; if you didn't already know you were crossing into the neighborhood, nothing would alert you to having done so. But once you're there, the complex nature of life under gang control, the eternal possibility of being read as a threat or a spy, being a person walking down a street in a neighborhood in which you do not belong — especially if you are a young man — means that you may have to fight your way out. Leave, *if* you're able.

And navigating these dynamics is at the heart of life in Honduras's Sula Valley. Knowing who controls which neighborhoods, and who is allied with whom, is crucial for survival. Especially for the young, especially for the boys. People employ a range of strategies to manage these dangers but, frequently, the only choice, the best choice, the last choice that people feel

they have is to migrate. If you can get out, if there's a chance at doing so, you do. *Leave,* if you're able.

Laying out this fraught geography is the content of Chapter 2, "A Social Geography of Violence." This chapter is a bit different from the rest of the chapters that follow in that it is primarily descriptive, designed to give context and texture to the subsequent analyses. While the dissertation is grounded in ethnography in every section, this chapter is not so much making an argument as depicting life in San Pedro Sula as I learned it. It is a collection of vignettes, discussion, snippets from my fieldnotes, which, taken together, offer a portrait of the backdrop within which the migration phenomena that I take as my object of study emerges.

From there, Chapter 3, "*Mañana me mandan, mañana vengo*," reviews the deportation studies literature in depth and explains more fully why the Honduran case is different and needs to be approached from a different vantage point. Here, I suggest that by reframing deportation studies through a lens of circulation, we can see more clearly the coherences that knit together displacements, migrations, and deportations, rather than treating each as distinct, segmented experiences.

Chapter 4, "*Sabemos Aguantar*,"[20] focuses on daily life for those who have migrated as well as those who have not, in and around San Pedro Sula. Here, I argue for a new analytic, borrowing from the Spanish "*aguantar*," to trouble notions of resilience. *Aguantar*, which means, literally, something close to "endure" (though I translate it as "to get through" or "to bear it") is used in contradistinction to the term resilience, highlighting the unromantic nature of enduring the hardness of life in Honduras. It is the term Hondurans themselves use, and by exploring its meanings, I challenge an idea of resilience that is almost always ascribed to marginalized populations (people of color and women in particular). In a life where people

describe not allowing themselves to dream, migration becomes one remaining avenue for channeling hope for a different future, one way to do more than *aguantar*.

In Chapter 5, "*Con los brazos abiertos*,"[21] I argue that the fundamental premise of what is to be done with the population of deportees is flawed, as programs aimed at "reinsertion" and "reintegration" fail to take into account a prior exclusion, the lack of integration, of the population who seeks to migrate in the first place. Echoing the broader argument of the dissertation, the examples foregrounded in this chapter show how migration and deportation are not exceptional moments of rupture but heightened experiences akin in kind to the exclusion and displacement experienced within Honduras by many who migrate.

Chapter 6, "Asylum Denied," argues for understanding the system of international protection through the lens of legal violence. Here, I focus on the process of seeking asylum in the United States and how insecurity at home does not translate into the kinds of categories of protection that the asylum system recognizes. At the same time, I suggest that the idea of asylum as a humanitarian and just system produces faith in it, even as most of the people who entangle with this system end up enduring lengthy periods in inhumane detention centers and are, ultimately, deported right back to the conditions that they imagined would render them worthy of protection.

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**Notes to the Introduction**

1. Department is the subnational jurisdictional division in Honduras, similar to a province.

2. Homicide data comes from the Igarapé Institute's Homicide Monitor (Igarapé Institute 2021). www.homicide.igarape.org.br. For most years their data source for Honduras is the Observatorio de la Violencia, a project of the National University's Institute in Democracy, Peace, and Security (IUDPAS). Iudpas.unah.edu.hn.

3. For more on the reasons that many are skeptical of trusting the homicide numbers see Shorack, Kennedy, and Frank-Vitale 2020.

4. The Trump administration made major changes to the kinds of information about immigration enforcement that is available to the public and, importantly, the way that information is disaggregated. The numbers that I use in this paper are the official numbers as reported by the Honduran government in early 2021. While their numbers are inconsistent – and there are discrepancies within the government's own data – it is still the best metric available.

5. The data presented here come from the Honduran statistics agency, the Centro Nacional de Información del Sector Social (CENISS). Clearly, the total persons deported from each country do not match the total number of people deported, but these are the numbers as reported by CENISS. It is unclear whether the additional deportees were deported from elsewhere, if their provenance is unknown, or if the difference is due to another error in record keeping. All the data included here can be found at ceniss.gob.hn/migrantes/migrantesestadisticas.aspx.

6. I am taking some creative linguistic license here in order to preserve anonymity through uniformity and shifting *naranja* to *naranjo,* moving from orange-colored to orange grove in the literal translation. I hope this choice is not too grating for fluent Spanish speakers.

7. This was not always the case, nor is it the case everywhere. Frequently deportees do face extreme stigma and hardship because of their category of deportee. In Honduras's urban margins, however, deportation is so common that this has ceased to be the case.

8. Adults deported by airplane are processed at the Centro de Atención al Migrante Retornado (CAMR), which is housed in an old military airport that is adjacent to Ramón Villeda International Airport in La Lima, Cortés. Adults deported overland by bus are processed at a center in Omoa, Cortés. Minors and their families, whether deported by air or by land, are processed at Belén, in San Pedro Sula.

9. The Honduran government was deeply invested in maintaining an image of bringing greater security to the country and official reports indicated that those who were migrating were doing so because of a desire for family reunification. Casa Alianza issued reports that contradicted that claim, insisting that their data suggested that many minors were trying to leave due to violence and insecurity.

10. The decision to kick out the NGOs was only reversed in 2020 in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the Honduran government desperately needed the assistance of non-governmental actors to deal with those deported while the country was in lockdown.

11. Cancillería is the office of the federal government that is in charge of all migration-related matters, among many other things. Although tours of the centers are possible, all other researchers of whom I am aware have been similarly stymied in their efforts to get access to these centers while deportees are being processed.

12. For InSight Crime, Juan Martínez d'Aubuisson profiled this Sector in 2012 (Martínez d'Aubuisson 2015), and then Sonia Nazario and Azam Ahmed have both written articles for the New York times featuring Rivera Hernández (Nazario 2016; Ahmed 2019). I'd learn during my time there that all three, notably, used the same pastor-turned-fixer as their guide to the neighborhood. This Pastor, Dany Pacheco, who is named in all three articles, is not Pastor Luis who I make reference to in this dissertation. Although I met Pacheco, he was not among my interlocutors for this project.

13. This assertion, which might seem counterintuitive, is addressed further in Chapter 2. Essentially, gangs enforce order within the *colonias* they control which means, among other things, that petty theft is punished swiftly and harshly within the neighborhood.

14. For a longer discussion on cultivating distance as a research strategy and my methods see Frank-Vitale 2019.

15. The Department of Homeland Security does not make asylum denial statistics disaggregated by gender and by nationality available; this is, however, something that has been noted by many of us who serve as expert witnesses in asylum hearings (myself included) and the asylum attorneys with whom we work.

16. Of course, murder is not the only kind of violence that is endemic in Honduras, and other kinds of violence, sexual violence in particular, are more frequently targeted at women.

17. For some of the essential work on women in migration see: Donato, Wagner, and Patterson 2008; O'Leary 2009; 2012 on border crossing; Petrozziello 2011; Mckenzie and Menjívar 2011 on gender and remittances in Honduras; Stephen 2018; Speed 2014; Menjívar 2011; Cook Heffron 2019 on the relationships between violence at home and the violences of migration for women. In addition, much scholarship has been produced in recent years that focuses specifically on the experience of Central American women in transit through Mexico, including Angulo-Pasel 2018; Cortés 2018; Schmidt and Buechler 2017; Varela Huerta 2017.

18. "Dentre" from the verb "dentrar" is a particular Honduran form of "to go in," that may not be familiar to Spanish speakers from other regions.

19. Adrienne Pine also notes the commonplace nature of this saying, glossing it as "*entra quien quiere, salga si puede*" (Pine 2008, 71).

20. "We know how to endure/get through/get by"

21. "With open arms," the phrase the Honduran government uses to describe how it receives deportees

## Chapter 2 A Social Geography of Violence

Pastor Luis takes me to meet Ramón in the *cancha* of La Libertad. I've known Luis for a while at this point, and we've developed a friendly rapport and a good base of trust. I pick him up at his house, in one neighborhood in Sector Rivera Hernández, and we drive towards La Libertad, a different *colonia*. Although I am driving slowly down the dirt road, my little hatchback has trouble with a particularly steep speed bump that seems to come out of nowhere. As we bounce ungraciously over the bump, Luis looks at me and grins: "We've just crossed the border."

We go a few more blocks, then park in front of a church. Luis asks the person tending the grounds if Ramón is around. *Ya viene*, he's coming. Ramón was expecting us; in the back of my car there are a handful of solar-powered streetlights that Luis is bringing him. Part of one of his many projects. Luis and I stand outside the church and chat for a bit when a short man, a little older than Luis, I'd guess, appears. I don't realize, at first, that he's the man we're looking for.

Trailing Ramón are a handful of skinny teenage boys. They seem to surround him and buffer him all at once. I unlock the hatchback and, with a few head nods and pointed fingers from Ramón, the boys grab the lights and move them into the empty space next to the church. Luis and Ramón and I follow behind them, walking around the corner into an empty lot that they are in the process of turning into a soccer field. The *cancha*.

The boys spread out, squatting, leaning, standing watch. They've got the two exits from the field covered, and although they've backed away from us, their attention doesn't drift. Luis,

Ramón, and I talk. Luis introduces me and I know that this is my chance to make a good enough impression, the right impression, to be able to come back here, to continue speaking with Ramón, and to have safe passage in this neighborhood.

Luis had prepped me beforehand. Ramón isn't a *pandillero* exactly. But he is an ex-*pandillero* from before the gang lines had hardened and the battles had moved from knives and dances to guns and massacres. He also has a certain kind of leadership in the neighborhood; the *muchachos* – a euphemism frequently used to refer to gang members – look up to him. He helps them, gets them involved in positive activities, finds ways for them to make an honest living. His brother had been the *jefe de la pandilla*, the local boss of the gang, but he was murdered a few years earlier. Ramón's closeness to the gang is vague, a murky relationship that turns out to be quite common. What is clear to me, though, as we gather to chat that day, is that the neighborhood *pandilleros* are both protective of and deferential to this middle-aged man. Luis also told me that Ramón, unlike some other neighborhood leaders and gang-adjacent individuals, does not seek the spotlight. He is uninterested in giving interviews or talking to the media. Luis thinks he might talk to me – he's seen how I work and thinks it's different enough – but the introduction was all Luis could offer me.

At first we discuss basic things: how the lighting will work; how the progress on the *cancha* has come along; what their plans are for the parts that are still overgrown; how hard it is to play soccer in the mud. I'm trying to think how to explain to him who I am, what it is that I'm doing there, why I want to talk to him. I'm always concerned people will place me into one of the few categories of *gringo* that is familiar here, as a way to make sense out of my otherwise unusual presence. I'm worried he's going to think I come from an NGO or a missionary group and that I can offer them material support in a sustained way. I'm also worried he's going to

think I'm one more journalist writing about la Rivera, eager to report back that I talked to a real live gang member.

Then I see his hat. Ramón somehow has a U.S. Border Patrol baseball cap on. So, we're talking, circling around issues, and there's an opportunity. I say, "*mire, yo puedo aceptar cualquier cosa, Ud., menos apoyar a la patrulla fronteriza*." Look, I can take just about anything, Sir, except supporting the border patrol. And I gesture towards his hat. He cracks up.

Now we start talking about the story of the hat. He takes it off his head and shows me the thickness of the brim, the reinforced stitching. It's a real Border Patrol hat, not a random baseball cap with the CBP logo on it. He tells me about the times he's been caught by Border Patrol, how he convinced one agent to give him his hat. I discuss my credentials, both academic and otherwise, being in the desert, riding the train, the years in Mexico, and I settle on what had become my standard explanation for my presence in Honduras: I'm here to document how life really is, to write a book about what people don't see. He likes that idea. And we agree to meet, without Luis, to keep talking.

Afterwards, as we drive back across the speed bump/border, Luis says, "I have never seen Ramón open up like that." And then he adds: "Now, you can go into La Libertad whenever you want. Now they all know you, and your car. That's what I was hoping for!"

Ramón messages me that night. He says how nice it was to meet me. How he is happy to talk to me. And he mentions, casually, carefully but insistently, how much he values loyalty.

Ramón would become one of my most trusted interlocutors, explaining how the world works to me, sending those who'd been deported to talk to me. After a long day of interviews, I came to look forward very much to showing up in Ramon's neighborhood and drinking a beer with him on a rickety wooden bench across from a *pulpería* at twilight. Neither of us were big

drinkers, but one crisp Imperial for me and a Coors for him would break the unrelenting heat in just the right way. Because Ramón approved of my presence, La Libertad would become one of a handful of neighborhoods where I was probably the safest in San Pedro Sula, even as I came to learn that the small neighborhood is a place of danger for others.

**The Importance of the Neighborhood**

La Libertad is on the edge of the Rivera Hernández Sector of San Pedro Sula. While the dynamics that I illustrate here are replicated in most of Honduras's urban and semi-urban neighborhoods, in this chapter I focus primarily on the socio-spatial landscape of violence and control in Rivera Hernández. The gangland geography is a foundational backdrop that informs migration decisions and shapes people's sense of safety, possibility, and mobility within Honduras. Importantly, while this project troubles a narrative of deportation as an experience akin to exile, there is a kind of exile at play in the dynamics I draw out here. It is a prior exile, however, being pushed out of one's community, the *colonia*, that often pushes people into migration. Mobility is delimited first not by I.C.E. agents and border walls but by the microdynamics of power and belonging that shape the social landscape on the urban margins in Honduras.

As I show throughout this chapter, in urban Honduras, the neighborhood where you are from is one of the most important points of reference and social location in young people's lives. The neighborhood, or *colonia*, shapes your experience of the world and, to a large part, determines where you can and cannot go. People are identified with their *colonia* and this has ramifications for mobility, education, and access to jobs, but also shapes relationships and people's imagined possibilities. The *colonia* is home, it is where you are known and rooted,

where you are understood to belong. The safety associated with being within your *colonia*, especially for young men, is one thread that emerges in this chapter and elsewhere in this dissertation. The *colonia* can be a space of protection, of safety, of *home* yet it can turn, quickly, into a source of vulnerability, danger, and violence.

Simply venturing beyond the bounds of the *colonia,* for example, can be rife with danger. Juan, a teacher who lives in La Libertad but teaches in a school in another part of the city, explains this:

> "*Tenemos a los jóvenes presos en las cuatro cuadras o en las diez cuadras, que es su territorio. Hay muros en medio de las calles que son más altos que los de concreto, porque son muros que nos representan peligro, muerte. Porque estamos hablando de fronteras de violencia, fronteras de muerte."*
>
> "We have our young people imprisoned in the four blocks, the ten blocks, that is their territory. There are walls in the middle of the roads that are higher than those made of concrete, because they are walls that represent danger, death, for us. Because we are talking about borders of violence, borders of death."

Profe Juan[1] recognizes the risk associated with the way in which young people are identified with their *colonia*: they live as though imprisoned, unable to cross the invisible borders without risking death. He emphasizes the way that this circumscribes mobility for youth, but he also – now in his 30s – continues to be mindful of the power of these neighborhood divisions. He hasn't aged out of the risk altogether. He continues:

> *"Por ejemplo, a mí me iban a nombrar en una escuela de aquí del sector … Yo no quise que me nombraran en esa escuela, aunque me quedaba muy cerca de mi casa, porque yo iba a estar pasando y cruzando una de las fronteras de esas para llegar a la escuela ... Entonces, evitando esa situación, mejor preferí que me nombraran allá, un poco largo, pero con la seguridad de que nadie me va a decir, 'vos sos de aquí, vos sos de allá.'"*
>
> "For example, they were going to place me in one of the schools, here in the Sector. I didn't want them to place me in this school, even though it's really close to my house, because I would have been passing and crossing one of these borders to get to the school… So, avoiding this situation, I preferred that they place me there, somewhat far away, but with the security that nobody would be saying to me 'oh you're from here, you're from over there.'"

Profe Juan has to navigate the potential dangers associated with crossing gang boundaries within his Sector, because doing so frequently, although he is no longer considered "youth," would arouse suspicion by the gangs who control both neighborhoods. Living safely within the *colonia* is frequently predicated upon refraining from engaging too much or too deeply in places, particularly other similar neighborhoods, beyond the *colonia.* To some extent, this dissertation is largely about what happens when the safety of being in one's own neighborhood is lost, when one has crossed those borders of violence, either intentionally or accidentally, or is perceived to have done so.

Many of the people who flee Honduras, those whose stories shape this dissertation in particular, are not always excluded from all places, even as they are, frequently, marginalized by the state. People are emplaced, with deep familial and community ties within their *colonia.* When people make the choice to leave Honduras, then, they are also leaving something, some *place*, behind. Without the *colonia* as a space of home, but still bound by the socio-spatial identification they carry with them, Honduran youth often have nowhere to go, no option but to try to leave their country altogether.

**A Social Geography of Everyday Violence**

I call this chapter "A Social Geography of Violence" because spatial relations of varying scales combine with social location to shape the experience of navigating, surviving, and at times employing violence for Hondurans. Understanding the unmarked, internal geography of the Sula Valley is essential for staying alive. One of the important aspects of the socio-spatial nature of how violence is understood in Honduras is that it makes it appear knowable and predictable, offering the tenuous illusion that violence is manageable as long as one stays within the

geography as defined. Knowing where neighborhoods start and end, knowing which neighborhoods are controlled by allied or rival crime groups, and knowing where your social location allows you to go (and where it does not) is crucial. There are, however, a multiplicity of ways that people violate the bounds and become out of place and are then, predictably, subjected to violence. Being out of place, being in the wrong place, means risking your life.

*Fieldnotes: February 6, 2019*

I drive Marlon home. Marlon lives in El Trébol, on the outskirts of San Pedro, in a neighborhood at the far end of a long, single road. As we're driving in, and driving in, and driving in, he starts to talk about how all of this is Los Verdes, everything here is Los Verdes. See how *tranquilo* it is? It's all Los Verdes. And he starts to point out look, up here you'll see, we're being reported. This car is being reported. Since we turned off the highway onto the *pavementada*, the car is being reported, reported, reported. Look, he said, we're going to pass a *llantera*, there will be someone there with a cell phone reporting, and then up further, there'll be someone. I ask at some point, should I put down my windows? He says not yet.

Once we get to a certain point he says ok, now. *Bájelos si quiere*.

Marlon isn't currently active in Los Verdes. But he was. And he's still loyal to them. He kind of regrets leaving, because then, he says, he was respected. But he had a daughter and wanted to make different choices. He's not sure, though, if it was the right one. He's had a hard time getting a job. He's 19 and has already been deported twice.

For a while he worked for a big hardware store chain, and he had to deliver stuff to different neighborhoods. Twice they sent him to Amarillo neighborhoods, and he got beaten up. I say, "How did you survive it?" He says, "well the police came but that's because the police are working with the big hardware store to protect their merchandise. After the third time," he says, "I'm not going to chance it" and he would just refuse to go. Like one time they came to pick him up for a job and on the way, they told him it was La Newton. An Amarillo stronghold.

"Heh! La Newton," he says. "*O no, me baje, me baje, me baje, y* (moving his hands to indicate, I'm out of here!) *de regreso*. That is a place I will not go in." He quit that job.

I say, but, like if you go into an Amarillo neighborhood, how do they know you're from a Verde neighborhood?

"They come up to you and they say 'where are you from' and if I say, say I lie and I say 'I'm from Rivera Hernández,' and they say 'what *colonia*?' and I say one, they say, 'ok who are the *locos ahí*?'[2] and I say, maybe because I know somebody there, I know a name, I say a name, they take my photo to send it to those people they say, is this guy from you? and heh! If they find out I lied? Well, they'll kill me. So it's better to just say the truth, cause if I just say the truth and say I'm from a Verde neighborhood, maybe they'll kill me too, but if I lie and say I'm from another neighborhood, they'll also kill me."

And well, I say, can you go into other Verde neighborhoods? And he says yeah, he can go into any Verde neighborhood anywhere because even if they do the same thing, they'll report

back to the Verdes here, and he's on really good terms with them. He says he left, he says they let him leave, *le dieron pase*, he just went and asked and said he wanted to make some more money, he wanted to have other opportunities in life. He joined when he was 15, and then three years, and he just wanted to try something else and they, *le dieron pase*.

He said if he had *saltado*, like passed to a higher level, having killed someone, then there's no leaving. But he wasn't at that level yet. He started out as one of those *banderas*, reporting. 24 hours a day there are people on this *pavementada* reporting back who's coming in and who's coming out.

He adds, "And if the police come in, from the moment they turn off the *pavementada*, we know."

I say, "Man, so you know every *colonia*, *colonia por colonia*, who controls what?" "Yeah," he says, "You kind of have to know."

A social geography of violence also gestures towards how violence is embedded in the social. Other scholars have masterfully theorized violence in its many forms, but this dissertation attempts to deal with violence by replicating the way that violence exists for people in Honduras. Violence is not extraordinary, even as it is something that people are always trying to manage. For example, Chico, a teenager from López Arellano, was shot three times. Once he was released from the hospital and sent home, his cousin, Magui, remarked to me: "*Pobre chico, tan joven para ya saber qué es una bala*." Poor Chico, so young to already know what a bullet is (is like). Magui was sad, but she expressed her lament in a way that suggests that the violence that hit her cousin in his leg and back was ever present, lurking, and would inevitably touch him eventually.

Chico was predictably likely to be touched by violence. Chico's older brother had been killed a few years earlier. They were growing up in one of the neighborhoods with an earned reputation for being *complicado*, "complicated," the frequently used euphemism to refer to places that have high rates of violence (and, in particular, violent death). Choloma's Sector López Arellano was once controlled by a patchwork of the early iteration of Honduran *maras.* Then, for years, it was under the strict domination of a drug cartel, known as *Los de La Rumba*, which effectively liquidated known and suspected *mareros* and established order in the area.

Then, in 2016, the powerful leadership trio of *La Rumba* was jailed, killed, and fled, respectively, and the power vacuum led to multiple groups – some count as many as 10 – fighting over the territory (Diario La Prensa 2018). As is often the case, when control is firmly established, when gang control is deeply entrenched, violence goes down. When the borders are contested, homicide increases. Here, however, not everyone is equally as likely to be the victim of violence – Chico's shooting was predictable not only because of his geographical location but also because of his social location. Chico was young, male, and poor, making him the kind of person who – in the areas dominated by organized crime, especially during periods of warring over territory – is most likely to be seen as a threat, a problem, a potential rival, a potentially disloyal subject, an unruly body.

Not everyone in Sector López Arellano equally expects to learn what a bullet feels like. While Honduras does have alarmingly high rates of femicide (Menjívar and Walsh 2017; Varela Huerta 2017), young women do not figure into this landscape of violence in quite the same way as young men. Magui hasn't been shot; Magui doesn't expect to know what a bullet feels like herself in the same way that she does for her cousin. Those who survive adolescence and young adulthood eventually age out of being at such high risk as well. Benjamín, Luis, and Ramón, for example, all tangled with violence in their youth but, being men in their 30s and 40s, they all breathe a bit easier, understanding that if they follow the geographic rules, their social location is no longer quite as dangerous.[3] They each worry now, like many Hondurans, about their own teenage sons. This is not to say that older adults or women of all ages are immune to violence, only that their demographic traits alone do not put them at heightened risk for murder.

Like many scholars, I am concerned with how violence is represented through the writing of it. Anthropologists have rightly identified the violence done when people are essentialized as

somehow uniquely, inherently, violent (Skurski and Coronil 2006, 6; Theidon 2001, 23), especially in service of perpetuating the myth of a less violent "us" in contrast to a highly violent "them" (Besteman 1996). These are perennial questions, unresolved tensions around how to best write violence without dehumanizing those who experience it or sensationalizing it (Feldman 1996, 245), while finding a way to humanize those who do "inhuman things" and at once "do justice" to their victims (Drybread 2020, 128). The ever-present risk of giving into the sensorial excess of violence and turning it into "a sensational object of interest, pleasure, or profit" (Skurski and Coronil 2006, 15)[4] – of engaging in the pornography of violence (Daniel 1996, 4) – must be avoided while we must also be careful not to sanitize such violence (Bourgois 2003, 433) or "flatten it down into theory" (Daniel 1996, 4). Allan Feldman suggests that a "crucial ethnographic stance salvages the particularity of the victim while systematizing the violence arrayed against the subject" (Feldman 1996, 245). Philippe Bourgois puts a similar direction another way, to "clarify the chains of causality that link structural, political, and symbolic violence in the production of an everyday violence that buttresses unequal power relations and distorts efforts at resistance" (Bourgois 2003, 433). Ted Swedenberg, in grappling with how to communicate to those in the United States the violence in occupied Palestine, writes that "perhaps the hardest thing is how impossible it is to convey the everyday normality of the violence" (Swedenburg 2003, 414). With the work and advice of these scholars and others in mind, I approach writing about violence in Honduras by taking direction from the people whose stories appear in these pages, in this chapter and throughout the dissertation. As such, my approach is to reference violence directly, unflinchingly, but without sensationalizing it or lingering on it. I do not try to minimize, sanitize, or flatten the violence with which my interlocutors contend, but neither do I offer gratuitous details or use language intended to shock.

As much as possible, I strive to recount stories of violence in the same tone as the storyteller used. When Chico is shot his sister, Estefani, sends me a text message to let me know, so I can meet them at the hospital: *Esq balearon a mi hermano Chico le pegaron dos disparos* :(. It's that they shot my brother Chico; two bullets hit him. Followed by a sad face emoji. This is how the everydayness of violence is communicated in Honduras.

Everyday violence was first proposed by Nancy Scheper-Hughes to identify the "routinization of human suffering" (Scheper-Hughes 1993, 16), the "mundane rituals and routines of humiliation and violence" (Scheper-Hughes 1993, 225) "inherent in particular social, economic, and political formations" (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2003, 21).[5] In other words, everyday violence is the toll that structural violence takes on the intimate lives of the marginalized. This is not necessarily direct physical violence, though it frequently results in illness and death, but it is more about the pressures of precarity that seep into people's bodies and shape their chances at life.

Scheper-Hughes and others use the "violence of everyday life" and "everyday violence" as interchangeable concepts. I'd like to separate the terms out, however, as I think there is a useful distinction to be made between the "violence of everyday life" and "everyday violence." The former we can use to identify the ways in which structural violence (Galtung 1969; Farmer 2004) produces quotidian suffering; the latter to suggest the situation where direct, physical violence, not only of the structural kind, has become an ordinary occurrence and forms the backdrop of everyday life. The two meanings fold into and reinforce each other, of course, but there is a subtle difference. In the case of Honduras, the violence of everyday life is seen in the grinding poverty in which people live, the stark inequality, the lack of access to resources, opportunities, and mobility. Everyday violence, on the other hand, we could use to describe life

where young people recount seeing men hacked to death by a machete, rattle off the names of loved ones and friends murdered, and anticipate that your cousin will eventually know what it feels like to have a bullet pierce his body.

Migration is frequently categorized as being either due to economic reasons, or violence, or both (here, "mixed migration" has come to be used), but those categories are not actually discrete experiences. In a country where most government functions – except for repression – have been privatized, safety and security become the responsibility of individuals to procure for themselves. In this sense, everyday violence intertwines with the violence of everyday life to produce migration; poverty and insecurity are inextricable. Chico had already been deported twice before he was shot. And as soon as he is able to walk without pain, he leaves Honduras again. Deportation, then, is a feature of the violence of everyday life.

This is not to say that the ordinariness of violence means that it is accepted as normal or goes unnoticed. Scholars of everyday violence have been careful to emphasize that living under these conditions, even getting used to them, does not imply that people are unaware that they should not have to do so. People have to *learn* how to live with violence; it is not natural or automatic (Das and Kleinman 2000). Henrik Vigh cautions that we should not confuse normalization and routinization with indifference. "People see hardship and suffering as a fact of social life," he writes, "yet they are equally aware that life is lived differently and better elsewhere" (Vigh 2008, 11). The ways in which these multiple kinds and registers are linked have been described as "a continuum of violence" (Bourgois 2003), "violent concatenations" (Auyero and Berti 2015), or a "violent mosaic" (Speed 2014). Everyday violence is connected to other forms – personal, structural, symbolic, legal (see chapter 6). This is not a new assertion. Building upon this well-grounded foundation, then, I focus on the socio-spatiality of these

overlapping forms of violence and how that shapes what is familiar and ordinary for young men in the Sula Valley, and how that relates to the experience of migration.

**Approaching the *Pandilla***

The *maras*, or *pandillas*, or street gangs, are not the only important actors in this geography of violence, but they loom large, frequently becoming the stand-in for all forms of violence and insecurity that exist in Honduras. As Jon Horne Carter notes, the *maras* must be understood as "a kind of synecdoche pointing to the intersection of state and criminal worlds of which street gangs are just the most visible appendage" (Carter 2019). Their visibility, while being part of what allows them to be construed as the primary problem in the country, is also part of how they maintain their intimate geography of control.

In Honduras, the landscape of organized crime is complex and multilayered. There are the *maras*, these neighborhood-based street gangs that control dynamics internally, within the *colonia*. There are also *bandas de sicarios*, or organized groups of assassins for hire, which are often, at least initially, family based. There are drug cartels dedicated to moving drugs across Honduras and into Mexico who also control territory, but their ends are distinct from that of the *maras*. There are also armed vigilante groups, mercenary-like private security groups, paramilitary groups, and death squads. Many of these organizations are involved in the drug trade and extortion at differing scales and to differing degrees. Rivalries are fierce and deadly, and alliances are often tenuous and shifting. Their fights over territory – over small swaths of poor neighborhoods – create the contours for much of the geography of violence in Honduras.

While recognizing the heterogeneity of organized crime in Honduras, in this dissertation I focus on the *maras* and the police, as it is their presence that is felt most acutely in daily life in

the urban neighborhoods of San Pedro Sula. As of this writing, there is no definitive genealogy for the rise of the *maras* in Honduras.[6] While a narrative about deportees from the United States being responsible for bringing the *maras* with them is one that circulates widely throughout the media and in popular discourse, a closer analysis of the situation in Honduras reveals that this is not a sufficient explanation (Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011; Brenneman 2011; Gutiérrez Rivera 2013).[7]

In addition to the presence of deportees in Honduran society, a handful of other factors were also at play in the 1990s: a transition to civilian rule, the end of the cold war and a corresponding decrease in military funding from the United States, the end of mandatory military service, neoliberal economic policies and structural adjustment programs, and Hurricane Mitch in 1998. The end of the cold war and the decrease in military spending had major ramifications for Honduras, which had long relied on substantial U.S. assistance as the staging ground for the U.S. counterinsurgency agenda in the region. These cuts were coupled with the global turn to the Washington Consensus prescriptions for economic growth – liberalization, stabilization, privatization – where Honduras was encouraged to dismantle (and rewarded for it) the few existing yet precarious social welfare programs it had in place (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013, 2).[8] This "retreat of the state" exacerbated poverty and inequality (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013, 50), and its focus on export agriculture and *maquila* manufacturing spurred other major shifts, as people from throughout the country's rural territory moved into the infrastructurally ill-equipped urban zones – chief among them the Sula Valley – in search of jobs (Pine 2008, 19).[9]

The worsening economic situation combined with changing trends in the region's drug trade. As the U.S.-led drug war ramped up, Colombian cartels looked for different routes to get cocaine to the United States. Honduras, strategically located between South and North America,

has substantial territory largely ungoverned by the central government (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013, 51). In addition, as the Colombian cartels were disrupted by U.S.-led interdiction efforts, the Mexican cartels begin to fill the void (Grillo 2012) and establish bases of operation in Honduras (Gutiérrez Rivera 2013, 4).[10] While the shifting contours of the drug trade in the '90s throughout the Americas is an important factor, I want to be careful not to conflate the major drug trafficking operations with *maras*. While the *maras* are at times used by drug cartels as instruments, cannon fodder, or scapegoats (Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011, 2), the wealthy, well-organized, and influential transnational organized crime groups are not the same as the poor, teenage, unruly *mareros*.[11]

Another crucial factor that contributed, perhaps above all else, to the rise of *maras* in Honduras was Hurricane Mitch in 1998, which devastated the country, hitting the poor, urban slums that had sprung up over the previous decade especially hard. Thousands died, and many more were displaced. In this context, youth turned to gangs for survival (Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011, 93; Arce 2018, 178–79). Jon Horne Carter points to Mitch as a crucial factor in the formation of Honduran gangs, discussing the youth made homeless or orphaned after Mitch, gathering in the ruined structures around Tegucigalpa's riverfront, defending themselves from paramilitaries and vigilantes (Carter 2014). He writes, "the *maras* emerged as an international league of marginalized individuals, stranded between law, borders, conflict, and natural and economic disasters" (Carter 2014, 485). In Carter's assessment, while neighborhood street gangs and *mara* groups existed here and there prior to 1998, it was the devastation of Mitch and the lack of response to it that enabled the ranks of the maras to swell.

In response to *mara* violence, Honduras, along with most of Central America, adopts "*Mano Dura*" type policing.[12] Modeled after U.S.-based law enforcement strategies, Honduran

President Ricardo Maduro was the pioneer of *mano dura* tactics in Central America (Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011, 91). *Mano Dura* translates conceptually to "iron fist" and signifies a suite of policies including harsh prison sentences, guilt by association, increased state violence against suspected offenders, and the abrogation of rights in the name of security. In Honduras, this series of laws allowed for the prosecution of youths for membership in a gang, regardless of whether or not they had committed any other crime (Brenneman 2011, 45; Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011, 142). Markers of urban youth culture are criminalized, as having tattoos, dressing in a certain way, having a certain kind of haircut, and simply associating with *mareros* is made sufficient for detainment. As this chapter demonstrates, "associating" with *mareros* is an unavoidable feature of life in the neighborhoods controlled by gangs.

While all of that is codified as legal, extrajudicial "enforcement" and "social cleansing" aimed at young, poor, urban men also rises (Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011, 98; Arce 2018, 176), with the return of unmarked cars that drive through neighborhoods and murder youth (Pine 2008, 48, 57).[13] When Chico is shot, his mother tells me about the *carros fantasmas* that used to kill young men in her neighborhood; she worries that they've come back. *Mano dura* produces and legalizes the widespread criminalization of poor, male, urban youth, turning their social and spatial location into a category of potential delinquency and grounds for arrest and imprisonment.

As I draw from the small body of literature on *maras* in Honduras, it is striking how few studies have been done that involve speaking with *mareros* themselves in the neighborhoods where they live and govern. Instead, they rest on the testimonies of former *mareros* who have converted to Christianity (Wolseth 2011; Brenneman 2011), imprisoned *mareros* who are more or less active from behind bars (Carter 2014; Gutiérrez Rivera 2012), short conversations with a

few *mareros* who are familiar to other informants (Pine 2008), or analysis of data collected by others (Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011). While this all yields valuable information and generates nuanced discussions, there is a noticeable gap of self-presentation by those who are members of, associate with, or sympathize with *maras* in Honduras. While the methodological difficulties of undertaking such an investigation are not to be taken lightly, it is important to keep in mind the limits of understanding that we can reach by approaching *mareros* and life in *mara*-controlled areas in these circuitous ways. In some sense, this serves to keep them opaque and add to the mythic quality of their organizations, their members, and, also, their violence.

I did not go to Honduras to study the *maras*, but I understood that their presence was going to be an important factor for many of the deportees I intended to work with. My focus on daily life between deportations, however, offered me a unique entrance into an understanding of gangs. Their presence is not tangential to life in Honduras; quite the contrary, life is shaped by the *maras* and the *maras* are shaped by all the features of life in Honduras that contribute to migration. The *maras* sometimes cause people to flee and are, also, at the same time, a consequence of the underlying structures that make so many people unable to stay. Ultimately, urban ethnography in Central America cannot be a distinct venture from my study of deportation, but is, rather, inextricable, especially as I understand deportation to be a continuance of a prior experience of exclusion.

**Flaco**

Flaco is thin and short, but he carries himself with the energy and posture of a tall, imposing man. He's 23 when we meet, and he's recently become *él quién lleva la palabra* – the

highest-ranking member, the decision-maker, he-who-has-the-final-word, of the gang that controls Vista del Cielo, Los Amarillos.

I meet Flaco through Benjamín. Benjamín had become one of my closest interlocutors, explaining things to me, setting up interviews for me before I even asked. Benjamín teaches the local kids basic skills; he gathers them into a soccer team. It's all very low profile, very grassroots, and every activity he engages in is always done with the approval and consent of Los Amarillos. When he approaches them about a new idea, they sign off, saying yes, "*si es para el bien de la colonia."* If it's for the good of the neighborhood.

Vista del Cielo has a reputation for being one of the most dangerous *colonias* in Honduras and, because of this, it has become one of the neighborhoods that gets a steady stream of journalists who come looking for gang graffiti, guns, and tattooed youth.

Benjamín decided to help me, he says, because I was the only one, of all the outsiders who came to their neighborhood, who came without a police escort or a pastor, who came alone. That showed him something: first, that I wasn't going to share information with the police, which meant I could be trusted but, also, more importantly, that I wasn't scared of him, and his children, and his neighbors. I hadn't anticipated how much that would matter, breaking with the quiet indignity of being residents of a neighborhood that gets attention from foreigners who never quite trust the people there enough to interact with them without protection.

When I ask Benjamín if he thinks one of the *mareros* there might speak with me, he offers to ask Flaco. "*Ah, ¿la del carrito rojo*?" Flaco answers. The girl with the little red car, referring to the red-orange hatchback I had in Honduras. From the beginning, my distinctive car and sustained presence without police *was* designed to make sure the gang knew I was there and that I was not trying to hide anything from them. Flaco agrees to speak with me.

I interview Flaco for the first time while he's *punteando*, standing guard at the entrance to the *colonia*. He's got an earphone in one ear, and he is constantly interrupted by his cell phone, reporting movements, checking in with the *jomis*.[14] Benjamín introduces us then backs away. Every time we see headlights coming Flaco recedes, behind a kind of half fence, enveloping himself in the darkness. I wait and think to myself "oh, now I understand why they tell you to do *cambio de luces* when you drive in these neighborhoods." It never made sense to me in daylight but at night… it indicates you're not police if you're driving around with your flashers on. I'd always done it, because I'd been told to, but it is only here, standing at the edge of the neighborhood and seeing headlights appear out of nowhere, unsure if they would be friendly or hostile, that I really understand the importance of those blinking lights at night.

The first interview is short and hasty, but over the rest of my time in Honduras (and after I left) Flaco and I develop a friendship. I'll return to his story in later chapters, but for now I will highlight a few things he tells me that night. The real war, he says, is with the Verdes. His gang, the Amarillos, aren't at war with the police, but the police come after them, so they fight back. "*No me voy a dejar de matar de alguien, me entiende, pudiendo defenderme*." I'm not going to let someone kill me, you understand, being able to defend myself. "*Y peor de la policía y porque la policía lo que hace es matar o golpear, si te agarran*." And even worse if it's the police, because the police what they do is kill or hit, if they get you.

He goes on to tell me about multiple times they've picked him up, when they found him sleeping and tied him up and beat him. He says the police "*dicen que nosotros molestamos a la gente, pero la verdad nosotros no molestamos a nadie, sino que nosotros cuidamos*." The police say we bother people, but we don't bother anyone, actually, we protect.

He also tells me that he has a son.

"*Vive aquí cerca y pasa con su mama. Porque Ud. sabe que los hijos tienen que estar con la mamá. Y con el papá también. Pero en este caso Ud. sabe que no puedo estar yo con mi hijo porque es un mal ejemplo*."

I say, "*¿Así lo piensa*?"

"*Sí, o sea, a mí no me gustaría que agarre este camino…. A nadie se lo deseo*."

Flaco's child lives with the boy's mother because he doesn't want his son to be influenced by his own bad example. "I wouldn't like for him to take this path," he says, "I don't want that for anyone."

I meet up with Flaco in the daylight a few days later, and we share a coke in the backyard area of a *pulperia* in the *colonia*. A few of his *jomis* walk through as we sit there and talk. They acknowledge him, he acknowledges them. He asks, fascinated, earnest:

"Is it true that in the United States there are *pandilleros* who live to be 30, 40 years old?" He's already escaped death a handful of times, and the idea that he could live another ten or twenty years seems as extraordinary to him as living another hundred.

Flaco expects to give his life for his gang and, he would argue, for the defense of the *colonia*. Flaco also emphatically does not want his own child or other kids to join his gang. He tells me when young kids start showing interest in joining, he counsels them against it. He wishes he might have had a different life, but he's proud of the protection he and his *jomis* provide, keeping the neighborhood "safe" – as they see it – from outsiders, intruders, thieves, petty criminals and, most importantly, rival gangs, the gangs that come from different *colonias.*

Flaco is in many ways a product of the iron-fisted anti-gang approach in Honduras. Flaco's "pretrial detention" put a young, low-level gang member in maximum security prison for two years alongside the highest-ranking leaders of his gang. He came out of jail without a

criminal conviction but with points and credibility, moving him up in the ranks. When the police show up in Vista del Cielo, as they often do, they go after Flaco, but not to arrest him. One time they grabbed him in the middle of the night and left him in a Verde neighborhood, counting on the gang rivalries to eliminate him. A major storm hit and Flaco was able to escape back to the safety of his own neighborhood, but a lot of young men – gang members and unaffiliated "civilians" – are not so lucky.

The ever-expanding security state in Honduras currently boasts seventeen different police forces, including a unit whose mission is to police former officers. There are multiple configurations of interagency forces, all aimed, ostensibly, at dealing with the country's organized crime groups and all widely suspected of being involved with those same groups. People in the *colonias* talk of seeing police officers with gang tattoos on their bodies, of police officers disappearing youth. César, a bus driver, tells me how his bus cooperative was being extorted by three different gangs and when the gangs wanted to raise the extortion amount, the cooperative went to the specialized anti-extortion police force. The agents told the bus cooperative that they should probably just leave the country, ask for asylum in the United States. When the bus cooperative said they didn't want to do that, the agents acted as middlemen, negotiating down the extortion demands. César was astounded. The police clearly knew who the extortionists were, yet they did nothing to intervene.

When I interviewed police, public prosecutors, and medical examiners, this deep mistrust was evident even among the authorities themselves. The public prosecutors did not trust the police assigned to work with them to investigate homicides and other crimes; many suspected that the police officers were working with the "criminals," some had been threatened directly by police agents, and some had witnessed extrajudicial murders at the hands of the military police

and feared for their own lives. One officer from the specialized, elite, anti-narco police force told me with increasing frustration how his higher-ups made him change his reports to protect high level and influential people who might have been implicated.

In addition to the police, the military has been increasingly involved in policing the civilian population in Honduras, all in the name of combating the *maras y pandillas*. The military police (*Policía Militar del Orden Popular, PMOP)* are essentially army units stationed in civilian neighborhoods and used to patrol the residents. Barracks housing fatigues-clad soldiers have sprung up in sectors like Rivera Hernández. This was a special project started by current president Juan Orlando Hernández when he was the President of Congress in 2013, and the PMOP has since become an entrenched feature of Honduran policing. While their presence is supposedly meant to combat organized crime, when I ask a pastor in La López if they have made things better, he responds emphatically:

> "No, no no no no no. It makes us feel like we're at war. But who's the war with? Who are we at war with?... There's a war, there's a war between drug cartels. There's a war between narcos. But are we at war? … With them patrolling the streets, it's like they're at war against us. It's like their war is against us. Is against the *pueblo*."

While the gangs are used as the pretext for an increasingly militarized security state, the presence of the state in the *colonias* like the ones profiled here manifests primarily in a repressive nature. The gangs, however, can have a mixed reception from those who live within their territories. The same pastor tells me:

> "*Si vivís en tierra de nadie, si venís de tierra de nadie*... if you live in no man's land, if you're from no man's land, what are you going to do if you can't count on anything, if you can't count on the institutions?" He adds, "you know there are some people who would prefer to deal with the criminal, *delincuente*, cause at least you know what you're getting. But with the police, you don't, you don't, you don't."

**Exile from La Libertad**

To be clear, although the gangs are often more trusted than the police, are made up of young people who come *from* the community, and undoubtedly face extrajudicial persecution, they are also feudal-like lords who exercise strict rule over the territories they control. While the gangs are, in many ways, a response to and a reflection of the violence of the state, their domination over territory is real and can be deadly, especially when someone steps out of place.

As a teenager, after his father died, Kevin, a young man who grew up in La Libertad – Ramón's neighborhood – started working in a market in an area controlled by Los Verdes. The gang in La Libertad, Los Morados, started to suspect that Kevin could be a spy, was maybe a Verde sympathizer or – even worse – a member, so they beat him up and told him to get out. He fled the country and headed for the United States. He was detained in Arizona, and after about six months he was deported back to Honduras. He thinks he started an asylum claim, but he's not totally sure what exactly happened.

Within days of being back at home, Los Morados abduct him. They smash his hands with a hammer, cut him, tell him they're going to kill him. "These were the same guys I went to elementary school with," he tells me. His mother manages to get the police to intervene, and Kevin is rescued. He's alive, but now, neither he nor the rest of his family can safely live in La Libertad. Speaking to the police is high treason – everyone in Rivera Hernández knows that.

Kevin waits just long enough for his hand to heal a bit – so he can grab onto the metal ladders of the freight train cars that he will climb while in Mexico – then he sets out again for the United States. His mother moves with Kevin's siblings to another area of San Pedro Sula, and she never sets foot in La Libertad again. It's causing trouble for her younger children. In order to register them for school she needs a certificate of home birth to prove their personhood, but the

midwife who would issue it lives in La Libertad – she was their neighbor – and Kevin's mom can't go back there to get it.

When Kevin is deported the second time, he stays a little while longer, a couple of weeks, but soon Los Morados learn that he is back. They send a cousin to tell him that they know where he is. The threats start again. Now they swear they will kill him both for being a Verde spy and for being a *sapo*, a snitch. I listen to the threatening voice notes sent over Facebook messenger, warning him to be vigilant, because they are after him. "*Ponéte buzo, te vamos a quebrar. Ponéte buzo, te vamos a pelar. Por sapo*."[15] Kevin leaves again.

Gangs are often thought to be an external presence, imposed from the outside but, as Kevin says, he knew them from elementary school. The young men who abducted Kevin are also his neighbors. Gloria, his mother, had watched them all grow up, grow into the young men who rule their neighborhood. When she intervened, they tried to dissuade her, saying, respectfully, "*no tenemos ningún problema con Ud, madre. Pero ya sabe*." We have no quarrel with you, mother. But you know.

The surveillance the gang exercises over Kevin's mobility, both within and outside of the neighborhood, is a constant feature of life in the Sula Valley. He gets in "trouble" with the gang at first because he pushes the boundaries of acceptable mobility by moving in and out of his neighborhood and into a space controlled by Los Verdes. The first consequence of this transgression is banishment – by Los Morados – and as long as he remains in exile, immobile elsewhere, his family is fine. When he returns, when he is deported back to Honduras, the problems resurface, involving his whole family, and then their movements, along with his, are watched. They all flee the neighborhood, but as long as Kevin remains in Honduras, they are all

uneasy. When he's deported the third time, he barely leaves the two rooms his mother has rented in a different part of the city, but still, they find him.

As I write this, Kevin is once again in Mexico. He's been there for a while this time, wandering across the country that lies between his home, where he cannot live safely, and the United States, where he cannot get refuge. As many times as Kevin is deported, he will keep leaving Honduras, as long as he is able. Because Kevin knows exactly what is waiting for him there. If he stays in Honduras, eventually they will kill him. The danger Kevin faces in La Libertad is real. The boys who control that neighborhood will always be after him, as his perceived transgression is understood to be an existential threat to them and their neighborhood.

*Fieldnotes: February 9, 2019*

I'm leaving La Libertad, it's 9:30 at night. This is probably the latest I've ever been in Rivera Hernández. I spent the evening with Ramón. People are asking him to take them north. So tomorrow he's actually leaving to take a family to Villahermosa. Then he'll come back.

We just hung out and drank some beers in front of a *pulpería* in La Libertad. He took me to see the *cancha* which is now *alumbrada*, and there were kids playing football and we talk about how he thinks more people are leaving now than before. He thinks more people are preparing to go, he thinks life here is getting harder, things are getting worse. There are just fewer jobs and people can't figure out how to make ends meet. He just thinks it's all just getting harder and harder.

At night the air is kind of smoky. People are burning trash or wood but mostly trash I think. The air is kind of filled with that smoky smell, not bad smelling, but not quite the delicious smell of a bonfire. And it's so humid and the air is so heavy, that the air is kind of filled with dust. Ash, I guess it's ash. It makes the evenings hazy.

At one point we heard gunshots in the distance, but Ramón didn't flinch, and I didn't flinch. Nobody said anything about it. But it wasn't the backfiring sounds of a car. It sounded more like *tiros* in the distance but *tiros*.

I asked him tonight if he's ever shot anyone. And he said yes. He told me about a time that Los Naranjos came and tried to get Los Morados to sell drugs for them. And he said look here we don't sell drugs. Marijuana sure. But we don't sell cocaine and we don't sell meth … we don't sell that here. That makes people crazy, we don't do that. And they threatened him, and he threatened back, and it was all like *quién sos vos, quién sos vos... yo no soy nadie pero yo sé qué onda acá*[16] and they came a couple of times and they shot up his house and he shot back and that's one of the reasons he says that people in the neighborhood have so much respect for him.

He takes me to see a pick-up truck that he has in his house that's full of corn and the idea is for the *muchachos* to go sell the corn. He said people like to say that he's the *jefe de pandilla*, but he's like man, I just want to give them a chance.

His brother was, he was the *jefe de pandilla*, and they only killed him a year ago. He's like look Amelia, if I were the *jefe de pandilla*, do you think I wouldn't have taken revenge? *no te creas, duele, duele cuando te matan a un hermano. duele. si yo fuera jefe*[17]... wouldn't I have gotten revenge for my brother's death? He says he tried to talk his brother out of that life, but his brother wanted to be the *jefe*, wanted to be the most powerful, and Ramón is like, and what did it get him? now he's dead.

There is something about the way that the Morados have kept La Libertad out of the hands of the *sicarios* or the narcos or even the Verdes or Amarillos that is beautiful even if they are violent. I think about Kevin and his mother, and I believe them that Kevin is not a *pandillero*, but I also understand for the first time tonight, I understand why they are so hyper vigilant about anybody who might have links to Los Verdes, they are keeping the neighborhood safe in their own way, in their violent, feudal, in-the-absence-of-the-state way. That's what they have to do to keep their neighborhood and their neighbors safe. They're constantly worried about Los Verdes coming in. They're constantly worried about being taken over by them. So, if someone from the neighborhood might possibly be working with them, I get why that means banishment.

I tentatively ask Ramón at some point about Kevin, without revealing that I know much about the boy and his family. He waves me off, he was a Verde, he says, and changes the subject. By this point, he makes clear, I should understand enough to know that this allegation is sufficient, on its own, to explain everything. From his vantage point, the possibility that one of their own had betrayed not just the gang but the whole neighborhood by getting involved with their rivals, with those who would take them over and endeavor to rule them, warranted expulsion and perhaps even death. Ramón isn't in charge, he couldn't direct the *muchachos* on how to handle this or any other situation, but he understands their reasoning.

**Conclusions**

The social geography I've depicted in this chapter informs every argument that I make throughout the rest of this dissertation. The tension between multiple immobilities, being stuck between internal borders and forced movement across international borders, is a fundamental

component of the continuity between life in Honduras and life as a migrant and deportee. Where one can and cannot go is circumscribed first not by national level boundaries but by a landscape of domination, exclusion, and persecution. Being out of place in Honduras pushes people into the expansive placelessness of migration, where those who leave are made to move, again and again, through ongoing cycles of unwanted movement. This is the subject of the next chapter.

**Update on the People in this Chapter**

Chico, Marlon, and Flaco all left Honduras not long after these fieldnotes were taken. Chico is seeking asylum in the US. Flaco is in Mexico, just trying to keep his head down. I don't know what's happened to Marlon, whether he has been deported again or not. Ramón has been in *prisión preventiva* for over a year, charged with *cobrando extorsión*, collecting the infamous extortion payments. The police took him in with three hundred lempiras and a cell phone on him, and the only "witnesses" to his alleged activities are police officers. The latest development in his case is that the police officers who filed charges against him have indicated their willingness to retract the complaint, for a fee of 40,000 lempiras (roughly $1600). People in La Libertad and elsewhere are pooling resources to come up with the money and Ramón is convinced that they targeted him because the police are in league with Los Verdes and want to help them take over La Libertad.

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**Notes to Chapter 2**

1. I refer to Juan as "Profe," reflecting the typical honorific that would be used in Honduras. *Profe* is short for *Profesor* which, in Honduras, is the title used for teacher. It is both respectful and, especially in this shortened form, lightly affectionate.

2. *Loco*, literally meaning "crazy person," in this context makes reference to the gang members, gang leaders, who would be known to the residents as those who control the neighborhood in question.

3. For more on the problem of generation in Honduras see Frank-Vitale and d'Aubuisson 2020.

4. In making this point Julie Skurski and Fernando Coronil cite, without quoting directly, Feldman 1991; Daniel 1996; Kleinman and Kleinman 1997; Rabasa 2000.

5. Kleinman uses an essentially identical operating definition, as "the violence such structural deprivation does to people" and "mundane and multiple" even as he calls for attention to this violence across the social order (A. Kleinman 2000, 227).

6. Salvadoran anthropologist Juan Martínez d'Aubuisson is in the process of writing a book about gangs in Honduras, but it is not yet published. Jon Horne Carter's monograph on Honduras is also forthcoming.

7. See Chapter 3 for a more in-depth discussion of the differences between Salvadoran and Honduran histories of deportation at the time.

8. There is also an argument to be made that Honduras was essentially a neoliberal state long before the Washington Consensus and the rise of neoliberalism. Dario Euraque's excellent book, *Reinterpreting the Banana Republic,* details this history pre-1980s (Euraque 1997).

9. While the extreme poverty of most Hondurans is perhaps a compelling explanation for the rise of the maras, if socioeconomic factors were the whole story, Nicaragua, Honduras's southern, poorer, neighbor would be at the top (Bruneau, Dammert, and Skinner 2011, 12–13). Nicaragua, however, while being the poorest country in Central American (and the second poorest in the western hemisphere, behind Haiti) is by far the safest country in the region and the *maras* have not been able to establish a presence there.

10. A key figure in this was Juan Ramón Matta Ballesteros. He was instrumental in connecting the Colombian trade and the Mexican trade. He was also a contractor with the CIA, using the same planes that made drug shipments to get weapons and other material supplied by the U.S. to the Contras in Nicaragua. One of the few interruptions in U.S. hegemony in Honduras occurred when the U.S. arrested Matta Ballesteros in 1988. Although the government collaborated in the arrest, Hondurans protested and set fire to the U.S. embassy in response.

11. There is some convergence in Honduras, especially between MS-13 and the cartels, but their operations and street presence are still substantially distinct.

12. For a full discussion of *Mano Dura* in El Salvador see Wolf 2017.

13. I say "return" here because these unmarked cars were familiar in the dirty war era of death squads in Honduras as in much of Latin America.

14. "*Jomi*" is the term used locally to refer to full-fledged members of the gang. It is derived from the English "homie."

15. "Be on the look out/be on high alert, we're going to break you. Be on the look out/be on high alert, we're going to peel you. For being a snitch." In this usage, both break and peel are common colloquial phrases used to mean murder.

16. "Who are you?" "And who are you" "I'm not anyone but I know what's up around here"

17. Don't think it doesn't. It hurts, it hurts when they kill a brother. It hurts. If I were the boss…

## Chapter 3 *Mañana me mandan, mañana vengo*: Re-Routing Deportation through Circulation

An almost mischievous smile spreads across her face, and she shakes her head defiantly: *mañana me mandan, mañana vengo.*

Yadira and I are sitting on the bed tucked into the corner of the cement-block room. The mattress has that musty sour smell of humidity and sweaty bodies but, compared to the pieces of cardboard that most migrants sleep on, it is the prized spot. Yadira is the current occupant, a status earned because of her lengthy time at this shelter and the ordeal she has been through. She is the star witness in a case against Mexican police officers who took her children away from her and accused her of being a *coyote*, a smuggler. Yadira is dark skinned, with tight curly hair, a round face, and a broad smile. Her children, she tells me, are *cheles*, fair-skinned, with fewer apparent markers of their family's afro-Honduran roots. That's why the police thought they had an easy case, Yadira says. But they didn't count on Yadira being her children's mother and being the kind of person who would put her own journey on hold for months to fight them for violating both Mexican law and her (and her children's) rights. When they threatened to deport her, in an effort to cow her into submission, she scoffed. *Mañana me mandan, mañana vengo*, she tells me. They send me back tomorrow; tomorrow I'll come (back.)

Yadira was one of the first Central Americans in transit I interviewed, more than ten years before writing this dissertation. Many of the details of her story have faded from my memory in the intervening decade, but these broad strokes and that phrase – *mañana me mandan, mañana vengo* – have reverberated in my mind as my engagement with Honduras and

migration have deepened. Yadira had been deported multiple times before I met her, from the U.S. and from Mexico, yet here she was, again, on her way north. Deportation wasn't the end of her journey. It was a frustrating setback, to be sure, but she'd just turn right around and start out again. And again.

At the time, that was the remarkable part of Yadira's story, her resolution to keep trying, the casualness with which she took the threats of deportation. After working with many more Honduran deportees, those in transit, and those in Honduras, I read another layer from Yadira's story. The mistreatment, racism, and threats from the police didn't dissuade her, neither did being jailed and separated from her children, nor the poverty and deprivation of life in transit. Rather, each facet of her story involved experiences already familiar from daily life in Honduras.

Her words, that she would come back, frame the argument of this chapter and the one that undergirds the larger dissertation: that deportation is not an exceptional experience for most Hondurans today but is, rather, one dislocation in a series, a circuit, of compelled movement. As people move through these circuits, so too does the exclusion that generates the move to migrate, making deportation less an experience of rupture and more one of mundane, everyday violence. In this chapter, I work through this argument by first narrating a "typical" experience of deportation among young Honduran men. From there, I review the existing literature on deportation. This broad body of literature forms the scaffolding upon which I build my argument, while I show how the primary emphasis of deportation studies does not fully apply to the Honduran deportees with whom I work. I then suggest that by using a lens of circulation, we can better attend to the constancy of the experience rather than focusing on the exceptionality of it.

**Ricardo: He Cannot Be Here**

29-year-old Ricardo has been migrating since he was a teenager. When I meet him in 2017, he's already been deported a handful of times. He is mostly unbothered, almost delighted, to be deported this time. He is so used to the whole process that he didn't even bother to tell his family he was being sent back ahead of time. He wants to surprise them. He'd told his friends in the U.S. that he was just going to visit his family, as though it were a vacation, and that then he'd be right back. It had been four years since he'd seen his mother, and he was eager to visit, but he knew he would not be staying. Ricardo hadn't grown up in the United States, and although he had recently fathered a child there, his home, his mother, and his extended family are all in Honduras.

Ricardo took a taxi from the deportee processing center in San Pedro Sula directly to his aunt's house in a *residencial*, a low-income but nominally gated community, on the outskirts of the city. Before he could knock on her door, however, a group of boys pulled him into a *mototaxi* and drove him to the edge of the neighborhood, where the residential area gave way to the woods. They roughed him up a bit and interrogated him, demanding to know who he was, why he was there. They made him strip down, completely, so they could examine his body for tattoos. Ricardo has a few – his mother's name, a marijuana leaf – but he was able to convince the boys that they were harmless, unrelated to any gang affiliation. It was enough to buy him a few days at his aunt's house, but, when they dropped him back off at her door, they waited to make sure she recognized him. And they made it clear that he shouldn't get too comfortable, he shouldn't plan on staying. *Cuidadito.* Watch yourself.

Two days later, I'm sitting in Ricardo's aunt's little living room. He sits, perched, on the armrest of the chair where his mother is seated, his arm gently draped around her shoulders. His

cousins run in and out and he tells me, proudly, how he made breakfast for them this morning. He's happy, at ease, and his mother and aunt are visibly pleased to have him back. Still, after he recounts the "welcome" he received in the neighborhood, his aunt says, placing her hand on her chest, "*él no puede estar aquí. Me duele decirlo, pero acá no se puede estar*." He can't be here, it hurts me to say so, but he cannot be here. His mother agrees with his aunt: Ricardo has to go. Here, they tell me, he cannot go outside, he cannot get a job, he cannot study. It's like he's in prison. They won't even let him go to the *pulpería* by himself.

Ricardo leaves Honduras shortly after my visit; he'd stayed in his country of citizenship this time for just four days. In Mexico, he gets shot by a criminal group that controls the train lines – he doesn't tell me why; he might not even know himself – and he's hospitalized in Tenosique, Tabasco. He convalesces there for a while and, ultimately, the doctors decide not to remove the bullet that's lodged in his leg. He continues northward, and, just two months after being deported to Honduras, he lets me know that he's made it back to the United States. He knows he'll be picked up and deported again sooner or later, but in the meantime, he is happy to be able to send money back to his mom.

**The State of Deportation Studies**

The stories of men like Ricardo show deportation to be one segment in a longer, cyclical journey. Ricardo isn't sent back to an unfamiliar world and deportation does not put an end to his life of migration. Deportation disrupts his life, of course, but it does not represent "confounding rupture" (Dingeman-Cerda and Coutin 2012). His return to Honduras brings him back home. Home, however, is at once familiar and inhospitable. The broad strokes of Ricardo's story are common among Honduran deportees; making multiple migration attempts and having multiple

deportations is normal. Yet much of the literature that has focused on deportations describes a markedly different experience of removal.

Deportation-As-Exile

Scholars of deportation studies have conceptualized deportees as "the new American Diaspora" (Kanstroom 2014; Dingeman-Cerda and Rumbaut 2015), as "reverse refugees" (Peutz 2006), as people "exiled home" (Coutin 2016) or "banished from the kingdom" (Zilberg 2004). All these configurations share a common understanding of the experience of deportation: that it involves ripping people out of the worlds they know and sending them "back" to a country of citizenship that does not feel like home.

While this broad literature includes the experience of people all across the globe (see Schuster and Majidi 2013; Galvin 2015; Drotbohm 2011; Collyer 2012 among others), much of it emerges in the context of deportation from the United States to Central America and the Caribbean. Here, the focus is on the experience of deportees who either lost legal status after committing a crime or were "unauthorized permanent residents" (D. E. Martínez, Slack, and Martínez-Schuldt 2018), whose life experience parallels that of legal permanent residents, save the official designation. In this context, scholars have examined what happens to those who grew up in the U.S. and are then sent back to their "homelands," focusing on the difficulties of reintegrating into an unfamiliar society and the longing they have for returning to the lives and communities they knew.[1]

Tanya Golash-Boza found in Guatemala that adjustment to life in one's "home" country is fraught, requiring learning different rules, navigating unfamiliar social cues, and contending with unfamiliar dynamics of violence (Golash-Boza 2015). Deportees are doubly stigmatized, as

they are suspected of being criminals whether or not their removal from the U.S. was related to a conviction, and, at the same time, they face the stigma of being former providers who are now unable to earn a living (Brotherton and Barrios 2009; Golash-Boza 2014). In Jamaica, Mexico, and the Dominican Republic, an idea that deportees are inherently criminal and at least partly culpable for rising violence has been widespread (Charles 2010; Golash-Boza 2014; Anderson 2015; Brotherton and Barrios 2011). Collectively, this scholarship shows the violence of deportation and the dangers that deportees face when sent back to countries with which they are unfamiliar, where they do not have family, and where they are unequipped to deal with daily life.

While deportees are shown to be at risk because of their de facto foreignness, that same otherness has been capitalized upon and repackaged into a kind of "opportunity" for those deported, the countries receiving them, and international business interests. Call centers have proliferated in places where there are large populations of deportees, like Guatemala, Mexico, the Dominican Republic, where companies serving U.S. customers can hire cheap labor that still "sounds" "American" on the phone (Golash-Boza 2016; Anderson 2015; Rodkey 2016). Alternately, deportees are seen as a potential resource for "development" (Scarnato 2019), possibly returning with savings and skills acquired before being sent back, building on the expectation and reliance on remittances (Wiltberger 2014; Åkesson 2011).

El Salvador, Honduras's neighbor, has been one of the primary sites where these studies have emerged. In part, El Salvador takes prominence because of the relationship between the deportation of gang-related youth from Los Angeles and the emergence of those same gangs, the *maras*, in El Salvador (O. Martínez and Martínez d'Aubuisson 2019). Elana Zilberg, in one of the earliest studies that focuses specifically on exiled deportees, notes how the young men she works with speak frequently about being Salvadoran but being *from* Los Angeles, locating

themselves in terms of neighborhoods in Los Angeles, even while being physically present in San Salvador. Their "street smarts," formed in the urban U.S., do not map onto the worlds waiting for them in El Salvador, even though many of them were involved in criminal activity prior to deportation (Zilberg 2011, 37). Katie Dingeman-Cerda has described the process of adapting to life in El Salvador for those who grew up in the U.S. as "segmented reintegration," adapting a term used by migration scholars to describe "assimilating" over time into a country after migrating (Dingeman-Cerda 2018). Studies have focused on deported Salvadoran fathers who form "involuntary transnational families" when their children remain in the United States (Berger Cardoso et al. 2016), and shown how the presence of strong social ties of deported Salvadorans to those who remained in the U.S. increases the likelihood of re-migration (Hagan, Eschbach, and Rodriguez 2008). Katie Dingeman-Cerda and Susan Bibler Coutin detail the "confounding effects" of deportation, focusing on the "ruptures of return" (Dingeman-Cerda and Coutin 2012). The experience of those "exiled home" to El Salvador (Coutin 2016) may very well be the most well-studied kind of deportation and, at least in the Americas, sets the kind of baseline assumptions for what deportation means.

Parallel to the literature that focuses on this disorienting dislocation for deportees, there is a related effort to study the collateral consequences on those left behind, struggling to remake their worlds after someone has been torn away. Heike Drotbohm and Ines Hasselberg, in their conceptualization of a "deportation corridor," highlight the social suffering of deportation, both for those "banished" and those who remain behind (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015, 557). William Lopez's *Separated* focuses on the deep webs of disruption in the wake of an immigration raid and the deportation of the male family members (Lopez 2019). Joanna Dreby has detailed the multiple layers of trauma for children whose parents are deported or could be

deported (Dreby 2012). Deborah Boehm shows how deportation affects transnational families across borders, sometimes compelling the "expulsion" of U.S. citizens as they join their deported loved ones in Mexico (Boehm 2016). Taken in tandem with the literature that explores the experience for those deported, deportation studies have revealed the process to be one of rupture, a violent rending that breaks families and communities apart, leaving both those deported and those left behind feeling out of place.

Deportation and The State

This deportation-as-exile literature develops for a number of reasons. First, it is grounded in the intellectual trajectory within which deportation studies itself emerges as a related but separate field from immigration studies (Coutin 2015). Deportation studies coalesces in the post-9/11 era, bringing together security studies and immigration studies, frequently utilizing a framework rooted in governmentality and the state of exception. Early scholars of deportation, like Nathalie Peutz, Nicholas De Genova, and William Walters analyze deportation through this theoretical lens. Peutz situates the "deportee as a contrast category that catapults the state and its exclusions directly into the transnational arena" (Peutz 2006, 218), a theme which she builds upon together with Nicholas De Genova in *The Deportation Regime*. Here, they argue that practices of removal constitute the "formulation and emphatic reaffirmation of state sovereignty itself" (Peutz and De Genova 2010, 2). This trajectory of deportation scholarship draws upon Agamben's formulation of the state of exception as constitutive of sovereign power (Agamben 1998; 2005) and a Foucauldian understanding of governmentality (Foucault 2007) to show how limiting who can move where and deciding who can be removed and when and how is intimately tied to how a state maintains itself as the state. In essence, in the globalized neoliberal present, an

in-other-ways waning state reasserts itself through its monopoly on the power to deport. Deportation *is* the state (Slack 2019, 23).

William Walters' (2002) excellent genealogical synthesis of deportation literature traces how deportation as a practice of power has its roots in earlier forms of punishment such as exile, banishment, and expulsion. Through the constitutive exception, he argues, deportation is actively involved in *making* the world. The modern order of citizenship and corresponding rights based on territorial belonging would not reproduce itself naturally; deportation is precisely the regime through which this order and citizens themselves are constituted and maintained. This body of literature has opened important avenues for analysis, understanding deportation not as the obvious and logical punishment for unauthorized presence, but as a crucial element of how the state makes and displays its sovereignty in the context of a globalizing world and all its attendant blurring of national boundaries and power (De Genova and Peutz 2010).

In keeping with this line of theorization, scholars have focused on the disciplinary nature of deportation, most clearly articulated in De Genova's idea of "deportability," or the condition of living a circumscribed life due to the ever-present threat of potential deportation (De Genova 2002). The U.S. has strategically employed this disciplinary function of deportation for much of its history (Goodman 2020) and scholars have shown how this makes undocumented workers more subject to the whims of capital (Gomberg-Muñoz 2016) and more compliant (Golash-Boza 2015), particularly as criminal and immigration law converge (Horton 2016, 314). Geographer Nancy Hiemstra has extended this analysis to argue that U.S. detention and deportation policy aims to make this disciplinary function work extraterritorially, counting on the threat of future incarceration to have a "pre-entry regulation value" (Hiemstra 2012, 304) for would-be migrants

in Ecuador. She notes that even as this is an unsuccessful strategy in terms of curtailing migrations, it is still the logic underpinning the entire U.S. deportation regime.

Deportation as Punishment

The deportation-as-exile literature also emerges as a particular legal argument, as a counter to the narrative that deportation is somehow a simple matter of returning people to where they "belong." Adam Goodman, in his history of what he terms the "deportation machine," details how U.S. law came to rest on the idea that deportation was administrative, not punishment (Goodman 2020). This means that deportation is a civil, not criminal, procedure, and those who are subjected to it are not necessarily guaranteed any of the rights of due process that a criminal matter would entail, nor does the idea of "double jeopardy" apply (Bleichmar 1999). Although deportation has never been a benign process (Slack 2019, 26), legal scholar Daniel Kanstroom locates a new era of deportation that results from changes to criminal and immigration law in 1996 (Kanstroom 2014). The Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) made more crimes deportable offenses, meaning that those with permanent residency and other non-citizenship legal statuses were now made deportable for a wide array of criminal convictions – including retroactively. Lawful Permanent Residents who had previously been convicted and already served their sentences, for example, were now subject to losing their status and being deported under IIRIRA. IIRIRA also invents a new category of crime, the "aggravated felony," a category uniquely relevant to immigration proceedings, which aggregates what might otherwise be misdemeanors into a felony and, thus, renders the "offender" deportable.[2]

Although the punitive nature of deportation has long antecedents, IIRIRA makes its punishing function clear, even while maintaining the fiction, under U.S. law, that deportation is simply an administrative procedure.[3] The studies showing how violent the experience of deportation is for those expelled after IIRIRA are part of the important project of countering that discourse. This research also figures into larger questions about the nature of the international order of nation-states, the rights and privileges of citizenship, and what it means to belong. For example, while there is a robust scholarly and humanitarian community focused on "forced migration," Matthew Gibney rightly points out that "deportation" is rarely discussed as a form of forced migration (Gibney 2013). He argues that those focused on forced migration have resisted characterizing deportation as such precisely because it is implicitly understood to be a *legitimate* form of forced migration. It does not violate the key principles of a liberal-state world order in that "coercion is used to send people to a country where they belong and out of a country where they do not" (Gibney 2013, 122). Deportation, in other words, moves people along the grain of the international order. It is unauthorized migration that causes friction, that disrupts; deportation, in going *with* the flow, masks the coercion involved. The literature that shows the violence of being sent back to where one "belongs" has played an important part in unmasking that coercion.

This literature also shows clearly how deportation, and the threat of incarceration, fails to immobilize people once banished to their estranged homelands. Like the failed logic of Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD), which relies on the inhospitable borderlands to do violence to the bodies of migrants and, in turn, serve as a deterrent effect (De León 2015), the harshness of detention and deportation also fails to deter re-migration efforts. In Guatemala, debt-driven re-migration of deportees highlights how heightened enforcement – which makes the

costs of migration higher – actually perpetuates the very return migration it seeks to impede (Heidbrink 2020; R. L. Johnson and Woodhouse 2018). Daniel Martínez, Jeremy Slack, and Ricardo Martínez-Schuldt found that those deportees who locate "home" in the United States are those most likely to try to re-migrate, regardless of threats, risks, viability, and costs (D. E. Martínez, Slack, and Martínez-Schuldt 2018).

Honduran Deportation

As should be evident by now, the robust deportation studies literature reviewed here does not fully describe the experience of Yadira or Ricardo, in that each was returned to familiar worlds. Deportation continues to be a kind of punishment in practice, a punishment aimed to deter. For many Honduran deportees, however, deportation now fails to curtail future migrations, not because of where "home" is located but for myriad other reasons. In part, this difference stems from the distinct history of migration in Honduras as compared to that of its Central American neighbors. Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans had been migrating toward the United States since the early '80s, as civil wars, brutal repression, and economic crises forced hundreds of thousands of people to flee. Mass Honduran migration, however, really begins in the late 1990s and early 2000s, as people struggled with the consequences of the structural adjustments of the post-cold war era in the region and, importantly, after Hurricane Mitch devastated the country in 1998. This timeline means that the population of Hondurans already in the country was quite small when multiple reforms were issued in the U.S. in the '80s and '90s that permitted other Central Americans to adjust their statuses.[4] Consequently, fewer Hondurans were able to benefit from these reforms and secure legal status. This also meant that fewer Hondurans were able to confer their status onto subsequent generations and, importantly for the

discussion here, when reforms stripped people of their permanent residency and deported them in the wake of IIRIRA in 1996, this also affected fewer Hondurans (see Reichman 2011 for a longer explanation of this history). Since IIRIRA is, in many ways, the generative cause of the rise of the "criminal" deportee – and the American diaspora being sent to Central America – it's an important distinction to highlight in the case of Honduras. Although some Hondurans were deported due to the changes in the law in 1996, this crucial turning point that underpins much of the deportation-as-exile literature does not shape the experience of deportation in Honduras to the same extent.

Additionally, in the last two decades, U.S. immigration enforcement has evolved in a multitude of ways, both internalizing and externalizing the border. The internalization is related to the concept of deportability (De Genova 2002), as the undocumented population within the United States is made to feel ever more precarious and under threat. The externalization involves a series of agreements between the United States and Mexico (and, later, Guatemala and Honduras) that effectively deploy Mexican immigration enforcement to stop migrants, primarily Central Americans, from making it to the U.S. border.[5] Starting in 2014, for example, Mexico began detaining and deporting more Central Americans than the United States (WOLA 2015). Of the nearly 100,000 Hondurans deported in 2019, just over half were deported from Mexico (just under half from the U.S.) (CENISS 2020). This means that a significant number of Central Americans are sent back before they ever arrive. In addition, the increased border enforcement and deteriorating conditions in Central America have led growing numbers of the Hondurans who do make it to the U.S. border to turn themselves over to border agents and ask for asylum. Hondurans had the highest rate of asylum denial in the United States – over 87% – in 2020 (TRAC 2020b), so most of those people who seek to start the process end up being deported.[6]

This is another group who, in many cases, only experience detention – especially if they're adult men – before being deported. Broadly, the evolving deportation regime has created one reason why we have to look beyond exile to understand how deportation is experienced today.

There is, I argue, another problem with a Deportation Studies that focuses almost exclusively on exile, beyond the fact that it does not adequately capture how it is lived by many young Hondurans today. Although this is not the intended consequence of the scholars who have focused on "the new American diaspora," their argument implicitly suggests that the violence of deportation is rooted in the banishing, in the breaking, in the rupture. An inference could be made that, absent that rupture, the administrative, non-punitive, idea of deportation could, in fact, be true. In the late 1800s, when these matters were being decided by Congress and the Supreme Court in the United States, one justice dissented, writing: "To be forcibly taken away from home and family, sent to a distant land… is punishment" (Goodman 2020, 23). If people are deported before they are settled, then, before they even have a chance to begin a life in the country of their destination, does that solve the problem of deportation? If aspiring immigrants are not able to build families and communities, is the punitive nature of deportation diminished? Will it be more effective at curtailing subsequent migrations? The content of this dissertation suggests that even when deportation does not entail rending or social dislocation, it still entails violence, though perhaps of a different kind. Deportation continues to be punitive, though it is now tinted heavily with deterrence. Here, rather than deportation being an exceptional experience, a break with an otherwise stable life, I suggest we look at the violence of the very coherence of deportation.

**Ezra: We Can No Longer Be Here**

*Amy vamos en la caravana*
*Ya no podemos estar aquí*

Ezra messages me these lines on Facebook in early January 2021. “Amy, we’re going in the caravan,” he writes, “we can’t be here any longer.” Like thousands of other Hondurans, Ezra was ready to set out on foot, with his family beside him, in hopes of making it to the United States. As rumblings of a new caravan forming made news, Mexico and Guatemala had both already promised to stop it, but Ezra was not dissuaded.

This would not be Ezra’s first attempt to make it to the United States. It would be at least his fourth, but maybe fifth or sixth; his multiple attempts in his teenage years blend together in his memory. He’s never achieved even the short periods of life in the United States that Ricardo has. Yet Ezra’s determination to leave Honduras in this new caravan marks a shift in this young man. The last time I saw him, in person, was almost two years earlier, in the spring of 2019, when he told me – with equal conviction – that he would never again try to get to the United States. He was disgusted, angry, and wholly disillusioned. Ezra was part of one of the many families who had been separated under the Trump administration’s policy of “zero tolerance” that led to parents being detained and deported without their children. Ezra and Amanda, his 8-year-old daughter, were separated in January of 2018. He spent four months in different detention centers before being sent back to Honduras, alone. It would be nearly another four months before Amanda, now 9, would join him in San Pedro Sula. I accompanied Ezra when Amanda was finally sent back to him. As we drove back from the processing center for deported minors that day, Amanda and Ezra recited the alphabet and counted in English in the back seat of my car. She showed off her new language skills – knowing more numbers than her father – and he let himself smile for the first time since I’d met him.

Ezra said that immigration agents had told him that they were doing this to them, taking his child away, so that he would never think about trying to come to the United States again.

When he recounted those words to me, he steeled his gaze and said, "You know what? It worked. *Ya no quiero saber nada de Estados Unidos*." I don't want to know anything about / have anything to do with the United States. This wasn't his first time trying to migrate, but he swore it was his last. His fear of losing his daughter mixed with a newfound contempt for the U.S. He threw himself into making sure that Amanda did well in school. A devoted single father, he moved them out of his mother's house, where his brothers and cousins all lived crammed together into a few rooms, and rented a single room, not far away, for just the two of them to share. I connected him to CASM, the NGO I was affiliated with, and he eagerly studied a trade and accepted their help when they offered to cover the startup costs so he could raise pigs. For a while, Ezra was literally the poster child for the NGO, appearing in their promotional videos, grateful for the help they'd offered him and his daughter. He married a young woman from the program who had also been deported and they blended their families and their dreams.

Then, about a year and a half later, he told me they were once again thinking of leaving. His trade certification hadn't helped him find a decent job. Things were getting more dangerous in their neighborhood, as a new gang was trying to take over. He wasn't eager to leave Honduras again, but he was starting to feel the pressure to get out. I asked him if he'd take Amanda with him. "Where I go, she goes," he answered.

Before he had time to think it through, the COVID-19 pandemic hit Honduras, hard. Fears of gang violence gave way to concerns about having enough food to eat. Then, in November of 2020, Honduras was hit by back-to-back devastating hurricanes. Ezra's neighborhood became a lake. He and his whole family fled, taking refuge under a highway bridge. Like hundreds of others in the northern coast of Honduras, their homes were wiped out.

Even after the waters subsided, there was nothing for them to go back to. And the gang problems that had been troubling Ezra only intensified in the wake of the disaster.

When Ezra decides to join the caravan in early 2021 – a caravan that, from the start, was very likely to fail to even enter into Mexico – it is an act of faith as much as desperation. He knows, as well as anybody, the dangers of migrating. He'd ridden the infamous freight train through Mexico a handful of times, once with his child in tow. He nearly lost his leg from an untreated wound while in detention. They took his daughter from him. The idealized version of the United States that he had as a teenager has crumbled into a stubborn, defiant realism.

Deportation alone never deterred Ezra from trying to migrate again. Having his child stolen from him almost convinced him to give up trying to migrate, but, in the end, the conditions in Honduras outweighed his rage and his fear of losing her. So, he and his wife and Amanda join a caravan of people trying to flee.

They make it to Chiquimula, not far across the border Honduras shares with Guatemala. They are blocked by the full force of the Guatemalan military. Stores have been ordered to close. Residents have been told not to give food or water or aid to the *caravaneros*. Ezra messages me: "They won't even let us buy water. Our kids are hungry. We need food and water. And masks."

The regional migration regime, dominated by the United States but carried out by the Guatemalan military in this case, endeavors to force people like Ezra to stay put. This is done through physical removal, psychological torment, tear gas, and police batons. The full security apparatus of the region is aimed at making him immobile, pinning him in his country of citizenship. Yet, within Honduras, Ezra is also unmoored, abandoned, already living like a refugee. Deportation sends him back to the familiarity of exclusion, displacement, and insecurity.

This only leads to ongoing, unwanted circulation, through cycles of displacements, migrations, and deportations.

**Circulation: Deportability Begins at Home**

Elana Zilberg, in her essential study of deported gang members in El Salvador, endeavors to write an ethnography of circulation. She focuses on the circulation of gangs and policing models, which she notes are part of the underlying circulatory patterns of globalization from above and from below (Zilberg 2011, 2). In her work, where the deportees are banished "home" to a place they've never been (Zilberg 2011, 130), the "securityscape" is a milieu in which circulate both the methods and logics of policing that target these youth by criminalizing everyday behavior and limiting movement and the forms of social organizing and control that street gangs develop. The gang member/deportee is multiply excluded, moved and made immobile, removed from his community, jailed, detained, deported, and, often, unable to engage in free public life once in El Salvador, as the policing models which targeted him in Los Angeles have him in their crosshairs in Central America as well. Circulation is important for Zilberg's analysis, yet it is not the young men who are described as circulating (even as they often try to re-migrate). They mostly experience restriction of their mobility, a kind of carceral existence in and out of detention (Coutin 2010), where their movement is restrained within nation-states. Though a few of the deportees she worked with do attempt to re-migrate, they were headed *back,* towards a home they'd been removed from. Life, in the fullest sense of the word, was waiting for them on the other side of a border, beyond the rupture of deportation and the risks of re-migration. I want to suggest that in the years since Zilberg's study, the circulation that she identifies, of policing tactics, gang control, and authorities, has generated a parallel circulation of

young men. New generations are repeatedly compelled to migrate, without the clear directionality of return that animated the Salvadoran deportee-exiles. Whereas those early deportees knew a life beyond migrating, the deportees whose experience forms the basis of this dissertation essentially live a life in circulation.

Stuart Rockefeller and Arjun Appadurai note that anthropology has yet to develop a clearly-articulated, robust theory of circulation itself (Rockefeller 2011 and response by Appadurai), even as the term has long roots in the discipline, being a central feature of the Kula Ring as described by Malinowski (Malinowski 2010) and later Mauss (Mauss 2000), and figuring prominently in the foundational explorations of kinship and society for both Evans-Pritchard (Evans-Pritchard 1969) and Levi-Strauss (Levi-Strauss 1969). In these works, circulation is understood as the movement of things and people, from givers to receivers, weaving society together through their ongoing exchange.

To add to the exchange and reciprocity-related notion of circulation, the term gained renewed prominence toward the end of the 20th century, as a way to reference the imagined free flow of goods, ideas, and people across national boundaries. Circulation becomes the language of "multicultural enrichment, freedom, mobility, communication, and creative" hybridity (Tsing 2000, 337). It is associated with progress; the "ideology of circulation" suggests that increased circulation would bring benefits to all (McDonald 2014). Circulation *is* modernity. Benjamin Lee and Edward LiPuma, in identifying what they call "cultures of circulation" argue that it is precisely the dynamics of circulation that are driving globalization (Lee and LiPuma 2002). Drawing from Levi-Strauss but also trying to reformulate circulation as a cultural phenomenon, they define circulation as "a cultural process with its own forms of abstraction, evaluation, and constraint, which are created by the interactions between specific types of circulating forms and

the interpretive communities built around them" (Lee and LiPuma 2002, 192). They identify the global economic order as shifting from a production-based capitalism to a circulation-based capitalism. Anna Tsing, in her discussion of friction, pushes against the heralding of a borderless world of promising circulation where "motion would proceed without friction [and] everyone would have the freedom to travel everywhere" (Tsing 2005, 5). For Tsing, circulation signals the movement of goods and products, and her critique of circulation is precisely that a focus on the moving entities obscures how their movement is *channeled.* Picking up on the idea of "cultures of circulation," Melissa Aronczyk and Ailsa Craig move from thinking about circulation in terms of the movement of objects and people between defined points in space and time. Instead, their take on circulation "acknowledges its performative character, its active role in constituting objects and identities… circulation enables some kinds of subjectivity… while disabling others" (Aronczyk and Craig 2012, 93–97).

Both the classical discussion of circulation and the more recent explorations are applicable to the situation of recurrent deportations/migrations in Central America/Mexico. In each formulation, circulation is essentially a mechanism for connecting that which is non-circulating through the movement of circulating things. Gayle Rubin's take on Levi-Strauss and exchange articulates this crucial insight in gendered terms: there is a distinction between gift and giver, between that which is circulated (women) and he who does the circulating (men). "It is the partners, not the presents, upon whom reciprocal exchange confers its quasi-mystical power of social linkage…" she writes, "women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation" (Rubin 1975, 174). In other words, those who are circulated do not set the terms of the circulation, nor are they equal beneficiaries of the whole system of circulation.

In the classical formulation of circulation, there is a recognized intertwining of things and people: the things given and received are not wholly separate from the people giving and receiving them (Mauss). Women are exchanged for things, things for women (Levi-Strauss). The lines between object and person are blurred in these systems of circulation; society as a whole is constituted through the giving and receiving – and movement – of persons and things. In the globalization-era idea of circulation, the movement of goods and ideas (and sometimes people) across space and time benefits those who send and receive and make use of those things and concepts (and sometimes people). While the kind of balanced relationships of reciprocity maintained by circulation in its classical usage is not suggested here, in each formulation circulation is primarily about those who are on the outside, their being and place in the world produced to some extent through their ability to circulate things. Here, Tanya Golash-Boza's argument about how the needs of capital shape the shuffling of labor through deportation might be one approach to this (Golash-Boza 2015), seeing how migrants, as a potential work force, get circulated through deportation when their labor is no longer needed.

Yet what I am suggesting here is somewhat different. To be clear, what we are looking at in Honduras is an experience of deportation that is distinct from the exploration of banishment. By turning toward an idea of circulation, I think we can accomplish a series of things. First, it places deportation firmly within a circuit, rather than positioning it primarily as rupture. Second, circulation draws our attention towards how people move through this circuit, and the connections among life before migration, in transit, in detention, in the country of destination, and after deportation. This extends the physical movement of the journey of migration across time and space, but it also points us towards the connections of how life is lived in each of these phases, rather than segmenting the experience. In addition, it continues the "Anthropology of

Removal" called for by Nathalie Peutz (2006), by building upon the critical examination of the statecraft of deportation by examining not how the state is made through deportation but what it means for those who are always already deportable, before even beginning to entangle directly with the deportation regime.

The importance of circulation as an analytic is the relationality embedded in the concept. Circulation knits together people; it makes and maintains communities and societies. At the same time, circulation draws attention to both that which is circulated and how that circulation is shaped, channeled – the relationship between the circulating object and the structure that produces its movement. If we think about migration and deportation through circulation, we are pointed towards the relationality of the experience: Ricardo's circulation knits together his aunt in her *residencial* and his daughter in Los Angeles, what has been described as transnationalism (Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton 1994), but, at the same time, it also highlights how his inability to stay in Honduras – the threats to get out, the prison-like life he would be required to lead – is related to the precarity of life for him in the United States and the nearly inevitable expulsion he'll again face. Circulation ties together Ricardo's movement, his circular migration, with the forces that make him keep moving.

Susan Bibler Coutin writes, "Even migrants who are not apprehended experience exclusionary tactics such as being denied access to employment, housing, higher education, social services, healthcare, and public benefits. Such exclusionary practices situate migrants ambiguously as outside of national territory even when, physically, they are within" (Coutin 2010, 201). Coutin is describing the experience of deportability for those in the United States – what she terms a carceral quality – yet this is, in many ways, the kind of life that young urban Honduran men already lead, in Honduras. They do not have access to employment, housing,

higher education (or primary education in many cases), health care, or public benefits. They are, essentially, already familiar with exclusionary practices that render them outside before they physically leave the boundaries of their country of citizenship.

Circulation connects the deportability experienced by immigrant communities living in the United States with the criminalization of poor youth who have not yet left Honduras. It connects the expansiveness of mobility that migration entails and the constraints on mobility felt by poor, young Honduran men wherever they are. Circulation also encourages us to consider how migrant caravans emerge in response to an increasingly militarized approach to migration moving ever further south, so that migration is channeled into collective, public action, which further shapes the response and public sentiment. Circulation also makes us think about the relationality between "home" and "destination," further unsettling the idea that "citizenship" connotes safety and freedom or potential to flourish. Rather than understanding deportation as exile or banishment, circulation suggests something more akin to de facto statelessness, a statelessness that extends even into one's country of citizenship.

Coutin writes, "The fact that national territories in some ways resemble detention centers – both of these confine, both restrict movement – challenges liberal notions of nation-states as entities through which individuals can realize their capacities" (Coutin 2010, 201). In her analysis, the deportation regime produces immobility among those confined within territories: those un- or under-documented who cannot leave for fear of being unable to return, those deported and unable to once again access the lives they'd been made to leave behind. Yet this carceral quality of nation-states – and the corresponding challenge to the liberal notion that she identifies – also applies to life before migration and both the lack of opportunity to "realize their

capacities" in the first place and the mechanisms increasingly put into place to keep Hondurans from being able to leave.

Ricardo's story contains some of the features of circulation that I want to highlight: his multiple deportations, his (dis)comfort in Honduras, the effective expulsion he experiences by both the U.S. and Honduras. While he has made a life, if temporary, in the United States, the experience of circulation continues. Ricardo, like many immigrants, moves around within the United States, from California to Louisiana to Tennessee, depending on where there's work, where word has spread that immigration enforcement is lax. His circulation is punctuated by periods of stillness, though that stillness is never permanent.

For many Hondurans like Ezra, however, even those moments of stasis remain elusive. Ezra's circulation is channeled by a hyperneoliberal and deeply corrupt state in Honduras that has essentially abandoned its citizens to deal with insecurity, a pandemic, and back-to-back hurricanes on their own. It is channeled through a regional migration regime that has increasingly militarized borders ever further south, making the kind of individual migration of Ezra's youth toward the United States even more dangerous and impractical. It is channeled, also, by a history of mass migration movements growing in Mexico and Central America that make this idea of collective circulation, the caravan, something that seems like a viable alternative to people like Ezra.

Ezra can now add deportation from Guatemala to his list of countries that have sent him back to a Honduras where, although it is the only place he has ever lived and the place where, in the international order, he "belongs" (Malkki 1992), multiple forces converge to expel him as well, over and over again. Ezra was displaced from his home, untethered, unhoused, shuffled and channeled by gangs, natural disasters, and a negligent, abandoning state. This experience of prior

displacement is also connected, through the idea of circulation, to the multiple displacements of migration and deportation. Antony, for example, has yet to migrate when I meet him, though he is already living in circulation, made place-less within Honduras from the moment he can no longer live safely within his *colonia*.

**Antony: I Just Inhabit Here**

Antony meets us where the paved road ends. He hops into the pick-up truck that Javier, my research assistant, is driving, and directs us back up the hill. It's a bit of a maze, steep dirt roads, winding away from the older, more established *colonias* in Choloma. Antony is buoyant, chatty, friendly with Javier and at ease with me because of Javier's presence. We get as far as we can go in a vehicle, park, and walk up further still to Antony's home. He rents a single room in a little complex, a *cuartería*, essentially meaning a collection of *cuartos,* rooms. There's an initial entrance and then a kind of outdoor hallway with rooms opening off from there. There's a small courtyard, a common *pila* to hand wash dishes and clothes, a bathroom.

Antony is skinny and, at first, I think he looks so much younger than 20. As we talk, however, I get the opposite impression, that this young man is aged well beyond his years. He says the neighbors are kind to him, and, while he tries to keep a positive outlook, he has an overwhelming air of loneliness. We sit down on his bed – the only furniture he has in the room he rents – and he tells me his story of exile.

Antony lived most of his young life surrounded by family in a neighborhood all the way on the other side of the Sula Valley, in Cofradía. His eyes well up with tears when he talks about not being able to be near his family any longer. He has no one to talk to when he comes home from work, no one to tell how his day went.

He talks about getting beaten up, about almost being kidnapped, about being sure that his death was imminent without his words catching, without a tear. But when he mentions the loneliness, the feeling of not being around his family, that's when he falters. That's when he fights back the tears.

It all started three years earlier. Antony found himself out of place. He came from a neighborhood controlled by one gang; he was in rival territory. He was abducted, interrogated, and eventually released. The gang that controlled his home neighborhood, however, heard about his interrogation and now *they* had him in their sights. He gets abducted by them and is nearly killed but manages to escape. This leads to his first displacement, as he goes to live in another municipality for six months. After that time, his family thinks that the threats against him must have faded. They talk to the gang and make a deal to let him return. He's okay for a while, though he pretty much doesn't leave his mother's house. Eventually, however, power shifts within the gang and Antony gets a new warning from a gang member who had been keeping tabs on him: *lo mejor sería que te fueras, o no salgás de tu casa o te vas*. The best thing would be if you left. Either you don't leave your house, or you get out.

So, he leaves, this time for good. He moves from place to place, all across the country, from Tegucigalpa, to a rural coffee growing region, to Amapala, a tourist island in the south, to La Lima. *"Y siempre andaba con miedo de encontrarme con este tipo de personas, pero igual yo trataba de evitarlo, no saliendo. Llegaba a un lugar, estar ahí el máximo tiempo posible, y no salir, ni a la pulpería, siempre con un miedo."* And I always went around with the fear of encountering those kinds of people, but still I tried to avoid it, by not going outside. I would arrive in a place, and be there the maximum time possible, not going outside, not even to the corner store, always very afraid.

He ends up alone in this room in Choloma. Everywhere, he says, he felt suffocated, *encerrado*, enclosed, scared. He couldn't leave, he wouldn't go outside. He always felt like people might be watching him. He says he doesn't feel at home here either; he's not sure he ever will. *"La verdad que aquí siento que habito y si lo ves, no compro muchas cosas porque nunca se sabe si me tocará moverme de un lugar a otro nuevamente. Entonces trato de no tener mucho que cargar, pues entonces por cualquier cosa, porque después de todo lo que me ha pasado me doy cuenta de que todo puede pasar a un segundo."* The truth is, I feel like here I inhabit, and if you notice, I don't buy many things because I never know if I'm going to have to move from one place to another again. So, I try to not have much to carry, so just in case, because after everything that's happened to me, I realize that anything can happen in just a second.

Antony experiences displacement while living within Honduras.[7] He has lost the possibility of being at home; his exile, in a sense, begins here. Later, Antony will leave for the United States, but the condition of being made to move around, being unable to go home, begins long before he ever leaves Honduras. When he does eventually leave his country of citizenship, Antony is already familiar with life in circulation, with a circumscribed, untethered existence.

**Conclusions**

Ezra, Ricardo, and Yadira all point us toward a different engagement with deportation than the experience of exile that has been so well documented and theorized. The disruption of deportation, for them, does not come with an experience of rupture or dislocation, it is, rather, a segment in a process of ongoing circulation. Deportation is an expected, though lamented, experience. "Deportee" is not a defining identity, then, but one part of a life lived in circulation.

What does this re-routing of deportation studies through an idea of circulation do for us? It places us on a different theoretical footing, I argue, one that requires us to look at displacement, migration, detention, and deportation together rather than as distinct experiences or distinct phases. Rather than focusing on life in transit, or life after deportation, or life as undocumented immigrants, operating from a foundation of circulation directs us to look at how the precarity of those who are in transit connects to the threat of deportation for the un- or liminally documented and connects to a prior condition of exclusion. Looking at deportation through the lens of circulation allows us to shuffle the chronology, extend the geography, and de-segment the experience of migration. It also upends a kind of nationalism that runs through deportation studies, which tends to analyze everything from the experience of the United States outwards (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003). Thinking about deportation in terms of circulation allows us to start from life in Honduras, moving outwards from there, and back again.

At the same time, if we look at migration from the vantage point of circulation, it directs us towards the circuit, the connections, the coherences across time and space. This dissertation focuses on those who live this circulation, but as they move through displacement, migration, and deportation so, too, does the structural violence of exclusion and criminalization. “Exile” can be experienced at home; deportation can be familiar, everyday.

Julie Kleinman, in her discussion of migrants as adventurers, encourages those of us who study migration to propose new models and narratives based on the way in which migrants themselves understand what they are doing, why, and what it means (J. Kleinman 2019, 8). Hondurans do not typically use the language of circulation that I am proposing here; however, there is a growing shift in how people talk about their own, channeled, mobility. The discourse around and from migrant caravans highlights this. From 2012 to 2014, the multiple caravans that

occurred (smaller in scope and distance covered than the later ones) called for *libre tránsito* – freedom of movement – and involved the frequent chanting of slogans like *los migrantes / no somos criminales / somos trabajadores / internacionales*. (The migrants / we are not criminals / we are international / workers.) By 2018, there were arguments about whether or not it was even appropriate to call the caravan a caravan; both internally and externally the word "exodus" was sometimes used in replacement or in addition (Frank-Vitale 2018). In southern Mexico, for example, the committees formed by the *caravaneros* to negotiate dubbed themselves the "*comité de diálogo del éxodo*" – the Exodus Dialogue Committee – and people started referring to the entire endeavor as the "*caravana del éxodo*," the exodus caravan. What is referred to as a singular caravan was really a series of waves of large groups of people, numbering in the hundreds and thousands each, that gathered together to leave Honduras, beginning in 2018 and continuing through to early 2021. The most recent caravan, the one in which Ezra and his family participated, is really part of the same, ongoing, exodus.

An important feature of thinking about one's own migration as exodus is the kind of biblically-derived righteousness with which an otherwise illegalized form of mobility becomes imbued. Unauthorized migration has, historically, been most "successful" when done on the margins and in the shadows. In Mexico, most people who engage in it try to make themselves as invisible as possible in order to make it across the country. The clandestine nature of migration in this context pushes people into shared space with other illicit actors, contributing to a sense that migration itself is criminal. The language of exodus turns this around and constructs those who are attempting to move across foreign territory as following a higher law. Migrants frequently remind us, *Dios no hizo fronteras*, God did not make borders. In the caravan, this ethic of a higher right to migrate is made manifest, as, rather than keeping a low profile and

moving along the literal margins, migrants walk into the town square, en masse, and negotiate accommodations and aid, as equals, with authorities.

Elsewhere we have discussed more fully the power of hypervisibility and the unapologetic nature of this caravan (Frank-Vitale and Nuñez Chaim 2020), but here I want to focus on how this language of exodus reflects how those who migrate from Honduras now feel about their movement, its motivations and meanings. I propose this idea of circulation, not as a counterpoint to the affect of exodus that currently infuses outmigration but to complement it. Exodus implies a mass movement outward that is compelled; circulation describes what people who have engaged in exodus experience when they are forced back to where they started. If people think about leaving their country of citizenship as a kind of exodus, how could they do anything else but leave again (and again) if they are made to return?


*Image 2: Caravan Approaching Oaxaca. 2018*

In the image above, a young man from the 2018 migrant caravan carries a tell-tale backpack. This flimsy green backpack is adorned with two logos – that of USAID and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) – and it is the backpack given to all deportees when they arrive at one of the processing centers in Honduras. This young man, like many of the *caravaneros*, and many of those who are migrating in less visible ways, is heading north again after at least one deportation. The backpack represents the kind of circulation which exists and will continue to exist despite the many-pronged efforts by states and NGOs to force people back to where they "belong" and try to convince them to stay there. Rather than helping him stay, it's been converted into a tool to keep moving.

**Update on the People in this Chapter**

Yadira did make it back to the United States eventually, and as far as I know, she continues to reside there. Ricardo also made it back to the United States, though we fell out of touch about a year after he arrived, after his Facebook account was hacked, so I do not know if he has been able to remain. Ezra and Amanda were not able to get across Guatemala and returned to Honduras, along with the thousands of other *caravaneros.* Their neighborhood hasn't been rebuilt since the hurricanes, so they are currently residing in El Progreso, trying to put life back together. Antony is a rare success story: he and his family were able to get asylum in the United States. He is studying English and working at a store in Alabama.

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**Notes to Chapter 3**

1. See Chapter 5 for a more in-depth discussion of the "reintegration" of deportees.

2. Other scholars have also examined the ways in which the criminal justice system, in pushing poor people of color to take plea deals, also funnels individuals towards deportation, by pushing

them to plead guilty, whether or not they are, in return for a reduced sentence. The guilty plea, however, often unbeknownst to the person pleading, can then result in deportation proceedings.

3. Jason De León and Jeremy Slack have both shown the intentional violence in the deportation policies aimed at Mexicans in the U.S.-Mexico border region, where deportation is used as a weapon to directly put people into harm's way (De León 2013a; Slack 2019).

4. See Susan Bibler Coutin's work for detailed explanations of the mediated statuses that became available to some Central Americans in the 1980s and 1990s (Coutin 2011; 2007).

5. These included "Plan Frontera Sur" in 2001 (Goodman 2020, 183), provisions of the security-focused Mérida Initiative (Carlsen 2008), and the 2014 Programa Frontera Sur (Doering-White, Frank-Vitale, and De León 2017) which funneled U.S. funds into increasing immigration enforcement in Mexico. See also Heidbrink's section on "La Otra Frontera" for a full overview of this evolution (2020). The use of Mexico as a buffer was taken to new levels by the Trump administration's absurdly named Migrant Protection Protocols which expelled those seeking asylum in the United States back to Mexico and made them wait outside of the country for hearings in U.S. immigration courts (Leutert 2020).

6. In 2020, Hondurans had the highest rate of asylum denials (TRAC 2020b) but, at the same time, they are, relative to other Central American countries, less likely to be deported *after* losing status or living lengthy lives in the United States. See Chapter 1 for the full overview of Honduran deportation numbers.

7. At the end of 2017, there were an estimated 190,000 Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Honduras, due to conflict and violence (IDMC 2017).

## Chapter 4 *Sabemos Aguantar*
## Living with and Leaving Behind the Violence of Everyday Life

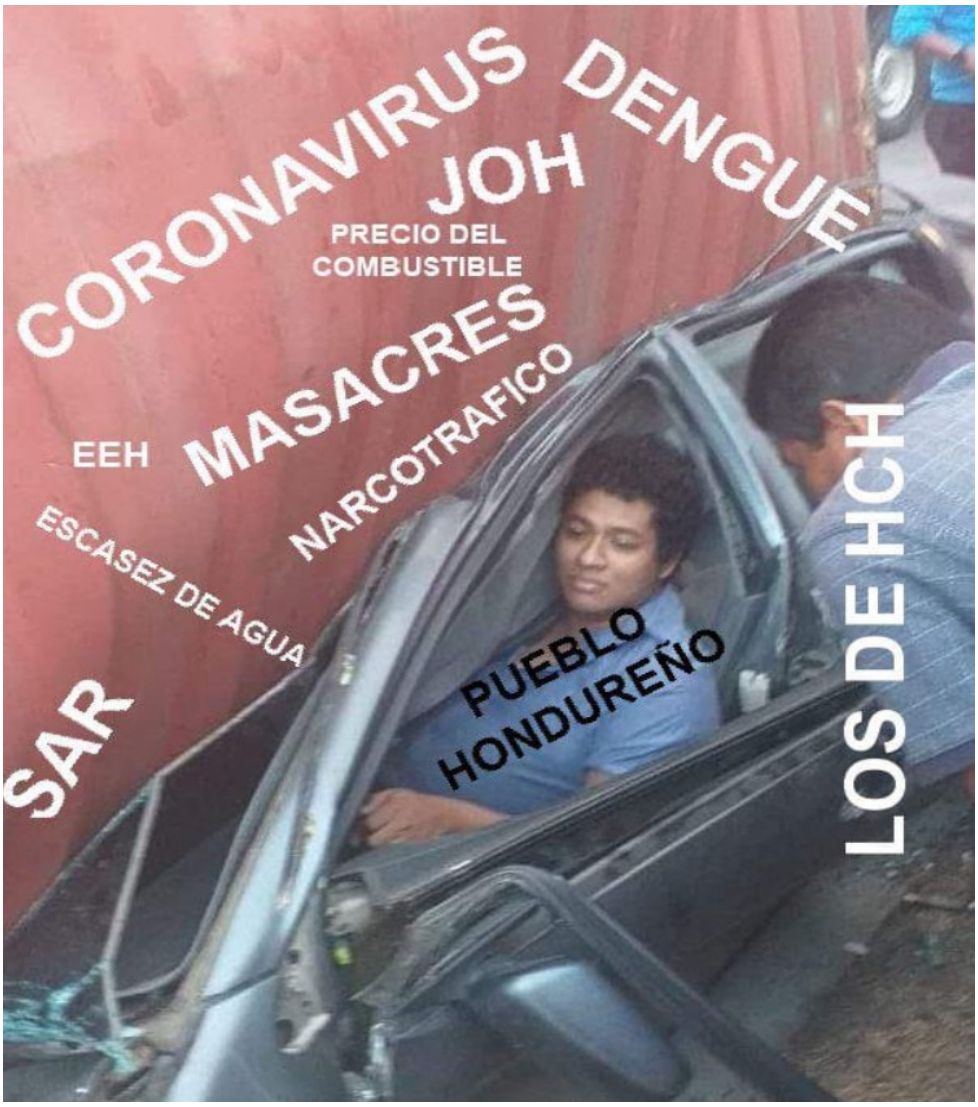


*Image 3: Coronavirus Meme 2020*

In early 2019, a tractor trailer truck tipped over and squashed a car – but not the driver – on one of Honduras's windy highways. A few months later, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit

Honduras, hard, this meme started circulating. There's the driver, looking remarkably calm, with a tractor trailer truck pressing down on him. Here he represents the "*pueblo hondureño*" – the Honduran people – and the truck is labeled with all the things crushing them: coronavirus, dengue, JOH (the initials of the Honduran president), the price of gas, massacres, the energy company (EEH), narcotrafficking, water shortages, SAR (the tax collection agency). And to the right, the person looking in on the man, is labeled with "los de HCH"– the people from the Honduran news channel that is widely watched and, simultaneously, roundly reviled for being the mouthpiece of the ruling party.

This image, as a response to the coronavirus, captures a sentiment frequently expressed in Honduras: that in the face of impossibly hard situations – violence, disease, abandonment, persecution, neglect, precarity, climate change – Hondurans just hang in there. They have a saying in Honduras, which was repeated to me many times: *En mal tiempo, buena cara*. In bad times, a good face.

Micol, a vivacious and eloquent teenager from San Pedro Sula, who has been deported and displaced multiple times, explains:

> *Muchas veces uno se acostumbra al estilo de vida de que tiene uno, cuando lo peligroso y horrible para otras personas es lo normal para nosotros, o sea como que nuestro subconsciente hace de que nuestro estilo de vida sea lo más seguro que podamos estar, ya que nosotros mismos buscamos nuestra propia seguridad. En cambio, otras personas vienen y nos miran, dicen (audible gasp). ¿Y cómo es que hace esto? ¿Cómo que eres capaz de aguantar tantas cosas? Pero uno ya se acostumbró. No es que uno ya no mira al peligro. Uno claro que lo ve. Pero uno ya se acostumbra tanto de que sabe qué va a pasar esto si uno no hace esto. Entonces como que está en nuestro chip … que esto ya es así y esto nunca va a cambiar.*
>
> Many times, people get used to the kind of life that you have, when what's dangerous and horrible for other people is normal for us, I mean that our subconscious makes it so that our kind of life becomes the safest that we could be, since we each figure out our own safety ourselves. On the contrary, other people come, and they look at us and say, (audible gasp) And how do you do this? How are you able to *aguantar* so many things? But you're already used to it. It's not that you don't see the danger anymore. Of course, you see it. But

> you're so used to it that you know that *this* will happen if you don't do *that*. It's like in our 'chip,'[1] that things are already like this, and it's never going to change."

Ramón from La Libertad (see Chapter 2) uses language similar to Micol's. He summarizes what it means to be Honduran, as: *somos un pueblo que aguanta*, he told me one day. *Sabemos aguantar*. This could be translated simply as: we are a people who *endure*; we know how to *endure.* But *aguantar* and endure are not perfect translations. In Honduras, the idea of *aguantar* captures much more than the English endure. *Aguantar* (pronounced ah-gwan-tar) means to withstand, to endure, to get through, but it also means, essentially, to suck it up. To take it. To grin and bear it. To deal with it. To hang in there. *Aguantar* is an active kind of endurance. Ramón's assessment really means: we are a people who get through. We know how to suck it up and deal with it. This is the "chip" that Micol, in his teenager's vocabulary, refers to: knowing what *not* to do and recognizing, at the same time, the panorama of danger around you.

This concept, to know how to *aguantar*, encapsulates the approach to survival in Honduras: sucking it up and dealing with it while being aware that life shouldn't have to be this hard. In this chapter, I use this frame of how Hondurans talk about how they deal with the violence of daily life and offer the idea of *aguantar* as a descriptive analytic. While scholars have developed a number of ways to discuss how people survive – and often thrive – in situations of great hardship,[2] in this chapter I suggest *aguantar* as a particular alternative to the idea of "resilience," a word that is often used in reference to the ability of the disadvantaged to carry on despite adversity.

As a term, the conceptual roots of resilience are complicated, coming from fields as diverse as ecological systems theory (Holling 1973; Klein, Nicholls, and Thomalla 2003) and psychology (Masten, Best, and Garmezy 1990; Egeland, Carlson, and Stroufe 1993).[3] From its

specific uses in these fields to describe particular phenomena (reversion to equilibrium; an ability to function despite trauma), however, resilience has evolved into a colloquial usage that approximates something like self-care[4] and, most importantly for the discussion that follows, it has become embedded in development discourse and humanitarian aid. Its etymological multivalence and usage by both scholars of survival strategies and international development programs allows for problematic slippage between the colloquial meaning and a theoretical one.

Taking seriously the term used by Hondurans to describe their own approach towards life, then, I propose adopting *aguantar* as an alternative to resilience. In what follows, I first lay out the definitions of and problems with the varying usages of resilience, especially as it is applied in Honduras. From there, I further elaborate on the meanings and usage of *aguantar*. I then reflect on what this looks like for young people and what they do when they can no longer *aguantar*.

**The Limits of Resilience**

*Fieldnotes November 9, 2017*

I'm sitting in the IAF meeting in Tegucigalpa. We're all gathered in a moderately fancy hotel in the capital. They've brought together all of their local partners. The IAF reps are clear: Congress in the U.S. is interested in one thing (and this is how the IAF is funded): *prevenir la migración*. Preventing migration. Congress has given us more funds, she says, but having more funds means we have to show more results. We are thinking mostly about resilience. *Resiliencia*. Environmental and security.

The Inter-American Foundation (IAF) is one of many international NGOs that fund projects aimed at helping poor communities in Honduras. I had the opportunity to sit in on this meeting because one of the grants I received to do fieldwork was through the IAF. The IAF representative responsible for Honduras, guided by the funding priorities of Congress and the

kinds of things she expected they would want to see, emphasized resilience. Importantly, they link strengthening resilience with preventing outmigration and re-migration. The IAF is not alone in this orientation. Resilience is a buzzword among the international organizations that develop projects aimed at helping people in places like Honduras. It has been a feature of development economics, among other modes of governance, since the 1990s (Walker and Cooper 2011, 143). Donor organizations and development aid along with the organizations of global governance have embraced the concept wholeheartedly (Bollig 2014, 254). "Leading international institutions, such as the United Nations, the European Union, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, government agents and departments, international non-governmental organizations and community groups are all promoting the importance of resilience" (Chandler and Coaffee 2016, 3).

Other interventions in Honduras are based around the idea that "increasing resilience among young males" might be the ways to "inoculate" them from participating in violence (Landa-Blanco et al. 2020). USAID has funded at least three resilience-based programs for "at-risk" Honduran youth, one through the Education Development Center (Reisman and Payan 2015), the other through Creative Associates International,[5] and the third through GOAL's *barrio resiliente* program.[6] The World Bank has trained and funded Honduran studies of resilience, through its Education Resilience Approaches program (ERA 2013). The Christian charity World Vision includes resilience as one of its key words that guide its interventions in Honduras and elsewhere.[7]

**What is Resilience?**

What, however, is resilience? What are all these NGOs really trying to *do* in Honduras when they talk about building it? In all these programs the underlying operating logic is that *resilience* is a resource that is lacking and can be cultivated, though how they imagine strengthening that resource varies, and what exactly they mean by resilience is often vague. Although they would not describe their interventions as such, ultimately resilience is used in the development arena as a word to talk about building the capacity of poor people to survive their poverty without actually enacting any structural change that could reduce that poverty.

Outside of the humanitarian/development world, resilience has clear antecedents and has come to be used, widely, in the physical and social sciences. Many scholars have done the arduous work of constructing a meticulous genealogy of resilience (see Walker and Cooper 2011; Ungar 2004; Cretney 2014; Sherrieb, Norris, and Galea 2010; Norris et al. 2008; Bourbeau 2018, among others), but even scholars of the term note that pinning down its origins are no longer that important as its usage has become so ubiquitous (Norris et al. 2008, 128). Briefly, it originally comes into the social sciences from the physical sciences (Barrios 2014, 331), with dual origins in systems ecology and complex systems theory. Broad definitions of resilience have proliferated (Barrios 2014, 331), and it has been employed to understand "an amorphous and exhaustive litany of social issues" (Jackson Levin 2020, 93), running through nearly all the disciplines "concerning individuals and institutions" (Pizzo 2015, 133). For a thorough overview of the evolution of the concept and many of its critiques, especially as it relates to resilience and individuals, see Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014.

A general consensus, however, coalesces around the idea that resilience is a capacity to cope with and survive despite overwhelming adversity (Barrios 2016; Norris et al. 2008;

Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014; Moulton and Machado 2019, among others). It is "overcoming rather than succumbing to the effects of exposure to risk" (Ager 2013, 488). From there, the consensus breaks down and resilience comes to be specified, delimited, and applied in wildly different ways. It has been defined as an antonym to vulnerability by some (Adger 2000); yet Michael Bollig holds that "resilience is not the opposite of vulnerability" (Bollig 2014, 275).

One of the early defining features of resilience was, from the physical sciences, a capacity to return to equilibrium (Sherrieb, Norris, and Galea 2010, 228; Norris et al. 2008, 127). This gets translated as the ability to withstand stressors or crisis and return to normal; resilience is often glossed, then, as the capacity to bounce back (Clark-Ginsberg et al. 2020; Neocleous 2013; Moulton and Machado 2019). This has been critiqued by other scholars who suggest, instead, that resilience should be thought of in terms of "bouncing forward," because a return to a pre-crisis situation is not necessarily favorable or desirable (Moulton and Machado 2019). The pre-crisis state of things very often contributes to the potential for the crisis to occur. Others who gently critique the implicit "return to equilibrium" idea note that resilience can be used to describe actions that facilitate survival without changing the circumstances that make survival so difficult (Jones 2012; Sparke 2008; Katz 2004). Resilience can be thought of as actions that "make life possible but do not result in, or even envision, emancipation from the situation" (Jones 2012, 697).

Some authors have made the move to employ resilience as a kind of not-quite resistance, agentive behavior under adverse circumstances along a continuum (Sparke 2008; Phillips 2015; Scheper-Hughes 2008; Katz 2004; Jackson Levin 2020). For anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes, the continued existence of "besieged lives" is every day resilience – and something worth celebrating (Scheper-Hughes 2008, 52). James Phillips, in his analysis of the post-coup

social movements that emerged in Honduras, suggests that people do not engage in resistance because they are resilient, but "rather they are resilient because they resist, and the living out of their resistance is precisely what resilience means" (Phillips 2015, 242–43).

Other scholars have noted how resilience, unlike resistance – and hearkening back to its "equilibrium" origins – maintains the status quo. In the case of natural disasters, resilience does not mitigate them but "serves as a mechanism for the maintenance of the 'system' that creates them" (Barrios 2016, 31). Barbara Pizzo adds that systems can be both resilient (as in reverting to their previous state) *and most definitely undesirable* (Pizzo 2015, 134). Writing about individual repertoires, Cindi Katz notes that "if their acts of resilience sustained them, they also supported the general trajectory of the developments that necessitated these acts in the first place" (Katz 2004, 246). Resilience, then, can become a kind of *active acquiescence* (Neocleous 2013, 7), as it entails accommodating oneself to the situation at hand.

This is an expansive array of uses for a single term, going from how people cope with adversity, to how others resist in the face of persecution, to how individuals manage trauma, to how communities survive disasters, to how systems maintain equilibrium. I am not suggesting that all uses of "resilience" should necessarily be subjected to the critique that I offer here. Rather, I focus specifically on how resilience is used in the case of Honduras (and the context of poverty and migration) as it is repurposed and repackaged from other arenas. Ultimately, the multiple ways of thinking about resilience rests on a cluster of ideas: that some people, either individually or in collective, have the capacity to carry on despite adversity and that this capacity is something to be prized. With this in mind, I turn to a discussion of who is and is not labeled as resilient and under what circumstances.

**Who "gets" to be / who is "made" to be resilient?**

Joän Patterson writes, "any person may be considered competent but only those exposed to significant risk could be considered resilient" (Patterson 2002, 237). Examples of resilience show a common pattern. The "constant physical vulnerability" of impoverished African-Americans made them "resilient" (Fennell 2012); those who will be displaced by "rebuilding" measures in New Orleans are encouraged to be resilient (Slater 2014); the well-being of Puerto Ricans in the wake of the twinned disasters of hurricanes and austerity is cast as their own responsibility, a measure of their resilience (Moulton and Machado 2019). Black women and girls in Detroit and Newark are romanticized as "superwomen" whose "indefatigable resilience" allows them to survive "untenable and inhuman circumstances" (Cox 2015; 2014); in the face of loss, violence, and scarcity, the apparent "invulnerability" of the very poor in Brazil demonstrates their resilience (Scheper-Hughes 2008). It is frequently the "poor and disenfranchised worldwide" from whom resilience is demanded, who are expected to be able to bend but not break (Boss 2013, 293).

Risk, adversity, scarcity, must already exist in order for those who overcome them to be seen as having the characteristic of resilience; put another way, no one has to be resilient if they have the resources, capital, or privilege to avoid being exposed to risk in the first place.[8] Frequently, it is those who are already structurally vulnerable who are forced to be resilient (Lluveras 2018) and they are, then, either celebrated for it or, in many cases, chided for failing. People who face those same risks and fail to withstand them or overcome them are "cast as responsible for their calamity" (Moulton and Machado 2019). Resilience is used as a designation, a descriptor, that conveys a kind of strength of character upon the people or community that it is used to describe. Celebrating a particular kind of success and individual

ability to overcome and thrive both excludes some and heroizes others who have no choice but resilience. In either case, the focus on resilient individuals obscures the conditions that require overcoming adversity. The real problem with the focus on resilience in these contexts, however, is when it shifts from being a descriptor of individuals or infrastructures or communities and becomes *prescribed* as the remedy. Resilience as an identifiable capacity is one thing; resilience as a solution is another.

In this sense, then, the systems understanding of resilience retains its importance, even as it is redefined as an individual capacity. Writing from a governance perspective, Kevin Grove and David Chandler state that "in resilience thinking, what matters most is not the security and stability of individual parts within a system, but rather the system's capacity to … adapt in ways that preserve its identity and function" (Grove and Chandler 2017, 81). I think this understanding does have a certain relevance for a discussion of those individuals who are labeled as resilient (or not). The "ability" of those most at risk to withstand and adapt and keep going actually translates into the resilience, in the systems sense, not of those individuals whose life chances are delimited and precarious, not the "individual parts," but of the larger system which depends upon and perpetuates their precarity.

**The Implications of Resilience**

Returning to the situation in Honduras, resilience has particular relevance as its emphasis on adaptability, improvisation, and flexibility (Grove and Chandler 2017; Barrios 2016; Pizzo 2015 among others) resonates seamlessly with the country's neoliberal orientation. It is repackaged here as a kind of updated version of the prosperity gospel, which is firmly rooted in Honduras, where it places the blame for the inability to thrive despite adversity on the individual.

The international financial institutions have adopted the language of resilience as a means of "fighting poverty" and "overcoming the weaknesses of fragile states" (Neocleous 2013, 4). Neoliberal citizenship, writes Mark Neocleous, is "a training in resilience as the new technology of the self: a training to withstand whatever crisis capital undergoes and whatever political measures the state carries out to save it" (Neocleous 2013, 5). The beauty of this logic is that, in the event of crisis, what the poor need *is a resource they already have*, "resilience" (4). As Alistair Ager writes, "resilience can be seen to principally locate resources for recovery within communities themselves rather than with government programs and initiatives" (Ager 2013, 489).

There are two immediate counters to this idea of resilience as championed by international financial institutions and development NGOs: first, that what the poor need isn't enhanced resilience but, in fact, actual resources. Second, the crisis with which people in places like Honduras must contend isn't a single event, it isn't a discrete moment of rupture and devastation. The crisis is perpetual. There is no pre-emergency state to which to return. As Roberto Barrios asks, "What are they building back to?" (Barrios 2016, 31). Even if resilience is theorized from a constructivist perspective (Ungar 2003) and understood as culturally and contextually specific (Ungar 2006), the underlying issues with resilience as the framework, as the model upon which to design interventions for those who are most at risk, persist.

Ultimately, resilience has become so polysemous as to be an empty metaphor (Cretney 2014, 636). As humanitarianism and development projects have "mainstreamed resilience," the concept now holds normative "and even teleological" (Bollig 2014, 283) connotations. Resilience comes to be associated with good character and, at once, both a quality and an end in and of itself. There is, of course, a distinction between the descriptive value of the concept of

resilience as an observed phenomenon – especially as it leads to the adoption of effective interventions – and the inspirational concept that it has come to represent (Norris et al. 2008; Pizzo 2015; Cretney 2014). Scholars have attempted to remedy this by delineating kinds of resilience (Moulton and Machado 2019), "unbounding" the concept (Hutcheon and Lashewicz 2014), or insisting that it be used to lead to efforts to mitigate the "stressors" (Boss 2013). I think, however, that its "inspirational," normative, teleological, and individualized connotation has overtaken any re-defining that scholars may wish to undertake, especially as its neoliberal usage has been magnified and taken up by international financial institutions and development NGOs. Therefore, we need a different analytic that eschews that usage. *Aguantar* retains the important aspects of resilience – a capacity to carry on despite adversity – while being free of the baggage of the celebratory, inspirational, or normative valences that resilience contains.

### ***Aguantamos Pues*** **(so, we *aguantar*)**

Benjamín and Gladys could be the archetype for NGO resilience programs, if they were ever interested in getting entangled with those kinds of organizations. Gladys is from Vista del Cielo. Benjamín, her husband, has been there for more than a decade, but he has no family anywhere else – he grew up an orphan – so it's his home as well, now. Benjamín had had a rough life. He had dabbled in drug running and in the military. Like so many young men he spent a good part of his twenties wandering across Mexico. He's a skilled electrician, a devout evangelical Christian, and determined to do what he can for the youth of his *colonia.* He and Gladys have started soccer teams for the local boys, and they've set up a kind of makeshift trade school in their yard. Benjamín teaches anyone who wants to learn how to do electrical work, using scraps of wires, donated tools, and dogged determination. He hopes to one day be able to

fabricate solar cells, so that people don't have to rely on the recently privatized energy company for the absurdly expensive and wholly unreliable electricity it provides.

I first visit their neighborhood at the invitation of Pastor Luis, for an event that he and the *Comité Pro-Desarrollo* (The Pro-Development Committee, a USAID supported, sector-wide organization) were hosting. They'd set up a stage in the middle of an empty field and local kids sang and danced for a very small crowd of very young children gathered right in front of the stage. The sun was unrelenting, and the field offered no shade, so at first I thought the small size of the gathering was due to that, that only little kids were enthusiastic enough to stand in the direct rays. But Melvin, one of the young men "backstage," pointed something out to me: pressed up against the fence at one edge of the field was a group of teenagers and young adults. They won't come any closer, he explained, because the police are behind this. They suspected – with reason – that the event was more of a ruse than anything else for the police to take photos of the youth in the neighborhood, start files on them, and then come back and pick them up later. If the police are involved in any activity, the neighborhood teens are out.

Melvin is just 19 years old himself, and he makes a living selling water in the *colonia.* He says he, personally, doesn't have any problem with the gang that controls things there. He's lived there all his life, he explains, they know him. The police, on the other hand, when they come through, that's when he runs and hides as fast as he can. "Because if *they* take you away in the middle of the night," he tells me, "you might never show up again."

Benjamín won't get involved with any USAID funded initiatives, even though they would likely be impressed with his operation, precisely because USAID always comes with the police. Like many Hondurans, Benjamín is deeply distrustful of the police. In addition to that general mistrust, he and Gladys operate very carefully, always with the approval and inclusion of

the *pandilleros* – and their children – in their activities. He can only continue with his projects if the gang is on board but, more than that, he knows that the gang and the community are intertwined. None of his ideas will ever go very far if he draws a bright line between gang involved youth and everyone else. In Vista del Cielo, like most gang-controlled neighborhoods, that line is blurry and porous. Benjamín sees his survival, and that of his children, and his neighbors, as inextricable, one from the other. When I give them the money to build a well so they have access to water, they connect plastic piping to four key spots in their little neighborhood so everyone can have access. When Benjamín wants to get his local soccer team into the city-wide league, he asks me to go with him. Though I know nothing about soccer, he bets – and turns out to be right – that having a *gringa* with him will make them take him and his team seriously. Otherwise, the league would freeze him out as soon as they hear they're from Vista del Cielo. Benjamín understands the problems with which they all contend to be systemic, collective, and, consequently, the solutions he's interested in being a part of don't fit the NGO resilience paradigm.

One evening, we're sitting in the now-empty home of a friend of theirs who is in jail. Selenia used to wash the clothes of the *muchachos,* and then she was arrested and convicted of *cobrando la renta*: collecting extortion payments. Benjamín and Gladys keep in touch and help her out when they can, and they check on her house. We sit on crates and drink coke, and Gladys starts talking about the first time she saw someone murdered. She must have been about twelve years old. She's in her 40s now, but she remembers how the body jumped, bounced, as the bullets hit it. *¡Brinca! ¡Brinca! ¡Cuando entran los disparos cómo brinca! ¡Brinca! ¡Hasta acá!* She raises her hand to about a foot off the ground to indicate: this high! She was sitting with her friends outside, and a man who had been shot already came running through, near them,

followed by the guy shooting at him. The man who had been shot fell to the ground and the shooter just kept shooting until he ran out of bullets. The kids, Gladys among them, saw it all happen – it was right in front of them – and they tried to turn away, trying to act like they hadn't seen anything, that they hadn't noticed that someone was being murdered just to their left. They turned their heads. The shooter came up to them. Gladys remembers he was big, dressed in black, and it was dark. And he came up to them and said to the children: you don't know what a terrible person that guy was. I had to kill him. Well, it turns out the man didn't die that night; he ended up in a wheelchair, though. They killed him later, in his wheelchair. But she never forgot how the body jumped, how it bounced, how it moved from the impact of the bullets. Every time a bullet hit it, how it jumped. *¡Brinca! ¡Brinca! ¡Cómo brincaba!* She repeats, almost laughing a little at the memory.

Her tone changes as she talks about hearing someone being murdered recently. How they could hear the thud of the blows, coming from a house across from theirs. Gladys's voice lowers and the laughter leaves it; she couldn't sleep. She couldn't *not* hear it. She heard them saying things like "*ya te toca a vos*" (now it's your turn) as they switched off who was beating the person until she heard the final thud, when they cracked his skull. She said it sounded hollow, like there was a hole. And then there was quiet.

Gladys talks about living with this kind of trauma and Benjamín looks at me and says, "You know how we live with it is, we just live with it. Cause it's the only thing we can do. There's nothing else to do, we just live with it. This is just the world. You can't not; this is just reality. *Aguantamos pues*."

Benjamín says, "We *aguantar*" followed by "*pues*" which has a kind of shrugging your shoulders, oh well, connotation in this context. Following Benjamín – and Micol, Ramón, and

the general sentiment that emerged among Hondurans – I want to take the term *aguantar* as a descriptive analytic alternative to resilience for two reasons: first, because it is the term used by Hondurans themselves to explain who they are and how they manage life in contexts of myriad pressures. At the same time, the term reveals something that is not encapsulated by other analytics that have been offered in similar situations, especially the idea of resilience. *Aguantar* is at once physical and affective. It is an individual capacity and application of knowledge deeply embedded in the collective reality, the structural situation. And it includes an element of opposition, a kind of stubborn resistance, within the idea of just sucking it up.

In English, the word *aguantar* translates to withstand, tolerate, or endure. Beyond the multiplicity of official meanings, though, the popular usage of *aguantar* captures something that does not correspond to its English equivalents. Less formally, a better translation might be "suck it up" or "to take it," or "hang in there." It has a both positive and negative valence mixed into one. A colleague from Mexico describes *aguantar* as "eating shit" coupled with "resisting."[9] Resist, here, is less the political kind and more like the concept from physics (opposition to current flow in an electrical circuit). It can also mean something more like wait or sustain or persevere. It speaks of a body holding, holding on, holding fast. A personal element and an awareness of others comes together in the term; a physicality to the ability to withstand combines with a recognition of the structural situation that requires that withstanding. Whether the usage is in terms of holding a glass for someone "*aguánteme este vaso*" or staying strong in the face of repression "*aguanta, aguanta, el pueblo se levanta*,"[10] *aguantar* implies a kind of stubborn determination to withstand the elements in your way, an active endurance, and also seeing the elements as they are.

Ramón clarifies his initial use of *aguantar* as a descriptive for how Hondurans are as a people. He adds: *we know how to aguantar*. We know how to withstand and keep going; we know how to put up with all the pressures and violences and injustices of life; we know how to hang in there; we know how to eat shit *and* we know how to resist. This is why I say *aguantar* is affective: it is both a knowledge, a set of skills and strategies that one has learned over life, and a disposition, a behavior, a feeling of how one goes about life. At the same time, it is physical, it is literal; *aguantar* also encapsulates continuing to live despite the many dangers present that cause death. There is much similarity here with Pierre Bourdieu's idea of habitus (Bourdieu 1977), but *aguantar* also incorporates the recognition by the actors of their own embodied disposition. Whether among soccer fans or the Honduran urban poor, *aguantar* can be intentionally developed, can be chosen or rejected, rather than being the taken-for-granted "matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions" (Bourdieu 1977, 82). Ramón says "we know how to *aguantar*;" it is a tactic, a knowledge, and a physical ability that can be cultivated.

I am not the first to think about using *aguantar* as a theoretical analytic. There is a small body of literature, mostly out of Argentina, that analyzes "*aguante*" (the noun form of the word), especially as it relates to fanatic soccer clubs and their rituals. José Garriga Zucal defines "*aguante*" as a conjunction of knowledges (Garriga Zucal 2016, 48) and a physical ability to withstand pain (Garriga Zucal 2016, 43). It is a defining and distinctive characteristic by those who claim to possess it and its symbolic capital (Garriga Zucal 2016, 43) in the world of the soccer clubs. John Alexander Castro-Lozano focuses on the corporeal element– *aguante* is reflected in the body through scars that represent physical confrontations (Castro-Lozano 2013, 173). *Aguante* makes tolerating suffering possible (Castro-Lozano 2013, 173), and it is the decision to be able to stand whatever circumstances are necessary (Castro-Lozano 2013, 182).

Pablo Alabarces, José Garriga Zucal, and María Verónica Moreira define *aguantar* as remaining standing, in disadvantage, staying (Alabarces, Zucal, and Moreira 2008, 119). It is a category with multiple significations, they contend, but they all point toward something corporeal (Alabarces, Zucal, and Moreira 2008, 117). Germán Hasicic specifies, explicitly, the fundamental role of corporeality in *aguantar* (Hasicic 2017, 35). He adds that it is fundamentally oriented towards the other, externally, and links the culture of *aguante* in Argentina with a new kind of social inclusion, of those who are broadly excluded from what he terms a "democratic story that tells of a just society" (Hasicic 2017, 37). Humberto Abarca adds a definition of "the art of not escaping, of taking whatever comes" (Abarca 2001, 115). He writes, "from an existential perspective, what is *aguante* but the human replacement for faith? It is an attitude of resistance towards the pounding blows of life" (Abarca 2001, 116).

While these authors are all writing to describe a particular characteristic/ethic that has emerged among the *barras bravas* – frequently violent, almost gang-like, soccer fan clubs – their exploration of what *aguante* and *aguantar* mean is useful here. The term and its attendant significations transcend the realm of soccer and hold, broadly, for how it is employed in daily life in Latin America. *Aguantar* is physical, tolerating pain and suffering; it is associated with those who are excluded from the promises of a just society, the art of not escaping, a replacement for faith, in withstanding the violence life directs at you, your community, and others like you. This broader understanding of the social meaning of what it is to *aguantar*, and to recognize the choice (however constricted) to *aguantar*, extends beyond the *barras bravas* and emerges in other work on/from Latin America as well.

In particular, scholars have explored the way in which women who suffer different forms of violence invoke *aguantar* as they explain their lives and the ways in which they endure

suffering (see Montesi 2017; Muñoz Cobos et al. 2008; Paredes Guerrero et al. 2016). In clear distinction to an idea of resilience, *aguantar* is understood in this body of work to be almost its opposite: enduring violence and adversity without getting out from under it, accepting that life involves suffering. Sociologist Cecilia Menjívar notes the importance of the usage of *aguantar* and its conjugation in her work with Ladina women in Guatemala. In fact, the frequent usage of the word is, in part, what alerted her to an important phenomenon and made her pivot towards a study of enduring violence. She writes, "This verb conveyed an underlying, steady suffering in the women's lives but also resignation and acceptance; it also implied that everyone went through it, and thus it was nothing out of the ordinary" (Menjívar 2011, 18). This sense of *aguantar*, though it doesn't necessarily carry with it the recognition of the structural situatedness of the hardness of life, does capture the affect of resignation towards the ordinariness and ubiquity of steady suffering that is present in Honduras.[11]

While my discussion here focuses on how *aguantar* is cultivated by Hondurans in Honduras, it resonates with the kind of habitus identified by David Spener, as migrants bring with them to the border a life of preparedness to endure myriad deprivations and brutality (Spener 2009, 226–27). This initial disposition is built into a "migrant-specific habitus" as people migrate through the same terrain and contend with the same obstacles and dangers again and again (De León 2013b, 340). This kind of active endurance, to adapt Menjívar's gloss,[12] is not celebrated, remarkable, or special. Yet, at the same time, to speak of *aguantar* contains the dual recognition that one is enduring a situation because they must and, also, that the situation should not be as it is. In a sense, cultivating *aguantar* as a recognized kind of knowledge and embodied practice, shapes the habitus De León and Spener identify among migrants.[13]

There is an interplay between *aguantar* and migration here that I want to draw out. A life of learning how to *aguantar* prepares people for enduring the kinds of hardships that they will face while migrating, yet it is precisely when one's capacity to *aguantar* at home is stretched too far, pushed to its limit, that migration is turned to as the next best option. There is an active nature to both *aguantar* and migrating, as I understand them in relation to one another here. In each case, critical capacities of assessment of place and circumstance, of survival and chance, are in operation. *Aguantar* as a term doesn't necessarily imply a rootedness or stuckness; it is not inherently a static category in opposition to a dynamic, mobile one. In the specific context of Honduras and migration, however, there is an element of migration thought of as being what is beyond the bounds of *aguantar* in two ways. Migration is both a last resort, when one can no longer *aguantar,* and, at once, a hope-filled chance-taking that life could be more than having to *aguantar* forever.

**How We *Aguantar:* From *Encuevado* to *Encaminado***

Francis Helen grew up in a *bordo* on the edge of San Pedro Sula. *Bordo* is the term in Honduras for the makeshift yet long-standing shanty towns built up on the edges of official neighborhoods. In San Pedro Sula, the *bordos* are almost always (though not exclusively) built precariously close to riverbanks. When flooding occurs, which happens to greater and lesser extremes each year, at best sections of the *bordos* become unlivable for a while. At worst, some houses are totally swept away by the rising waters. Francis Helen has three younger siblings. The four of them live with their mother and grandmother in two rooms in the *bordo*. Behind their two rooms they look down into one of the Valley's rivers. The water is low when I visit, but it isn't hard to imagine the flooding that could occur during a hurricane. The adult women sell food to

long-haul truckers six days each week. They'd work on Sundays too, but the trucks don't come that day.

Francis is upbeat; she is positive. She laughs easily and often. She has a knack for painting nails and doing hair and makeup, and she hopes to finish high school and maybe study journalism in university one day. Early on during my fieldwork, she offers to help me navigate the city's maze of a bus "system" – the routes and stops are not standardized or posted anywhere. It's one of the many things about life in Honduras that you just have to know. She accompanies me on a couple of trips, so I can get used to at least the feel of riding the *rapiditos* – as the cargo vans with seating that make up the backbone of the city's public transportation network are known. She yells at the *cobrador* when he doesn't give me the two lempiras in change he owes me. Later, when I give up on the buses and get a car, she and her siblings pile into it, driving all across the Sula Valley with me – Francis as my guide – picking up cameras from the participants in the photography workshops.

During one of my visits to the *bordo,* Francis Helen tells me that a few days earlier, one of her closest friends had died. 19 years old. She had a mysterious illness that killed her within three weeks of getting sick. Francis is heartbroken – this young woman was the only friend that never fought with her, she tells me. Francis does her makeup and nails for the funeral. Francis talks about her friend's death with calm and poise. She is sad, but not distraught. Her energy is down, but there are no tears as she talks. And soon the conversation turns to other topics.

When I leave Francis's house that day, she directs me out of the *bordo* through a different route. Usually, I would make a three-point turn and leave the way I'd come in, but the exit is blocked. Francis hops into my car, and following the *bordo's* single dirt road, we wind all the way through the neighborhood, to get out the other end. She accompanies me because the

*muchachos* might wonder, further on, what I'm doing there, she explains. They don't know my car yet. As we drive, kids playing soccer in the street slowly move out of the way of the approaching car, their game picking up immediately as soon as we're through. A crowd of people spills out from a small evangelical church; women seated in plastic chairs barely slide out of the way of the intruding vehicle. The street is lively; we have the windows down, and Francis says hello warmly to many of the people we pass by. Then, casually, she mentions – right back there, that's where they killed Betito's dad.

I came to know Francis and her family because a little more than a year ago Francis's uncle, Betito's father, Beto, was shot to death. The motives behind the killing remain unclear – but everyone is pretty sure that the *mara* that controls the *colonia* is responsible for the murder. Betito – along with his mother and siblings – fled the *bordo*, joining the growing number of internally displaced people in Honduras. Francis Helen and her family also ran. Their link to Betito's family was too close. Tío Beto had lived in the United States for many years. He sent money and goods back to his own children, but Francis Helen and her siblings were like a second set of children for him. Her own father never supported them much, but Tío Beto made sure they were taken care of. He had come back to Honduras temporarily, in fact, with the intention of taking Betito back with him to the United States. He did not like the chances for his teenage son in Honduras.

Francis Helen handles the murder of her uncle and the death of her friend well; she returns to "normal" relatively quickly. But Francis Helen's crises are not sudden or surprising: her uncle's murder, though not well explained, is not shocking; her friend's inadequate care and medical attention is not unusual. Resilience as a descriptive analytic does not capture the resignation in her affect; her acceptance of living a circumscribed life is a tactic she has learned

in order to survive structural conditions which make her life, and the lives of her family and her neighbors, perpetually at risk.

After Tío Beto was killed, Francis Helen and her family went to stay with another uncle and his wife and children in another municipality, but that wasn't tenable for the long term. After about a week or so, they came back to their home in the *bordo*, returning to life just down the road from the site where Beto was murdered, returning to living on edge. Now, instead of fleeing, instead of moving from place to place, they stay put. The four kids mostly stay inside the family's two rooms. Francis Helen is obedient and responsible. Her mother doesn't worry about her "getting into trouble," but 13-year-old Magdalena chafes at the constriction. Keeping her enclosed is harder to manage, but it is the only way her mother can think of to keep her safe. This family, like so many in San Pedro Sula, lives precisely at this tension between moving around and staying in place. Francis Helen is careful, *ella sabe aguantar*; she knows how to *aguantar*.

Francis Helen and her siblings were part of a group of displaced young people who received some initial assistance from UNHCR, the Norwegian Refugee Council, and the Programa de Apoyo al Migrante Retornado (PAMR). So were Micol and Lenín. One of the questions I ask during the focus group I ran with them was: so how do you navigate all of this? What kinds of things do you do to stay safe?

Everyone starts talking at once, describing different ways of hiding money or your wallet on your body when you're on the bus. People debate about whether it's better to stick to yourself or make friends with your neighbors. Then philosophical, analytical Lenín's voice cuts through the chatter: *estar encuevado.* Be encaved.

Lenín, whose neighborhood's motto frames the dissertation (see Chapter 1), has been deported four times by the time I meet him. When I interview him in a historic restaurant in

downtown San Pedro Sula, he talks at length about the political situation in the country, the social fallout from Hurricane Mitch (even though he was only four years old at the time), the threats against his brother, and the deep corruption of the Honduran police. Lenín laments:

> *¿Cómo me gustaría que, como adolescente, fuera a una discoteca de acá? Yo pudiera parecer relajado con amigos, mis amigas, mis amigos, lo que sea, en una discoteca... no puede, no se puede... Ud. tiene que saber a dónde va. Ud. no puede decir simplemente vamos a entrar a una discoteca porque se mira bonita, no. Se tiene que saber si hay alguien, fulano de tal, mengano, fulano, Pedro, Pablo o si ahí todavía no está prohibido por alguien. Tiene que saber todo eso y si no lo sabe, lo va a aprender. Bajo la mala, porque aquí no hay buenas.*
>
> How I would like to be able to, like a normal teenager, just go to a club or a bar here? That I could just seem relaxed, with friends, in a club… but you can't. You can't. You need to know exactly where you're going, you can't simply say: let's go to that club, it looks nice. No, you have to know who is there, if so and so is there, or if perhaps it's forbidden by someone for you to go there. You need to know all of this, and if you don't know, you're going to learn. The hard way, because here, there is no easy way.

Lenín emphasizes the situatedness of these dynamics. It's not simply that this is the way life is but, he stresses, that's the way it is *here.* He recognizes that there is a different way to live your adolescence, and he wishes that he and his friends could do that. But here, as he says, there are all these layers of knowledge that you must have in order to move around; you can't just go to a new place on a whim. Lenín is unequivocal about who is responsible for the situation in his country: the government. He is also clear about how a young man like him has to live in order to survive: *encuevado*. Stay inside. *La esquina*, the catch all "corner" that refers to youth just hanging out without purpose, is full of danger: from gangs, from the police, from temptation, from carelessness.

The shrunk down world of life in Honduras, limited to the inside of your home and, perhaps, the invisible borders of your *colonia*, juxtaposes strikingly with the expansiveness of migration. This is not to say that clandestine migration is simply free of dangers; many people

discuss having to *aguantar* thirst and hunger, sun and cold, while en route, and there is a wealth of scholarship that discusses the kinds of immobility that can be embedded within mobility (Balaguera 2018; Frank-Vitale 2020; Brigden and Mainwaring 2016; Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Bawa Yamba 1995 among others). The size and boundaries of one's world, however, are enlarged through migration. And for many, survival is understood to be limited to these two, wildly different, alternatives: *aguantar* at home, or migrate. Be either *encuevado*, or *encaminado*, on the road. We might understand this as a kind of "choiceless decision" (Aretxaga 1997), but I think the relationship between *aguantar* in Honduras and leaving the country is not that of two similarly undesirable options from which people feel they must choose. Rather, migrating is the strategy employed when the limits of one's ability to *aguantar* in Honduras have been reached.

This is how Melvin, the water salesman from Vista del Cielo, understands his own options. "Take me," he says, "I don't want to leave here! This is where I'm from, there is where I was born. This is where I want to die. But if I can't live here any longer, where will I go? I can't go to another neighborhood, ha!, that would be worse! The only place is to migrate." So far, Melvin is not at the point of breaking, but if the structural conditions that shaped his possibility for life in Vista del Cielo get worse, his next step would be to leave altogether. At the concert that day, after he points out the youth watching from a distance, I ask him: what future is waiting for these kids gathered here? He answers quickly, without pausing, without blinking, "jail, hospital, or death."

Returning to Antony, whose story of exile I narrated in Chapter 3, migration is also positioned as the choice that lies beyond the limits of what one can *aguantar*. By the time I meet him, Antony has been displaced at least six times – he's lost count – after being threatened by

two different *pandillas* in Cofradía, where he'd grown up. He talks about being afraid to be in public places, in case he's being watched, he talks about being careful to not let anyone get too close, about keeping to himself. He talks about not accumulating many things because he never knows when he will have to relocate again. I ask him: have you ever considered leaving the country?

"Yes," he tells me, "In fact I thought about it many times and I even traced the route I would take with some of the people I know…. But I always think hard before making a decision… my mom, my younger siblings… what if something happened to me in the journey? There are so many stories that I have heard about people who go missing and are never heard from again. I don't want my family to be one more like that. *Entonces siempre me he aguantado*." So, I just always *aguantar*.

**Conclusions**

During one of my photo workshops, the participants fell in love with this photo of a dog:

*Image 4: El Perro Sobreviviente. Gerry. 2018.*

It was taken by Gerry, a boy displaced, along with his whole family, from one of the city's *bordos.* He and his older sister, who was also part of the workshop, called the dog *el perro sobreviviente*, the survivor dog, and the rest of the participants in the workshop immediately took to the moniker and the metaphor of this dog as their own. The dog, they say, represents all of them because it has been through so much that it should have died many times and yet, it survives. They laugh, collectively, at the *perro sobreviviente* and adopt it as their mascot. When we reconvene, months later, to build an exhibit of their photos the photographers ask Gerry: *hey, ¿y el perro sobreviviente?* And the survivor dog? How's he doing? *Ahí está siempre.* He's there, same as always.

Young people in Honduras, like Gerry, Antony, Micol, Lenín, and Francis Helen, might be catalogued as resilient: against terrible odds they have each managed to survive and they haven't succumbed to the lure of gangs, which is what is always lurking on the other side of the development/humanitarian interventions aimed at boosting resilience. Each of them, however, face multiple displacements, multiple exclusions, and multiple deportations. They contend with threats, extreme poverty, loneliness, constricted movement, and violence. Their resilience is a tenuous kind of mediating factor that enables them to survive these conditions but does not undermine, challenge, or threaten the persistence of those conditions. Without changing the underlying structural conditions that require young Hondurans to be so resilient, their resilience will eventually wear thin and something else will have to give. In their social milieu in Honduras, when that happens, their answer will be to leave for the United States for the first or fourth time.

As shown throughout this chapter, in Honduras, people are constantly managing fear: fear of death, fear of violence, fear of threats, or fear of losing your home or not having enough to eat

or being able to send your kids to school. Daily life is manageable as long as you are willing to live within limits. When those limits shift, when the fear becomes unmanageable, unbalanceable through humor and links of community and love and affection, when one can no longer *aguantar*, that is when people look to leave the country. This is Antony's calculus: I think about leaving all the time, *pero siempre me he aguantado*. If the balance tips, and he can no longer *aguantar*, the idea of leaving is what remains. During that group meeting with the young people involved in the ACNUR program, where Lenín coined "*encuevado*," a common theme emerged: at some point displaced young people don't have the strength to keep living here.

Migration here must be understood as both a way to exercise agency, a way to break out of a life circumscribed by the bounds of what it means to *aguantar*, while, at the same time, migration is a kind of relinquishing of agency, when one can no longer *aguantar*. Migration is an act of faith, the retention of hope in a life that is better than getting by and, at the same time, it is a kind of giving up, a last resort when life at home beats you. It is driven by both aspiration and desperation. Thinking about migration in these terms lays the foundation for how I suggest we understand the experience of deportation. In the next chapter, I look at what it means to be deported back to a life where one just had to *aguantar*.

**Update on the People in this Chapter**

Antony is in the United States now; he and his whole family eventually got out of the country, and they are together in the U.S. Micol is as well. Francis Helen is still in the *bordo* but Betito is in the U.S. His older sister is in Belize. Benjamín and Gladys are still in Vista del Cielo, and their projects continue, along with the beginning of a *comedor infantil*, a place to give food out to hungry children in the neighborhood. In a wonderful twist, someone from a foundation

contacted me after I wrote an op-ed about life in Honduras, and her foundation has taken an interest in their projects. The foundation does not work with the police or USAID and nowhere on its website does it talk about resilience. It's a good fit and they've helped Benjamín advance on his projects as he – and the community – envision them. At least one of the young men on their soccer team was going to leave for the United States and decided not to go just yet, because he didn't want to let his team mates down. The league made him able to *aguantar* better, for a little while longer at least.

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**Notes to Chapter 4**

1. "Chip" is used in Spanish to refer to the sim card in a cell phone; metaphorically, it refers to the programming, the wiring, the settings governing one's functionality.

2. These ideas include ones with a positive valence, like Henrik Vigh's "social navigation" (Vigh 2009) or James Scott's "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1987), as well as concepts that emphasize and explain destructivity like Phillipe Bourgois's "oppositional street culture" (Bourgois 1996).

3. For a thorough genealogy of the term see Norris et al. 2008.

4. There are numerous articles talking about "resilience" during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. From the CDC (Employees: How to Cope with Job Stress and Build Resilience), to hospitals (Growing our Resilience Wellbeing During COVID-19), to McKinsey consulting (Strategic Resilience during the COVID_19 crisis), strategies for "building resilience" abound. The University of Michigan offers "Coping & Practicing Resilience during COVID-19: Tips for U-M Students" which include "Find your new normal," "Actively Manage Stress," and "Use this time productively."

5. See http://specialreports.creativeassocaitesinternational.com/Honduran-families-take-the-lead for more on this program.

6. See http://goalglobal.org/stories/barrio-resiliente-building-resilience-changing-lives/ for more on this program.

7. World Vision is raising money for programming in Honduras centered around resilience (http://donate.worldvision.org/give/honduras-thrive) and, more broadly, they take resilience to be "at the heart of development thinking, climate change adaptation and humanitarian policy" (Folkema, Ibrahim, and Wilkinson 2013).

8. To be clear, I do not only mean this in terms of socio-economic "resources" or "privilege." Risk of some sort, whether structural, physical, emotional, situational, climactic, etc, must already be a factor in the person's life in order for them to be labeled resilient. Because of other salient vectors of vulnerability, this frequently is used in reference to communities of color and

lower income communities. The problem is when a term that has been used to *describe* an intrinsic capacity evolves into a prescription.

9. Personal communication with Mexican anthropologist Margarita Nuñez Chaim.

10. This array of colorful and evocative definitions comes from digital crowdsourcing I did among Hondurans, Mexicans, and fluent Spanish-speaking friends in the United States.

11. There may be a broader, gendered, analysis of the ways in which *aguantar* is used in Honduras and elsewhere. In Honduras, I would argue that the usage I am teasing out here is not particularly gendered – in so much as it references a kind of stubborn endurance combined with a frustration about the forces that make life such that it must be endured. The bodies of literature I reference here are highly gendered – men in soccer clubs, women enduring intimate partner violence – and a comparative project with a gendered analysis focused on this concept would be an interesting and necessary area of subsequent research.

12. Menjívar's general gloss of the term is endure, a choice which facilitates the important larger argument she is making about what constitutes violence in the lives of the women. Throughout the book she defines *aguantar* alternately as endure, tolerate, put up with. Reflecting the unease with a simple one-word translation, in her quotations from interlocutors, Menjívar at times leaves the word *aguantar* in Spanish, mixed in with the English. She adds the gloss, "endure," in parentheses (87).

13. This interplay between an unconscious system of dispositions and the choice to act in a certain way leads to the eternal discussion about structure and agency. Many scholars have offered compelling and interesting takes on weak agency, from everyday forms of resistance (Scott 1987; 1990), to spaces of refusal (Jones 2012), to choiceless decisions (Aretxaga 1997), or just getting by (Allen 2008). While my intention in this chapter is not to engage in these debates, and I find each of the formulations of weak agency valuable, I do want to note that *aguantar* could perhaps join these other formulations as a kind of agentive resignation to the world as it is but not as it should be.

## Chapter 5 *¿Con los brazos abiertos?*
## The Flawed Paradigm of Deportee Reintegration

When I visit the El Chaco neighborhood, Pablo, a longtime community (and sometimes political) leader, pulls me into his house. He has something for me, he says, something he's eager to show me.

He unearths a piece of paper. It is a partial plan of San Pedro Sula, a section of the city on an 8.5 x 11 page. I'd told him the first time we'd met about my total failure to be able to get a plan of the city. I'd waited for hours in different lines in different government offices, was told I had to go pay for it in one place, was told there they couldn't accept my payment unless I got it authorized from the first place, and around and around. I'd complained to Pablo about the absurd bureaucracy, and at first, I think Pablo is just proud to have been able to help me, just a little bit, in my quest for an official plan of the city.

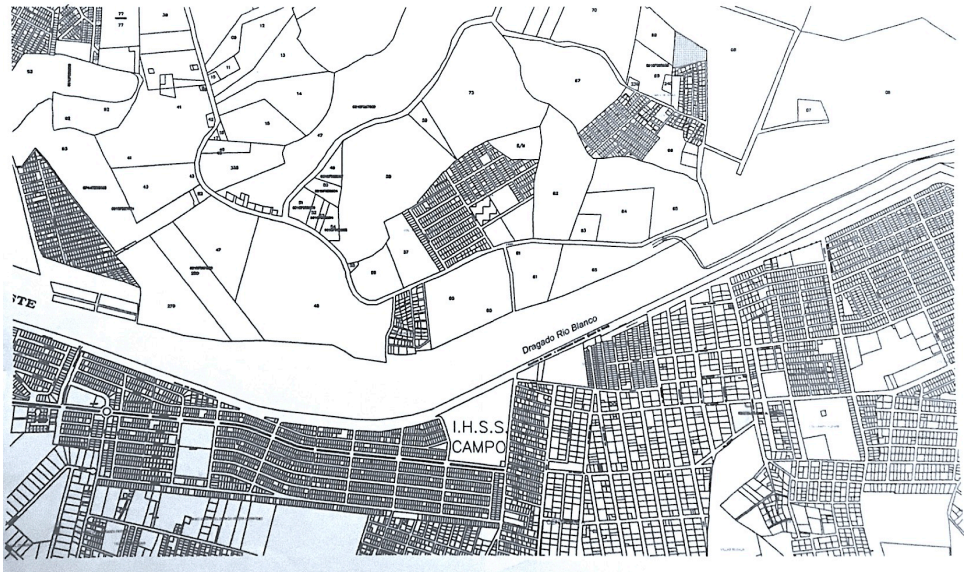


*Image 5: Partial plan of San Pedro Sula given to me by Pablo. 2018.*

But Pablo is indignant.

"Look," he says, "you can see how every *colonia* is numbered, and there's little line markers to show that the area is populated, right? That shows it's *poblado*." He indicates the lines that divide up the blank space, representing individual lots. Houses. Then he points his finger at the piece of paper, on the side that appears to be less congested, with fewer little house markers, across the river.

"This, on the other side of the river, this is where we are," he says. His finger directs me towards where most of the area looks to be uninhabited – there are very few little house markers. But these blank spaces are actually filled with people. According to Pablo, we're standing where the map is blank, yet El Chaco is here, along with many other densely populated neighborhoods.

Pablo says, "It's like we don't exist, like we don't count. There are 128,000 people living here, and officially, we don't exist. *Qué falta de respeto*. It's like we're not human for them."

I have tried to match the corner of the map that Pablo gave me with the geography of Rivera Hernández, and I am certain that the section of the city plan that he dug up for me doesn't correspond to his sector. I'm not sure why he mixed that up, or if he even realized that he had, but it is his impression of what the map represented that I find revealing.[1]

This sentiment – that we do not appear on their maps, that we do not count – represents the broader dynamics that form the foundation of life on the urban margins and that contributes to migration which I have detailed thus far. It also demonstrates the extent to which people in communities like El Chaco feel themselves to be separate from and external to "official" Honduras.

In this chapter, I focus on this structural exclusion that runs much deeper than lines on a map. Working through access to education, employment opportunities, and the criminalization of

poor urban youth, I show the fundamental flaws in the idea of "reintegration" as the critical response to the rising numbers of deportees. Reintegration, an idea championed by the government, NGOs, and some scholars, is incongruous with the experience in Honduras because, I argue, there is no prior condition of social integration for those deported to be re-incorporated into. Like the blank spaces on Pablo's map, Hondurans are returned to a marginalization that makes "reintegration" a false premise from the start.

**The Reintegration Paradigm**

"Reinsertion" and "reintegration" are terms commonly employed in the context of former combatants re-adapting to civilian life after a period of estrangement, child soldiers for example (Spear 2013) or guerrilla fighters (Theidon 2007), or the armed forces returning from combat abroad (Holmer and Shtuni 2017). The common thread that ties together disparate usages of reintegration and reinsertion rests on a substantial period of separation, an experience of removal from the normalcy of daily life so complete that it requires assistance, skill, and time to once again recover or remember how to live within that normalcy, whatever that may be. In keeping with this understanding, much of the approach to the "problem" of deportees has focused on reintegration, integrating individuals into society who have been separated from that society for lengthy periods of time.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM), for example, holds that reintegration is essential, as it "empowers and protects returnees" and contributes to the sustainability of return (Fonseca, Hart, and Klink 2015, 9). The "sustainability of return" is a sanitized way of saying that people who are sent back should stay put and not attempt, again, to leave their place in the international order. Reintegration and deterrence are inextricable. This commitment to

reintegration is replicated broadly by migration-focused NGOs and governments. Since 2014, the United States government has increased support for "reception and reintegration" in Central America (GAO 2018, 4). The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) has dedicated approximately $5.4 million dollars for assistance in Honduras, funneled through the IOM, for programs related to reception, reintegration, and prevention through information campaigns (GAO 2018, 10). The Honduran government echoes this focus. In an article announcing the support that Honduras will receive from the United Nations for reintegration, the first lady, who has taken on migration as her personal issue, is quoted as saying "we are betting deeply on processes of reinsertion and prevention campaigns" (El País 2018, translation mine).

Scholars have demonstrated the problems that occur when reintegration is not attended to and argued for the need for robust reintegration programs for deportees. I reviewed the deportation-as-exile literature more thoroughly in Chapter 3, but, broadly, scholars have detailed the hardships faced by deportees who have grown up elsewhere and are sent back to unfamiliar countries of citizenship. The challenges vary, but some deportees do not speak the local language; many do not know how to navigate the streets or social cues. Others find it particularly difficult to incorporate into the local labor market (Dako-Gyeke and Kodom 2017), as credentials earned elsewhere do not fit into the system at "home," or their being tagged as foreign – whether linguistically, through dress and style, or literally through tattoos – makes employers wary (Golash-Boza 2016). Another issue for some deportees has been one of schooling, getting children back into school, or validating degrees earned in the United States or elsewhere to allow access to continued or higher education once deported (Hagan, Wassink, and Castro 2019).

The need identified by many who analyze this situation is precisely for better reintegration, reinsertion, reincorporation of those deported into the worlds where they have been

forced to live (Golash-Boza and Ceciliano-Navarro 2019). Katie Dingeman-Cerda and Susan Bibler Coutin suggest that the United States Department of State ought to fund reintegration efforts in El Salvador to stave off the growing gang problem (Dingeman-Cerda and Coutin 2012). Similarly, David Brotherton and Luis Barrios argue that Washington should at least help pay for the reintegration into the Dominican Republic of those it has rejected (Brotherton and Barrios 2011, 298).

These were well-intentioned suggestions, perhaps, responsive to the conditions of deportees in those places at those times. As I have shown throughout this dissertation, however, deportation in Honduras does not conform to this pattern; most deportees are returned to Honduras within months of having left. Given this, the idea of reintegration programs – and their related supposed deterrent effect – are inappropriate at best and harmful at worst. Still, this approach proliferates. As deportations of Hondurans have increased and become noticeable for the U.S., Mexican, and Honduran governments, both the IOM and USAID have designed and funded the implementation of projects aimed at reintegration, often mirroring approaches adopted in El Salvador (which were never as successful there as those who called for them and designed them might have hoped they would be).

Reintegration programs have often focused on two primary aspects of life post-deportation: ensuring that deportees can integrate into the educational system and that they can successfully be inserted into the economy, finding opportunities for them in the labor market. Echoing the larger argument of this dissertation, that deportation in the case of Honduras is not an experience of rupture, I highlight the continuity of experience pre- and post-deportation in the realms of education and labor. From there, I detail the limits of the logic of reintegration. A lack

of integration, I suggest, in the form of exclusion, marginalization, and criminalization, is part of what contributes to the choice to migrate in the first place.

**Education as a Site of (Re)integration**

The language of reintegration is ubiquitous. PAMR, the NGO that I was affiliated with for a time in Honduras, based its programming around this idea: if deportees could learn a skill, if they could be reintegrated into the educational system and the labor market, they would stay. In addition, during my research in Honduras a handful of other international NGOs started education-based programs there, helping deportees re-enroll in school and catch up with their classmates (Mercado 2018), sometimes helping them with the costs of school supplies. Through another foundation, CASM received funds to develop a partner program to PAMR, called "*Regreso, Aprendo, Me Quedo*" which means, "I Return, I Learn, I Stay," which was entirely focused on the reinsertion of deported youth back into school (notably, this program could never seem to find enough youth to support to use the budget it had been allotted). Additionally, the Honduran government enacted a law guaranteeing school-age deportees the right to re-matriculate in the middle of the school year. Public schools are officially not allowed to tell students that they have to wait until the next school year to re-enroll, and teachers and schools are prohibited from discriminating against those who have been deported.

Profe Juan, the teacher from Rivera Hernández who works in a public school in another sector (see Chapter 2), is part of a pilot program run by the *Secretaría de Educación*, the Ministry of Education, in conjunction with UNHCR and IOM. It's designed to educate students about the risks of migration and deter them from trying to leave Honduras. The program was

introduced first at a handful of schools in the Sula Valley, those with the highest rates of students re-matriculating after deportation. Juan's school is among them.

We turn out the lights in the classroom and start the video. A family on the screen recounts how the coyote they hired to take them to the United States stole their money and left them stranded. The movie ends with close-up shots of pained faces as each person says some variation of "if I'd have known what could happen, I never would have left." It's meant to end with impact. The lights come up, however, and the students are unimpressed and unmoved. They are eager to finish the programming and get to the promised snack.

The second activity is designed to combat stigma: the observing IOM employees assist Juan by sticking literal construction paper labels on the students' foreheads with masking tape. Words like "lazy" and "criminal" and "stupid" are written across the brightly colored sheets of paper. I watch as the students then walk around, interacting with each other, unaware of what their "label" is. They laugh at the words on their classmates' foreheads, snickering in the way that teenagers do at the more vulgar and offensive descriptions. They are then directed to remove their cardboard labels and stick them on the blackboard at the front of the classroom. The point of the exercise is to train young people not to see deportees differently, to see past the "labels." This, however, is a battle for another context, from another time. Whereas in El Salvador and Mexico deportees have dealt with the stigma of being seen as criminals (Anderson 2015; Zilberg 2004), this is not the situation at present in Honduras. Rather, most deportees are greeted with a mix of pity and outrage and worry *for the deportee*. Rarely are they faulted for not having made it to their destination. Initiatives like these IOM activities mask the underlying problem of access to education for many young people in Honduras that contributes to the move to migrate.

I speak at length with Juan before and after these activities. He tells me, before we get to the school that day:

> *Voy a dar esta charla ahí, de que no se vayan los niños. Pero es una charla hipócrita, yo me siento hipócrita …. Que venga el Gobierno y me digan, da una charla para que el niño no migre. ¿Pero qué oportunidad le da el Estado a este niño? No hay oportunidad. Yo me siento hipócrita… Vos le podés decir a la gente que la van a bajar los Zetas. Le vas a decir a la gente que le va a caer del tren, y se le va a caer una pierna. Le vas a decir a la gente que en Estados Unidos va a estar presa en una cárcel…pero dice la gente yo prefiero eso a quedarme acá… me voy porque en Honduras descuartizan a la gente, la ponen a la orilla de la carretera en sacos . . .* ***¿Cómo yo le digo a un joven que no emigre, con qué autoridad moral?***
>
> I'm going to give this talk there, telling the youth not to go. But this is a hypocritical talk, I feel like a hypocrite… The government comes and says to me, give this talk so the kids don't migrate. But what opportunity does the state give to this kid? There is no opportunity. I feel like a hypocrite… You can tell the people that they are going to get taken by the Zetas. You tell them that they'll fall from the train, that they'll lose a leg. You tell them that in the U.S. they are going to be in a prison… but the people say I prefer that to staying here… I go because in Honduras they cut people into pieces, they leave them in a sack along the side of the highway. . . **How am I going to tell a young person not to migrate, with what moral authority?**

He continues:

> *Si a mí, un niño me dice, "profe, yo me voy," yo lo que puedo hacer es tomar su mano. Si tengo dinero, dárselo, decirle que le vaya bien, que espero que Dios lo cuide, lo guarde en ese camino, y que llegue.*
>
> If a child comes to me and says, "Profe, I'm leaving," all I can do is take his hand. If I have money, give it to him, wish him well, that I hope that God protects him and takes care of him on his journey, and that he makes it.

After the students file out of the classroom, and the IOM reps pack up their materials, get Juan's signature, and leave for the day, Juan reiterates his frustration and anger with this whole approach. Most of his students have family who have left, have left themselves, or are in the process of planning to leave, he tells me. They know the risks – a video about bad coyotes or the dangers of migrating will do nothing. He subtly points out a handful of students who have already tried to migrate. They're just waiting for the right time to try again, he tells me.

Juan works at two schools, a private high school in the mornings and this public school in the afternoons. The private school is subsidized by a religious charity; even so many of the families cannot afford the low monthly payments. Teachers and staff often go without getting paid their full salary. Still, that's better than the public school where teachers wait months to get paid sometimes. The buildings don't always have electricity; the classrooms are sparse. Juan will often share his lunch with his students because they haven't had a full meal in days. He warns me before we get to the school that many of the children appear blonde. It's not because they're actually blonde, he says, it's because of malnutrition.

Education is not accessible to average Hondurans, whether or not they have attempted migration. An average of 30% of the students who finish primary school do not transition to secondary school (UNESCO 2019); the illiteracy rate is over 10% among adults over age 15 (CIA 2019). Even public school, which is supposed to be free, is expensive for families with limited means. Students are responsible for buying their own uniforms, books, notebooks, and other school supplies. Frequently, their families must also pool resources to provide things like toilet paper and cleaning supplies to their children's classrooms. On top of this, teachers like Juan are often underpaid or irregularly paid and sometimes resort to charging their students for materials, for raffles, for trips, and other things that they invent to supplement their own salaries. Most of the deportees I know did not finish high school. A significant number of them only finished sixth grade. Many of them cannot really read or write. In nearly all cases, the reason for not continuing with school was because they and their parents simply could not afford to continue attending.

Programs designed to "reintegrate" deportees back into the educational system after return do not address these issues. Rather, insufficient access to public education contributed to

their decision to leave the country in the first place. Their status as deportees does not make it harder for them to get an education; access to education for poor, young men in their neighborhoods was already elusive due to a combination of economic reasons, security reasons, and a lack of infrastructural commitment from the government to educate all Hondurans.

Juan was skeptical of the IOM program from the start but, like the other teachers who were part of the pilot program, he was not given a choice in the matter. The *Secretaría de Educación* signed on to the program, eager to take the funds from IOM and USAID that came along with it. This is also just one area where the Honduran government under Juan Orlando Hernández proved to be willing to go along with the anti-migration agenda of the Trump administration in the United States.[2] For Juan and the others, it means a day of training and then choosing among five options of activities to replicate with their students. Juan chose the two activities that seemed the least objectionable to him, that would take the least time. And like with any organization bringing resources to his students, he was happy for that part. The students were eager for the snack that came with participation; Juan also saw a utility in that.

Juan, like all public-school teachers, is employed by the state. But Juan, like most public-school teachers (including principals), does not see himself as an agent of or a representative of the state. Teachers frequently place themselves in opposition to the Honduran government, even as they are obligated to conform to dictates from the *Secretaría de Educación*. There is a long history of public-school teachers as a radical element within society in Central America, and in Honduras many of the now-principals I met were once Marxist-inspired revolutionaries, a generation older than Juan and his peers. Parents – like Benjamín and Pablo – still sometimes grumble that all teachers do is teach kids to protest. In moments of social unrest, it is frequently the teachers (who are unionized) who form the backbone of protest movements. In 2019, the

Honduran government proposed "reforms" to education and health care that would have, essentially, privatized these public institutions. Notably, a powerful NGO, the Association for a More Just Society (ASJ for its name in Spanish) had recommended this "restructuring" to the Honduran government (Funes 2019). ASJ is a large NGO that receives substantial funding from USAID and has a particularly close relationship to the Hernández government. In response, teachers and health care workers – along with many others – mounted a month-long national strike that brought much of the nation to a standstill (Geglia 2019). Eventually the pressure succeeded in pushing the government to roll back the proposed reforms. Juan, like most of his cohort, sees himself as on the side of, as part of, the community in opposition to a state whose presence is felt primarily, if not exclusively, as a corrupt, repressive force in their lives. They see that state as a force in opposition to their role as teachers; the state wants to disinvest in education, with little interest manifested in making sure that poor Hondurans can learn.

Profe Juan turns to talking about his sector, Rivera Hernández, where he declined to take a position in the public high school because it would have meant crossing from his neighborhood, La Libertad, into another neighborhood controlled by a different gang (see Chapter 2). But the problem with the local high school is broader than that. He says, "*Solo hay un colegio del estado, solo hay un colegio oficial* … there's only one public high school in the whole sector, so there isn't sufficient teaching capacity to serve all the students, but with the aggravating factor that many of the young people cannot go to this school because it's in a specific zone," making reference to the gangland neighborhood geography that shapes mobility in Rivera Hernández (again, see Chapter 2). Because of this, many families choose not to send their children to school at all, once they reach high school age. Juan faults the state both for not genuinely working to ensure the safety of him and his neighbors and their children and for not

building enough schools to adequately serve the population. It is not solely that the gang lines prevent some young people from attending high school in Rivera Hernández; it is also that, like elsewhere in Honduras, there wouldn't be enough space in the classroom for all of them even if they *could* get to school.

*Fieldnotes: September 18, 2018*

Potrerillos. I show up at Jayson's house to pick up the disposable film camera he had from one of the photography workshops. His mother comes to the door and gives me the camera, but, she tells me, Jayson is just waking up. I make a good-natured joke about teenagers sleeping in - it's well into the afternoon - but she corrects me quickly. No, *viera*, it's because he was up all night waiting to be able to register for high school this morning. I'm confused, and she explains that this happens every year. He had to stay in line all night, in order to get a spot, in the public high school in Potrerillos. Registration started in the morning, but the *fila* started the day before. Like queuing up for concert tickets.

If he didn't get a spot – *si no hay cupo* – he'd be out of luck. He'd have to wait until next year to enroll.

I recounted this interaction to friends and colleagues elsewhere in the Sula Valley, and no one was surprised; the yearly battle to register is well known. There are simply not enough public schools for all the young people in Honduras. Missing out on a spot means losing a year of schooling, unless they have the resources to attend a private school. Like many, this would not have been an option for Jayson's family. The seventeen-year-old had already been deported once. If he had not secured a place in high school this year, his backup plan was to try migrating again. A year of idleness is too dangerous for a young man like Jayson. The newly enacted law in Honduras that guaranteed the rights of deportees to re-enroll in school does not address the real barrier to his education: poverty and a dire lack of investment in the public education system.

Juan summarizes: "*El sistema de educación de Honduras … es un sistema colapsado…. Mientras los niños de los ricos están estudiando mecatrónica, robótica, nuestros niños de la escuela pública no tienen ni libros para dar una clase de español. Entonces, cuando este niño empieza su vida laboral, ¿será que va a tener oportunidades? Muy pocas. El sistema no funciona*." Honduras's educational system is collapsed…. While the children of the rich are studying engineering, robotics, our children in public school don't even have the books for a Spanish language class. So, when this child begins working, will he have opportunities? Very few. The system does not work.

**Labor Participation as a Site of (Re)Integration**

Ulises, who has been deported twice, worked hard to graduate with a *bachillerato* in computer sciences, a kind of post-high school, pre-college specialized degree. Even so, he has never been able to find a job in his field. Instead, he found work for a while with a company that would send him out to different sites to fix machinery. One day he was sent to the Rivera Hernández sector, to fix something at the local branch of a low-cost chain grocery store. Taking a short lunch break, he drove the company vehicle around, trying to find tortillas. All of a sudden, he was stopped, a young man put a gun to his chest and demanded to know what he was doing there. Unbeknownst to Ulises, he had crossed gang lines, leaving the relative safety of the neutral main road and moving from the territory of one gang into another. All in the course of a few blocks. He swore he was just a worker, promised to never return, and got out of the neighborhood and the sector. The company told him to change his shirt and tried to send him right back to finish the job. He quit that same day.

Then Ulises tried to work as a taxi driver for a while, but he never felt safe, knowing that if the company he worked for didn't pay the extortion payments demanded, he was always a potential target for the organized crime group that wasn't getting paid. After an uncle, who was also a taxi driver, was killed, Ulises and his family moved to a different neighborhood in San Pedro Sula, then left for a rural village in Santa Bárbara. Sometimes he picks up a shift working construction, but the pay is low, and the shifts are few and far between. While he would be a good candidate to get into the public university, he no longer sees the point of trying to get a college degree. When he was younger, Ulises had dreamed of being a lawyer, "But why bother now?" he asks. "I know lawyers who can't find a job."

As Profe Juan alluded to, one of the primary issues facing young people in Honduras is their inability to enter fully into the labor market (especially given the inaccessibility of completing even secondary education). On the surface, Honduras does not seem to have a problem with extreme unemployment. The official unemployment rate in 2018 was 5.7% (ILO 2019). However, the underemployment rate is alarmingly high, reaching 62.8% in 2018, according to a report from the Secretary of Work and Social Security (Diario La Prensa 2019). This was up from 56% in 2017, and it means that more than 2.7 million Hondurans are "economically active" but do not earn sufficient wages to meet their needs. In 2018, the average monthly earnings of someone employed was 6650 lempiras (ILO 2019), roughly 270 U.S. dollars. COHEP, the Association of Private Businesses in Honduras, monitors the monthly cost of the *canasta básica de alimentos*, or the basket of staple consumer foodstuffs. This varies by region, but by the middle of 2019 this monthly cost was over 6000 lempiras, on average (notibomba 2019). This means that most fully employed Hondurans' wages barely cover the cost of basic foods, while the more than 60% of the population that is underemployed, we can infer,

does not even make that wage. In the 2018 household survey conducted by the National Statistics Institute (INE), they found that 79.7% of the population of individuals who are employed do not make one "minimum salary" (INE 2018). The minimum salary varies by sector and number of employees, but in 2019 the federally mandated minimum salary, a monthly wage, ranged from 6440 lempiras (in the agricultural sector) to 11,549 lempiras (for financial and real estate companies that employ over 150 people) (STSS 2019). Beyond the underemployment figures, then, we can reasonably understand that most Hondurans do not currently make enough to cover the cost of the *canasta básica* and anything additional, be that housing, health care, education, transportation, or any other costs that could be considered essential.

The *maquila* sector, the sweatshop-like garment factories making t-shirts for Fruit of the Loom and Gildan (among others), offers slightly better wages and relative stability for people without advanced education. However, many of the *maquilas* are situated within "*Zonas Libres*," zones that are free from certain kinds of taxation and regulation. The minimum salary for companies in these zones, regardless of number of employees, is 7652 lempiras per month (STSS 2019). Despite the low pay and the general condition of having to work 12-hour shifts, when a *maquila* is hiring, there are roughly 300 applicants for every open position. Passersby can easily tell when a *maquila* is hiring, as the line of people hoping to get a chance at applying for the position stretches for blocks and blocks. Given the high interest in these jobs, *maquilas* can afford to be picky and discriminatory in who they hire. Anyone over 35 is summarily rejected.[3] People residing in the sectors of San Pedro Sula that have a bad reputation, like Rivera Hernández, are often eliminated as candidates solely based on their address.[4] Given this dismal economic outlook, where getting a full-time job is elusive and even full employment entails

barely making ends meet, the idea of assisting deportees with starting their own business might seem, from a distance, like an obviously helpful intervention.

One of the primary approaches of PAMR, and many other deportee-serving NGOs, involves teaching young deportees a trade and helping the most dedicated students to start up their own microenterprise.[5] Deportees can learn how to cut hair, paint nails, fix cell phones, bake bread, and other similar skills. It is, at heart, an entrepreneurship program, encouraging young people to see business ownership as a path towards being able to stay in the country. The program is funded by U.S.-based church foundations (Lutherans and Mennonites, for the most part), and the tenets of the gospel of prosperity inflect the shape and goals of the program. In addition to the broader critique of an ideology that suggests that getting out of poverty is a question of individual choices, there are particular problems with the idea of emphasizing a "solution" that centers around encouraging young people to start their own microenterprises in Honduras. First, echoing the exclusions referenced in the preceding section, the reality is that many of the deportees the program targets do not have the formal education required to manage accounting. Second, the very idea of opening up a business within their own neighborhoods might pose an existential problem: if they open a store, for example, will they be calling too much attention to themselves, will they be vulnerable to extortion demands from the gangs that control where they live? Some of the young people in the program simply include *renta*, as the extortion payments are known, as part of the costs of doing business. For others, however, entrepreneurship does not solve the reasons they had left the country in the first place. It exacerbates them.

Franklin learned how to cut hair when he was incarcerated for immigration violations in the United States. After his first deportation he tried to make it back to the U.S. but fell ill while

in northern Mexico and decided that, since he was in no condition to make the crossing, he would turn himself over to Mexican immigration agents and be sent back to Honduras. He intended to recuperate and try again, but he got involved with PAMR and decided to try and make a go of it in Honduras. He was delighted to learn that, through PAMR, he could get an accredited certificate in *barbería*, turning a skill he'd first picked up in jail into a career. The PAMR staff saw that Franklin was talented and driven and decided to give him the *capital semilla*, the basic necessary equipment to open up his own barbershop in Los Cerros, his neighborhood in Choloma's Sector López Arellano.

Getting to Franklin's barbershop isn't easy. The roads aren't paved and there's a steep incline that turns into a mudslide whenever it rains. When I finally make it there, he is bursting with pride to show me around. With the help of his father, he's built a small, corrugated metal room on the edge of a motorcycle mechanic's plot of land. He has to pay the mechanic to rent the space, but the location is good, he tells me, and the men waiting to get their *motos* fixed are easy clientele. His prices are low, he's open seven days a week, and he is full of hope that his business will be a success. His first investment will be an air conditioning unit, as the metal room turns sweltering under the Honduran sun and blowing fans and hair cuttings make for a bad combination. He started seeing a girl who works in a salon, and their dream is to open up a joint barbershop/salon one day somewhere more central, more formal. Maybe in a mall.

A few weeks after I visit him at his barbershop, I receive a panicked text message from Franklin. "Amelia, I'm sorry, I have to go. They're going to kill me." And the next day, he is in Mexico. Through Facebook messages here and there, Franklin tells me the story: the gang that controls Los Cerros had noticed him. His tattoos (from the time he was previously in the states) initially caused suspicion, though he assured them that he had no gang affiliation, and for a while

the tension had abated. However, his barbershop was located in a different, but adjacent, *colonia* from the *colonia* where he lived with his family. Having a small business and crossing neighborhood lines put him further on their radar, and this led to renewed doubts about his allegiances and intentions. The threats resumed and increased. He decided he had no choice but to flee, leaving behind his beloved barbershop. He was really worried that PAMR would think that he hadn't been serious about his business, but he was too scared to stay. Once in Mexico, Franklin hears that the same night he left, the gang that had threatened him killed another young man, thinking it was him.

Franklin's story highlights the disconnect between ideas of "reintegration" that attempt to address the problem of deportees without addressing the root problems that spur many to migrate in the first place. Franklin had the skills, the infrastructure, and both the familial and NGO support to become a small-scale entrepreneur in Honduras. He certainly had the dream and the drive. Still, the basic situation of insecurity for a young man in a poor, urban neighborhood made realizing that dream impossible. Going to the authorities was not an option that ever occurred to Franklin; he was regularly harassed by the police that patrolled his sector. He trusted them even less than he trusted the gang that was after him.

**On the Limits of the Logic of "Reintegration"**

When I met Flaco (see Chapter 2), he was high up in the ranks of the gang that controlled Vista del Cielo. At 22, he had recently been released from *prisión preventiva*, having spent two years behind bars for being accused of stealing cars. He laughed when he told me. "They could have gotten me for so many other things, but stealing cars? Amelia, I don't even know how to drive." When his case did finally come up in front of a judge, she dismissed the charges, citing a

complete lack of evidence. His stint in prison earned him points within the gang hierarchy, however, and when he got out, he was tasked with more responsibility. His gang's discipline is strict and after making a few mistakes, he was convinced that they were going to "punish" him by killing him. His only option was to flee. He stays with family in another municipality for a few days, but his presence puts everyone there at risk so, reluctantly, he makes his way towards Mexico. He talks about maybe painting houses in the United States one day, but he knows that he has little hope of getting protection from deportation there.

If Flaco is deported back to Honduras, what kind of "reintegration" program would be appropriate for him? He's a smart young man who joined a gang when he was barely a teenager. It wasn't exactly forced recruitment, but neither was it a choice made free from pressures and coercion. A choiceless decision (Aretxaga 1997). He would have rather stayed in school, he would have rather found well-paying work, but those were not options available to him. If he is deported, now, he will immediately be taken to prison, as when he left he was essentially out on bond for another, new charge, and he was supposed to sign in at the courthouse weekly. By leaving the country he violated those terms. He tells me, from somewhere in northern Mexico, that if he's deported, he won't have the chance to flee again. They'll take him straight to prison – and there, his former *jomis* will kill him. "*Ni horas sobrevivo*," he tells me with a wry chuckle. He won't even survive a few hours in Honduras.

As far as either of us are able to determine, there are no programs or assistance of any sort for young people who wish to leave the gang behind. Flaco tells me that if he could have stayed in school, then maybe he would have had a different life. He would have liked to have had a different life. He hopes his young son will have a different life. But by the time I meet Flaco it is too late for him. His choices in Honduras have constricted even further. He joined the gang to

belong to something, to not be a burden on his mother, to protect his neighborhood, to feel powerful – and for many other unarticulated and perhaps inarticulable reasons. He didn't regret joining; he *loved* his gang. And even though he knows that a different life would have been better, a different life never seemed available to him, and he devoted himself to Los Amarillos. The fear he felt when his life was in danger was almost dwarfed by the hurt he felt at the betrayal, that this organization that he had given his life to was now going to end it.

Flaco's situation brings the discussion of (re)integration into greater relief. He is not the person that the government or the NGOS are talking about when they tout receiving deportees with open arms. He is already excluded, long before he leaves Honduras, and, in fact, he specifically points to lack of access to education and dignified work as the decisive factor that pushed him towards the *pandilla* as an adolescent. An adult now, however, his chances of being able to settle anywhere are slim. Before leaving his country of citizenship, Flaco is always already deportable, even though deportation means certain death. In this way his story is the extreme, perhaps, but contains the same contours as that of Franklin or Juan's students. They are already deportable, already looked at as criminals as though they were Flaco, simply by virtue of growing up alongside him (or people like him), or because they come from a place where young men like themselves could become *pandilleros* and sometimes do.

### *Aquí Todos Son Diablitos*: The Criminalization of Urban Youth

The first thing I noticed was the smell of urine. I could smell the jail cells before my eyes adjusted enough to the darkness to make out the contours of the barred rooms. It was hard to tell how many bodies were stuffed inside – there was no light, no windows, no air, no beds, no bathroom. I called out for Henry, the young man I was there to see, and a figure emerged at the

bars at the doorway. He wanted to show me the bruises on his wrists, from when the police tried to make him touch the drugs they already had in their possession, and he had resisted. Even in the darkness, I could see the purplish marks on his tanned skin. After a few minutes, the officer who was accompanying me strongly suggested that it had been long enough. Henry receded into the darkness, and I walked back across the concrete courtyard into the central offices of the National Police in San Pedro Sula.

18-year-old Henry had been arrested the day before. The military police picked him up while he was working at a *mototaxi* stand. They put him in the back of their pickup truck and drove around for a while, while Henry sweated under the hot sun. Then they picked up another young man, in another neighborhood, while he was working at a barbershop. They took both boys to their headquarters, used such force that bruises would be evident in the darkness the following day, and took photos of them with drugs that the police already had in their possession. Later, in court, the charges would say the police had caught both men, together, in the act of selling drugs. Despite a host of witnesses to refute this basic assertion, both young men were sent to the adult men's prison, Támara, for *prisión preventiva* – pretrial detention – to be held while the investigation and trial went on, which could legally be up to two years. Henry, the barber, their family and friends, and even the state-appointed lawyer who was initially responsible for their case, doubted their chances of beating the charges, clumsy and fraudulent as they were. The lawyer threw up his hands as I probed. "Surely there must be some way to get the judge to see their innocence," I insisted. His only response was to tell me story after story of the grave injustices he'd seen carried out.

The residents of areas like Rivera Hernández are familiar with being treated in this way by the authorities; the criminalization of the urban poor is wide and deep in Honduras. Henry

Giroux argues that the criminalization of poverty is intimately tied to the rise of the neoliberal, "punishing" state (Giroux 2011).[6] He links the social death of the poor with the death of the social state, where the neoliberal idea of individual freedom and personal responsibility means that individuals are thought to be at fault for their own suffering. "Poverty has become criminalized," he writes, "and 'extreme poverty' has become a 'pathological condition' rather than an effect of structural injustice" (Giroux 2011, 591). For young men like Henry, their position, their lack of viable alternatives, their vulnerability to being misrecognized by the police as criminals, is intimately tied to the criminalization of the urban poor.

Following Lisa Marie Cacho's formulation in her work on "social death," the "criminalization of the urban poor" means that they have a different relationship to the justice system and law enforcement than others, namely, the wealthy (Cacho 2012, 4). This differential ability to be considered equally under the system of laws results in what Cacho calls "ineligibility for personhood," meaning that people are subjected to laws but "refused the legal means to contest those laws…. [and] denied… the political legitimacy and moral credibility necessary to question them" (Cacho 2012, 6). Poor urban youth like Henry must acquiesce to the laws (and those who enforce them) but do not have the possibility to contest those laws or their application. This kind of exclusion runs deep in Honduras, making some, including Profe Juan, believe that the state not only criminalizes them but actively persecutes young people. He describes the situation:

> *Por ejemplo, este gobierno, estaba la Policía Nacional, montó la Policía Militar, montó la Policía Tigres, montó la Policía ATIC, montó la Policía DPI, y ahora monta la policía anti-maras. Seis policías nuevas, más la policía que ya estaba. ¿Y por qué la situación de riesgo, de violencia y de peligro no cambia en el país? A lo que voy, yo siento más bien que la persecución es contra la juventud de Honduras. Yo siento que hay una persecución contra la juventud de Honduras.*

> For example, this government, there was already the National Police, they added the Military Police, they added the "*Tigre*s," they added the "ATIC," they added the "DPI," and now they add the "*anti-mara*" police. Six new police units, in addition to the police that already existed.[7] So why doesn't the situation of risk, of violence, of danger change in the country? What I'm getting at is that, actually, the persecution is against the youth in Honduras. I feel that there is persecution against youth in Honduras.

Juan answers his own question, suggesting that the proliferation of policing in Honduras is designed to persecute youth, not protect them. He's not alone in that assessment. After giving me the map that I opened this chapter with, Pablo introduces me to one of his neighbors, Doris. He wants her to tell me what happened the night before. Doris obliges; she's not shy. She's frazzled, and a bit sleep deprived, but mostly angry.

The night before, she tells me, the police invaded her home, chasing after her sons. They were on a rampage and actually told her: "It's a good thing we didn't find your sons, cause we would have killed them." Her sons, she says, weren't doing anything but when they saw the police coming into their neighborhood, they ran. And for that, for running, the police chased them and were ready to kill them. "It happens all the time," she says, "police kill young men, blame it on the *mareros*, but we all know it's actually the police. Then they will arrest other young men and say they're responsible for the murders, so it's like they get two for one. They get to get rid of two of our kids at the same time."

Just a few days earlier, the police had picked up a different kid from their neighborhood. Doris saw him being loaded into the back of the police pickup truck. The young man appeared the next day, *embolsado*. Dead, his body stuffed in a sack, left in front of a *pulpería*. People there saw the police unload the body; the police say he threw himself from the back of their pick-up truck.

"*Nos satanizan*," she says, almost hissing the words, so full of contempt for the way the police treat her sons and her neighbors. They satanize us. "*Por eso a veces les decimos a*

*nuestros hijos que se vayan, pa' que se salven*." This is why sometimes we tell our children to leave, so that they might save themselves.

Doris ties the way in which her sons and her neighbors are treated as criminals, as less-than-human, by the police to the reasons that mothers like herself would tell their children to migrate. The lack of recognition of full personhood in the eyes of the state (and its agents) precedes and precipitates the need to leave the country. This is not to suggest that the state exists in a kind of all-seeing, ever-present, determinative power that controls daily life in Honduras. Far from it. Rather, what I am identifying throughout this dissertation is the way in which, for average Hondurans, the state is a monolithic entity that is mostly absent. When its presence is felt, however, it primarily comes in the form of repression and persecution. The criminalization of poor youth, however, isn't always as directly or obviously violent as that experienced by Doris and her sons and their neighborhood. This exclusion, this lack of integration, extends into smaller ways that the authorities interact with young men as well.

Arám, like Flaco, is from Vista del Cielo. He's 18 years old and dreams of being a Christian rapper. Aware of the dangers awaiting a young man like himself, he rarely leaves his mother's house – only to work and go to school. His father and sister left for the United States a few months earlier, and he hopes every day that his father will send for him soon. In the meantime, Arám spends most of his free time in his room, writing song lyrics, sending WhatsApp messages back and forth with his friends, who are all tucked away inside their own homes. He likes to spread positive messages about believing in yourself and having faith in God. He says that even if he's feeling lonely, he likes to try and uplift other people.

One day, when he was on his way to school, the police stop him. They interrogate him. They speak to him using the hyper-familiar "*vos*" which, he emphasizes, they would never have

done if he were from a different, wealthier neighborhood. "*Vos*," in Central America, is a form of singular "you" which is used exclusively among people who are very close with each other, and sometimes not even then. No person in a position of authority would ever address a civilian for whom they had respect that way. Arám recounts his interaction with the police for me:

"I'm on my way to school," Aram told the police.

*"¿Vos estudiás?* You study?" they asked him. Incredulously.

"And I go to church," he added "I'm not a criminal."

"*¿Vos asistís a una iglesia?* You go to church?"

"I even sing Christian music," he added.

"Oh yeah? Sing us something."

Aram is livid and embarrassed, "like I need character references just to walk down the street," he later says to me. The way those officers spoke to him, the humiliating disbelief that *he* could be a student, a person of faith, stings. The palpable lack of respect the police officers showed towards him is what hurts the most. Their use of "*vos*" immediately places them as above him in the social structure, although they were young men not that much older or more accomplished than himself. Their uniforms, position, and power encourage them to see Arám – and other young men like him – as beneath them and always potentially their enemy. Essentially, the way the police view young men from neighborhoods like Rivera Hernández is that they are all potentially and inherently criminal.

Gladys recalls going to the police station to speak up for a different young man a police officer had taken in. "He's a good kid," she told him, "he's a Christian!" The officer's response stayed with Gladys. "Here there are no Christians," he snapped back. "*Aquí todos son diablitos*." Here you are all little devils.

This is, perhaps, the clearest manifestation of the lack of "integration" that young men living on the urban margins in Honduras experience. They are already viewed as potentially criminal, always already exterior to society, much in the way that those exiled deportees of an earlier generation were treated because they were presumed to be both criminal because of their deportation and other because they had grown up elsewhere. Rather than being treatment that arises in response to one's status as a deportee, however, it is a condition that exists before migration and continues, largely unaltered, post-deportation. Furthermore, for many Hondurans, it is precisely this experience that fundamentally shapes the move to migrate in the first place. A discourse focused on the "reintegration" of deportees does not address this underlying issue: that those who migrate are already excluded. When Ulises or Franklin is deported back to Honduras, they do not feel out of place or unfamiliar; it is not that they do not know how to survive in their country of birth because their knowledge, skills, and instincts were formed elsewhere, adapted to a different context. It is, rather, that a lack of inclusion and protection already made life precarious for them, before they ever left.

**Conclusions**

Given a situation of prior exclusion, the fact of deportation does not create a *new* kind of outsiderness for deportees once they are sent back to Honduras. They are returned, rather, to precisely the same situation from which they had tried to flee. The criminalization of young men like Henry follows them through the process of migration, detention, and deportation, even as they explicitly seek safety through asking for asylum (see chapter 6).

Throughout this chapter, I have argued that reintegration is a false notion in Honduras for two reasons: first, Honduran deportees are exceedingly familiar with the conditions on the

ground in Honduras; they were their reasons for leaving. Second, those conditions are, essentially, ones of exclusion. An existential lack of integration marks the life of the urban poor in Honduras. Until that changes, programs and policies aimed at "reintegration" will continue to fail both at easing the pressures of life for deported Honduran youth and at deterring them from trying to migrate again.

Beyond the specifics of the context of Honduras, however, the focus on "reintegration" more broadly can mask the inherent violence of deportation, contributing to making it more palatable. As deportation is framed as returning people to where they belong, then deportation does not seem to be a matter of uprooting families and banishing them but returning everyone to their proper place (Collyer 2012). As Gibney argues, it coheres to the liberal order of things, it "works with the grain of the international system of States, not against it" (Gibney 2013, 123). Reintegration as a scheme, as a paradigm, is inextricable from this fundamental feature of deportation. Reintegration efforts led by NGOs, both national and international, focus on the individual as the unit to be assisted, rather than taking an approach that recognizes what is needed to be, for the most part, "collective and structural" (Schuster and Majidi 2013, 234).

What might true integration look like? To close, I want to draw attention to one educational access program in Honduras that does offer an alternative explanation of the failure of education-based efforts at "reintegration." In El Progreso, Yoro, an NGO offers educational support and resources to youth and adolescents in the form not of technical or skills training but access to computers, tutors, homework help, and support all the way through college. Unlike most of the programs that focus on training deportees and would-be migrants in technical-vocational skills, this one encourages its participants to aspire to something beyond learning a trade and stays with them over the course of years. In effect, they encourage the young people

with whom they work to dream. This program was not designed with migration prevention or reintegration in mind. However, after thirteen years in operation they did a retrospective analysis of their participants and discovered that only one individual who completed their program had migrated. This is remarkable data that would need to be analyzed further; it suggests, however, that there is something fundamentally different about a program that is education-centered that offers long-term support, a full array of resources, and encourages the participants to aspire beyond the standard options for their futures. This, perhaps, could be what actual integration looks like and might offer a blueprint for what could mitigate the move to pursue opportunities in life imagined through migration. Profe Juan, ultimately, analyzes the fundamental problem in his country in keeping with this: "*Más allá del hambre, es un país que ha perdido las esperanzas.*" Worse than hunger, this is a country that has lost hope.

**Update on the People in this Chapter**

Profe Juan continues to teach in his two schools. Every once in a while, though, he tells me he's had enough and he's considering migrating himself. I've lost touch with Ulises; the last I heard from him he was going back and forth between San Pedro Sula and Santa Bárbara, reluctantly considering his next trek northward. Franklin made it back to the United States and is cutting hair in a barbershop in the south. Being a *barbero* has become his defining identity, and he proudly posts barber-related content on Facebook now, almost daily. His younger brother, who had also been deported, enrolled in the PAMR program after Franklin left. Flaco is in northern Mexico, lonely, but alive. Henry was eventually released from prison, after his family gathered a substantial sum to pay for his release. Arám got a job at a *maquila* and continues to write Christian rap songs. His father's asylum hearing is pending, and Arám still hopes he'll be

able to join him in California one day. Doris's brother was recently killed. She tells me that it was the police, the *Fuerza Nacional Anti-Maras y Pandillas*; Benjamín tells me it was Los Amarillos, a rival gang trying to take over her neighborhood. Her two sons, though, are still alive and still in El Chaco.

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**Notes to Chapter 5**

1. The parts that Pablo indicated as being populated but shown as empty are, in fact, populated, it's just a different sector of the Sula Valley.

2. During the Trump administration, insiders at the U.S. embassy in Honduras reported that the agenda there was primarily set by the Department of Homeland Security and not diplomats representing the State Department as would usually be the case.

3. This age limit on hiring is widely reported but the reasoning behind it isn't well explained. Some people who have worked in the *maquilas* for years are then not re-hired after they reach a certain age, even though they have useful experience and are still physically capable of doing the work. More than a logic that stems from the requirements of the job, I think that this has to do more with the general kind of sweatshop labor practices that aim to keep costs low and the workforce feeling precarious in their employment. In addition, *maquila* workers, as part of the formal employment sector, pay into what is called Social Security in Honduras but is more like a parallel quasi-public health care system. As health care needs grow with age, I think the *maquilas* might prefer younger employees who would be less likely to make use of that system (and incur higher costs). This is conjecture, but what the situation represents is not: there is such an overabundance of those who would like to work in the *maquilas* that the companies can be wildly, opaquely, discriminatory in their hiring practices.

4. While these assertions are made widely by people living in areas like Rivera Hernández, it was confirmed during a meeting I observed, where representatives from the HR departments from various *maquilas* and other businesses gathered (hosted by USAID). They recognized discrimination in hiring practices but did not discuss any plans to change this.

5. IOM offers some direct support for microenterprise startups for deportees; the Lutheran Church funds a program in the rural department of Olancho that offers seed money for those deported to start small businesses there. As of this writing, the U.S. Committee for Refugees is beginning a similar program in Honduras.

6. Adrienne Pine terms this "neoliberal fascism" (Pine 2019).

7. Profe Juan actually undercounts the police units in Honduras, which numbered 17 in total as of 2019, with the addition of a new unit specialized to police former officers (Rainsford 2019). For more on the Honduran police and the deep mistrust they have in Honduras see Shorack, Kennedy, and Frank-Vitale 2020.

## Chapter 6 Asylum Denied:
## The Legal Violence of the System of International Protection

### Introduction: A Final Visit to CAMR

In my last month of fieldwork in Honduras, I have one final chance to be back in the deportation processing center at the San Pedro Sula airport, CAMR. Although the government's access rules haven't changed (see Chapter 1), one of the people who is running the center at this time invites me to come, incognito. Her plan is to put one of the volunteer vests on me, just in case *Cancillería* shows up.

Even though it has been more than a year since my last visit to CAMR, the place feels familiar, the process essentially the same. Deportees shuffle in and are directed to sit, in order, in the tightly placed rows of chairs. Everyone gets a small Styrofoam cup of coffee and a *baleada*.[1] They are given a flimsy green backpack with a *kit de aseo personal*, a personal hygiene kit, provided by USAID, with the words "*del pueblo de los Estados Unidos de América*" emblazoned below the logo. From the people of the United States. Once in, the crowd is restless, eager to get out of this place and get on to whatever comes next. But, first, they must wait to be called to retrieve their belongings, which get sent on the plane in mesh bags, separate from the deportees. Then, they must wait to be called to get their *constancias*, the official piece of paper that serves as an interim form of identification. Then, once again, they must wait, in line, to get interviewed and registered by the team of volunteers. Once they've gone through these steps, they are

released into the blinding heat of San Pedro Sula. Those who want it are given a lift to the bus terminal; from there they are on their own.

Every time I come here I think to myself, "I wonder if I'll see anyone I know?" The thought comes with both a bit of hope and a sinking feeling, how nice it would be to see a familiar face, how sad it would be. For some reason I always think I see Milton, a young *pollero* I met in 2012 on the train tracks outside of Mexico City. It's never him, but every time I'm in CAMR, it's his face I'm scanning the crowd for.

This time, I help distribute the bags of belongings to the deported men, calling their names from a little table set up in the front of the room. Then it happens. The first thing I notice is the two-toned puffy jacket, brown and cream, just like when I'd met up with him in Tijuana, just a day or two before he turned himself over to the Border Patrol to ask for asylum, when we talked about his life in Honduras over French fries at a Carl's Junior. It was cold in Tijuana in December, and he never took off the puffer jacket. Ulises. He's across the room from me, holding the Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hands. He's thinner than he was in the caravan, I think. Eventually he looks across the room and I catch his eye – and that same big smile spreads across his face. He makes his way through the rows of chairs, and I give him a giant hug. I'm already not supposed to be in the reception center, I don't know if there are rules against personal interactions, but no one seems to care. I remind myself it's probably not the first time someone deported has had a connection to someone inside the center.

Ulises! He seems dazed, disoriented, but happy to see a familiar face. We can't talk much in the center; the process of registration is slow but precise and there's no room for chit chat really. I give him my number so we can reconnect later. He returns to his spot in the line of chairs, I return to the table in front to assist in the distribution of *constancias*, but he catches my

eye and grins broadly from time to time for the rest of the day. Then, from the row of chairs closer to me, another young man tries to get my attention. He asks, politely, "*¿Verdad que Ud. estaba en Tijuana*?" You were in Tijuana, right? "I was," I say. He turns to the boys around him, quietly triumphant, "*Sí es ella. Les dije que ya la conocía*." It *is* her. I told you that I already knew her. I give him my contact information as well and say that if he wants to talk about what happened, how he ended up back here, I'd love to. Ángel, this young man who recognized me, messages me the very next day; he is eager to talk.

That evening, I get a message from Héctor. Turns out he'd been in CAMR that day as well, though I hadn't picked him out in the crowd. I'd also met Héctor in Tijuana, outside of el Chaparral, the pedestrian border crossing point. A group of *caravaneros* was milling around in the plaza in front of the border crossing, and Héctor and his friends and I struck up a conversation, mostly about the risks that bus and taxi drivers navigate in Honduras. He had secured a job in a factory in Mexicali and, as he'd already been deported from the United States once, as far as I knew he was planning to stay in Mexicali. When he messages me that night after my day in CAMR, I am surprised to learn that he, too, is back in Honduras after being deported from the United States.

Because I happened to be present in CAMR that day, I was able to reconnect with and interview Ulises, Angel, and Héctor in person after they were deported. Each of these three men had tried for asylum in the United States, and each of them was detained and sent back. Héctor took it in stride, and he got back into the rhythm of being a *busero* after a few days. Ángel was crushed, and left Honduras again as quickly as possible. Ulises was aimless, adrift. He did not want to try migrating again, but he did not know how to stay in Honduras either.

Each of these men, like many Honduran deportees, had left Honduras with hopes of finding a combination of protection and safety and opportunity in the United States. As I make clear throughout this dissertation, these things are not discrete motivations but are fundamentally intertwined. Their experiences with the asylum system, however, dashed those hopes. In this chapter, I use their cases along with other stories of Hondurans seeking asylum to make an argument for understanding the asylum process as a system which rests on legal violence. The asylum process contributes to the criminalization of Central American men, deports people back to real danger under the guise of legitimacy, and, at the same time, contributes to subsequent cycles of aspirational migration.

**How Asylum "Works"**

I focus this final chapter on asylum and its denial for two reasons. One, it is an increasingly important part of the experience of migration and deportation for Central Americans. Second, deportation after the denial of asylum brings the violence of the entire migration regime into sharper relief; a system ostensibly designed to offer protection to those fleeing persecution becomes a crucial mechanism in the hardening of borders and the expulsion of people back to conditions from which they've tried to flee. While asylum denial rates continued to increase across the board, in Fiscal Year 2020, Hondurans had the highest rate of denials of any nationality seeking asylum in the United States: 87.3% (TRAC 2020b).

Asylum emerges as an international system in the post-Second World War era, and, from its beginning, it is a system that excludes as much as it protects. From its inception it is a dual system, one for the global north, where the war's Western "winners" administered reception of those seeking refuge (primarily from communism) for themselves. The other system, for those in

the global south, was administered by the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR). Siobhán McGuirk and Adrienne Pine review this history, concluding that "racialized and colonialist logics underpin it from the beginning" (McGuirk and Pine 2020, 5). Coming up to the present day, Julia Morris, in her examination of Australia's offshoring of its refugee policy, discusses how becoming a refugee, getting certified as such, is one of the few authorized ways for the world's poor to move across borders. She notes that this is often demeaning, requiring the performance of a certain kind of legible suffering and victimhood, and is "laced with ideologies of Western salvation from Third World poverty and state tyranny" (Morris 2020, 174). Proving suffering is the "prevailing mode of border entry over accusations of economic migrancy" (Morris 2020, 175). Suffering alone, however, is not enough to guarantee access to asylum; it has to be the right kind of suffering for certain kinds of reasons in order to "count."

To win an asylum claim in the United States, a person must establish that they are persecuted in their country of origin on account of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group (PSG). While the first four are fairly clearly defined, the last one, PSG, "has no statutory definition" (Quintero 2018, 201), allowing for interpretation, which has evolved over time. Essentially, winning an asylum claim requires identifying a category of people to which an individual belongs, and establishing that persecution in their home country is both directed at the individual and due to the person's membership in that category of people. Both the category and that membership must be immutable, something that the person could not or should not have to change, opt out of, or hide. It is not sufficient, therefore, that an individual establishes that they, as an individual, are at risk; that risk must derive from their category. Moreover, as Susan Bibler Coutin explains, asylum law in the United States is grounded in *exceptionality*, meaning that the applicant must be at risk of a greater level

of violence than everyone else around them (Coutin 2011, 573). If the violence is simply general, even if it is extraordinary, that does not meet the grounds for asylum.

While this is, roughly, the rubric with which asylum cases are decided, asylum decisions are made by individual immigration judges invested with wide discretion in how they rule and how they interpret the categories outlined above. One example of the discretion inherent in the asylum system is the wildly different grant rates across jurisdictions. In FY 2020, for example, the Sacramento Immigration Court granted 63.1% of asylum claims (and provided other forms of relief in 2.8% of cases). In contrast, the Orlando Immigration Court granted 17.5% of asylum claims during the same period (and provided other forms of relief in 1.6% of cases).[2] These numbers are even more stark when broken down by individual judge: In the Memphis Immigration Court, for example, Judge Vernon Benet Miles denied 97.5% of the asylum cases he heard while Judge Charles E. Pazar granted 46.4% of his cases. The New York Immigration Judges have, on average, a much higher grant rate (ranging from the 20s to the 90s) than the Houston Immigration Judges (ranging from 0 to 12%) (TRAC 2020a).[3] Scholars note that judges, able to exercise such wide discretion, may "rely on their own personal attitudes, biases, or motivations, using non-citizens' individual case characteristics as proxies for how 'American' or 'dangerous' they perceive" a claimant to be (Asad 2019, 1222).

As such, there is an emerging tendency for asylum to be decided on intimate rather than political grounds (Fassin 2013), based on stereotyped ideas of who is legible as a victim and who is understood to appear like a perpetrator (a terrorist, a criminal, a gang member, a warlord). In one example of this, LGBTQ asylum seekers often find themselves expected to perform a particular kind of queerness to be legible to both the NGOs that might support their claims and the judges who will adjudicate them (McGuirk 2018).[4] This process is gendered and racialized,

casting straight, dark-skinned young men, from the global south as probable criminals – often replicating the way they are viewed in the countries from which they have fled. Ariadna Estévez has found, in her study of Mexican asylum seekers, that men spend more time in detention, writing "these are the men associated with the drug business or gangs in the biased mind of American civil servants or judges" (Estévez 2017, 254).[5]

In effect, the asylum system has come to be the way in which "real" refugees are sifted out from economic migrants who are just pretending to fear for their lives (when really they are "just" hungry) and criminals who are trying to take advantage of the system. Asylum law is not designed to offer protection but to manage and normalize the expulsion of applicants (Estévez 2017, 254). From the outset, this rests on an operating logic that assumes that most people are not legitimate claimants and requires adherence to the false notion that poverty and persecution are discrete experiences. Asylum is held apart from other areas of immigration, as distinguishing "between genuine (granted) and bogus (denied) asylum claimants… reinforces the reassuring notion that there exists the possibility of objective and infallible determinations of who 'deserves' refuge; that asylum adjudication is an arbiter of 'truth'" (McGuirk and Pine 2020, 10). It is the very humanitarian nature of the asylum system that allows it to criminalize, brutalize, and reproduce violence against those who do not possess and perform "legally legitimate suffering" (Pine 2020, 211).

In actual experience, the asylum system for Central Americans looks roughly like this: First, you make your way across Mexico, however you can, and arrive at the U.S.-Mexico border. Once there, you present yourself at a port of entry. Officially, at this point, you should be able to start the process in the United States. DHS instituted an illegal process, however, that came to be called "metering," telling asylum seekers that they were "full" and wouldn't take

their case on a given day (Leutert 2019).[6] Those seeking asylum started organizing a list, assigning numbers, and giving order to the metering process – helping DHS implement its illegal policy. By the time Héctor, Ángel, and Ulises took a number in Tijuana in December of 2018, the wait time was close to a month. Seeking asylum in the United States involved waiting around in one of Mexico's border cities for weeks.

Once your number comes up, you are taken into a Border Patrol holding cell, where you might remain for a few hours or a few days. From this moment on the process is riddled with uncertainty, discretion, and arbitrariness. You should have an initial Credible Fear Interview (CFI) by an asylum officer which will essentially determine if your fear seems real and well-founded, but you might not. You should be dispatched to a longer-term detention facility, somewhere with beds, quickly, but you might not be. You might be released at a bus station. You might be sent to a federal prison. You might have to wait in the holding cells for a week or more. Someday, one day, you are supposed to have that CFI in front of an asylum officer, if you haven't given up and signed a "voluntary" deportation order first. At every turn there are ample pressures to sign this document, to give up on seeking asylum.[7] Conditions vary across detention centers but, frequently, detainees are made to wake up at 3:00 in the morning to have breakfast, they are denied necessary medical care, and the fluorescent lights are never turned off, so sleeping at all is next to impossible.

The experience of detention is also violent in that it has been made a site of total uncertainty. Nancy Hiemstra calls the "uneven, illogical space-time geographies" of the detention and deportation system "chaotic geographies," arguing that intentional disorder, opacity, and arbitrariness are employed because they confer structural advantages (Hiemstra 2013). Asylum, as a piece of the detention regime, is no exception to the "inherent chaos" of the

larger system of immigration enforcement. After an individual begins the process of seeking asylum, they may be released while awaiting a hearing. For some people that happens quickly, while for others that occurs after many months in detention. Sometimes, being released comes after paying a steep bond, or securing a sponsor, or with the condition of wearing an electronic ankle monitor.[8] Most asylum seekers do not get released, and most do not win their claims, but the fact that some people do get released, that some people do win their cases, serves as an example to everyone else that it is in fact possible. This legitimizes a system that fails most of them as a genuine arbiter of justice. This "cruel optimism" (Berlant 2006) of asylum engenders a hope and faith in the system, despite its incoherence and brutality, which amounts to legal violence.

**Ángel: No "Credible" Fear**

A few days after my last visit to CAMR, I drive to Ángel's sister's house, in Villanueva, Cortés, on the outskirts of San Pedro Sula. He meets me at a Pizza Hut parking lot along the main boulevard. A cousin drives him there, but Ángel gets in my car, and we follow his cousin deep into Villanueva. He tells me when to roll the windows down. I exchange pleasantries with his sister and her household – the house is tiny, basically a hallway and two small rooms. His sister is kind and warm, but drawn, exhausted. She's clearly fond of her brother, but his presence is an added burden – both in terms of having another mouth to feed, another body to squeeze into an already stretched space, and in terms of his being an unknown young man here. He can't walk into and out of the neighborhood alone; someone in the family has to go pick him up, in a car, at the entrance where he met me, and drive him to their house.

We go for a walk – staying within the bounds of the neighborhood – so that he and I can talk alone. Ángel doesn't want his family to be present, but there really wouldn't be space in the home for quiet anyway. We walk to the edge of the neighborhood where there's a park, a half-abandoned field. The sun is brutal, the earth is dry and cracked. The lush, suffocating humidity of San Pedro Sula seems to give way, here, to desert-like aridity. We sit on a graffiti-covered bench where there's bit of shade, but it doesn't provide much relief. He tries to show me photos on his phone, but the sun is too bright. Still, there's a peacefulness here, with no one else around.

I am unsure of how to run this interview. Usually, I interview people with whom I have already had the chance to build at least a bit of rapport (see Chapter 1); often I already know their "story" long before I ask to turn on the voice recorder. I don't know this young man very well, so I am cautious, gentle, tentative. Ángel, however, wants to talk. He wants to tell me what he's been through, and he has been through a lot. He doesn't seem to know *how* to talk, but he's emphatic that he wants to. He fights to hold back tears. He explains, almost apologizing, *soy muy sensible*. I'm very sensitive. His voice breaks, but he keeps going. I think he needs the chance to *desahogarse*, undrown himself, but he's not used to talking.

He grew up in Tegucigalpa. His mother had ten children, but only five of them are still alive. One of his sisters was murdered, another died when he was a baby, from an asthma attack. Another brother is simply disappeared. Ángel has worked since he was seven years old, selling things, landscaping, electricity, whatever opportunity arose. He knows how to do lots of things. He has a son of his own now, just two years old, living with the boy's mother in Tegucigalpa. He catches himself from crying when he mentions his son.

Before he left Honduras, Ángel was selling bread on buses. It's a common scene in Central America. Vendors will get on a bus with a large basket of goods: pastries, bags of fruit,

chips, bottles of soda, bags of juice. Sometimes they'll just sell what they can while the bus is idling, waiting for stragglers to board. Often, especially when they have a good relationship with the driver on the route, they'll ride along for a few stops, sell what they can, get off, find another bus, then sell to other passengers going the other way. A gang wanted Ángel to move drugs for them. Since he was one of these vendors, they reasoned he could hide the drugs under the bread, at the bottom of the basket, and move the product from neighborhood to neighborhood as he rode the bus. He did it once. He wasn't thrilled about it, but he did it. After that he told them he didn't want to do it again. That's when the "offer" became a threat: you do it or you're dead. That's when he left.

Still, Ángel did not pass his credible fear interview. I don't have the transcript of it; I don't know exactly what was said to the asylum officer who was judging whether or not he had a real fear of being sent back to Honduras. But I have seen few young men from Honduras so clearly terrified, so openly broken, when they talk about what had happened to them at home. Ángel says he told the same thing to the asylum officer. He even appealed the first decision, repeated his story, and was once again denied.

By the time I sit down with Ángel, I've interviewed hundreds of migrants, asylum seekers, deportees. Ángel seems more fragile than almost anyone I've spoken with. He's heartbroken, crushed. He doesn't have any of the whimsical affect, joking demeanor, that so many of the others put on when they're talking with me. There is no silver lining for him. He's too raw, too sad, too defeated to pretend otherwise. I notice his feet: he is still wearing the blue canvas shoes that he was given in detention.

He'd like to go back and see his baby before he leaves the country again, but he's not sure if that's a good idea. He doesn't have the money for the bus to Tegus, on the one hand, and,

on the other, he's not sure his child's mother would let him near his son. After the threats against him, his presence puts everyone at risk. He'd also like to hug his own mother. In the end, he doesn't go to Tegucigalpa; he and a cousin set out for Mexico less than a week after his deportation. He thinks he might stay in Mexico for a while this time, he tells me, or maybe he will try again for asylum in the United States. Maybe with a different judge… maybe there will be more sympathy… he conjectures, but he doesn't sound very convinced.

**Héctor: Deported Again**

After I interview Ángel I drive across the Sula Valley to the far side of Choloma to interview Héctor. Going from one to the other gives me a bit of affective whiplash. Where Ángel is broken, Héctor is almost giddy to be home. The cracked earth and weariness of Angel's family contrasts starkly with the beautiful garden and doting mother I find at Héctor's home.

Héctor talks easily. We sit at a small kitchen table, his mother serves us *arroz chino* and Coke, and he pulls out his phone and shows me his collection of photos from the caravan and his few months living in Mexicali. His sister and nephew play in the next room. His own children are in the United States, which was one of the reasons that he was trying to get back there. The other reason, which he talks about lightly, is that people involved in the public transportation industry like himself are often targeted for violence. He's not terribly worried for his own safety, but mostly because he's used to it and he works for a bus line that diligently pays the extortion fees demanded of it. It's the other bus lines, he says, whose drivers have to worry. They don't pay the extortion fees and then the gangs start killing drivers and *cobradores* like him and sometimes passengers to send a message. Not his line, though, they are a smaller company and they play by the rules. It's not that he's *not* in danger, it's just that, relatively, the danger is well-

managed. I spend a full day with Héctor after the interview, driving back and forth from San Pedro Sula to Puerto Cortés, to get a feel for what his days are like. He starts early and ends late, but he and the driver have a good, friendly dynamic; they've been working together for ages. At one point he indicates a specific passenger to me: remember that guy? He is one of *them,* he rides for free, always *armado*. Armed. *Nos protege.* He protects us. He makes sure no one else will assault the bus. No one *else*, I think, but also his presence is part of the deal so that the bus line is protected from his own group.

Despite Héctor's casual relationship to the violence around him, he did pass his credible fear interview. Unlike Ángel, this means he had the opportunity to apply for asylum. It didn't work out, he never got out of detention, and he isn't entirely sure why exactly. He never had a full hearing, so I suspect he may have signed a voluntary deportation order, possibly without knowing it. Héctor thinks it's because he has a record of having been undocumented in the United States, of having been deported before. Something doesn't entirely make sense, but this is how Héctor understands why he is back in Honduras. His confusion about the specifics is common; the asylum process is so opaque that many of those who fail to "win" their cases fill in the gaps in information with their best guess of how the system ought to work. He wishes things had worked out differently, and he talks about possibly trying again, but he doesn't have any of the urgency that overwhelmed Ángel.

**Ulises: "Voluntary" Departure**

Ulises, whose experience introduces this dissertation and whose puffy coat stood out to me inside CAMR, knows he gave up on his asylum claim after four months, after it was clear that he was not getting out of detention, and he just couldn't take it any longer. The experience of

detention wore him down. Unlike Héctor, Ulises's interactions with the transportation industry were potentially directly deadly. His uncle had been a taxi driver and was murdered. Ulises, who also worked as a taxi driver with his uncle, knew who had killed him and was then threatened with death as well. He'd already been deported once, from Mexico, after surviving a kidnapping by a drug cartel, and he had been in no rush to try again. With the threats against him, however, he felt like he had to leave. He passed his credible fear interview, but eventually signed the voluntary deportation order. Ulises suspects that things might have been different, but he did not have anyone to receive him in the United States, no address he could give to ICE, no one to put up bond. He had a friend, someone he thought would come through, but once he was in detention in the United States the friend stopped answering his calls.

Ángel, Héctor, and Ulises were all held in Adelanto, an immigration detention center in California. Each man has a different story, different levels of fears and threats, different life chances waiting for them in Honduras. They each try to make sense out of why their particular situation didn't merit asylum, but it is really what they all have in common – the fact of being poor, young, urban Honduran men – that made their cases unlikely to prevail from the start, regardless of the specifics of their claims, the amount of proof they could present, or the existence of a sponsor. This is because the asylum system is an arm of the immigration regime which seeks to exclude men like them. This systematic exclusion coupled with the hope that it offers is what I identify as the legal violence of asylum.

**Legal Violence and the Asylum System**

Drawing from the concepts of structural violence (Galtung 1969) and symbolic violence (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2003), sociologists Cecilia Menjívar and Leisy Abrego introduce the

idea of "legal violence" which "incorporates the various, mutually reinforcing forms of violence that the law makes possible and amplifies" (Menjívar and Abrego 2012, 1384). Menjívar and Abrego's framework is employed to understand the kinds of violence that result from U.S. immigration laws which produce legally sanctioned social suffering among those without status or temporary or partial status and their communities both within the United States and their countries of first citizenship. They identify the legal violence which causes people to suffer from existential uncertainty, as they live with the possibility of being or becoming deportable (De Genova 2002). They focus on how a fragmented, arbitrary, and unreliable cluster of immigration laws limits or derails potential paths toward immigrant incorporation, and significantly shapes life chances and future prospects.

Moving beyond the original formulation, many immigration scholars have taken up the legal violence framework proposed by Menjívar and Abrego to describe the collateral suffering that legal systems cause in the lives of immigrants and their families and communities. Focusing on the daily pressures of life for those with contingent legal status and the ever present threat of removal (Alvord, Menjívar, and Gómez Cervantes 2018), scholars have expanded the understanding of the legal violence of immigration law to be present in the realms of access to health care (Cervantes and Menjívar 2020), workplace rights and protections (Stuesse 2018), gendered violence (Kivilcim 2016), legal representation (Longazel 2018) and both detention and alternatives to detention (Llewellyn 2020; Koulish 2016; Longazel, Berman, and Fleury-Steiner 2016). These usages of legal violence focus heavily on demonstrating the structural violence inherent in the repercussions of immigration law, but there has been less robust engagement with the other key element of the concept of legal violence. Legal violence is both structural and symbolic, in that it both creates conditions of suffering and, at the same time, normalizes those

conditions of suffering in the minds of those who are subjected to them (Menjívar and Abrego 2012, 1413). This is a crucial element to understand why the legal violence of immigration law extends beyond the structural violence it produces.

Expanding upon the original concept, Leisy Abrego and Sarah Lakhani explain that the idea of legal violence, "rather than beginning from the perspective that immigration laws are neutral, the framework draws out the many ways that immigration laws serve as legitimating sources for the harmful treatment of immigrants" (Abrego and Lakhani 2015, 267). When people are constructed as being outside the law, their mistreatment, incarceration, and expulsion is framed as legitimate and necessary even among those who are subjected to it. This can be true for immigrants of various statuses residing in the United States (Menjívar 2013), but here I want to turn this framework towards the asylum system. The system of asylum can be understood as a manifestation of legal violence in both aspects of the concept, as it replicates structural violence and, as a system imbued with humanitarian righteousness, inflicts symbolic violence simultaneously. The asylum system, by virtue of being invested with the power to determine who is worthy of protection and who is not, contributes to structural violence. In the case of Central Americans today, those who are viewed as likely criminal in their home countries are frequently treated as such as they navigate the asylum process, and, when their claims are denied, are returned to the same conditions from which they had tried to escape.[9]

As a gatekeeping mechanism, the asylum system reproduces structural violence. It does so, however, under the guise of distinguishing those with valid needs of protection from those who do not have "credible fear" of persecution based on certain grounds. By virtue of losing an asylum claim (or giving up on it after losing hope and choosing "voluntary" deportation), an individual's status as potential-asylee is foreclosed and they become the "bogus" asylum seeker

that the system is so concerned with keeping out, one of the many who are cast as trying to take advantage of the system to exploit supposed "loopholes" in immigration laws. While they continue to feel like refugees, in that they fear returning home, whatever violence is done to them next becomes justified, their mistreatment and deportation is made legitimate, because of this decision which labels them as outside of the categories which are designated as worthy of protection.

The Canadian asylum system is often pointed to by those in the United States as being more generous, more humane, than the increasingly narrow path to asylum offered in the U.S. Paloma E. Villegas argues, however, that the Canadian system exercises legal violence in part because it trades on an "ideological investment in a Canadian national narrative that depicts its systems as fair and generous" while actually enacting policies to reduce the acceptance of asylum applicants (Villegas 2020, 289). This is supported by the way in which the increasing denial rate is used by the Canadian government as evidence of more fraudulent claims being made (Villegas 2020, 288). The system maintains, and even cultivates, its reputation for humanitarian concern by casting those who cannot access it as unworthy of its protection.

By being a system that is held up as one of protection, the legal violence of the asylum process is also symbolic because those who do not enjoy its protection are encouraged to believe that it was either through some choice of their own (I gave up my case), bad luck (I lost my proof documents), or other external factors (no one would sign for me, I don't have any physical scars) that excluded them from the protection it might offer. The responsibility for the misfortune is placed on other factors, rather than understood to be part of the design of the system itself. Asylum seekers, then, look for ways to better prove their persecution and their worthiness, trying to make sense out of a system that is supposed to be about care yet is designed to exclude them.

The incomprehensibility of the asylum system, the discretion involved, and the lack of uniformity in its application are additional features of its legal violence.

It is not necessarily that people seeking asylum imagine that the state is going to be supportive of them, that it will take them in and welcome them. It is, rather, that people in Honduras imagine the United States to be a place that is ruled by law in a way that their own country is not; the idea of the United States, one of the ideas that contributes to its continued allure, is that *there* judges are impartial, police can be trusted, and everyone is equal under the law. In New York City, an undocumented Honduran man told me in the same breath how he gets paid less than those with papers for his work as a welder *and* how he was free here because he could speak his mind and anyone, it did not matter if you were wealthy or powerful, would face consequences for their actions if they broke the law. Many of us in the United States understand things to be far more like Honduras than the welder expressed; we see the deeply rooted racialized injustice, the embedded corruption, the powerful judicial discretion that does treat the vulnerable and the powerful differentially. This, however, is not the imagined idea of the United States and its systems, especially for those who have cultivated a dream of this country as a counter to the desperation and oppression they have long felt at home. For many asylum seekers, they understand that they will need to show a judge that they are good people – but the mismatch lies in lay, local understandings of "good" and the convoluted, opaque, and legal ideas of what it means to be worthy of protection.

For example, frequently in asylum cases claimants are required to show proof of their persecution. This can mean presenting copies of police reports, charges filed, medical records, death certificates, restraining orders, and other markers of officialdom. Officialdom, however, is often elusive to Hondurans, especially those who are already structurally vulnerable. Officially

registering the death of a loved one is costly; often people simply do not do it because they do not have the funds. Health care is also cost prohibitive for many, and the public hospitals and clinics are so drastically understaffed and under-resourced that people refrain from going there unless it is absolutely critical (and even then they often are denied care). Hondurans who have partnered and lived for years together often decline to get legally married, seeing little value in the state paperwork, especially compared to the cost it would imply. Couples still refer to each other as *esposos,* husband and wife, but they don't have the official paperwork to demonstrate family sufficiently in a U.S. courtroom.

In addition to all these ways in which the world of "official" proof can be elusive for Hondurans, importantly, a widespread lack of trust in the police means that rarely do people fleeing violence first file charges against those who would do them harm. One woman in La López recounted how, after her son was killed, a police officer, who was a longtime friend of her family, cautioned her: do not file a police report (*denuncia*) until you are ready to leave the country the very next day. I accompanied the mother of Chico, the boy who was shot in La López (see chapter 2), as she tried to get a copy of the medical examiner's report of her son's injury. We were sent back and forth across the Sula Valley, to multiple police stations, and were finally told that his report would not be released to her unless she filed a *denuncia*. She declined. Getting the report that indicated the size and shape of her son's bullet wounds was not worth the risk of putting a complaint into the system. His body carried the scars; she hoped that would be good enough. When Chico's mother showed me the file she'd prepared for her and her children before they left the country, she included things that many Hondurans have thought to include: elementary school diplomas, report cards, letters from a church pastor, certificates of achievement and recognition, things that indicate, to her, that her children are *good*. The hope at

the heart of this calculation is that if she can just show a judge that she and her children are good people, that they will be allowed to stay. They understand there is a kind of performance involved, but the idea of how one could demonstrate their character and need for protection has little in common with the confusing and non-obvious rubric that governs asylum as mediated through the embedded ideas of "victim" and "persecution" held by discretion-wielding judges.

**Doña Marta's Sons: Lost in Detention**

Shortly before I end my fieldwork in Honduras, Benjamín asks me to meet with an older woman from Vista del Cielo, one of his neighbors. He's hoping I can explain some things to her, maybe give her some peace of mind. Two of her sons had left for the United States, planning to turn themselves in to Border Patrol. Then she stopped hearing from them.

She's nervous about meeting with me; she prefers to meet someplace outside of Vista del Cielo. Just in case. So, Benjamín accompanies her, and we meet in a Tío Dolmo's, a fast-casual take on traditional Honduran food. I often suggest it as a meeting place because the food is familiar and filling, but it's just slightly upscale enough to ensure that others from the neighborhood would be very unlikely to go there. Doña Marta is too nervous to eat, but she accepts my offer of a cup of coffee and some *rosquillas*.[10] The three of us settle into a booth in the corner, cups of coffee in hand, away from the few other patrons, and Doña Marta tells me about her sons.

Her first son left three years earlier and has been living in Mexico ever since. Her second son left just three months before this meeting. The two boys reunited and headed to Tijuana together, and, as far as she knows, they went to the border and asked for asylum. She insists that they will get it because they are good young men. They brought *constancias*, notarized letters,

from the pastor of their church, saying that they are good workers, that they are professional. There had been threats against them, especially the younger son, in the neighborhood – he'd tried to help a girl involved with the gang to get out – but I know enough to know that their claims are unlikely to make it very far in asylum court.

As we talk, Doña Marta scrolls through her phone and points out messages to me, messages that are insignificant, really, but that she clings to, that anchor her to her sons and their goodness. … *Aquí estamos mami*… pause, scroll… *Estamos bien mami*… She shows me these messages over and over again, scrolling through her archive of WhatsApp, offering them as proof of what she's telling me. Here's where I sent money, here's where he says I made it to Tijuana, just snippets, threads of connection, proof of contact, of communication. She scrolls through and stops, randomly, hovers over a photo. Scrolls. Stops. Hovers over a line. Her eyes well up with tears as she scrolls through these moments of proof of life and of love between a mother and her sons.

It takes a few days, but I am able to find the brothers in ICE's online database, the "detainee locator."[11] It's a tricky, imperfect, system – not everyone detained appears in the database, and the information about those who do isn't always correct – but it does give people peace of mind to know that the person they are looking for exists, somewhere, in the system. The scariest days are when people simply don't appear at all, and you don't know if they're disappeared bureaucratically and momentarily or physically and permanently. Doña Marta is briefly relieved when I tell her they've appeared. When I tell her that, according to the locator, they've been sent to different detention centers, though, she asks why. She doesn't understand why immigration would separate them like that. I don't have a good explanation, but ICE doesn't need a reason to move detainees around. Later, it seems like one of the brothers is given the

opportunity to be released on bond; he's been able to communicate with a family member residing in the United States. No one has heard from the other son. Doña Marta asks me why. I can't say; I don't know. There might be a reason; there might be no reason at all.

One of her sons appears to be in a detention center I have some familiarity with, as another asylum seeker I have contact with, Julio César, is detained there as well. When he calls me next, I ask him to see if he can find Doña Marta's son; I ask him to help arrange a call with her. Julio César gets transferred, suddenly, a few days later, and he hadn't found Doña Marta's son yet. Eventually, Doña Marta stops asking me why; she stops calling me altogether. The news I gave her was never good, it was never positive, and it was never definitive. She was insistent on believing that a judge would see what good men her sons were, and they would be given a chance to stay. They had their pastor's letter, she kept reminding me.

**Julio César: A "Real" Asylum Claim**

It is a bit difficult to get an accurate picture of asylum grant/denial rates because asylum cases often take years to adjudicate. I am going to review the data for 2019, but it is worth noting that most of these cases were very likely not begun in the same year in which they were decided. In FY 2019, the United States decided 67,684 asylum claims. Of those, 46,766 were denied (69%), 19,960 were granted (29%), and 958 claims were granted another form of relief from deportation (1%).[12] Of the 10,715 Honduran cases that were decided that year, 86% were denied. In contrast, in 2019, 18% of Egyptian claims, 25% of Chinese claims, 33% of Venezuelan claims, and 50% of Cuban claims were denied.[13] While DHS does not make data available on the grounds upon which successful asylum claims were decided, there are some clear patterns that make a case more likely to be won. Asylum seekers are not guaranteed representation, and those

who do have a lawyer often have a better chance at navigating the system, and, consequently, winning. Then, cases that fall into one of the four specified grounds I identified earlier (religion, race, political opinion, ethnicity) are also, often, more legible to immigration judges (Coptic Christians from Egypt, for example, or anti-socialist activists in Venezuela and Cuba). Many Central American cases – like Héctor, Ulises, Ángel, and Doña Marta's sons – would fall into the undefined and difficult to establish "particular social group" category for asylum, which puts them in a relatively unfavorable position from the beginning.

Julio César, who didn't have the chance to find Doña Marta's son before he was transferred, is one of the few "successful" asylum cases for young Honduran men of which I have firsthand knowledge. Julio César fled Honduras in October of 2018. He had been an active, public student leader in the opposition movement that coalesced after the fraudulent election of 2017. He had received clear, ongoing threats from government actors, which recurred in multiple parts of the country. Julio César had never been eager to leave Honduras; he was deeply committed to changing things in his country. His life at risk, however, he decided to flee.

A group of us were standing, in a circle, shivering a bit in the cool, damp grayness of Tijuana in November 2018. We were just outside Benito Juarez, the small baseball stadium-turned-makeshift refugee camp where the caravan had been "housed" by the municipal authorities when it arrived in the border city. A few of us, *caravaneros* and accompaniers like myself, were huddled together, discussing the events of the day. A skinny young man in a flannel shirt walks up to our circle and, without ceremony, says, "*Soy Julio*," tilting his head down and sticking his hand out to be shaken by whoever in the circle would respond. "*Soy del MEU. Busco a Jorge*." I'm Julio; I'm from MEU; I'm looking for Jorge.

Twenty-two-year-old Julio César had led a group of about 300 people from Honduras all the way to Tijuana, in the wake of the larger caravan that had already arrived. During the trek, he'd been in touch with Jorge, one of the *caravanero* leaders. Jorge happened to be in our circle. After the circle broke up, so Jorge could show Julio César where his group could set up, I turned to him, excited: "*¿Ud. es del MEU*!?" It hadn't resonated with the rest of the crowd, and the logistics of where they could settle in for the night (and how, as it was getting increasingly frigid) were far more pressing. But when I had a chance, I wanted to hear about his involvement with this powerful, radical student opposition movement.[14] Most of the *caravaneros* were decidedly against the Honduran president and his regime; chants of *¡fuera JOH!*[15] broke out regularly from the group. But so far, I hadn't run into many *caravaneros* who were fleeing Honduras because of explicit political activity and who were open about it.

Over the next month, I came to know Julio César well and I helped him prepare his materials for his asylum claim. I wasn't the only one; a number of U.S.-based activists found his story compelling and signed on in a kind of support team. He was savvy, got involved with multiple groups that came to assist in Tijuana, and made crucial connections that would serve him well on the other side of the border. By the time his number came up in early January, he had a sponsor ready to take him in, a filmmaker making a documentary about him, and a well-documented case of clearly political persecution.

It would be a full nine months before Julio César would walk free again. In that time, he was held in four different places, transferred each time without notice. He had the bad luck of being sent to detention centers in the deep south, that had very recently been prisons, and that still used the same private communications company that they'd used when they were primarily housing U.S.-citizen inmates. This meant that Julio César, and all the other men detained

alongside him, could only make calls to people within the United States. They cannot receive incoming calls at all. Making these calls was extremely expensive – he would go through $25 dollars in minutes – but even if he'd had thousands of dollars in his commissary account, there was literally no mechanism for him to be able to contact his family in Honduras. I was back in Honduras by the time he turned himself over to border agents, and he was able to call me on a U.S. google voice number that worked on my computer. I could then let his family know he was ok. One day, after he'd been detained for more than six months, I was able to take my laptop to his mother's house and turn my cell phone into an internet hot spot, so she could hear her son's voice for the first time in more than half a year. If he hadn't happened to have met a moderately tech-savvy *gringa* anthropologist living in Honduras, his mother would not have known where he was or whether her son was alive or dead for the duration of his imprisonment.

When Julio César eventually wins his asylum case, it is not because his life was at significantly greater risk than that of Ángel and many others. What made the difference for him, I think, was that he had a network of people in the United States who made sure he had a practiced asylum attorney, the best expert witness for Honduras in the country, religious groups ready to house him upon his release, and people who could explain to him, at every step of the process, what was happening and why. Still, even with this unusual level of support, when I visited him in his fourth detention center in Louisiana a few months before his hearing, he was a changed young man. He was notably sharp and incisive in Tijuana, but now he seemed to have trouble remembering stories and the order of events in his past. He'd had an easy confidence about him before; in detention he was absent-mindedly agitated, his leg moving incessantly, his nails bitten down to the beds.

**Conclusions**

Liza Schuster, who works with Afghan refugees and deportees, reminds us that "it is not recognition that makes one a refugee, but the circumstances that caused one to flee" (Schuster 2011, 1392). What else, then, is a system that adjudicates fears and determines whose life is worth saving and whose life is worth risking but one which reproduces and inflicts violence? Julio César is a lovely young man, but he is no more or less deserving or in need of safety than Ulises or Héctor or Ángel or Doña Marta's sons or the more than 8,000 other Hondurans who were denied asylum in the United States in FY 2020. In truth, Julio César's "success" with the asylum system has to do with the particulars of his case to some extent – in that it made it easy for the judge to fit his fears into the asylum rubric – but it also has everything to do with his access to a network of advocates and a seasoned asylum attorney. Without that, I doubt he would have won either, as I know other Honduran political dissidents who have not won their claims. The fact that he did, however, serves to reinforce the idea that there is some element of justice administered through the asylum process: those with *real* claims will endure detention as long as necessary and will ultimately be recognized as asylees. Those who do not win or cannot endure, then, were never "real" refugees to begin with. Because they lost or gave up, they could have never won.

I think this dynamic is inherent in the construction of a system that determines who does and does not merit protection based on a certain set of criteria and a narrow definition of persecution. Additionally, however, we see this emerge clearly in the discourse around asylum in the United States as politicians and the media make reference to the "asylum loophole," suggesting that those who are not in need of protection are taking advantage of the system and, in the process, hurting the few who truly are. A press release from the White House in 2018 reads,

"Loopholes in our asylum laws have led to a significant spike in asylum claims. Because current law sets an easily met standard for 'credible fear,' refugees fleeing actual persecution and violence are bogged down in the U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services backlog…" (The White House 2018). In 2019, H.R. 517 was introduced to Congress with the intention to "close loopholes in the immigration laws that serve as incentives to aliens to attempt to enter the United States unlawfully." This bill, titled the "Closing Asylum Loopholes Act," aims to make it harder to pass a "Credible Fear Interview" and uses language which suggests that many "aliens" make statements to pass the CFI that are untrue (M. Johnson 2019). As Attorney General, Jeff Sessions decried how "claims of fear to return have skyrocketed, and the percentage of claims that are genuinely meritorious are down…overwhelming the system and leaving those with just claims buried…. DHS found a credible fear in 88 percent of claims adjudicated. That means an alien entering the United States illegally has an 88 percent chance to avoid expedited removal simply by claiming a fear of return…. The system is being gamed" (Sessions 2017). The U.S. government intentionally positions most, if not all, asylum seekers as likely fraudulent and blames them for causing harm to the small number of applicants who are, in contrast, legitimate.[16]

There has been a wealth of important work showing the ways in which immigration policy inflicts violence on people. The best-studied and most egregious example of this is the logic behind the fortification of select areas of the U.S.-Mexico border known as Prevention Through Deterrence (PTD), which funneled would-be migrants through the most dangerous terrain, expecting more people to die, thus serving as a deterrent to those who were considering following in their footsteps. The violence of this policy, hiding behind desert terrain and blaming smugglers for the fates of the thousands of migrants who lost their lives, is compellingly revealed

in Jason De León's *The Land of Open Graves* (2015). Prevention Through Deterrence, as an ordering, governing logic behind the immigration regime, has also pushed south, along with the externalization of border enforcement, inflecting Mexico's Plan Frontera Sur (Doering-White 2018). I suggest that, especially during the Trump administration, we can understand the asylum regime as being, essentially, the "humanitarian" arm of Prevention Through Deterrence. Asylum seekers are locked up, shuffled around, shackled, housed with those convicted of crimes, separated from their families, made to wait in squalid camps, and never allowed to fully understand the process to which they are being subjected. Just like PTD at the border was designed to deter through physical hardship, so is the abuse inflicted upon those seeking asylum designed to discourage them from seeing their claims through or trying again if they are denied.

Other scholars have noted a convergence of care and cruelty in the treatment of refugees and migrants. Shahram Khosravi describes the Swedish system as one of "hostile hospitality," where asylum seekers are held in relatively pleasant congregate living situations until their cases are denied and they acquiesce to deportation (Khosravi 2016). The humane gentleness with which those detained are treated stands in stark contrast to the stories of racist, belittling prison guards in the United States, but the kinder tack does not indicate being welcomed. Didier Fassin uses "compassionate repression" to describe how France has haphazardly mixed security concerns with humanitarian impulses and, consequently, created a kind of limbo camp in Calais and elsewhere for migrants/refugees who had hoped to seek asylum in Britain but got stuck (Fassin 2005). In both cases, there is a recognition of a kind of "nice" approach to detaining and deterring, a humane veneer to the inhumanity of rendering people immobile so that they might "choose" to leave. In the case of the application of asylum in the United States, I think we can see how the system has become, essentially, the "humanitarian" arm of the country's

immigration regime. The trappings of compassion or hospitality have fallen away, and asylum seekers are made to undergo conditions that are, in many cases, worse than prison. As Ariadna Estévez argues, the asylum system is established with "no intention to protect victims but rather to contain a new forced migration" (Estévez 2018, 15). The path to asylum is made so unbearable, obtaining it so elusive, that people ought to desist from trying. Just like with PTD at the southern border, the violence works to cause trauma, but the supposed corresponding deterrent effect never materializes. As I have argued in this chapter, this is the legal violence of the asylum regime: the promise of protection and the idea of there being some clear, knowable path to being deemed worthy of that protection creates the mistaken idea among those who are denied asylum that it is their fault for somehow not proving that their case is worthy of that potential care.

As immigration enforcement has shifted modalities over the last decade, coinciding with a hardening of life chances for young people in Central America, more and more people try to seek asylum. Those whose requests for asylum are given up on or denied make up an increasingly substantial percentage of deportees. It is no great analytical deduction to suggest that those who flee threats of violence or other untenable circumstances and try to seek protection but are not treated as "legitimate" refugees may be unlikely to safely return to the countries from which they had tried to escape. Like all the young people whose stories fill these pages, Ángel, Héctor, Ulises, and Doña Marta's sons are sent back to the same situations that had led them to flee. Deportation, especially after seeking asylum, does not impose immobility; it is, rather, another phase in an ongoing process of displacement, of wandering, of exodus, as young Honduran men try to find some place where they can safely make a life.

**Update on the People in this Chapter**

Ángel left Honduras a few days after we spoke. He made his way back to Tijuana and has been living there since then. He's considered trying for asylum again but has, so far, decided that staying in Mexico is better than risking deportation again. He recently got married. Then he got the news that one of his brother's remains had been identified in Mexico: he was trying to figure out how to get them repatriated to Honduras but did not have the funds to cover the costs. Then, in desperation, he told me he was going to try to *tirarse por el desierto or* take his chances trying to cross the border and walk through the desert on his own. Héctor is still in Choloma, still working on his bus line. He says he's decided to leave again every now and then but, so far, hasn't done so. I'm sad to say I've fallen out of touch with Ulises. He did not have a phone number of his own, and the number for his mother fell out of service a few months after we last spoke. I would be surprised, however, if he were still in Honduras.

Doña Marta's sons were both deported back to Honduras. They left again and are living in Mexico. She blames a family member's reticence at acting as their sponsor as the reason they didn't get asylum. Julio César resides in Los Angeles, works two jobs, and is in school, learning English. He sends as much money back to Honduras as he can, planning to buy his mother a house. He filed for permanent residency as soon as he was able, knowing that that status is more secure than asylee, but he waits eagerly for the day that Juan Orlando Hernández is out of power and he can visit his family back in Honduras. I spoke to him as I was writing this chapter, and he says he thinks the fact that he beat the asylum system (*lo vencí*) means he could teach other people how to beat it. "It's beatable," he tells me, "just hard, but beatable." Still, he insists, "*solo dije lo que me pasó, no fue nada de otro mundo*." I just told them what happened to me, nothing out of this world.

**Notes to Chapter 6**

1. The *baleada* is s typical Honduran dish, consisting of a flour tortilla folder over liquified beans, salty shredded cheese, and thick cream.

2. The Washington Office on Latin America has produced a startling graph of asylum grant rates across the country, using the data from TRAC. This graph is on page 41 of the PDF available here: defenseassistance.org/files/wola_migration_charts.pdf.

3. Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC) compiles data from DHS and produces reports about immigration and asylum, among them the full record of asylum grant and denial rates by judge and by jurisdiction. In addition to the report cited here, they maintain a database searchable by judge name and city available here: trac.syr.edu/immigration/reports/judgereports/.

4. I discuss this gendered aspect of asylum more in depth here (Frank-Vitale forthcoming).

5. While DHS no longer makes data available that breaks down asylum grants and denials by both nationality and gender, in my experience as an expert witness in Honduran asylum cases, I get far more requests from pro-bono lawyers to serve as an expert for Honduran women who suffered from gender-based violence. These cases fit with a public discourse of violent Central American men, so they are considered easier to win. This is not unique to the United States: in Switzerland, researchers found that rejected asylum seekers were predominantly young, male, and single (Schoretsanitis et al. 2018); while the EU asylum regime generally sees "young, middle-eastern, Muslim men" as dual threats – both sexual and security – to "European" society (Burrell and Hörschelmann 2019, 48)

6. For a detailed description of what metering looks like and how it has changed during the COVID-19 pandemic, see the Metering Reports published by the Strauss Center at the University of Texas at Austin (Leutert, Arvey, and Ezzell 2020a; 2020b).

7. There is nothing "voluntary" about choosing deportation when the alternative is indefinite detention and the prospect of obtaining recognition has been made remote because of the laws and procedures put in place (Webber 2011).

8. See Marzena Zukowska (2020) for a longer discussion of the problems with bond and other "alternatives to detention" for asylum seekers.

9. While this is frequently true for Central Americans today, this dynamic varies over time and across the globe, often shifting in tandem with how the United States evaluates the government of the asylum seekers' home countries. For example, during the 1980s, Nicaraguans were more likely to receive asylum in the United States for political motives if they claimed persecution by the leftist Sandinista government than Salvadorans who were nearly summarily denied access to asylum at the same time, when the United States supported, trained, and armed the rightwing Salvadoran government that was largely responsible for much of the violence that was causing so many Salvadoran citizens to flee. Today, we see a similar, though not as stark, discrepancy with the way that Venezuelans and Cubans are evaluated in asylum adjudications in contrast to Central Americans.

10. *Rosquillas* are circular biscuits, usually made with a combination of wheat and corn flour, sometimes filled with a sweet cheese.

11. The "Detainee Locator" is available to the public at locator.ice.gove/odls/#/index. Most adults who are detained by ICE appear in this system.

12. This can include but is not limited to withholding of removal under the Convention Against Torture and the granting of special visas for juveniles, those who have cooperated with law enforcement in criminal cases, or individuals who have survived situations of domestic violence.

13. All data listed here comes from TRAC's Asylum Decision App, available here: trac.syr.edu/phptools/immigration/asylum/

14. MEU stands for *Movimiento Estudiantil Universitario*, University Student Movement. It's a radical student group that is non-hierarchical, not affiliated with any particular political party, and uses direct action tactics to protest the Honduran government.

15. *Fuera JOH* means "JOH, get out!" J-O-H are the initials by which the Honduran President, Juan Orlando Hernández, is commonly known. This phrase, chanted, is common in protests in Honduras, and, as the president is increasingly reviled, at all large gatherings – like concerts, festivals, soccer matches, and during the caravan.

16. The Biden administration, while using different language than its predecessors, replicates the underlying sentiment. In their proposals to overhaul the asylum system, they have focused on shortening the time that it takes for a case to be adjudicated in order to "discourage unauthorized migration" as Franco Ordoñez reports, "because currently those who can argue for a certain fear of persecution are able to gain temporary residence and often a work permit as they wait out their cases" ("Biden Administration Considers Overhaul Of Asylum System At Southern Border" 2021). In addition to the official government discourse, the media has replicated this positioning, suggesting that those seeking asylum are somehow breaking laws by doing so and that a lax asylum system hurts "real" refugees by being flooded by "fake" ones. (See for example WSJ Editorial Board 2020; Chronicle Editorial Board 2019.)

# Chapter 7 Conclusions

This dissertation is built from the stories of young men from Honduras's urban margins who have attempted migration to the United States one (or many times) and been deported back. Some have been caught in Mexico, some have been kidnapped, some have tried for asylum and given up, others have lost their claims. The men whose stories fill these pages and shape the arguments offered here – Ángel, Ulises, Roberto, Lenín, Marlon, Kevin, Ezra, Flaco, along with so many other young Hondurans – left their country of birth because of a constellation of intersecting factors: unable to find work, unable to continue their studies, navigating threats from gangs, climate change, violent state "security" forces, and a near absolute dearth of options for building a stable and fulfilling future. One young man who doesn't appear in this dissertation – a cousin of Kevin's – told me after being deported that he used to have dreams but doesn't any longer. He was just 22 years old. He, like most of my interlocutors, has since migrated again. In early May 2021, he told me he was in Tapachula, in southern Mexico, because he'd had a new "problem" – as he put it – in Honduras and had to flee. Kevin finally made it into the U.S. after countless attempts and is working construction in Las Vegas; his cousin hopes to join him there.

## Inflection Points and Permanent Crisis

In 2009, there was a military coup d'état in Honduras. As soldiers removed the democratically elected president, Jose Manuel Zelaya Rosales, from his home, in his pajamas, and forced him into exile outside of the country, the hemisphere was reminded of a period not

long in Latin America's past, when coups and military rule were common. A few short years later, Honduras would make headlines again when its murder rate soared to be the highest in the world, reaching over 90 per 100,000 people (Miroff 2011). A few years after that, in 2014, a "surge" of unaccompanied minors appeared on the U.S.-Mexico border. Many of these young people seeking protection were from Honduras, and the small country once again became front page news. The 2018 migrant caravan again brought Honduras and Hondurans into the international spotlight.

Many analysts, commentators, scholars, and activists who have become focused on Honduras in recent years frequently cite the 2009 coup as the root cause of almost all the nation's problems, including violence and migration. I think, however, that the coup is just one inflection point – albeit a critical one – in a series of crises that, rather than being the root itself, represents the moment when a situation of constant near-crisis reaches a breaking point and exposes the fragility of the equilibrium that had existed beforehand. The coup was one such moment: when the democratically elected president was removed from power, the extent to which the rule of law was a selectively enforced and performative fallacy was laid bare. In 1998, when Hurricane Mitch devastated Honduras's social and material infrastructure, it led to the first wave of massive outmigration and, also, the consolidation of disparate street gangs into what would become the *maras* that we know today (Carter 2014; Arce 2018). Mitch didn't cause these phenomena; rather, the hurricane, in shattering what fragile infrastructure existed, exacerbated and exposed the extent to which people are unprotected in Honduras and left to their own devices to survive (Olivo Diaz Lopez 2002). A tenuous stability existed before Mitch, as it existed before the coup, and these inflection points showed how precarious that equilibrium had been; they broke the delicate balance that people had found to make life work and illuminated it.

Another inflection point occurred right after I began my long-term fieldwork, when Juan Orlando Hernández declared victory in the presidential elections that year. While the election results were widely considered to be dubious, the United States congratulated Hernández on his re-election victory, and he was able to retain power. The Honduran constitution prohibits re-election, but Hernández had stacked the supreme court to ensure that they ruled in his favor, deciding that a prohibition on reelection violates an individual's rights, without actually changing the constitution. Hondurans took to the streets after he declared himself the winner. Much of the country was shut down, and I spent my first months visiting barricades and street protests and navigating a military curfew. Surprising no one, outmigration again increased after it became clear that Juan Orlando would not be relinquishing power.

Then, while I was writing this dissertation, Juan Orlando Hernández was implicated in the drug trafficking case against his brother in the Southern District of New York. During my first months back from the field, I spent every day in the courtroom, listening to Central American narcos (and police-narcos) give testimony against Juan Antonio "Tony" Hernández, who was on trial, his brother, Juan Orlando Hernández, and the entire governing regime. Tony was found guilty – later to be sentenced to life plus thirty years – and the federal prosecutor, in his closing argument, labeled the government of Juan Orlando Hernández a "state sponsor of international drug trafficking" (Southern District of New York 2020). It seemed clear that the SDNY was building a case against JOH, but they have no way to arrest him while he holds the presidency. Many Hondurans were briefly elated, expecting the U.S. to remove JOH swiftly after the end of the trial. This, of course, did not happen. JOH continued to enjoy a cozy relationship with the Trump administration, acquiescing to all its anti-immigration dictates, including signing an absurdly named "safe third country" agreement which would require people of certain

nationalities to seek asylum in Honduras, rather than in the United States. Although the Biden administration rescinded those agreements, Juan Orlando Hernández and his predecessor, Porfirio Lobo, enjoyed support from the Obama Administration as well as Trump's, so it remains unclear whether the new U.S. government will be less friendly with the governing Honduran regime.

Then, the COVID-19 pandemic hits Honduras. An already fragile healthcare system is quickly overwhelmed. An initial lockdown leaves people more worried about how they will afford food than contracting the virus. Between drafting chapters four and six, Hurricane Eta batters Honduras. Two weeks later, Hurricane Iota follows in Eta's path. Some of the neighborhoods featured in this dissertation are turned into lakes. During the weeks and months after the hurricanes, many of us who had accompanied migrant caravans see the images coming out of Honduras, of people huddled under bridges, standing in line waiting for donated food to be distributed, and think: people are already living like *caravaneros* inside Honduras.

The primary inflection points I first identify as shaping the history of Honduras – and, in particular, the history of Honduran migration and violence – were spaced out over a few decades. In 2020, however, multiple crises happened in quick succession suggesting that the current condition in Honduras is, in fact, a condition of constant crisis. The inflection points do not create a crisis; they reveal the ongoing emergency that is daily life.

**Summary of the Argument**

The intervention of the dissertation builds across five chapters. In Chapter 2, I laid out the social geography of violence and exclusion in San Pedro Sula, especially for young men. In Chapter 3, I began the work of reframing our understanding of deportation as an event, placing

it, instead, within an experience of ongoing, unwanted circulation. In Chapter 4, I adopted the Honduran usage of the term *aguantar* to examine how people understand their own mechanisms for survival and the interplay between a kind of active, intentional endurance (*aguantar*) at home and migration as an act of both desperation and hope. From there, in Chapter 5, I took aim at the premise of "reintegration" of deportees – a frequent goal of "migration management" shared among NGOs, governments, and some scholars – and I argued that a prior lack of integration, in the sense of full inclusion into the promise of a good life and a future, contributes to the move to migrate in the first place. In Chapter 6, I focused on deportation in the context of failed asylum claims, suggesting that the promise of protection the asylum system appears to offer masks the legal violence embedded in it.

Across these chapters, I have described intersecting regimes of mobility control that shape the contours of daily life for young Honduran men in Honduras and, also, shape their experience of unauthorized migration, detention, deportation, and return to the country from which they had fled. I offer analysis across multiple scales of inclusion and exclusion, from the neighborhood level out to the nation and across international borders. I show how poor young people in Honduras both belong within their *colonias* (until they don't) and are simultaneously structurally excluded and marginalized. In part, that exclusion looks like being unable to circulate freely within Honduras (beyond their *colonia*) and, in part, it looks like being treated as a likely criminal for growing up in that *colonia* in the first place, both within Honduras and beyond. I show how deportation in Honduras entails being sent back to the familiarity of treacherous mobility and layered precarities and how, given this, deportation fails to discourage repeated migrations.

As I make these arguments, I contribute to the deportation studies literature which has primarily focused on an experience of removal that is akin to exile, where people are torn from communities and families and worlds they knew and sent "back" to places where they technically hold citizenship but do not feel themselves to belong. While this experience of deportation still occurs, in Honduras we see something different happening. My dissertation is situated in a moment when regionally (but also globally) the effects of border externalization and border hardening are shifting the contours of who is deported and what deportation means. As the deportation regime has evolved, it has endeavored to capture, immobilize, and return people before they have the possibility of settling into a life elsewhere, before they can build that community, before "home" can become a strange place. As such, more Central Americans are deported from Mexico than the United States now; and many of those who are deported from the U.S. are sent back shortly after crossing the border.

For the young men with whom I worked, deportation is not a singular event, it is not a moment of rupture leading to upended lives. To the contrary, deportation for them is coherent with a prior condition of exclusion and circumscribed mobility, extended now across international borders. This results in a differently situated trauma, as deportation continues to be violent not in its exceptionality but in its very ordinariness. I argue that by approaching migration and deportation through a lens of circulation, we can better attend to this experience of those caught up in the regional migration regime today.

Two interlaced stories – Honduras's history of migration patterns and the increasing move by the United States to ensure people are detained before they reach the U.S. border – set the backdrop for my interventions here. Migration and deportation are never uniform or a single kind of experience. Some Central Americans had the deportation experience I depict in this

dissertation in earlier eras; some Hondurans today are deported back to the country without speaking much Spanish after having spent childhoods and adolescence in the United States. The trend, however, is one of fewer people losing status later in life and greater enforcement targeting aspiring migrants before they have the chance to get used to life elsewhere. Much of my analysis has been presented in distinction to how the reception of deportees has been understood and theorized elsewhere in Central America – El Salvador in particular – but this is, largely, because of the temporally-determined dynamics and the unique patterns of migration and enforcement that shaped the phenomenon in those places at those times. The changes in the regional migration regime that shape the context of Honduras are also shifting the experience of deportation elsewhere in Central America now, and, I think, the arguments I make here could be productively engaged in the Guatemalan and Salvadoran contexts, and, perhaps, beyond. The Honduran case points us toward the future of how deportation is experienced and, I think, the future of how deportation studies must examine what being returned means for the people who are subjected to it. Broadly, my project suggests that by moving border controls further and further from international boundaries, the experience of being deported has been changed from one of exile to one of circulation.

**Directions for Further Research**

Going back and forth as I do across the chapters, I think one way this dissertation could be read might be to see an unresolved tension between the migration part of the story I'm telling and the part that focuses on daily life in Honduras. Perhaps these are two separate projects, as most of the bodies of literature from which I draw do theorize one or the other. At times in writing I was tempted to focus on one piece or the other, to write about Honduran migration here

and save the violence in Honduras material for a second book. Ultimately, my data and my interlocutors would not allow me to do so, as these experiences as I understand them are inextricable and mutually constitutive. Consequently, I think the more interesting, though complicated, path is to dig in further to this underlying argument about how both people and violence circulate, and to resolve any apparent tension by strengthening the analytical core rather than moving away from it.

This might mean in future iterations of this text that I ought to adopt a different theoretical framing. It might instead mean doing more robust research on the institutions – both state and NGO – that facilitate, channel, make mobile and immobilize people across the region. I might scale up and engage more directly with the relationship among the states, looking at how conflicting interests at that level contribute to pushing people out and back, engaging more deeply with theories of circulation. Here, however, I have a concern that has prevented me from taking this aspect of my argument further. While I have argued for understanding deportation and migration through this lens of circulation, I am hesitant to push it further and make a claim that states or capital are, in effect, circulating undocumented labor according to their needs. It does benefit the Honduran regime to have young people leaving in such high numbers, but I think the current moment reveals the extent to which people are made to *keep* moving, rather than being exploited for their labor temporarily (as Tanya Golash-Boza 2015 has shown). Other flows of circulation do more of the work of knitting the circulators (the circulation of aid and goods and remittances and security infrastructure and interdiction cooperation, for example). I don't see the circulation of people that I identify as serving those outside the circuit in such a clear way. At the same time, I very much do not want to underestimate the kinds of agency –

weak or limited or channeled as they might be – that those who are doing the circulating exercise by doing so.

Dispossessed Mobilities: Caravans and *Coyotaje*

One way to address this could be to include a fuller account of the 2018 migrant caravan, with a discussion on what that kind of mass, visible, unapologetic, migration movement means – and also what the subsequent crackdown indicates for migration strategies in the future. In the middle of my fieldwork, the largest migrant caravan in history – and the first to begin in Central America – gathered in Honduras and made its way across Mexico. I shifted my research plans and joined the nearly 10,000-person, mostly-Honduran, caravan in Southern Mexico for a while and returned to Mexico later to meet them in Tijuana. While this was clearly relevant for my current research, I also have a long-term history with migrant caravans; as an activist, organizer, and researcher, I was part of the very first migrant caravan in Mexico in 2011 and accompanied many subsequent, smaller ones once since then.[1] Although this form of collective or group migration was not the intended focus of the present study, I think including a more thorough description and analysis of caravans (especially in terms of thinking about nested mobilities and strategies for survival) could be an important addition and offer a unique contribution.

In general, I have not grounded my discussion here primarily in mobilities studies. However, putting my intervention into conversation with these literatures (Sheller and Urry 2006; Cresswell 2006; Chu 2010, among others) could add another layer to this analysis, as one way to interpret the story I tell here would be the recognition of circulation as a condition of mobility of the dispossessed. In the era of globalization (or post-globalization?) there is a frequent coupling of human mobility with privilege and power; those who are vulnerable or less

powerful or marginalized are associated with either immobility or forced movement. Yet, here, we have a story of heightened mobility of those who are multiply excluded. It is a mobility that is shaped, channeled, pressured, to be sure, but is also chosen and desired and, in all its complexity, often enjoyed.

I could take that further and reframe the project substantially to be situated in terms of overlapping regimes of mobility control across space – from border guards and organized crime closing and undermining international boundaries to the micro level street politics of space and mobility in San Pedro Sula. I've started some of that in Chapter 2 especially, but it could be built out much further. I have a long-term interest in continuing to complicate the idea of *coyotaje* (Frank-Vitale 2020), or people smuggling (building off the work of David Spener 2009; Gabriella Sanchez and Luigi Achilli 2019; and Jason De León's forthcoming book). This hasn't been directly part of this dissertation but thinking about *coyotaje* and organized crime as competing regimes of mobility control operating parallel to, against, and sometimes in conjunction with that of states is one component that I could return to as I adapt this into a book or may form the basis of my next project.

Gendering Survival and Circulation

While this is a story of men, primarily, it is not yet a story of masculinity. My work does suggest, however, that a study of the masculinity that is produced (or perhaps challenged) by living in circulation could be a provocative area for further research. How does living in circulation shift ideas of masculinity among the men who are circulating? How does migration and deportation reframe (or not) their sense of self as men, their expectations of what it means to be men, and gendered social relations? How are migration and gangs configured in relationship

to these gendered ideas? In thinking about scales of mobility regimes, how is masculinity constructed when, in Honduras, men in public space are at risk and women – mothers, girlfriends, sisters, daughters – sometimes step in as protectors of criminalized men? At the same time, while there has been much important work recently from a gender perspective on the experience of women in migration (and deportation), there is much work still to be done.[2] How is this circuit experienced differently by women? How do women make meaning out of failed asylum claims? What is their experience of return? Crucially, what is gang life and gang membership like for the women in their ranks? This is, perhaps, the most understudied aspect of gangs in Central America and there is little work that isn't highly sensational about *mareras*, or female gang members.

For the discussion here, there are two particular aspects that merit further attention through a gendered lens. While I begin to address this in Chapter 4's discussion of the word *aguantar*, it is notable that the term's exploration by scholars thus far has been conducted in highly gendered spaces – male soccer fans and women surviving intrafamilial violence. The question here is whether and how those analyses translate into a non-gendered usage or, on the contrary, there is a gendered aspect to the invocation of the term by Hondurans that I identify. Thinking about the term with this in mind could add further richness to the discussion of *aguantar* and how it helps us understand survival amidst adversity beyond the now-loaded term resilience.

The gendered aspect of asylum denial, which I raise in Chapter 5, can also be developed further, especially focusing on how gender and age together form both a category of risk in Honduras and a category of suspicion in humanitarian spaces aimed at protecting the vulnerable. There is an iterative quality to the asylum system, to the asylum process, which leads to a

situation in which the person who must be vilified in one case is the person seeking protection in the next. It is strategic for attorneys representing girls and women to present Honduran society as uniquely, uniformly, violently misogynistic which, in turn, makes it harder for young men to portray themselves as victimized. Young men are targeted at home and often must flee because they are young men; that same category makes them more likely to be viewed as persecutors and deported, even as they are persecuted. Their construction as marginal is central to every part of the circuit through which they circulate, and their gender and age are central to that construction.

Importantly, as I focus on young men and their marginality and both the risk and lack of protection that comes with that, many of the interlocutors here who help me to understand this situation are men who have, essentially, aged out of the most virulent category of risk. Pastor Luis, Profe Juan, Benjamín, and Ramón each recognize that they are mostly beyond the bounds of the category that would make them most vulnerable, that would push them to have to leave. Luis, Benjamín, and Ramón each tried to migrate when they were young, but now they stay in Honduras, trusting both their age and stature in their communities to offer them some level of protection. This, like all survival strategies, is not foolproof, though, and Ramón ends up arrested and in jail, accused of collecting extortion payments, just like many of the 17- to 22-year-olds from his *colonia.*

Lots of Hondurans do not ever migrate. However, the increase in outmigration over the last ten years is notable, both in terms of the statistics that I presented in the introduction and in terms of the feeling on the ground. Ramón tells me, over one of our evening beers, how sad he is to see his *colonia* emptying out. A meme circulates among Honduran Facebook pages saying, "Last one to leave Honduras be sure to turn off the lights." Coyotes can't keep up with the demand. Still, many Hondurans do not attempt to migrate. More research could be done to focus

on those who stay,[3] but the general sense in the communities in which I work was that most people were one step away from leaving at any given time. One more family member loses a job, someone will leave. One more death threat makes its way to their ears, they leave. The neighborhood changes hands from one gang to their rivals, people leave. The new police in the zone are heavier handed then those they replaced; people leave. People are teetering on the brink of leaving constantly, and one additional piece of straw (or drop of water, in the equivalent Spanish expression) tips them over the edge. This is to say that hundreds of thousands of Hondurans are already potential migrants, and the conditions of daily life determine day to day how many of them go that route. One of the breaking points, particularly for young men, is when the *colonia* shifts from a place of safety, an oasis away from the dangers of San Pedro Sula, into one of risk.

Institutions: States, NGOS, and Gangs

The role and presence of the state, even as it is negligent and omissive, is also ubiquitous throughout this discussion. As people are engaging in the circulation I identify, part of that frequently involves making claims on states – a right to free transit in the case of the caravans, a right to migrate more broadly, or a right to seek asylum or refugee status.[4] There is a persistence evident in the multiple journeys that people undertake, even as they are denied and detained and deported and told, essentially, that their lives do not warrant protection. This persistence, however, does not indicate a faith in the state or international institutions but is, rather, demonstrative of a determination that people have to keep trying every option, every possibility, every rumor that might potentially lead to a different outcome. People are always guessing at what the trick is to getting in, based on who they know and stories they've heard about what has

worked. Recently, I've had people tell me with great assuredness that the United States is only letting in people with children under six. This is not policy, but it is what people have extrapolated from the patterns they've heard about among people they know. There is an understanding, I think, that there is some mix of luck, persistence, and savvy that enables people to break through the official and illicit barriers. Whereas asylum seemed to be the most viable path for many years, in the wake of the pandemic-related suspension of the processing of asylum claims, we are starting to see a shift to people going deep into debt and paying more than 10,000 dollars to hire a coyote to get them all the way into the interior of the United States.

With this in mind, the role that international NGOs play as a kind of broker for the state in the realm of migration management is also an aspect of this that warrants further scrutiny. In the chaos of the border closures, there is a murky patchwork of U.S. civil rights organizations, legal organizations, UN-affiliated human rights organizations, and church-backed humanitarian organizations that has emerged to manage the entrance of people into the United States to begin their asylum claims. Much of this "managing" involves identifying and designating those who are the most "vulnerable" and prioritizing their entrance; not surprisingly this replicates the same gender/age dynamics I've discussed here with women, children, the elderly, and the infirm frequently being designated as those who need to be paroled into the United States first. This is, however, all prior to any official state processes of adjudication and is a selection process being managed entirely by third party, private, non-profit organizations. The role of these NGOs in facilitating and immobilizing circulation could be analyzed further and, in particular, a focus on how those circulating (or trying to do so) interact with, interpret, and make use of these organizations would be illuminating. This could also be done in connection to how NGOs manage deportation reception, migration prevention campaigns, and refugee resettlement as well.

In some ways, my analysis here comes from an ethnography of an NGO engaged in third party migration management, and this aspect of my methodology and intervention could be developed further.

In addition, the broader interplay between gangs and migration merits more study, approached from a vantage point other than the one which tells the story of gangs being "deported" to Central America, which is, by now, a history that has been well written (see Martínez and Martínez d'Aubuisson 2019 for one example of this). Rather, I think, gangs and migration should both be looked at as consequences, as twinned visible phenomena that emerge in response to the underlying crises and ongoing precarity that shape life in Honduras. This dissertation perhaps suggests that, if gangs did not exist, people would leave Honduras less; external aid designed to reduce migration certainly operates from that idea. However, I think that frames the situation incorrectly. Migration is not a problem that needs to be managed; migration is the apparent consequence of other problems. Gangs as well. Without addressing the real "root causes" of migration – which are, I think, very similar if not identical to the root causes of gangs – there is no reason to expect that outmigration will decrease. Similarly, gangs are not inevitable, and they are not eternal. Their presence, their power, and their pull endure because the conditions in which they arise continue unabated. If Honduras, as elsewhere, were to be "developed" in such a way that the conditions that give rise to gangs were significantly lessened, outmigration would also decrease. Looking at gangs and migration together in this way would be another area of future research that would help us understand why people move (or don't) and what movement – or the right not to move – means for them.

**Concluding Thoughts**

As I finish drafting these conclusions, Central American migration is once again filling news cycles, with the Biden administration proclaiming a commitment to address the "root causes" of migration in the region (while also signing new agreements with Honduras and Guatemala to dedicate troops to combat "human smuggling"). The new administration appears poised to continue the decades-long practices of making migration more deadly, pushing the human toll it takes further from the U.S. border, and imposing "aid" on Central America that at best does little to address the reasons people migrate and, at worst, exacerbates the situation.

One primary contribution of this dissertation is, quite simply, its focus on Honduras. Honduras has long received relatively little scholarly attention and, as its series of inflection points over the last two decades have put a spotlight on the continual conditions of crisis, much analysis has elided the nuances in the histories, cultures, and realities among Honduras and its Central American neighbors. This dissertation is far from the only work contributing to scholarship that is Honduras-focused, but it does play a part in addressing the notable and lamentable scarcity of rigorous and deep analysis.

I also write these final pages as news breaks, once again, of the police in Minneapolis killing a young man of color; in Chicago, the video of 13-year-old Adam Toledo, with his hands up, being shot in the chest by another police officer is released. I am reminded, violently, of just how heartbreakingly common the stories I tell about the dangers young Hondurans face really are. While so many of them imagine life in the United States to be an escape from those fears, the truth is that the same vectors of risk and precarity operate here, as in much of the world.

These situations are linked: the militarized policing of young urban men of color extends from the U.S. into Central America (Zilberg 2011). The ravages of neoliberal fascism (Pine

2019) shape communities from Chicago to San Pedro Sula, where young people have little access to adequate education, few prospects for dignified, stable employment, and frequently get funneled into criminality and imprisonment. The portrait I offer throughout this dissertation of life in Honduras's urban margins is not meant to suggest that life there is incomprehensibly violent, that the people there and the institutions they've built are somehow inherently different from people and institutions in the rest of the world. To the contrary, the atrocity of the situation – Profe Juan calls it *atroz* – is better thought of as a mirror, a reflection, of these dynamics which are at play, to varying degrees and levels of visibility, everywhere, including "here" in the United States.

One aspect of the argument offered here is that, essentially, many Hondurans who migrate are already living with an instability that that is similar to that which has become a feature of life for the undocumented in the United States – the ever-present potential of emergency, the perennial possibility of displacement. The vast literature on liminal subjectivity theorizing the partial, contingent belonging for undocumented communities could aptly describe daily life for Hondurans in Honduras. This raises further questions about what citizenship confers, what meaning it holds, and how the illegalization of immigrants (De Genova 2002) might have become a process and a status that begins before migration, decoupled from legal status. These points become almost comically clearer as Honduras launches a new *cédula,* the primary ID document that all adults have and must have, and many Hondurans find themselves unable to figure out how to actually acquire the *cédula.* This is being done in the lead up to the 2021 presidential election, and it is no coincidence that obtaining the document required to be able to vote is widely elusive. Jokes circulate that without the new *cédula* maybe people will be lucky enough to be deported *out* of Honduras.

Honduras gives us a peek into how deportation will be lived and the meaning it will have in people's lives increasingly in the future. The dynamics I start to address here will only intensify as people in different parts of the world continue to find life at home unlivable, while borders expand and militarize, and even the idea of *seeking* asylum is undermined and attacked. It is the most human of things to do, to try to find safety and opportunity elsewhere when conditions at home are dire. I do not want to paint a picture that suggests that young men in Honduras have no agency. Like everywhere, people are trying to figure out creative ways to survive all the time. Migration is an act of hope, of faith, of belief in the possibility of something beyond the constricted chances available at home; and this, I think, is where the violence of deportation is done in this new era of immigration enforcement. Young men are deported back and told, in the process, that their lives are essentially not worth protecting. Their physical safety is compromised in many cases, but also, their dreams are dashed. The question becomes: when people cannot be secure at home and are unable to find refuge anywhere – when people are sent back again and again to worlds from which they had tried to flee – what forms of movement and mobility will emerge now? And what kinds of lives will people build as they live in circulation?

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**Notes to the Conclusions**

1. My Master's Thesis (Frank-Vitale 2011), where I posit understanding mass unauthorized migration as civil disobedience, begins with an account of the first migrant caravan. I have also written about the strategy of hypervisiblity and the power of unapologetic unauthorized migration in the context of the 2018 migrant caravan (Frank-Vitale and Nuñez Chaim 2020).

2. There are also many other less often told stories of migration and deportation that merit direct attention, including that of the LGBTQ community and indigenous groups like the Garífuna, Lenca, Tolupanes, and Miskitu, among others, who each have distinct migration trajectories and dynamics. In this vein, the relationship between dispossession of land, climate change, and outmigration should also be studied in depth.

3. Jesse Acevedo, a political scientist at the University of Denver, is developing a comparative study in Central America exploring this question specifically but his findings have not yet been published.

4. In some places, like the Indigenous communities in Guatemala with whom anthropologist Lauren Heidbrink works, this also includes campaigns centered around the idea of *el derecho de no migrarar,* the right to *not* migrate (Heidbrink 2020).

## Appendix 1: Glossary of Honduran Terms

**Aguantar** – endure, put up with, hold on through, suck it up, etc.

**Atroz** – atrocious, but carrying the connotation of the horror of atrocity

**Baleada** – a typical Honduran dish, a freshly-made flour tortilla folded over beans, cheese, cream, and sometimes eggs or meat.

**Barbero** – barber

**Barras bravas** – intense soccer fan clubs, in Honduras gang-like organizations

**Bordo** – the shanty town-like neighborhoods built on the margins of other urban neighborhoods, usually along the edges of riverbanks

**Brinca** – from the verb *brincar,* meaning to jump or bounce. Conjugated this way it means he/she/it jumps or bounces.

**Busero** – a person who works in the bus system, either as a driver or a *cobrador*

**Buzo** – attentive, vigilant, on guard

**Cabecillas** – high level leaders of the gang

**Caliche** – the term used to refer to the argot of urban youth

**Cancha** – soccer field

**Cancillería** – Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Diplomacy, Consular Affairs and other offices relating to Hondurans outside of Honduras

**Capital semilla** – startup capital, seed money, used to refer here to the initial investment of supplies provided by an NGO to support microenterprises

**Caravanero/a** – participant in a caravan

**Carros fantasmas** – literally "ghost cars," unmarked cars used by death squads engaged in social cleansing

**Cédula** – official identity card carried by all Hondurans over the age of 18

**Chele/a** – light haired, light skinned

**Cobrador** – the person on the bus who encourages passengers to get on and collects their fares

**Colonia** – neighborhood

**Coyote** – facilitator of unauthorized migration, see also *pollero*

**Coyotaje** – the business of facilitating unauthorized migration, people-smuggling

**Cuartería** – a collection of rooms

**Delincuente** – literally "delinquent" but used to mean criminal

**Denuncia** – complaint, official report with the police regarding a crime or threat

**Deportado/a** – deported person

**Embolsado/a** – in a bag, used to mean a body stuffed in a sack

**Encerrado/a** – enclosed

**Encuevado/a** – encaved, meaning living as though in a cave, stuck inside one's house

**Esquina** – literally corner; used as a shorthand for referencing public idleness, especially of young men

**Frontera** – border

**Flaco/a** – skinny

**Guirro/a** – Honduran term for boy/girl

**Impuesto de guerra** – literally "war tax;" used to refer to the systematic extortion payments, "protection fees," demanded by gangs. Also called *renta.*

**Jefe de pandilla** – boss of the gang, neighborhood-level gang leader

**Jomi** – from English "homie," but used in Spanish as the term to refer to fully initiated members of the gang

**Llantera** – tire workshop

**Loco** – literally meaning "crazy," in the context of gangs it refers to the people who are involved with the gang

**Maquila** – sweatshop-like garment factory and other light manufacturing plants

**Mano Dura** – iron-fisted security policies

**Mara** – gang (also used colloquially to refer to group, as in group of friends, social group, outside of the gang context)

**Marero/a** – gang member

**Mototaxi** – motorized rickshaws, a common form of low-cost taxis used in the *colonias* in Honduras. Frequently to cover ground from where the *rapiditos* end their route to people's homes.

**Muchachos** – literally "boys," but used as a euphemism to refer to gang members

**Pandilla** – gang

**Pandillero/a** – gang member

**Pavementada** – paved road, indicating the main road, usually

**Pila** – in Honduras, refers to the sink/washing area usually located outdoors

**Poblado** – populated

**Pollero** – guide who takes migrants across Mexico, facilitator of unauthorized migration, see also *coyote*

**Prisión Preventiva** – pretrial detention. In Honduras, people accused of a crime can be held in prison for up to two years while authorities investigate. That timeline can be extended for various reasons even longer.

**Profe** – short for "*profesor*," a title used to address teachers

**Pueblo** – dual meaning of "people" and "town"

**Pulpería** – small corner store, often run out of people's homes

**Rapiditos** – the small, cargo van-sized buses that make up the lowest cost public bus routes in Honduras (called *combis* in Mexico).

**Renta** – systematic extortion payments, "protection fees," demanded by gangs. Also called *impuesto de guerra.*

**Rosquilla –** a slightly sweet round biscuit, often eaten with coffee

**Sapo** – snitch

**Sicario** – assassin for hire, hitman

**Tiro** – bullet shot

**Tranquilo/a** – calm, tranquil

**Vos** – in its usage in Central America, an extremely informal second person singular pronoun

## Appendix 2: List of Acronyms

**ACNUR** – Alta Comisionado de Naciones Unidas para Refugiados (UNHCR in English)

**CAMR** – Centro de Atención al Migrante Retornado (Attention Center for Returned Migrants)

**CASM** – Comisión de Acción Social Menonita (Mennonite Social Action Commission)

**CBP** – Customs and Border Protection

**DHS** – Department of Homeland Security

**FNAMP** – Fuerza Nacional Anti-Maras y Pandillas (National Anti-Maras and Pandillas Force)

**ICE** – Immigration and Customs Enforcement

**INE** – Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas (National Statistics Institute)

**IOM** – International Organization for Migration

**JOH** – Juan Orlando Hernández, President of Honduran Congress, 2009-2013; President of Honduras, 2013-present

**MEU** – Movimiento Estudiantil Universitario (University Student Movement)

**PAMR** – Programa de Apoyo al Migrante Retornado (Program of Support for Returned Migrants, a project of CASM).

**PSG** – Particular Social Group

**PTD** – Prevention Through Deterrence

**UNHCR –** United Nations High Commission on Refugees (ACNUR in Spanish)

**WHO** – World Health Organization

## Appendix 3: Sula Valley Place Names and Relationships

**Department of Cortés**

- Municipality of Choloma

    *Sector López Arellano*

        - Colonia Los Cerros
        - Colonia López Arellano

- Municipality of La Lima

    *La Newton*

- Municipality of Potrerillos
- Municipality of Puerto Cortés
- Municipality of San Pedro Sula

    *Cofradía*

    *Sector Rivera Hernández*

        - Colonia El Chaco
        - Colonia La Libertad
        - Colonia Vista del Cielo

    *El Trébol*

- Municipality of Villanueva

**Department of Yoro**

- Municipality of El Progreso

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