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Yates-Doerr, E.

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An Unfinished War

Emily Yates-Doerr

In May 2018, the death of 20-year-old Claudia Patricia Gómez González was recorded and streamed on Facebook Live. A U.S. border guard shot her in the head after she crossed into Texas. She was unarmed. Shortly afterward, her mother explained to a reporter that she was fleeing a jobless future in Guatemala. She loved mathematics and hoped to find work as an accountant in the United States, where her father had lived for most of her childhood and where her boyfriend lived at the time of her death. Like many others from her community, she had wanted to stay in Guatemala but did not see a way to do so and survive.

Claudia’s killing came weeks after the Trump administration announced its zero-tolerance policy, which aimed to criminally prosecute people, including asylum seekers and children, crossing the U.S. border through unofficial routes. The policy also allowed for immigrant parents who had traveled with children to be held in detention while their sons and daughters were taken from them and detained elsewhere. Government reports documented 2,737 family separations in 2018. Accounting, however, was admittedly sloppy, and the ongoing discovery of new cases of separation lent credibility to the suspicion that thousands more family separations went unreported. Media outlets circulated news about the inhumane and abusive conditions of detention center holding cells, which became known as “hieleras” or “iceboxes” because they were so cold. In the summer of 2019, as the holding areas multiplied, academics and politicians began to refer to them as concentration camps.

Also in May 2018, Yazmin Juárez, age 1, died shortly after she was released from 20 days in border custody in Texas. According to her mother, her daughter developed a severe respiratory infection during her time at the detention center. The illness went untreated, eventually provoking her death. By the end of the year, two more Guatemalan Indigenous children died in border custody. Jakelin Amei Rosmery Caal Maquin, age 6, and Felipe Gómez Alonzo, age 8, died of easily preventable illnesses shortly after crossing with their fathers into the United States. Within a year of Claudia’s killing, at least six children would die in U.S. custody, joining the thousands who have died while crossing into the U.S. in recent years. The media attention surrounding these cases has drawn unusual public attention toward violence at the border, although historian Greg Grandin notes that Border Patrol has been a “frontline instrument of race vigilantism” since it was formed in 1924.

This essay draws attention to border violence by considering how the U.S. border shapes life within Guatemala. I have worked in Guatemala’s Indigenous highlands since...
the late 1990s. During the past decade I have worked as an anthropologist in the Mam-speaking community where Claudia grew up. I study motherhood and global development, focusing on the rebuilding of communities torn apart by a confluence of poverty and war. To carry out my work, I live in people’s homes. Many solitary women have an extra room, and they have readily taken me in, fed me and cared for me in exchange for little money. I now have two small children of my own, whom they care for as well. Often the women’s husbands have gone north, or their own children have gone north or sometimes both. Everyone knows someone who has left. Studying motherhood in Claudia’s community means that I necessarily study U.S. migration, though I do so from the vantage point of those who remain.

In the pages that follow, I present you with five vignettes that take place over 20 years. I use these stories to illustrate the long-standing history of Trump’s so-called “border emergency.” The stories highlight how the deep connections between the United States and Guatemala are connections of kinship as well as geopolitics. They make evident that the genocide, long waged against Guatemala’s Indigenous peoples, is far from over.

When selecting images to accompany the following stories about living and dying through U.S. warfare, I considered depict-
ing scenes of cruelty to grab your attention. But instead of displaying the familiar graphic pain of migrants, I offer you images of a few caring and determined women who have stayed behind. The women featured in these photographs have welcomed me into their homes, played with my children and offered us hospitality. They have also taught me that the U.S. is not only a distant destination but an ever-present force in Guatemalan lives.

Todos Santos, 1999

In late November, the family I was living with while studying Spanish at the northwestern edge of Guatemala invited me to a funeral. Eduardo, a teenager, had departed for the United States a few months earlier (anthropologists rely on pseudonyms for non-public figures, and I follow this convention here). He was almost my age, and since the main language of his community is Maya-Mam, he had also studied Spanish before leaving home.

But whereas a U.S. passport automatically qualified me for a visa to enter his country, a similar privilege was not afforded to Guatemalans wanting to visit the U.S. To apply was prohibitively expensive, and applications were almost always denied for people who were Indigenous and poor. Eduardo had traveled without documents and was smuggled across Mexico’s numerous checkpoints before finally arriving in the U.S. Shortly after, before he could find work or return a single

Figure 2. My son, age one, is welcomed at community events, where many people look after him.
dollar to his family, he drowned in an accident in a southern California swimming pool.

At dusk, the funeral procession gathered in the town’s central park. We followed candles and wailing mourners to the cemetery. The dead in Guatemala are buried above ground in colorful tombs. I was startled by how many were painted red, white and blue. Many people in the community returned from the U.S. in coffins.

The procession wound back to Eduardo’s home, where his aunts gave me a plate with a large tamale and a cup of sweet tea. A family friend nodded toward the bounty of the meal. He had just come from the town of Nebaj and told us that the annual harvest there was terrific. He continued, “Finally, all the bodies from the war are decomposing, leaving fertile soil behind.” My host-mother managed to smile at her friend’s dark humor but pointed out that impressive harvest in this land of abundant agriculture did little for most people in the country. Later that evening she told me, “They say the war ended when the peace treaty was signed, but just look around at how many of us are still leaving, and you’ll see the violence carries on.”

November in the highlands is a time of harvest and celebration. Marimba music and firecrackers can be heard day and night. The month is joyous, but also bittersweet. For as long as anyone can remember, people in the

Figure 3. The cemeteries in Guatemala’s Western Highlands are full of coffins that have been painted with U.S.-flag imagery, usually indicating that the person buried there died within or en route to the United States.
region have been caught in a cycle of seasonal employment. Just after the corn is cut, Indigenous families throughout the highlands set off for coastal plantations where they will work through hunger and heartache. Many will die.

The early 1950s saw a small but growing push for land redistribution that might have changed this cycle. Then in 1954 a coup deposed Jacobo Árbenz, Guatemala’s second-ever democratically elected president, who spoke openly about agrarian reform. In Guatemala, it is common knowledge that the U.S. government backed the coup. Allen Dulles, head of the CIA, and his brother John Foster Dulles, Secretary of State, were among many U.S. shareholders of The United Fruit Company, which operated massive plantations in Guatemala’s lowlands, producing cheap bananas. Open war overtook Guatemala in the decades to come, during which the CIA trained Guatemala’s most brutal military officers — the ones who burned communities and raped women and filled mass graves with mutilated corpses and who would someday become presidents.

The highland burial coincided with a massive protest in my hometown, soon dubbed the “Battle of Seattle.” Tens of thousands of people, disproportionately young, had gathered to object to the WTO’s free trade negotiations under way. Demonstrators foretold how laws being written to promote international trade would consolidate wealth over the coming decades in the name of cheap consumer goods. I read in a Guatemalan newspaper about Molotov cocktails though later I learned that the protest was generally peaceful. The real violence set in motion was economic and cultural, but that does not make for good headlines.

In Spanish class that afternoon, my teacher walked me to a balcony overlooking craggy hillsides and pointed northward. People from his town sought refuge from wartime terror by crossing into Mexico. They typically fled the high-altitude mountains by foot, weaving between the agave cactuses that grew from the rocky outcrops of volcanic soil and sleeping under the pines.

After the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords, many who had been in hiding began to return. But even more were continuing to exit. Between 1998 and 2000, when calm was supposed to be coming to the country, reported numbers of people leaving the country with permission more than doubled and then continued to spike, with untold people like Eduardo embarking on the journey north under the radar. The North American Free Trade Agreement had taken effect in 1994, and my teacher told me that the structural adjustment policies of free trade are desecrating small farmers and Indigenous ways of life.

My teacher pointed out that politicians and history books were calling Guatemala’s years of armed conflict a “Civil War.” He said this was wrong, warning me not to trust any label that implies the country was internally split in two. This was not a war between civilians but a war fomented by military elites and armed and funded by politicians in the United States.
and armed and funded by politicians in the United States. The U.N.-appointed commission to investigate the violence had just reported that state forces and paramilitary groups killed or forcibly disappeared 93% of the 240,000 victims, specifically targeting Indigenous Guatemalans. The commission also linked the U.S. government to Guatemala’s ethnic violence. “A one-sided war,” he told me, “is better termed a genocide.”

He then called this war unfinished. When I asked him to tell me more, he repeated what my host-mother had said after the funeral the night before: “Just look around.”

Nebaj, 2001

I had spent the previous two summers conducting ethnographic fieldwork in Todos Santos. So many people had spoken to me about the wartime violence in Nebaj that I decided to visit the region before heading home. Buses ran infrequently, so I hitchhiked on the back of a Red Cross 4x4 and arrived to a city center buzzing with NGOs. Public services were all but absent in this war-torn part of Guatemala, replaced by private and foreign aid.

The day after I arrived to Nebaj, I went on a hike that brought me through resettlement

Figure 4. A view toward Mexico from the mountain ridge above Todos Santos, a town in the Northwest corner of Guatemala. Members of the community have long migrated via the land passage north.
The facts of genocide were difficult to wrap my head around when the sun was out and the breeze was gentle. They were difficult facts to face when everyone around was so very friendly. The landscape was breathtaking. Even in sites that were once hell on earth, it was easy to believe that most people in this world were kind — as if kindness to me, a white American, reflected the goodness of the world and not how race and nationality structured privilege and pain.

One afternoon before I left Nebaj for home, I saw people crowded around an electronics repair store in front of a black-and-white TV set. I approached, curious. Like others, I could not believe what was happening and we stood there for hours, watching the Twin Towers collapse on repeat. Someone in the crowd commented that the socialist politician Salvador Allende was overthrown in Chile in another U.S.-sponsored coup on September 11, 1973. Myrna Mack, a Guatemalan anthropologist and staunch defender of Indigenous rights, was also killed at the hands of a military death squad on this day in 1990.

September 11 is just four days before Guatemala’s Independence Day, and almost instantly the Guatemalan flags that had been everywhere were covered with U.S. flags. Still thinking about the impact of U.S. politics on Nebaj’s countryside, I was confused by the symbolism. A man running a restaurant I have been frequenting explained, “We know the difference between a government and its people.”

Then he added, “Besides, our families are there too.”

Quetzaltenango, 2008–2009

I carried out my doctoral research in the state of Quetzaltenango, where I studied the slow effects of violence on bodies and health. I moved to the highland city where Jacobo Árbenz was born, a city known by its Indigenous name: Xela. I lived with women who had endured long histories of suffering. We spent a lot of our time laughing. I came to see that when power has been taken from you, living with pleasure becomes a way to refuse the will of politicians who want you gone.

Following the lead of scientists who linked chronic illness to nutrient deprivation, I joined an NGO that made weekly rounds to deliver aid and education to a dozen Mam-speaking communities in the cold mountains where Claudia Gómez González was born. All the health organi-
zations in the region targeted pregnant and nursing women, who were seen to hold the key to future development. Experienced midwives told me they had never lost a mother, but they must work in secret. College students from the city arrived to train Indigenous women in capacity building, unprepared to see the skills that the women in their classes already possessed.

In 2006, the Central American Free Trade Agreement — an extension of NAFTA — took effect, and the countryside was hurting. Markets for local corn were disappearing, and the corn that was grown in Guatemala was increasingly exported for biofuel instead of eaten as food. There was drought, there was flooding and people were hungry. State surveys reported that this region had some of the highest rates of chronic malnutrition on earth, and maternal mortality was far higher than it should ever be. I could not help but notice how all the talk of caring for women seemed to have the effect of leaving them

State surveys reported that this region had some of the highest rates of chronic malnutrition on earth

Figure 5. A woman in a marketplace in Quetzaltenango drapes a towel imprinted with the U.S. flag over herself. U.S. flag imagery is extremely common in the region.
without the kind of care they would want. Midwifery was often criminalized. For many, to even think about agrarian reform would be to summon death.  

As 2008 came to a close, global financial markets collapsed and U.S. deportations spiked. Local newspapers reported that the Bush administration had forcibly returned 28,000 Guatemalans that year, with many more expected in the years to come. Crimes, both big and small, went largely unpunished in Guatemala, and street violence was on the rise. I met many gentle fathers, who sang to their children and woke to comfort them as they cried out at night. I could not shake the dissonance between these scenes of masculine sweetness and the reports of femicide, which appeared daily in the newspapers beside faceless pictures of murdered women.

I flew back to New York City, where my partner lived, several times during my research. On one flight back to Guatemala, just before the gate to Kennedy airport closed, guards led a young man wearing industrial clothing and flat plastic shoes to the empty seat next to me. “Deportation,” he explained softly. A decade earlier he had left the highlands with his family. He had never before been to Guatemala’s capital city where we would shortly land. He was still a kid, and so obviously scared. He had no belongings, no one meeting him upon arrival. He had

Figure 6. Two women from the Guatemalan community where Claudia Gómez González grew up wait in line for health services with their babies. It is common for babies and children to be wrapped in bandanas or swaddles with U.S. flag imagery.
no idea what he was going to do, except do everything he could to make it back — to make it home.

Salcajá, 2016–2018

The road entering Xela passes by a statue of The Emigrant. He is a giant man with a backpack facing north, one hand outstretched in the direction of the United States, the other clenched into a fist at his side. The city of Salcajá, where the statue is located, is home to the oldest church in Central America, built in 1524 — the year the Spanish claimed conquest of the Mayas, long before there was a USA. In 2010, when the mayor cut the ribbon around this homage to migrant workers, he told the crowd that the previous year nearly $300-million dollars had come to his city from Guatemalans living abroad.13

Today, it is impossible for most people in this part of the world to find a job that pays a livable wage. People migrate out of fear and desperation and because it is what so many have done for decades, or longer, to survive. The CIA reports that remittances coming through banks from the U.S. to Guatemala are equivalent to two-thirds of the country’s exports and one-tenth its GDP.14 A Spanish-language poem at the base of the statue reads, “You left your mother crying, as were your father and your siblings, they are together longing, to shake your sweet hands.”
If you head westward past the statue for a few miles, you will come to Claudia Gómez González’s community. Juana, at the age of 65, has worked there as a midwife for a half-century, which is why we met. She is a builder and visionary, both risky things to be in Guatemala. In August 2018, the U.N. released a report confirming that killings of community leaders were routinely orchestrated by powerful interests with ties to the Guatemalan military.15 Midwives were among the social justice workers targeted and killed.

Juana lived with her son Juan and his wife, Lucinda, who had been lucky to find modest employment running sustainability projects with local NGOs. They distributed a nutrient supplement made from surplus U.S. corn to neighbors, also giving them metal silos to store homegrown corn so it would last through the season. Another project had them raising goats for milk and fertilizer and chickens for their valuable eggs. Their family made use of everything they were given. USAID’s logo is on a wrapper carrying supplements that they had turned into insulation, which covers their house.

Darwin, Juan and Lucinda’s 16-year-old son was not so lucky when it came to securing a job. The only work he could find was in a heartless situation where he would spend...
more on transportation than he could make in a day. Knowing his family would not give him permission to go to the U.S., he left on a summer night in 2015. When they awoke, he was gone.

Weeks later, a U.S. attorney contacted them. Darwin had made it across the border and had found his way to the Arlington Juvenile and Domestic Relations Court. The attorney asked them to send a notarized fax, which is hard to do from the mountains. Harder still was the truth of the content they had to write. The fax they sent relinquished their rights as his parent, granting sole custody of their son to the U.S. court. “We are unable to protect our son nor provide him with the care necessary for his well-being,” they affirmed.

They had a phone number for him at a youth center in New York where he told them he would be, but when they had attempted to call their son, they were unable to reach him. Months had passed without contact. One day, we dialed the number together from my phone. It rang with no answer.

Afterward, Lucinda took me the edge of their property where she had planted a garden in worn-out tires — an experiment in recycling that was going well. She plucked a few small orange peppers and offered them to me. “Cook these with your meal tonight,” she said gently, handing me the gift. “You are
so sad. They’re strong peppers. They’ll help you to feel better.” I knew her heart was broken into countless pieces over her missing child, and yet she was worried about me.

Reliably accounting for the missing is a challenge, but a low estimate is that more than 4,000 people have died or gone missing while migrating to the United States in the past four years. Claudia’s death was the most publicized from her small community this past year, but in the weeks that followed, when the mass media was still paying attention, two other people from her community were reported to have died crossing the border. This is but a small piece of the suffering. Many women in the region move through their days carrying the grief of vanished family members, waiting for news and trying to rebuild their lives in whatever ways they can.

The shape of violence, 2019

In the 20 years that I have been traveling annually to Guatemala, I have seen the demographic of U.S. migration change. Once it was mostly men who left. Today, women and children regularly leave as well. People are quick to tell me that this shift is not because the journey has gotten safer but because Guatemala has become a more dangerous place for them to live.

For them. As for me, I continue to be welcomed. As I have carried out my research, I have become a mother myself. Now most of the time I travel to Guatemala, I take my own two small children. On our first trip together, my one-year-old falls down stairs and needs emergency surgery at the hospital. Everyone takes such good care of us. No one treats us as if we do not belong. In all the times I have been, I have passed through customs easily, and people have welcomed me into their homes and offered me all the kindness in the world. When my son is in danger, Guatemalans jump into action to save his life.

Meanwhile, everywhere along the border and beyond, Guatemalans are going missing. That so many parents and children cannot locate one another reminds me of how survivors in Guatemala have turned “disappear” into an active verb. It refers to a state-directed practice of making people vanish so thoroughly that no claim of murder could ever be brought to court. “My sister disappeared” becomes “my sister was disappeared.” The small shift draws attention to the force behind such absence. In Guatemala, disappearance is taken as an act of war — a war that belongs to the United States as well as to Guatemala. In the United States, too many people still cannot even see that this is happening.

For two decades now, Guatemalans have been asking me to look at the violence that surrounds us. Accustomed to thinking of violence as an explosion and not the sound of quiet footsteps of a son disappearing forever in the night, it has been hard to know how or where to look. Looking long enough, however, I have learned to see fragility in beauty, absence in abundance and how some peo-
ple’s histories obscure tragedies in other people’s lives. Looking — and then looking again — I have learned that an image cannot contain all that their stories have to tell. Seeing requires commitment, taking more than an instant to fulfill.

Let me tell you about one woman in these images, Miriam, who has a severely disabled teenage son. Every day she pushes him into the sunlight of her courtyard and mushes up his food, which she spoon-feeds him with more tenderness and love than I can put into words. Last year her second son, the older brother, headed to New Jersey, where an uncle lives. They borrowed $10,000 to pay a coyote to take him, and it took two tries. No one wanted him to go, but neither could he stay. The medicine his brother needs to live costs far more than the expensive journey. His brother, his family, depend on his migration.

If “families belong together” is to become the slogan for this moment, it should be taken as a call to do more than reunite parents and children. It also should challenge our border walls. Guatemalans should be allowed to be with their families in the U.S. Their obvious moral claim should become a legal one as well. U.S. prosperity has been
built, in part, on the backs of Guatemalans and other immigrants, and the U.S. government continues to interfere in Central American politics. These countries are, it seems, far too rich, too fertile and too prosperous to be left alone. The White House says tightening the border and increasing deportations will keep people from entering, but it is an obviously failed strategy. People who cross the border do so with tremendous fear. They also do it because they have no other place to go.

So long as the U.S. follows its present path of Central American destabilization, Guatemalans will, in turn, stay on the path of The Emigrant. They are fighting with all their might to survive. Those of us living in the north with the privileges afforded by passports, language, or skin color should be fighting with all our might to change our border policies to allow them to enter.

In this time when tender, loving, human women and children are called animals, held in cages, found to be missing, allowed to die from dehydration or shot in the head by those empowered by morally bankrupt politicians, I am reminded that we are still engaged in a war that never really ended. Many conscientious U.S. Americans do not want this war. Still more think this war simply could not be possible today — that these stories of violence are from other places, that Guatemala’s violence is not theirs.

Figure 11. A woman holds her newborn daughter outside of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. An estimated one in five people from her community live in the United States. For now, she is committed to raising her daughter in Guatemala.
And yet, the crisis in Guatemala is a crisis of long-standing U.S. warfare. Claudia’s death was an act of this war. This war is ongoing. Do not look away.

Notes


Emily Yates-Doerr is an anthropologist at Oregon State University and the University of Amsterdam. She is a European Research Council Starting Grant laureate for the project “Global Future Health.” She has been carrying out research in Guatemala’s highlands over the past 20 years.