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“La Gente de Washington es la Más Tranquila” (People from Washington are the Most Laid-Back): An Ethnographic Perspective on Honduran and Salvadoran Migration to the Pacific Northwest

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Abstract *Drawing upon engaged ethnographic research conducted during 2018 in Washington state, this paper examines how Honduran and Salvadoran transnational migrants navigate changing circumstances and turbulent times characterized by intensified forms of xenophobia and racism in the U.S., and political uncertainty in Central America. Most literature on Honduran and Salvadoran migrants focuses on the “push” and “pull” factors of international migration. Our paper engages such important questions, but also goes beyond causational frameworks about why people move—to focus instead on everyday lived experiences in the receiving country. Working from a theoretical perspective that privileges migrants’ agency in choosing to move to the Pacific Northwest, we explore peoples’ adept abilities to pursue their livelihood strategies while reading the political landscape and imagining different paths toward realizing their goals. In so doing this study contributes to anthropological understandings of Central American transnationalism in the Pacific Northwest during the post-2017 U.S. political environment.*

Keywords

Honduras, El Salvador, transnational migration, agency, xenophobia

Introduction: Moving From Central America to Washington State

Over coffee one July evening in Fife, Washington (an industrial town between Tacoma and Seattle), Mario recalled the life he once lived in La Ceiba, Honduras—the country’s third largest city. He grew up in a neighborhood affected by gang violence and drug trafficking. And his family struggled to meet their basic subsistence needs. Although Mario did manage to finish high school with training in soldering and welding, upon graduating he had no means of studying at the any of the country’s universities, nor could he find viable work in La Ceiba. To make matters more complicated for him, at the young age of 18 he

and his girlfriend discovered they had a baby on the way. Without a steady income, Mario did what he had to in order to survive.

Like so many other young unemployed men in Central America, he would spend his days loitering the streets, attempting to do occasional odd jobs for an under-the-table tip—an endeavor which relied upon his entire social network in his neighborhood. Being out in public spaces socializing with other unemployed young men meant that Mario was becoming particularly susceptible to recruitment into the world of illicit drug trafficking. He revealed to us in his interview that there was a time in La Ceiba when he did sell drugs as a way of surviving and providing for his family. But he knew this was not a viable solution to his

problems because he was aware of others who had become victims to the violence associated with the trade. Cognizant that this was not a lifestyle he wanted in the long term, Mario decided to leave Honduras, migrating first to Florida in search of a construction job. He successfully crossed the Guatemala-Mexico and then the Mexico-U.S. border clandestinely, quickly found a job and moved in with extended family. At first, things were going well in Florida for Mario; he worked harder than he ever had and began sending remittances to support his family in Central America. But all this changed when he was then pulled over by traffic police for speeding and the officer discovered he had been driving without a license. Summoned to appear in Florida traffic court, but worried about his undocumented status and how this minor traffic violation could lead to his eventual deportation, Mario decided to leave Florida for Washington state, where he had heard about migrants obtaining a driver's license legally, even without immigration paperwork.

Drawing upon engaged ethnographic research conducted during 2018 in western Washington, this article examines Honduran and Salvadoran transnational migrant experiences in the Pacific Northwest. Our research takes place in a historical moment characterized by intensified forms of xenophobia and racism in the U.S., and significant political uncertainty and turmoil in Central America. Working from a theoretical perspective that privileges migrants' agency in choosing to move to Washington state, we explore peoples' adept abilities to pursue their livelihood strategies as they read the shifting political landscape of the United States—the new immigration policies coming from the federal government—while also imagining different paths toward realizing their socially-constructed goals. In so doing this study contributes to anthropological understandings of Central American transnationalism in the Pacific Northwest during the post-2017 U.S. political environment.

Background: Theorizing Contemporary Honduran and Salvadoran Migration

Anthropologists and others who study the contemporary Latin American diaspora continue to approach migration vis-à-vis three main arenas of inquiry: 1) the various reasons why people leave their countries of origin; 2) migrants' lived experiences while in route to, and crossing, the international borders of receiving countries; and 3) what migrants actually do once they are living in the receiving country, attempting to make a better life for themselves. Our project engages all three arenas but focuses on the third realm of inquiry. In relation to this first question of why people move, perhaps the most significant "push" factor driving the contemporary exodus from Honduras and El Salvador is that these two countries have some of the highest homicide rates per capita outside of a warzone, hitting an all-time high of 108.64 murders per 100,000 inhabitants in El Salvador in 2015, and 93.21 per 100,000 in Honduras in 2011 (UNODC 2018). The allure of being able to remit money to support one's family's basic subsistence needs is also commonly conceived as a kind of "pull" factor to explain why people move where they do. In the case of Honduras and El Salvador, remittance money far surpasses earnings from other industries; it also represents a major source of state revenues as people spend remittance money in local economies. In 2016 the amount of Gross Domestic Product comprised of remittance money was 17.1% in El Salvador, and 18% in Honduras (World Bank 2018). Regardless of paperwork status in the U.S., contemporary Honduran and Salvadoran migrants come fleeing violence while also in pursuit of economically stable living conditions.

Major U.S. media outlets have recently begun to focus on the Central American exodus, highlighting the fact that Hondurans and Salvadorans are coming to the U.S. with their children. That people leave the isthmus in large numbers due to rampant violence, extreme poverty, and significant political uncertainty

is, however, not a new phenomenon; neither are the various interventions by the U.S. in the affairs of Honduras and El Salvador. Imperialist interventions of all kinds have been shown to hinge the national and economic development of Central America—benefiting foreign interests while impoverishing local people from the isthmus. Most reasons for emigrating can be linked to civil wars in the 1980s, followed by the imposition of neoliberal development policies from the 1990s onward.

The Cold War had immediate consequences for the poor of Central America who became caught in the crossfire in a mix of capitalist and socialist interests. During the 1980s in El Salvador the left-wing guerrilla group, Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) was coming closer to its goal of toppling the U.S.-backed right-wing government of José Napoleón Duarte (Woodward 1985:251). (A similar situation was underway in Guatemala, and socialist revolution was already successful in Nicaragua.) The U.S., worried about the spread of Soviet- and Cuban-influenced ideologies in its “own backyard,” saw Honduras as key to its geopolitical interests, and installed a total of 18 military bases throughout the country in order to train and deploy capitalist-allied troops in their fight against armed socialist revolutionaries (Lapper 1985; Alvarado 1987; Salomón 1989; Pine 2008). The result was both a civil war in El Salvador and persecution of Honduran working class and peasant organizations who were deemed a “communist threat” when advocating for labor and land rights. While some Salvadorans were ardent supporters of a given side, the estimated 75,000 murdered and 10,000 “disappeared” victims of war were not ideologically-driven. When Salvadorans began to flee from civil war violence and arrive in large numbers to the U.S., the official response of the State Department was to deny their need for refugee status (given that they were leaving a U.S.-sponsored government), thus relegating most Salvadoran migrants at the time to an undocumented status (Alvarado et al. 2017:9). While Salvadorans fled from civil war in large numbers during the

1980s, the amount of Hondurans fleeing from state-sponsored persecution during this period of militarization and national security doctrine was comparatively low.

By the 1990s with the close to the Cold War and onset of peace accords in Central America prompting the formal end to civil wars, both Honduras and El Salvador had become further in debt to foreign lending institutions and dependent upon the income that U.S. military aid provided their economies. Worried they would default on foreign debt loans, the response from the International Monetary Fund and World Bank was to demand via “structural adjustment” programs. These aimed to significantly decrease government spending on social services, while encouraging privatized enterprises previously run by the state. Such “neoliberal” policies required attracting foreign capital and setting up conditions that would attract transnational corporations in Central America—incentives such as charging few taxes, while granting access to cheap labor, cheap or free land, and minimizing environmental and health regulations. The imposition of neoliberalism in Central America from the 1990s onward has since forged policies of governance aimed at curtailing state-sponsored services and programs, turning them over to the private sector.

At a political and economic level, neoliberalism in Latin America has been associated by some with attempts to create a better climate for attracting foreign investment through the understanding that this “opening up” of the economy will stimulate the “free market.” And cutting basic social services from the state’s budget is also one of the primary methods by which international financial institutions have argued indebted countries can pay down their development loans—resulting in coercive agreements that require they cut such services. Yet neoliberalism has also been associated by scholars and activists alike with dangerous and poorly-paid working conditions, and tremendous increases in poverty and social inequities—creating lived experiences of “misery” for the vast majority as the most

basic government services are privatized and subsequently become too expensive for the majority of people to afford (Phillips 2017). In Central America the increasingly high price of health care, education, road construction, and the delivery of utilities is downloaded onto the shoulders of individuals (Harvey 2005; Goodale and Postero 2013). While neoliberalism is global in scope, its effects, experienced locally, are diverse in terms of what exactly is privatized.

At a social and cultural level, under the philosophy of neoliberalism, individuals and local communities are encouraged to take responsibility for meeting their own basic needs without the assistance of the state. Through a discursive framework of efficiency, self-regulation, and accountability (values that might well resonate positively with a range of people), proponents of neoliberalism argue that it is the best way to achieve financial well-being. Like all social processes, the formation of neoliberal subjectivities in El Salvador and Honduras is a gendered phenomenon, which connects with previously-existing cultural understandings of gendered household tasks. For instance, young men such as Mario experience pressure to provide for their families, but if massive unemployment and underemployment conditions cannot forge the right kinds of opportunities for these men to provide economically, many turn to migration as one viable solution. In other cases, young unemployed males seek out, or get coercively recruited to, the infamous *maras* (street gangs), which do form a kind of community for youth who are abandoned. *Maras* tend to engage in illicit activities in urban centers in Honduras and El Salvador where they frequently have violent encounters with the state's security apparatus (e.g., Wolseth 2008). Over the years different governments in both countries have adopted a series of policies known locally as "*la mano dura*" (an "iron fist"), which give the poorly-trained and chronically under-paid police and military officials the ability to arrest anyone who they suspected of being a gang member. Anthropologists working on these topics have demonstrated the extent to which

such policies have adverse effects for young men (Pine 2008, 2010; Wolseth 2008; Phillips 2015), some of whom are not actually gang members, but get arrested nonetheless while wandering the streets and loitering (the police having identified them by their tattoos, short haircuts, and clothes, which are sometimes also gang symbols). Thus, in addition to widespread poverty exacerbated by the negative effects of neoliberalism, Hondurans and Salvadorans now also flee from everyday forms of violence (caused by either gangs themselves or the state's security apparatus—police and military corruption has now become commonplace throughout both Central American countries).

In the 1990s these consequences of neoliberalism coincided with efforts by part of the U.S. to deport undocumented Salvadoran youth, some of whom had formed gangs in the U.S. (in response to their exclusion from mainstream society). Then in 1998 Hurricane Mitch struck Honduras—arguably the deadliest and most destructive natural disaster in the history of Central America—killing 7,000 and displacing nearly 20% of the country's population (Alvarado et al. 2017:14). These processes characterize much of the migration patterns from Central America to the U.S. As Central Americanist scholars Karina Alvarado, Alicia Estrada, and Ester Hernández summarize:

Thirty-five years after the initial mass civil war migrations primarily from Guatemala and El Salvador from the '70s to the '90s, out-migration continues because of post-war economic free-trade programs, growing economic dependence, and the proliferation of *maras* (gangs). Central Americans have grown permanent roots in the United States. (2017:6)

Thus, while the civil war in El Salvador produced its first exodus to the U.S. during the 1980s (Coutin 1993, 2000, 2007), it was not until the onset of neoliberalism and aftermath of Hurricane Mitch in 1998 that Honduran migrants began to move to the U.S. in large numbers

(cf. Stonich 1991; Schmalzbauer 2005; Barrios 2009). Most Salvadorans and Hondurans in the U.S. move to cities such as Los Angeles, Houston, and Miami—where there is already a large Central American migrant community. In Washington state the Central American population is relatively small, although the Latino/a/x population is the fastest growing ethnic group in the state—comprising 13.1% of the total population (CHA-Washington 2020).

Anthropological attempts to understand this group of Latin Americans in the U.S. aim to study a diverse set of processes. Some scholars of Salvadoran and Honduran out-migration have focused specifically on how the lack of opportunities for young people and increased everyday forms of violence push people to leave Central America (Wolseth 2008; Reichman 2011; Dyrness 2012, 2014). Others have illuminated migrants’ paradoxical experiences of life once integrated into U.S. society—with a hegemonic discourse of inclusiveness on the one hand, and migrants’ actual lived experiences of exclusion and racism on the other (Coutin 1999, 2005; Schmalzbauer 2004, 2005, 2008; Alvarado et al. 2017; Cárdenas 2018). Still too, others have examined the contrast between the various ways migrants and their families in Central America imagine a “good life” in the U.S. and migrants’ actual lived experiences of underpaid and dangerous working conditions that do not allow them to fulfill their goals, especially if they are undocumented and struggling to meet their basic substance needs (e.g., Reichman 2011; Alvarado et al. 2017). Finally, scholars working in political-economy and world system theory frameworks have unveiled how the bodies of Salvadoran and Honduran migrants have been transformed or commodified by elites (e.g., Vogt 2013), in a world system that exploits the labor of poor individuals in both the “periphery” and “center” of global capitalist relations.

Our study draws upon knowledge produced by scholars of contemporary Central America about the various ways the U.S. has forged conditions for its own transnational corporations to profit in the isthmus, since at

least the early twentieth century—contributing to much of the extreme poverty that such capitalist relations produces for majority (see, for instance, Portillo-Villeda 2014a, 2014b; Phillips 2015, 2017). This resonates with our present endeavor since all of our Salvadoran and Honduran informants are also individuals who experienced these realities first-hand and decided to leave their countries. Our research participants are individuals whose labor was chronically underpaid in Central America, and remains underpaid in the U.S.

Our ethnographic research among this group of transnational migrants in western Washington engages these broad anthropological questions about people’s reasons for, and experiences with, international migration. In so doing, however, we also move beyond causational frameworks about why individuals leave their “sending” country (the “push” and “pull” factors of migration), to ask what differently-positioned individuals actually do once they arrive in the “receiving” country: how migrants navigate daily life in the U.S. and develop their own short-term and long-term goals, and how events from their lives in El Salvador and Honduras influence people’s socially-constructed ambitions. We consider valid and important those studies that examine the human experience of crossing the southern U.S. border clandestinely, but we also advocate for additional research into understanding the various ways that Honduran and Salvadoran migrants continue to make history once in the U.S. We therefore join other scholars of the Central American diaspora in shifting our focus “beyond civil wars and political factions to community emplacement and social justice within the United States” (Alvarado et al. 2017:ix). This shift demands we study individual choices and experiences.

Our focus on the agency of migrants aims to uplift the creative and adept ways that Hondurans and Salvadorans have been reading the post-2017 political landscape—the changes to immigration policy in the U.S. since the inauguration of Donald Trump, and the

accompanying increase in xenophobia and racism directed toward Central Americans (regardless of paperwork status). Rather than see Honduran and Salvadoran migrants as mere victims in a global system of structural inequality, we consider the various ways that they actively construct their individual lives between more than one nation-state, and use their agency to make conscious efforts toward realizing their goals. A focus on the human ability to achieve diverse notions of “the good life” amidst adverse structural conditions has been especially productive for understanding the everyday experiences of working-class and vulnerable migrants in particular, and something we believe the ethnographic method is well positioned to study (see, for example, the seminal work of Gomberg-Muñoz (2010) on the utility of an agency framework for understanding the complexities of Mexican busboys in a Chicago diner). By studying how differently-positioned individuals read the contemporary U.S. political landscape and envision possibilities in both sending and receiving countries, we seek to contribute to scholarly debates on how migrants take concerted actions in everyday contexts to achieve their familial and economic aims. How then should migrants be conceived, theoretically?

We begin with the premise that contemporary immigrant communities—in the U.S. or elsewhere—can no longer be considered “uprooted,” or to have completely severed ties with their countries of origin. Rather, we assume that Salvadoran and Honduran migrants actively construct some kind of *transnational* ties, meaning that they “forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement” (Basch et al. 1994:7; see also Schiller et al. 1995). Our project is thus an exercise in understanding the lived experience of sending remittances to, and remaining in contact with, family members in migrants’ countries of origin; becoming politically conscious about global processes that unfold in either or both countries; and developing individual goals that involve more than one nation-state. In sum, our objective is to study the various

ways that Salvadoran and Honduran migrants simultaneously build their lives in both North and Central American societies.

This focus on the agency of migrants in not severing ties and loyalties to either country moves beyond the assimilationist paradigm, once popular in anthropological studies of immigration. The present endeavor also represents a shift away from classic place-bound studies in the discipline as a whole (of, for instance, a village). Rather than study the dynamics of one location, our project aims to study a process—transnational migration—as it is experienced across space. In so doing we ask questions informed by economic and political processes in contemporary Honduran, Salvadoran, and U.S. societies, in order to study not just why people leave, but what characterizes their experiences with migration in the U.S., and the Pacific Northwest in particular. For instance, we see the phenomenon of gang violence in Central America as not just a reason why people leave, but part of how they envision the wellbeing of loved ones once in the U.S.—how this influences their decisions about remittance patterns, and any possible family visits. The global flow of policies and capital thus influences migrants’ living and employment conditions across national borders. At the same time we engage topics of long-standing and continued anthropological interest by considering variables to do with migrants’ identity, including how people’s varied gender roles and ethnic categories affect their experiences with migration—and in turn, how transnational migration itself influences these aspects of people’s identities.

In uplifting the agency migrants in choosing to move to and remain in the Pacific Northwest instead of other regions of the U.S., we learned that Hondurans and Salvadorans have a diverse set of reasons for settling in Washington state. Their reasons range from perceptions about the strong economy and job opportunities; to less competition with other undocumented migrants; to few encounters with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) officers; to the ability to get a driver’s license without legal residency

paperwork (which is now changing with the Real ID Act of 2005, see Goodell 2018); to simply the notion that “People from Washington are the most laid-back” (*La gente de Washington es la más tranquila*), as one Garifuna-Honduran restaurant owner in Burien so candidly captured [interview, September 5, 2018]. The Pacific Northwest region has a long-standing history as a “frontier space” of the U.S. nation. Newcomers and native-born residents alike tend to discourage government oversight in business and family affairs. At the same time, the perception that people from Washington state are less xenophobic and less overtly racist toward Central American migrants was commonly expressed among the majority of our research participants who had lived in than other parts of the U.S.

Research Sites, Positionality, and Methods

We spent the summer of 2018 conducting ethnographic research among Hondurans and Salvadorans who were already settled in the Pacific Northwest. All of our research participants had been in the U.S. since before 2017, which means they experienced living in the U.S. during previous periods of U.S. immigration policy. In 2018 our research participants were sharing with us their intimate stories of crossing the U.S.-Mexico border and settling in the Pacific Northwest during a moment of increased racism and xenophobia directed toward the Central American migrant community, much of which coincided with the first of several migrant “caravans” (already well underway by summer 2018). Our engaged research project also emerges from our positions as insider and semi-insider in this community, and our own long-term personal and professional commitments to Honduras, El Salvador, and their diasporic populations. Sandra Estrada was born in Olancho, Honduras, and migrated to Washington at a young age where she was raised in a Honduran-Salvadoran immigrant household. During the time of data collection Sandra was an undergraduate student; she regularly attends church and community

events within the Central American community in Tacoma. Her professor, Jordan Levy, has been doing engaged anthropological research in Valle and Choluteca, Honduras, on various political processes since the 2009 military coup. He is married to a Honduran woman from the region—now an immigrant to the U.S. That we as researchers each have family in Honduras, and Central American family members in Washington state, means that neither we nor our research participants approached these topics from a supposedly “objective” or completely “neutral” position. Rather, we believe it is our very positionality as members of this community and demonstrable dedication to justice for Central America and its diasporic populations, that facilitated our rapport and ability to interview Salvadoran and Honduran migrants during our contemporary historical conjuncture.

We are living in a moment of U.S. history characterized by heightened levels of nationalism and nativism; one cannot simply insert oneself into this migrant community and expect to collect ethnographic data without strong levels of trust. As others have convincingly argued, there are several theoretical and methodological advantages to engaged anthropology: the solidarity ethnographers demonstrate with their informants facilitates trust and access to ethnographic details they are not otherwise likely to obtain when dealing with controversial topics (cf. Nash 2007; see Kirsch 2018). In other words, we approached our fieldwork with explicit support for migrants.

Given the similar historical and contemporary political processes of both Central American countries that influence their out-migration patterns, and their people’s experiences in the diaspora, we decided to include both Salvadorans and Hondurans in a single study. In the Pacific Northwest, Hondurans and Salvadorans frequently eat at the same Central American food restaurants, attend the same churches, and social events. This allowed us to set up initial interviews through our pre-existing networks of friends and family, following which we received recommendations of who else to

interview as the news about our project began to “snowball.” Through our conversations in people’s homes, at restaurants, and other public spaces, we were able to ask how this migrant community manages livelihood strategies and navigates uncertainty—how they forge a life for themselves amidst increasing economic and political precarity.

While we didn’t directly ask about people’s immigration paperwork status, the topics that interviewees themselves brought up revealed to us that more than half of our participants were either undocumented, or were in some kind of “limbo status”—toward documentation, or toward having their legal status removed. To complement our semi-structured interviews we also attended migrant solidarity events outside the Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, and different public celebrations of Central American culture in the greater Seattle area. In total we interviewed thirteen different migrants—nine Salvadorans and four Hondurans; six of whom were female, and seven male. The following three vignettes underscore our findings on how Honduran and Salvadoran migrants use their agency to navigate contemporary political processes beyond their individual control. Topics to be examined include migrants’ access to healthcare under a privatized system linked to employment; the shifting criteria for “nexus” to obtain asylum status in the post-2017 political environment; and the recent removal of the Temporary Protected Status program for Central Americans.

Findings: Domestic Violence, Brain Cancer, and Forced Divestment from Washington

While many people from Honduras and El Salvador flee state-sponsored violence, drug-trafficking violence, or gang-related violence, we also heard stories about people fleeing from domestic violence. The case of Laura is one such example. Her childhood in El Salvador consisted of never knowing her biological father, and her mother seeking out male partners who could support her financially, but ultimately abused

her physically, and kicked her children out of the house. Laura therefore spent her childhood moving between her aunts’ homes and the houses of the various abusive men with whom her mother had relations. Domestic violence was rampant during Laura’s childhood—she was threatened by several men, prompting her to flee home on more than one occasion; ultimately one of her mother’s boyfriends was murdered. Laura had hoped for a life without violence when she married and became financially independent from her mother. But Laura’s husband repeatedly beat her and raped her. She had attempted to leave him on several occasions but could not find adequate support for doing so successfully. Especially as neoliberal governments reduce expenditures for social services, no women’s shelters or social workers existed in the city where Laura lived, and she did not feel that law enforcement officials would step in to help a battered woman. Laura’s husband would not allow her to use contraceptives and she became pregnant after one such instance of rape. After her daughter was born, during one episode of alcohol and drug abuse, her husband attempted to murder both her and the baby. Laura managed to escape and sought refuge in a neighbor’s house.

With the help of her neighbor, Laura was able to call someone in the U.S. who arranged for a *coyote* (human trafficker) to bring her across the U.S. border. She had never before considered fleeing from her country, but after that incident felt that she had no other options. Given her socioeconomic background and lived experiences similar to those of her mother (of depending upon abusive men for economic support), Laura had no previous travel experience, much less internationally; she never desired to leave her home in order to work in the U.S. Yet she did not have anyone in El Salvador who was able to help her, or to physically defend against her abusive husband. He knew this, and would constantly tell her, “*no tienes ni perro que te ladra*” (an idiomatic phrase, which roughly translates to “you don’t even have a dog who will bark to defend you”)

[Interview, June 28, 2018]. Laura thus came to the United States fleeing for her life, and seeking asylum for both herself and her daughter. At the time of her departure from El Salvador, Laura was confident that once on U.S. soil her case would be successful. She knew of course that her declaration to U.S. immigration authorities was sincere—because she really was fleeing for her life. And she believed in the U.S. asylum system to defend her against the high likelihood of torture and death that she would endure if forced to return to El Salvador.

The clandestine journey itself took her through Mexico via land, which was very dangerous and difficult—especially since she was traveling with an infant. Other migrants along the way would tell her that she would surely be the first to get caught because of the baby. This, however, did not deter her in the least. Laura kept repeating to herself, “*mi hija va a tener un mejor futuro*” (my daughter will have a better future) [Interview, June 28, 2018]. She eventually made it to Washington, D.C. where she had an aunt who received her. Knowledgeable about the dynamics of femicide in her home country, Laura mentioned in her interview that at least one woman a day dies in El Salvador, and how she hoped that this statistic would help advance the credibility of her asylum case. In fact, the actual statistic is worse than what Laura imagines: According to the Institute of Legal Medicine, there were 468 femicides in 2017—that is one every 18 hours (Griffin 2018). Yet even once in the U.S., Laura was not entirely safe. Her ex-husband managed to find where she was; he would send her and her boyfriend death threats.

At one point, Laura’s ex-husband attempted to cross the U.S. border himself with the expressed intention of killing her, but he was detained at the Mexican border and was sent back to El Salvador. Anthropologist Lynn Stephen has demonstrated through her work serving as expert witness for asylum cases for Mexican migrants in Washington and Oregon, the intersectionality between institutional violence and domestic violence, and the extent to which international

migration does not necessarily solve domestic violence:

We need to explain both as expert witnesses and anthropologists how gendered violence is not simply violence that targets women because they are women and continues because of how men and others are socialized to treat women as disposable and unimportant. We also have to demonstrate the ways that states, police, local government, and justice officials perpetuate and sanction this violence. (2016:161)

This understanding resonates with Laura’s situation, since she fled from El Salvador not just because she was a woman, but because she lacked access to state institutions that could protect her, and financial capital to simply live on her own. We must therefore understand the attempted murder of Laura and her child in light of Laura being someone without a large kin support network; as someone who never graduated from high school; and, as mother in Salvadoran society, as someone who would have little chance of obtaining any kind of viable employment that could provide enough income to support her child.

At the time that Laura sought legal immigration paperwork by applying for asylum, these variables would have likely convinced a judge that she was worthy of asylum—or another kind of legal protection in the U.S. (such as the “withholding of removal and protection under the convention against torture”). At the time of our interview with Laura, however, Laura revealed to us that her asylum case was still in limbo. She paused our conversation to communicate that she is especially worried since her ex-husband might be able to find her—especially if she were deported to El Salvador. That her case is still pending is not surprising to us as researchers since Trump-appointed attorney general Jeff Sessions no longer considers individual household violence (and gang violence) as valid criteria for

asylum in the United States (see Benner and Dickerson 2018). This new legislation means that Laura may not receive asylum at all (unless her legal team can argue that she is subject to other, more systemic reasons for her persecution based on her “particular social group,” which is becoming increasingly difficult to prove).

For now, Laura remains in Washington state without legal immigration paperwork and is thus subject to deportation. Yet while the Trump Administration challenges the validity of Laura’s need for asylum, Laura herself emphasized in our interview how she does not want to “be a burden for the president” (*ser una carga para el presidente*) [Interview, June 28, 2018]. Laura’s comments go directly against much of the current rhetoric about migrants as “taking advantage of the U.S.” since she is suggesting she would continue to provide for herself and not depend upon any U.S. social service or welfare program. At the time of our interview, Laura spoke of how she only wants to depend upon herself, “*para seguir sacando adelante a mis hijos*” (in order to continue to bring her children forward) [Interview, June 28, 2018]. In order to do so, however, Laura will need domestic violence to once again be a criterion for asylum.

While not all women are persecuted in Salvadoran society, the high femicide rates and particulars of Laura’s situation make clear that she lacks institutional resources to escape the threat of violence. An intersectionality approach thus reminds us that Laura’s situation cannot be reduced to any one aspect of her identity, but rather, needs to be seen in conjunction with other interconnected forms of institutional injustice. In El Salvador, the police are unlikely to intervene to defend Laura and her daughter—even if they believed her story about abuse, which they may not. For all these reasons, Laura was indeed fleeing from structurally-imposed dangers to her life in El Salvador, where she had very limited access to public education, social services, or employment opportunities that could have helped to prevent, or at least alleviate, such threats to her life. So long as she is undocumented and thus lacks access to

basic public services in the U.S., however, such structural violence that disproportionately affects women will continue to pose a major challenge to Laura’s wellbeing.

If deported to El Salvador it is very likely that Laura’s husband would find her. This is because her resettlement would depend on her own pre-established network of family and friends and the news of her presence could easily reach her abusive husband. She told us during her interview that one of her goals is to get permanent residency paperwork, which would allow her to raise her children in the Pacific Northwest, where she believes she would have the best access to employment opportunities and a good quality of life—that is, once she has legal documents. Until she gets permanent residency, however, Laura continues to face an uncertain future while living in a transnational limbo space. Yet she remains resilient and continues to exhaust all resources in order to make a life for herself.

Such intersectionality about who is likely to be most affected by structural injustices in Central America can also be seen in the case of Mario. As discussed in the opening of this article, he did manage to graduate from high school but could not find viable employment. And he lived in a neighborhood affected by gang activity, where drug trafficking was already a common livelihood strategy when he came of age. He felt neoliberal gendered pressure to provide for his family—even when no viable employment opportunities existed. But thankfully for Mario, he had the foresight to understand that selling illicit drugs would have likely brought him more problems. He chose instead to reform his life. To do this, however, he knew he would have to migrate without paperwork to the U.S., and eventually to Washington.

In his interview Mario told us that upon arriving to Sea-Tac airport, he had three priorities: get a job, get a state-issued driver’s license, and find a church. Churches in western Washington that offer services in Spanish also perform an important social function for the Central American migrant community—providing resources for job trainings, immigration

paperwork assistance, and English classes. At first Mario thought Washington state would be only a temporary home, somehow hoping that things in Florida would resolve themselves. He did not know anyone in Washington, and he thus spent his first few days living in a hotel while he looked for work with a bicycle. His determination and resiliency amidst structural difficulties meant that he would ride the bicycle to different warehouses throughout the Seattle-Tacoma area, and with his limited English, use hand signals to communicate to employers that he knew how to weld metal. But these welding jobs were occasional, temporary, and always under-the-table.

Los empleadores gringos me trabajaban mal (the American employers would work me poorly). *Yo rogaba a Dios que hubiera uno donde hablan español, y me respondió: hubo uno... ¡pero no había trabajo!* (I begged God that there would be one where they speak Spanish, and he answered me: there was one... but there was no work!) [Interview, July 12, 2018]

To make matters more difficult for Mario, in the midst of his struggles to find employment in western Washington state, he discovered that cancerous cells in his body he thought he had previously overcome did in fact return. In our interview, he told us about this additional difficulty he experienced in Florida, well before the incident with traffic police: he had been diagnosed with brain cancer. Getting access to proper healthcare in order to manage cancer was a real challenge; Mario had neither legal immigration paperwork, nor health insurance. Yet he was cognizant of how hospitals could not legally turn someone away because of inability to pay or because of their immigration status. He had therefore gone to a hospital in Florida and simply accrued the debt. By 2015 when he moved to Washington, apparently the cancer had returned.

Mario's story of surviving life-threatening illness in the U.S. illuminates his savvy ability to navigate the privatized healthcare system

that neoliberalism has produced for the U.S. population—where access to affordable health insurance is linked to employment (and permanent residency immigration paperwork). Upon learning that his cancer had returned, Mario went to a public library in south King County where he sought resources on how to obtain health insurance. He applied for and received COBRA insurance (through the Consolidated Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act) in order to gain coverage and access to his medication. Striking is his ability to seek out resources on his own, and to adeptly navigate the U.S. healthcare system.

At the time of our interview he had been off chemotherapy for five months. He spoke about the difficulties of the U.S. privatized and for-profit health care system, and how having cancer also meant not being able to send remittances to his family in Honduras—especially his mother and his daughter who depend upon that income for their subsistence needs. The COBRA insurance does not cover all of his medications, which means that Mario often cannot send any money at all. He recalled one such occasion in our interview:

Mi hija ahora vive en San Pedro Sula. Yo siempre le he mandado dinero, pero una vez estaba cumpliendo años y yo no tenía para mandarle. (My daughter lives in San Pedro Sula now. I have always sent her money, but one time it was her birthday and I didn't have anything to send her.) [Interview, July 12, 2018]

Given his undocumented status, Mario cannot realistically visit family in Honduras since he would risk not being able to make it back to Washington. But he maintains in contact with his family on a regular basis—even now, 16 years since he left La Ceiba. Mario's dream is for his daughter to come visit—that is, if his ex in-laws would let her travel here, and if she could get a visa to do so. Although he does not have his daughter in Washington with him, Mario believes that he can still give her a better life in Honduras than the one she would have if she

were not receiving the remittance money that he sends back. While so much of the U.S. population struggles under a neoliberal healthcare system (as under-insured persons whose insurance plans have such high co-payments and charges it discourages doctor visits, or as simply people without insurance), Mario's story illuminates how much more difficult these situations are if you are undocumented. Yet rather than see Mario as a mere victim of globalized neoliberal structural variables in both Honduras and the United States, we can also understand how Mario has persistently and creatively used his agency to read this political landscape, and then make efforts to obtain his own socially-constructed goals with migration to Washington.

At age 34 Mario now has family obligations in Washington state, having married into a Mexican family. He also still supports his daughter in Honduras. During our interview he reflected on the extent to which his life has changed with migration, explaining that:

En Honduras no pasé ni un día con mi familia, sólo navidad... siempre andaba en la calle. Pero aquí no, siempre estoy o trabajando o con mi esposa y mi suegra. Y me siento que por fin tengo a una familia que me cuida. (In Honduras I didn't spend even a single day with my family, perhaps only Christmas... I was always in the streets. But here no. Here I'm either working, or with my wife and my mother-in-law. I finally feel as if I have a family to take care of me. [Interview, July 12, 2018])

The gendered practice of men loitering in the streets is no longer a part of Mario's routine. In Washington state, by contrast, he goes home to his family after work. In his interview, Mario told us that his ultimate goal is to someday save enough to money buy a plot of land in both Honduras and in Washington state, but that such a goal has become difficult because of his health and undocumented status. In summer of 2018, Mario had a deportation order—the result of having neglected to go to the traffic court

hearing in Florida. Yet neither the deportation order nor the brain cancer has stopped Mario from pursuing his dreams.

For now Mario views Washington as his new home, where he continues to work in welding. Moving from his troubles in La Ceiba to a more comfortable, albeit still difficult, family lifestyle in south King County should be seen as a function of Mario's agency and perseverance in overcoming the abandonment of youth by the neoliberal Honduran state (where educational opportunities and social programs are increasingly limited and difficult for the majority to access) and the neoliberal U.S. state (where access to healthcare is linked not only to having a job with good benefits, but also one's immigration status).

Such resiliency and desire to remain in Washington state can also be seen among Hondurans and Salvadorans who have been living in the U.S. with Temporary Protected Status (TPS)—a program established in 1990 for individuals whose lives are in danger in their home countries (due to either violence or natural disasters). Hundreds of thousands of individuals have been living in the U.S. with this legal status—some for well over a decade, and many now have U.S.-born children. Yet with the Trump administration's decision to remove TPS for Hondurans and Salvadorans, an estimated 86,000 Hondurans, and 200,000 Salvadorans registered with this program will lose their legal right to work and reside in a country they now call home. (At the time of our interview, the program was set to end for Hondurans in January 2020—a termination date which the government is now reassessing, see Jordan 2018a, 2018b; USCIS 2020.)

The case of Josué and Gloria highlights their agency as TPS-holding Hondurans in knowing how to navigate the exclusion and injustice in contemporary U.S. society that comes when the government attempts to dismantle a long-standing legal migration program. The couple moved to the U.S. from their homes just outside of El Progreso and La Ceiba, Honduras a little more than 20 years

ago. They have spent most of their time in the U.S. living in Washington state, where they are raising their son, who was born in south King County. At the time of our interview with Josué and Gloria they were forced to rearrange their long-term plans and negotiate uncertainty both in the U.S. and in Honduras, unsure of what they would do.

As researchers, we came to interview Josué and Gloria at their apartment. We arrived with coffee and pastries, which prompted a conversation about all the Honduran foods they long for, and what foods their families would prepare for them while growing up in the Honduran provinces of Yoro and Atlántida. It was Josué's family relationships that brought him to Washington state. He had originally migrated to California, without paperwork, where he struggled to find dignified work. His brother told him about how much better things were in Washington state—how he had not experienced any encounters with ICE, experienced less competition with other undocumented migrants, and where the local economy seemed to be good. His brother was able to help Josué gain employment in a bakery, even though in Honduras Josué had worked in a carpentry workshop and had no prior experience baking. Josué spent six years working in this bakery, during which time he applied for and was granted TPS.

As his ties to the U.S. developed, his son was born in Washington state, and he and Gloria continued to make a life for themselves in Auburn—imagining their future in the Pacific Northwest. As Josué put it: “*Nunca nos sentimos más en casa que en los Estados Unidos, por los vínculos*” (We've never felt more at home than in the United States, because of our ties here) [Interview, July 27, 2018]. Josué emphasized to us that returning to Honduras right now could be very dangerous for him, telling us: “*No tengo miedo a la pobreza, sino a la violencia*” (I'm not afraid of poverty, but of violence) [Interview, July 27, 2018]. Josué's comments prompted a conversation about the increase in gang activity in their hometowns of El Progreso and La Ceiba, realities that resonate with current

anthropological efforts to understand such everyday forms of violence (see, for instance, Wolseth 2005; Pine 2010; Phillips 2015, 2017).

At the time of our interview, Josué and Gloria continued to debate how to respond to the removal of TPS. They commented how their immigration lawyer reminds the couple that their son could soon sponsor their application for legal permanent residency; he was 19 years old at the time, and at 21 would become eligible. This resolution seemed more feasible to Josué than begging his employer to sponsor him to get a work visa; their main dilemma was thus in how to wait out the next two years [Interview, July 27, 2018]. Josué mentioned that if he were to be deported Gloria would stay with their son. Another option is simply to remain in Washington and “*vivir en las sombras*” (live in the shadows) as Josué put it [Interview, July 27, 2018].

During their interview the couple emphasized how they have never had any problems with the law or otherwise, and had never done anything that would bring any additional attention about their presence in the U.S. But they worry about the increase in xenophobia and vigilance over immigrants in general, especially Latinos with darker skin tones. In summer 2018 they were carefully thinking through potential worst-case scenarios, using their agency to read the political landscape and make decisions. If one of them were deported, this could negatively affect their eventual application for legal permanent residency. Despite the uncertainty that has overcome their future plans, Josué maintains a positive outlook on the situation. When he looked at their future he said, “*Yo no me veo deportado, yo me veo aquí. Nunca nos sentíamos mas en casa que en los Estados Unidos*” (I do not see myself deported, I see myself here. We will never feel more at home than in the United States) [Interview, July 27, 2018].

At the time of our interview, the couple had still not reached a decision about what to do. Josué talked with us about how all they could do right now was save up money. Josué's goal was to therefore have at least two years-worth

of rent saved up for his wife and his son, and to simply spend as much time with his family as possible (fearing that he could be deported once his TPS was removed). Such precarity and uncertainty—of not knowing whether or not they should or would return to Honduras, or for how long—thus leads to less investment in Washington: Josué and Gloria no longer plan to buy a house, and their son's plans to go to college are now uncertain (despite his excellent grades and the likelihood he would get a scholarship and be academically successful in college). Paradoxically, they described a situation whereby Washington state has treated them well and allowed them to contribute to U.S. society as a whole. As Josué told us, "*Estamos en el lugar correcto. Nos sentimos parte de esta gran nación*" (We're in the right place. We feel that we are part of this great nation) [Interview, July 27, 2018].

Josué and Gloria continue to envision their future in Washington state and pursue goals toward that end, even though they understand that those plans are always tentative (just as the plans of so many Hondurans living in Honduras are tentative, albeit due to everyday violence and not the threat of deportation). They continue to paradoxically attempt to save for the unknown and also establish themselves in Washington state. As a result, the couple hasn't been able to send as much remittance money to Honduras as they once did—something that could complicate their possible forced return since their relationships there have changed over the years. Some people in Honduras have even blamed them for not helping out as much as they were expected to. In describing to us how they fear returning home empty-handed, Josué recalled a family member of theirs in Honduras whom he suspects would be upset with them if they were come back now. As Josué put it, they would tell them: "*Tanto tiempo allá y no me ayudaste... ¿ahora quieres venir aquí?*" (So much time over there and you didn't help me... now you want to come here?) [Interview, July 27, 2018].

Situations such as that of Josué and Gloria are illuminative of how the maintenance of some familial relationships are dependent upon

continued remittances that fulfill expectations of reciprocal relations. And yet, as the couple revealed to us, splitting their finances between Washington and Honduras has meant that there have been times in their lives when they had to "*vivir en lo escaso*" (live in scarcity), as Gloria put it [Interview, July 27, 2018]. They are already investing in a *potential* future in Honduras for themselves and their extended family members. Even though they would like to imagine their futures in the Pacific Northwest and have made concerted efforts to do so, they are now forced to divest from Washington state. The couple also fears returning to a context of everyday forms of violence and to a country they hadn't been living in for such a long time.

Political alliances and state practices continue to shift quite rapidly in Honduras, especially after the June 2009 military coup and the 10 years of post-coup militarized neoliberal governance (see Portillo-Villeda 2014a; Phillips 2015, 2017). Josué and Gloria have already been well established in the Pacific Northwest—having left Honduras in 1999. If deported, they would thus be forced to reintegrate into a society less familiar to them than when they left, where new social movements and struggle for change emerged in their absence. At the same time, post-coup policies of governance have significantly altered everyday life in Honduras. Josué and Gloria's story thus highlights how, while migrants do forge transnational ties of *some* kind, we would be incorrect to assume there is always a strong maintenance of family ties. Instead, their goals up until this point have always revolved around building a life for themselves in Washington state, and supporting their son's future in the Pacific Northwest.

The case of Josué and Gloria also highlights how while Central American transnational migrants may send remittances to help family members in their countries of origin achieve some kind of upward mobility (to open a business, or to remodel a house, for instance); they may also send remittances out of a sense of desperation for their loved ones' immediate wellbeing. Remit-

tances can also serve as a method for migrants to plan for their possible return by maintaining on good terms with friends and family in their countries of origin, thus strengthening their social safety-nets—a shortcoming that Josué and Gloria admitted to, because of their attempts to build a life for their families in the receiving country; they had hoped to send their son to college in Washington state. Other interviewees in our project also highlighted the paradox of on the one hand, feeling joy in being able to contribute to household expenses in their countries of origin, but also the burden of not having significant portions of their income for their increasingly costly living expenses in the U.S. Similar to Josué and Gloria, some interviewees also reflected on familial pressures they felt—the perceptions of their families about how “easy” life is in the U.S., and their own fears of negative repercussions if they do not meet expectations.

Discussion: Toward Ethnography of Central Americans Living in Post-2017 U.S.

The ethnographic stories recounted here add not only a voice to migrants but also a sense of their agency once living in U.S. society—perspectives that are often excluded from mainstream journalistic analyses of Central American “caravans,” detention centers, and deportations. Such processes are important to study, but we would be incorrect to assume the Central American migrant experience begins and ends with crossing an international border. Hondurans and Salvadorans are still making history once inside the U.S. The ethnographic record on their experiences is exceptionally limited to previous periods (exceptions include Coutin 2000, 2007; Schmalzbauer 2005; and Alvarado et al. 2017, but these studies either focus on Guatemalans, or date back to as early as the turn of the century). We continue to know even less about the everyday lived experiences of Central Americans in the Pacific Northwest. Contributions from political science and journalism provide valuable statistics about macro-level

political process, and news as stories unfold (e.g., Fabian 2018; PBS NewsHour 2018; TRNN 2018). We believe however that the ethnographic approach is best suited to say something of the lived experience of Central American migration to the U.S., and illuminate some of the complexities of everyday life for migrants who are already living in the U.S. While quantitative analyses are valuable, only the ethnographic method can relay the lived experiences of an undocumented person who navigates privatized healthcare to battle brain cancer; how a woman fleeing from domestic violence and entrusting the U.S. with her life and that of her daughter reacts to new criteria for asylum; or how a family is forced to divest from Washington with the news of the end to a long-standing legal migration program.

Our focus on the agency of Hondurans and Salvadorans illuminates how contemporary transnational migrants attempt to take control of their own futures through reflexive livelihood strategies as they strive to make a living and remain in the Pacific Northwest. Even though Laura is cognizant that there is no guarantee of approval for her asylum case, her persistence is demonstrative of her imagining of a future in the Pacific Northwest and her concerted actions toward achieving that goal. Yet if she doesn’t get her case approved then she will continue living “*en las sombras*” as Josué and Gloria are likely to do once their TPS is removed. They will continue to live in limbo status of “undocumented,” just like Mario, with an uncertain future.

Political crises and precarity continue in Central America as the neoliberal governments of Honduras and El Salvador reduce their expenditures in public services—and largely abandon the poor, government officials and elite members of the capitalist class alike are cognizant of the \$3.77 billion in remittance money that currently goes to Honduras and \$4.61 billion that goes to El Salvador every year (PEW Research Center 2019). In essence, we have a situation whereby Central American migrants in the U.S., often undocumented and working for meager wages, are subsidizing very basic public services in Honduras and El Salvador—by providing a steady

income via remittance money through which the poor in Central America can purchase their basic necessities. In this sense, it is doubtful that the Honduran or Salvadoran governments really want to stop all forms of out-migration—since it has become such a major source of revenue for Central American countries, just as it is doubtful that the U.S. government really wants to stop all undocumented migration as U.S. employers have seen advantages to hiring undocumented laborers—where they are often paid less, while laboring in undesirable or even dangerous working conditions.

Latin Americanist scholars have continually demonstrated the extent to which unemployment and precarious working conditions in Honduras and El Salvador are exacerbating problems of gang violence, and how state-sponsored repression has worsened in recent years (in Honduras, especially since the 2009 military coup which ousted the one government that advocated for reform programs for young men who resort to gangs). The increase in violence, unemployment, and political uncertainty in recent years has left so many Salvadorans and Hondurans in desperate conditions, while the various movements of popular resistance and struggles for social change (e.g., Portillo-Villeda 2014b; Phillips 2017) may very well seem foreign to someone like Josué or Gloria who has not been living through that rapidly shifting political environment. Work and social life in Central American societies thus revolve around the maintenance of relationships that in the case of long-term migration, are relations that can become altered—sometimes even severed when migrants do not remit as much money as expected. As the Trump administration continues to deport Central American migrants, more ethnographic research on the experiences of returnees is also needed to understand how exactly such individuals reintegrate into a society that in the eyes of the state is legally their country of citizenship, yet socially and culturally rather foreign after having lived in the U.S. for so long (see, for example, Golash-Boza (2013) on the alienation of returnees to El Salvador).

Hondurans and Salvadorans living in Central America are increasingly developing strategies for how to leave their country—amidst the U.S. response to militarize the border and separate families—and Salvadorans and Hondurans living in the U.S. are now developing adept strategies to remain here and successfully avoid their possible deportation. “*Se necesita ser astuto*” (one has to be astute), as Josué put it—a phrase that highlights the agency of the Central American migrant community. Amidst the violence and poverty augmented in Central America vis-à-vis neoliberalism, these individuals have used their agency to seek refuge not just anywhere in the United States, but in Washington state where they seek to establish themselves and invest their futures. Despite the constant threat of deportation for some, and the increase in xenophobia directed to all, Central American migrants are contributing to the economy of Washington state. Some are business owners who provide services and employment opportunities for the same Central American migrant community—while paying taxes, providing jobs, and contributing to long-standing traditions of becoming an entrepreneur in Washington state. Current attacks against this community hinder these efforts.

That the U.S. neglected asylum status to Salvadorans fleeing a civil war it contributed to, and that Honduran and Salvadoran citizens have been removed from TPS—a long-standing *legal* migration program—highlights how ruling elites in charge of governing can forge the conditions necessary to create what Nicholas De Genova has aptly calls, “the legal production of migrant ‘illegality’” (2002:429). The removal of this legal program, and the altering of qualifications for asylum, demonstrates how the state itself—as a set of governing institutions and as a culturally-produced idea—establishes what activities are considered within the realm of the “legal” or the “illicit,” highlighting how these very categories are subject to change:

“Illegality” is the product of immigration laws—not merely in the abstract sense that without the law,

nothing could be construed to be outside of the law; nor simply in the generic sense that immigration law constructs, differentiates, and ranks various categories of “aliens”—but in the more profound sense that the history of deliberate interventions that have revised and reformulated the law has entailed an active process of inclusions through “illegalization.” (De Genova 2002:439)

We are living in a moment of heightened nativism and increased xenophobia in U.S. society, which, while not limited to any one group is so often directed toward and experienced among the Central American community. U.S. state officials are thus currently forging the conditions of exclusions and “illegality” to which De Genova alludes, thereby criminalizing migration (cf. Heyman 1999). The irony is that the U.S. government has long been a proponent of open borders in Central America—that is, open to U.S. transnational corporations to do business abroad, and open to importing goods produced in Central America to be consumed in the U.S. It has thus been acceptable for capital and commodities to freely cross borders, but not for Central American people—to sell their labor in the U.S. or simply flee from violence.

At the same time that the U.S. forges conditions of illegality and deportability for Central American migrants, government officials in El Salvador and Honduras are aware of both the reasons why people are fleeing, and the high amount of remittance dollars that flow into the local economy. But with the Trump Administration, gone are the days when Central American governments can ask the U.S. to continue TPS for “development” or “humanitarian” reasons (see, for example, El Heraldito 2014, 2016a, 2016b, 2018, La Prensa 2014a, 2014b), as has consistently been the case since the programs’ passing in 1990. As self-serving governing officials in El Salvador and Honduras continue to be granted impunity for violent crimes (see, for instance, Phillips 2015), the individual migrants recounted here fled

a state unwilling to invest in social programs that could alleviate poverty, all while the Trump administration uses racist fear tactics to paint an image of a “crisis”—devoid of U.S. culpability in supporting neoliberal policies and the military industrial complex in Central America that has helped to create the very conditions from which people are fleeing. The discourse of migrants composing an “invasion” of the United States (Fabian 2019) is thus disconnected from the Salvadoran and Honduran realities of poverty and violence from which individuals are seeking refuge.

Engaged scholars of Central American migration must study these processes across space and be willing to take action, when asked to do so by the communities we work with. This may include serving as expert witnesses for asylum cases when migrants are faced with deportation orders, or becoming informed academic signatories for denunciation letters and reports that debunk the notion that the U.S. is unable to accept so many Central Americans, or that deterrence via the desert (or a wall) is an effective way to prevent migration (cf. De León 2015). Conditions in Central America would have to first improve in order to decrease the amount of people fleeing from violence and extreme poverty. Scholars of this process must therefore continue to make connections between the kinds of obstacles that the working class and peasantry face in Central America, and those that Salvadoran and Honduran migrants face once in route through Mexico. How these experiences may change under the government of Lopez-Obrador, and while crossing the actual U.S. border—amidst a fabricated “crisis” and proposed wall, will be a particularly fruitful area of research. But we also need more studies about the various obstacles Central Americans face once they are actually living and working here in the U.S., where they are still using their agency to make history.

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