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## There are the Ones that Migrate and There are the Ones that Flee: The Case of Honduran Migrants and Refugees

Meylin Y. Colindres

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***There are the Ones that Migrate and There are the Ones that Flee:  
The Case of Honduran Migrants and Refugees***

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
and  
Multidisciplinary Studies  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2022



*Para ti, mi ángel, que me cuidas desde el cielo. Te amo y te extraño profundamente. Este proyecto es tan tuyo como mío.*



## ***Para mi familia***

### ***Para mis padres Ruth y Arturo***

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## INTRODUCTION

no one leaves home unless  
home is the mouth of a shark  
you only run for the border  
when you see the whole city running as well

- Warsan Shire, *Home*

In November of 2015, Yohely, a 15-year-old Honduran girl, crossed the U.S.-Mexico southern border and, along with her father and older sister, requested asylum from U.S. officials. When the U.S. asylum officer asked her why she had fled Honduras, she replied, “because they want to kill me.” She did not know who wanted to kill her; she only knew that she had to run for her life. Yohely was a witness to her uncle’s assassination and was being persecuted for it. Yohely said she and her family did not find protection from the police and were forced to leave the country to protect their lives.

Yohely was from a small town in the center of Honduras; she loved reading and learning about ways to help her community. Her dream was to become a doctor and work in the rural areas of Honduras where there is an enormous lack of health care. Her dream, however, was obstructed by her unexpected and forced migration. The night of the assassination of her uncle, whom she loved as a brother, changed the course of her life. The same people who assassinated her uncle wanted to harm Yohely and her sister. The following day, one of the police officers taking notes on the case secretly approached Yohely’s grandfather and told him, “You need to take them out of the country; we can not protect them.” Yohely never went back to school or saw her friends again. Her father, who had crossed the border before Yohely to provide a better life for his kids, took a plane back to Honduras one more time and crossed the border. They tried to obtain visas, but they did not have the luxury of time. They needed to run. Yohely did not know what she was running from. She only knew she needed to run.

The day she left Honduras, her world collapsed: she was afraid of what she could endure on the journey. At such a young age, she knew the danger of crossing, because most of her family were border crossers. She had heard the many stories of people being kidnaped, girls sexually assaulted, and people disappearing and dying in the desert. She knew of the ones who

made it, but she also knew of those who came back home in a coffin and the ones that were lost in the journey. Despite this, she knew she needed to be strong and courageous to keep running. While traveling, Yohely almost lost her life in two car accidents, encountered gangs and drug traffickers, walked the hot desert, and slept in the cold when the sun went down. She crossed the border and ran even when she could no longer run.

After almost a month of crossing multiple borders of different dimensions, Yohely was finally reunited with her family. Yohely's mom could finally rest, knowing that her kids were safe. Yohely, on the other hand, could not sleep that night thinking about all the things she saw while crossing. She felt overwhelmed and numb due to all the things that had happened in her life in a short amount of time. Three years later, Yohely was living in Queens, NY, waiting for her asylum application to be granted when she was confronted by the rising hate speech among U.S citizens in response to the 2018-2019 Central American migrant "caravans." Some of the daily hatred and comments she remembered were "they are an invasion of our country," "bad thugs," "criminals," and many other comments full of hatred. As an asylum seeker herself, she knew that people in the caravans were running away for reasons similar to her own and that of her family's.

One young girl's story of exodus was repeating itself, but this time it was multiplied in many many other people's stories. Although it is hard to give a specific account of how many people were traveling in the Central American migrant caravans, some news stations reported that between 2018 to 2019, one of the biggest migrant caravans had surpassed 7,000 people.<sup>1</sup> As the caravans became larger and more visible, everyone asked questions such as, "Why are they leaving their homes?" "What is happening in their home countries?" And why are they running

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<sup>1</sup> "The Migrant Caravans: A Common Road toward Different Fates," *Reuters*, October 10, 2019, sec. americas-test-2. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-immigration-profiles-introduction-idUSKBN1WP1GB>.

away?”<sup>2</sup> Entire families from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were traveling by foot more than 4,000 km (2,500 miles) to the U.S.-Mexico border. News reports alleged that the migrant caravans started on October 12, 2018, in San Pedro Sula, Honduras. San Pedro Sula was considered the “murder capital of the world” during the early 2010s.<sup>3</sup> According to the report, about 160 Hondurans left the murder capital “in hopes of arriving to present themselves for asylum in Mexico or the United States.”<sup>4</sup>

Because the Central American Migrant Caravans originated in Honduras, I became interested in studying Honduran migration specifically in the past decade. My thesis focuses on understanding the causes and roots of migration from Honduras post the 2009 Honduran military coup. I intend to demonstrate that migration and displacement from Honduras in the past decade have roots in Honduras’s political fragility. I explain how the political violence, lack of democracy, and corruption turned Honduras into one of the most dangerous and poorest countries in the world.<sup>5</sup> I discuss how these factors have contributed enormously to Honduran people fleeing the country.

To answer why Honduran migrants and refugees have fled Honduras in the past decade, I take two different but equally essential approaches. First, I utilize the knowledge of academia to discuss what other scholars have found about the causes and roots of migration from Honduras. And second, I use *Testimonios*, “an account told in the first person by a narrator who is the real

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<sup>2</sup> “Honduran Migrants: ‘We Left Because We Had To,’” *BBC News*, November 18, 2016, sec. Latin America & Caribbean. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-37935357>.

<sup>3</sup> Sonia Nazario, “Opinion | How the Most Dangerous Place on Earth Got Safer,” *The New York Times*, August 11, 2016, sec. Opinion, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/14/opinion/sunday/how-the-most-dangerous-place-on-earth-got-a-little-bit-safer.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Dara Lind, “The Migrant Caravan, Explained,” *Vox*, October 24, 2018. <https://www.vox.com/2018/10/24/18010340/caravan-trump-border-honduras-mexico>.

<sup>5</sup> “Honduras, One of the Most Dangerous Countries for Human Rights Defenders – Experts Warn,” OHCHR, accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2016/08/honduras-one-most-dangerous-countries-human-rights-defenders-experts-warn>.

protagonist or witness of events,”<sup>6</sup> to carefully construct and gather knowledge about migration from Honduras from the perspective of those who have experienced it.

In my first chapter, I study the history of Honduras politics following the 2009 military coup and its aftermath to understand the roots of corruption, poverty, weak institutions, and violence and how all of these have caused forced migration from Honduras in the last decade. The chapter is divided into five sections: 1) Background information on Honduras, 2) U.S.-Honduras relations, 3) 2009 military coup, 4) The Juan Orlando Hernández’s corrupt regime, and 5) Honduras as a narco-state. All these sections contribute to the overall understanding of the fragility of Honduras as a nation-state. Throughout the chapter, I emphasize that all the governments in place post the 2009 military coup have been a continuation of the reproduction of violence after the coup. I analyze the way in which the fragility of democratic institutions has caused both institutional and physical violence. I intend to demonstrate that migrants and refugees, whether they were in caravans or by themselves, ran from totalitarian regimes in the past decade.

In my second chapter, I take a different approach to understanding the causes and roots of migration and displacement from Honduras. I use *testimonios* as a narrative and methodology to construct and cultivate a different type of knowledge about migration. In essence, *testimonios* has its origins in the Latin American history of struggle, especially in marginalized collective like indigenous groups and others. *Testimonios* call for attention to certain issues and demand the recognition of people’s knowledge and experiences as factual and truthful.<sup>7</sup> *Me llamo Rigoberta Menchú y así me nació la conciencia* by Guatemalan indigenous activist Rigoberta Menchú is

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<sup>6</sup> Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez, “*Testimonio*: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (July 2012): 525–38, 527. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.698571>.

<sup>7</sup> Claudia G. Cervantes-Soon, “*Testimonios* of Life and Learning in the Borderlands: Subaltern Juárez Girls Speak,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (July 2012): 373–91, 374. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.698>.

perhaps one of the primary examples of the concept and practice of *testimonios*. Menchú shares her own *testimonio* of the “violence and death she survived as an indigenous Guatemalan woman during the horrific civil war, and how she became an active leader in the struggle for human rights in her country.”<sup>8</sup> Menchú’s *testimonio* has allowed the world to learn about the historical events of the civil war in Guatemala from her perspective and that of her people.

In my chapter, I take *testimonios* in definition and practice to reimagine and redefine historical events from the perspective of those who have experienced or have been affected by the events discussed. I present the *testimonios* of three Honduran migrants and refugees: Yannis, Eduardo, and Jaime<sup>9</sup> to investigate what their *testimonios* disclose about the roots and causes of migration from Honduras in the last decade. These *testimonios* also serve to deconstruct and decolonize knowledge production and invite scholars in this field to reimagine what is considered “valuable knowledge” in academia. In addition, I also intend to provide a space for migrants and refugees to tell their *testimonios* in their own terms and conditions. I was honored and privileged to have had the opportunity to listen to their *testimonios*. Their *testimonios* are painful: they are open wounds and bleed with the demand for the creation of active and critical consciousness. But they are also *testimonios* of resilience and resistance to social conditions. They refuse to accept statements made by any others than themselves and call for recognition and agency. With the help of the *testimonios* of Yannis, Eduardo, and Jaime, I aspire to create spaces for individual narratives while also constructing collective knowledge.

In my third and last chapter, I further analyze the knowledge of scholars in academia as well as the knowledge shared by Yannis, Eduardo, and Jaime. I discuss why Yannis, Eduardo,

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<sup>8</sup> Lindsay Pérez Huber, “Disrupting Apartheid of Knowledge: *Testimonio* as Methodology in Latina/o Critical Race Research in Education,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 22, no. 6 (November 2009): 639–54, 651. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518390903333863>.

<sup>9</sup> Pseudonyms have been used for confidentiality reasons.

and Jaime flee Honduras and how their individual *testimonios* serve to understand the collective causes of migration and displacement from Honduras in the past decade.

Finally, in my conclusion, I summarize my chapters, restate my thesis, and present my findings from both the academic and *testimonios* knowledge. In addition, I also bring my readers' attention back to the idea of *testimonios* as a new and factual way of understanding, reimagining, and redefining migration from Honduras in the last decade. In the end, I remind my readers that *testimonios* help us understand migration from a different perspective, perhaps the perspective missing in the discourse of migration. I tell my reader that when they read the *testimonios* of migrants and refugees, they become witnesses of the narratives and that it is up to them (my readers) to act on them or stay silent.



**CHAPTER I**  
**State-Sponsored Terror:**  
**The Aftermath of the 2009 Military Honduran Coup**

## HONDURAS

Figure 1. Map of Honduras <sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Source: Map Resources. Adapted by CRS Graphics

## 1.1

### Introduction

Honduras's long history of corruption, abuse of power, and foreign interventions are core examples of the fragility of its democratic regimes in the last decade. Although Honduras has never had a golden year, and it has always struggled to progress economically and politically, the various violent events that occurred in this past decade illustrate the disturbing reality of Honduras' democratic principles. For years, Honduras has been a struggling middle-class society led and controlled by the few that form part of the elite class. The elite class takes the money and power to enrich themselves and leave the poor struggling. Honduran people not only have to worry about the scarcity of employment but also about the ongoing violence in the streets. The issue of security has been the most concerning for the majority of people living in Honduras. Honduras is not only one of the poorest nations in the Latin American region but also one of the most dangerous. The abuse of power, poverty and violence are the leading causes of Honduras' economic and political instability. These ongoing issues have caused trauma to the lives of many and have forced others to flee their homes and find refuge somewhere else.

In this chapter, I ask the questions: what has provoked Honduras to be one of the most violent and politically unstable countries in the region, and how has this affected the Honduran people and forced them to flee their homes and find refuge somewhere else? I start my chapter by providing background information on Honduras' geographics, demographics, economy, and the government for my reader to become more familiar with the country. I also focus on understanding the history of U.S.-Honduras relations and argue that these uneven relations have caused both economic and political instability in Honduras. Next, I focus on understanding Honduras's political system following the 2009 military coup and its aftermath. I argue that,

although Honduras has always been a struggling society, it was not until 2009 that the fragility of its democracy and political systems was revealed. Finally, I discuss the impact of former Honduran president Juan Orlando Hernández and how his government perpetrated violence and chaos in the streets of Honduras. I argue that Juan Orlando Hernández turned Honduras into a narco-state and a war zone for criminal organizations. I conclude this chapter by arguing that the events following the 2009 military coup and Juan Orlando Hernández's *narcodictadura* (Narcodictatorship) are the leading causes of displacement, migration, and the suffering of Honduran people.

## 1.2

### Background Information

#### Geographics:

Honduras is located in the heart of Central America and shares borders with Nicaragua to the south, El Salvador to the southwest, and Guatemala to the north. It has a total area of 43,433 square miles (112,492 km<sup>2</sup>), slightly larger than the state of Tennessee, making the country one of the largest in the Central American region after Nicaragua.<sup>11</sup> Its attractive location gives Honduras access to both the Pacific Ocean on its south coast and the Caribbean Sea on the northern coast. Although Honduras has two beautiful coastal lowlands, 80 percent of Honduran terrain is composed of interior highlands. The Pacific coast lowlands are known to have fine-grained and fertile soils, but the mountainous terrain makes it almost impossible to use the

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<sup>11</sup>James W. Wilkie, *Statistical Abstract of Latin America* (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications, 2001): 34. [http://www.jameswilkiepublicationlinks.org/pub/Intoduction\\_statistical\\_abstract\\_of\\_LA.pdf](http://www.jameswilkiepublicationlinks.org/pub/Intoduction_statistical_abstract_of_LA.pdf)

land for agricultural purposes. The Caribbean or North Coast became the backbone of Honduras' economy for the production of tropical fruits in which bananas were the mass-produced goods. The other 80 percent of the terrain is occupied by interior highland with copious amounts of flat-floor valleys that are mainly used for agriculture purposes.<sup>12</sup>

Honduras also has a subtropical climate, which makes it substantially vulnerable to extreme weather. Although it does not happen often, Honduras is prone to hurricanes, tropical storms, earthquakes, floods, droughts, and wildfires during the dry season. For instance, in late October of 1998 Honduras experienced one of the worst hurricanes of the Atlantic hurricane season, Hurricane Mitch. Hurricane Mitch destroyed an estimated 70 percent of Honduran infrastructure resulting in \$3 billion in damage. It also caused more than 10,000 deaths, high rates of migration, and aggravated the levels of poverty resulting in a major setback for Honduran economic development.<sup>13</sup>

### **Demographics:**

As of October 31, 2021, the estimated population of Honduras was 10,128,895, making it one of the most populated nations in Central America. The majority of its population is distributed in the two largest cities: Tegucigalpa and San Pedro Sula, in addition to some other rural areas. 90 percent of the population self-identify as *Mestizos*<sup>14</sup>, those with a mixed-race background of white European and Indigenous descent. Nearly 9 percent of the population self-identify with at least one of the indigenous groups (Lenca, Miskito, Maya Ch'ortí, Tolupán,

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<sup>12</sup> Thomas M. Leonard, *The History of Honduras* (California: Greenwood, 2011), 1-12.

<sup>13</sup> "Climate Risk Profile: Honduras," accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.climatelinks.org/resources/climate-risk-profile-honduras>.

<sup>14</sup> The word "Mestizo" originates from the Cast System. The Cast System was a racial and social system to determine people's social class at birth. It was used throughout Latin America during the colonial period by Spain. Essentially, it meant to determine the amount of privilege people would hold in society. According to the system, the more Spanish blood an individual had, the more privilege this individual would hold. See more at: <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/268106762.pdf>.

Nahua, Pech, and Tawahka) and/or of African descent (Garífuna, Bay Creoles).<sup>15</sup> The rest 1 percent consider themselves to be European white. Although Spanish is by far the most natively spoken language in Honduras, there are five indigenous languages that are often spoken in the country. These languages are Garifuna, Miskito, Sumo, Pech, and Jicaque. In addition, due to the effects of globalization and immigration to Honduras, languages such as Arabic, Armenian, Turkish, and Yue Chinese are moderately spoken. Lastly, Creole English is commonly spoken in the Bay Islands of Honduras as a result of the British settlement in the Caribbean Islands of Honduras in the 1600s.

Although the population of Honduras has had drastic changes over the years, it somehow manages to keep a positive population change meaning that there are more births than deaths. The major factors that have contributed to population change in Honduras have been the birth rate, death rate, and migration rate. In Honduras, there is one birth every 3 minutes and a total of 571 births per day; one death every 12 minutes and a total of 123 deaths per day; and one net migration every 90 minutes resulting in -16 migrations per day. If these numbers continue to increase, Honduras is expected to surpass 15 million people by 2071 before experiencing a major decline in their population for the rest of the century.<sup>16</sup>

### **Economy:**

Every effort to grow Honduras's economy and bring the country to a better position in the international economic arena has been stymied by corruption and failing institutions. Corrupt institutions and poor management practices have caused Honduras's economy to class through

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<sup>15</sup> "Honduras - World Directory of Minorities & Indigenous Peoples," accessed April 29, 2022. <https://minorityrights.org/country/honduras/>.

<sup>16</sup> "Honduras Population 2022 (Demographics, Maps, Graphs)," accessed April 29, 2022. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/honduras-population>.

the years. This crash in the economy has positioned Honduras as one of the poorest countries in Latin America and the second poorest in Central America. By 2017, Honduras had a gross domestic product (GDP) of \$46.3 billion and an unemployment rate of 4.3 percent in 2019.<sup>17</sup>

Honduras's economy is based on three main domains: industrialization, agriculture, and tourism. Honduras is known for its banana and clothing industries, which, not surprisingly, are often foreign-owned. These two big industries have helped Honduras's economy grow; however, many of these factories take advantage of cheap labor. Some of Honduras' main partners for exports and exchanges are the United States, China, Germany, and some neighboring countries such as Guatemala and Panama. Agriculture also contributes to Honduran economic growth; specifically the production of bananas and coffee. Before the best bananas are exported they are carefully grown on big farms by *Campesinos*. Although the demand for bananas had a major decline after Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the production and exportation of bananas are still very much alive throughout the country. On the other hand, the demand for coffee is often affected by the change in the prices of the international market.

Lastly, tourism in historical places such as the Mayan ruins in the department of Copán, La Tigra National Park, Cerro el Picacho, and the Bay Islands on the northern coast of Honduras has contributed enormously to the country's economy.<sup>18</sup> Due to the country's political environment and safety concerns, tourism has declined over the years. The area that has maintained its tourism is the Bay Islands, where most tourists prefer to go. Tourism along with industrialization and the agriculture sector has been the backbone of Honduras's economy. The COVID-19 Virus pandemic, however, made the Honduran economy fall by 9 percent in 2020.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> "Honduras - Employment by Economic Sector 2009-2019," Statista, accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/510041/employment-by-economic-sector-in-honduras/>.

<sup>18</sup> Rebekah Painter, "Honduras," in *Salem Press Encyclopedia* (Great Neck Publishing, 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Painter.

## Government:

Article #1 of Honduras constitution states that “Honduras is a State of law, sovereign, constituted as a free, democratic and independent republic to ensure its inhabitants the enjoyment of justice, liberty, culture, and social and economic well-being.”<sup>20</sup> According to the constitution, Honduras is a democratic constitutional republic where a president is elected for four consecutive years. Besides the president, Honduras’s government comprises the Supreme Court of Justice and a legislative branch with 128 members. Although Honduras keeps trying to implement a working democracy, it has been almost impossible to achieve this goal due to corruption, abuse of power, and human rights abuses, often perpetrated by government officials and the national armed forces.

Historically, Honduras has suffered military revolts against the government, which is why it was not until 1981 that Honduras could hold elections to elect the country’s representatives. There are two dominant political parties in Honduras: *Partido Nacional de Honduras* also known as PNH ( National Party of Honduras) and Partido Liberal de Honduras or PLH (Liberal Party of Honduras). PLH was established in 1891 by Policarpo Bonilla Vásquez<sup>21</sup> to promote liberal reforms in the country. Later in 1902, the right-wing party, PNH, was formed by Manuel Bonilla Chirinos<sup>22</sup> to counteractive the PLH. Both PLH and PNH have been the two most influential parties in Honduras since their creation. PNH has historically been one of the most dominant parties in Honduras from Manuel Bonilla in 1903 to former president Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH).

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<sup>20</sup> “Honduras’s Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2013” (Constituteproject.org, n.d.). <https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Honduras>.

<sup>21</sup> Policarpo Bonilla Vásquez was a Honduran politician when he helped establish the PLH. He then became the first elected Honduran president in 1895.

<sup>22</sup> Manuel Bonilla Chirinos served as the 29th and 31st president of Honduras between 1912-1913 and 1903-1907.

### 1.3

#### **U.S. - Honduras Relations**

Honduras has never been a country with international recognition. Its national economy; however, added it to the list of countries the U.S. became interested in. For a very long time, the production of bananas dominated the economic industry and sustained the country's internal affairs. The U.S. saw the banana production as a great opportunity to expand its interest and hegemony thus “two giant North American firms, United Fruit and Standard Fruit,” became the most dominant actors in banana production in Honduras.<sup>23</sup> With these two companies leading the market, the U.S. reassured his presence in Honduras. Since then, the U.S. has always had an interest in Honduras’s affairs, whether this is to protect their interests or to expand their hegemony.

Until this day, the U.S. treats Honduras the same way a colonial power treats its colony. One important point that the history of banana production in Honduras reveals is that Honduras has had little or no control over its economy. Although being a “banana republic” allowed Honduras’s economy to stay afloat, it only benefited Honduras elites, foreign investors, business owners, and the U.S. The majority of Honduran citizens, who form part of the low-middle income class, did not benefit from the banana production in the long term period.

Banana production is only one example of U.S. efforts to extend its power, whether it is economically, territorially, or politically. Another imperialistic tactic the U.S. has used is to intervene in Honduras’s political affairs. Honduras’s political history is not the most stable one: totalitarian regimes, corruption, and weak institutions have prevented Honduras’s political, economic, and social development as a nation-state. Since the creation of the two most

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<sup>23</sup> Thomas P. Anderson, “Honduras in Transition,” *Current History* 84, no. 500 (1985): 114.

influential political parties, PNH and PLH, Honduras has experienced numerous corrupt governments, dictatorships, human rights abuses, and more. Because of the history of its very fragile political system, the U.S. has always sought the opportunity to interfere and gain control over Honduran affairs. At some point, when communism was spreading fast over the world and the U.S. feared many countries would turn communist, Honduras was overwhelmed by the presence of U.S. military troops. Similarly, between 1982-1989, the U.S. government decided to increase its military presence in Honduras, build military training camps and conduct war games in Honduras's territory with the intention of training neighboring central American citizens to fight and overthrow the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. Later in 1954, the U.S. worked closely with the Honduran government to use Honduras as a base to organize a CIA-organized coup to overthrow Guatemalan democratic elected socialist president Jacobo Árbenz, resulting in years of horror and genocide perpetrated by the state toward Guatemalan citizens.<sup>24</sup>

Although Honduras never fought a war with Nicaragua or Guatemala, Honduras's territory served as a training zone for the U.S. The aftermath of these wars was catastrophic for Honduras in the upcoming years. After the Central American wars, Honduras' citizens were left with all the firearms and soldiers that became walking killing machines. By the late 1990s, dead squat groups and street gangs had already taken over every corner of Honduras and turned the country into a violent war zone. In 1998 Transparency International ranked Honduras in the bottom five of the world's most corrupt governments.<sup>25</sup> To conclude the twentieth century, Honduras experienced Hurricane Mitch, one of the deadliest storms in records in Latin America. Hurricane Mitch took an estimated 9,000 lives and caused severe infrastructure damage

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<sup>24</sup> Nick Cullather and Piero Gleijeses, *Secret History: The CIA's Classified Account of Its Operations in Guatemala, 1952-1954* (Stanford University Press, 1999), 7-38.

<sup>25</sup> "1998 Corruption Perceptions Index - Press," Transparency.org, accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/1998-corruption-perceptions-index>. <https://www.transparency.org/en/press/1998-corruption-perceptions-index>.

throughout the country and destabilized, it, even more, the economy. The impact of Hurricane Mitch in Honduras revealed the weaknesses of the political system and the lack of both social and economic resources in the country, resulting in thousands of Honduran citizens leaving the country to find better opportunities.

## 1.4

### 2009 Military Coup

Only a year after Hurricane Mitch, Honduras became not only a poorer country but also one of the most violent in Central America. Not only did birth rates, infant malnutrition, and violence rates go up, but it also became almost impossible for civil societies to exist in Honduras. Hondurans were left with nothing but an everyday life-or-death struggle.<sup>26</sup> Hurricane Mitch also revealed the fragility of Honduras's democracy and called for its reconstruction. Honduras has a long history of corrupt and military governments that have put Honduras's democratic principles in jeopardy but it was not until the 2009 military coup that this was revealed publicly.

After Hurricane Mitch, Hondurans suffered another catastrophe, but this time it was not a natural storm but a political one. On June 28, 2009, the Honduran military ousted then-president Manuel Zelaya from the modern Liberal Party and exiled him to Costa Rica, ending 27 years of uninterrupted democracy. Zelaya, a member of the Honduran elite himself, was popular among the low-middle class citizens for his populist form of governing. During his time in office, he “stopped multiple power grabs by the elites”<sup>27</sup> and implemented welfare measures such as “a 60% increase in the minimum wages, free primary schooling, and lower prices for public

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<sup>26</sup> “In Debt to Disaster: What Happened to Honduras after Hurricane Mitch - Honduras,” ReliefWeb, accessed April 29, 2022. <https://reliefweb.int/report/honduras/debt-disaster-what-happened-honduras-after-hurricane-mitch>.

<sup>27</sup> Dana Frank, *The Long Honduran Night: Resistance, Terror, and the United States in the Aftermath of the Coup* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 11.

transportation.”<sup>28</sup> These changes, however, threatened the status quo already established by the elite and thus created conflicts between Zelaya and the elite class.

Honduran political elites, business owners, and foreign investors, including U.S. companies, saw President Zelaya as a threat to their interests and practices. Even the rest of the governmental body and his political party were not content with Zelaya’s reforms. Consequently, as a way of seeking restoration the elite and other affected actors plotted to removed Zelaya from office and finally the Honduran National Congress approved the ouster and exiled former president Zelaya after accusing him of “repeated violations against the Constitution and laws of the Republic and nonobservance of the resolutions and rulings of the judicial organs.”<sup>29</sup>

The response of the low-middle class people was not surprising: they were in the streets protesting and demanding for Zelaya to go back to the office but instead, his successor, Roberto Micheletti, became the interim *de facto* president. During his short time serving in office (2009-2010) Micheletti, who served as the president of Honduras’ National Congress before becoming president,<sup>30</sup> turned Honduras into a repressive state ruled by the military. Micheletti put in place multiple curfews and ordered the military to patrol the streets of Honduras to prevent Zelaya from returning to Honduras.<sup>31</sup> Additionally, Micheletti annulled many progressive reforms and alliances made by Zelaya, such as Honduras’ accession to the Venezuelan-led trade bloc known as the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA).<sup>32</sup>

Moreover, Micheletti was also the main perpetrator of violence and human rights violations. Honduran journalists, human rights defenders, activists, prosecutors, students, indigenous people, *campesinos*, women, and the LGBTQ+ community were drastically affected

<sup>28</sup> “Coup in Honduras,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 44, no. 40 (2009): 7.

<sup>29</sup> Peter J Meyer, “Honduran Political Crisis, June 2009-January 2010,” 2010, 23. <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/row/R41064.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> The National Congress (Spanish: *Congreso Nacional*) is the legislative branch of the government of Honduras.

<sup>31</sup> Meyer, “Honduran Political Crisis,” 23.

<sup>32</sup> Mark P Sullivan and Peter J Meyer, “Honduras-U.S. Relations,” 2010, 26. <https://www.everycrsreport.com/files>

by the Post-Coup era under Micheletti.<sup>33</sup> According to a report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR),<sup>34</sup> “deaths, an arbitrary declaration of a state of emergency, suppression of public demonstrations through disproportionate use of force, criminalization of public protest, arbitrary detentions of thousands of persons, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment and grossly inadequate conditions of detention, the militarization of Honduran territory, a surge in incidents of racial discrimination, violations of women’s rights, serious and arbitrary restrictions on the right to freedom of expression, and grave violations of political rights,” occurred during Micheletti’s time in office.

Despite the many human rights violations and Micheletti’s military regime, the United States never publicly condemned the post-coup era as a threat to democracy and human rights. Although the Obama Administration claimed not to be taking sides, it “began treating de facto President Micheletti as Zelaya’s legitimate diplomatic equal”<sup>35</sup> and ignored Zelaya’s claim of being the only legitimate president of Honduras. In fact, the U.S. never recognized the event as a “military coup” and instead used only the term “coup” to avoid being obligated to cease foreign aid to Honduras and pause their relations with the country.<sup>36</sup>

In 2010 Micheletti’s military regime came to an end and Former Honduran President Porfirio Lobo Sosa began on January 27, 2010. While the Obama Administration legitimized and continued to celebrate Lobo as the Honduran president who would restore democracy after the 2009 military coup, the Honduran people were still living under the retaliation of the government<sup>37</sup>. For many Hondurans, Lobo’s regime was just a continuation of Micheletti’s acts

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<sup>33</sup> For instance, in 2013 Human Rights Watch reported that of all perpetrators during the 2009 Coup, only one police officer had been held accountable for engaging in violence in the streets of Honduras. See more at: [World Report 2013: Honduras](#)

<sup>34</sup> IACHR is an autonomous body of the Organization of American States (OAS). See more [Honduras: Human Rights And The Coup D’état](#)

<sup>35</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 17

<sup>37</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 36-7.

of violence and systematic oppression of the Honduran people.<sup>38</sup> The hopes for a restoration of Honduran principles of democracy were far from reality under Lobo's regime; on the contrary, his regime continued to oppress and commit human rights violations. Some of these cases are the 1) assassination of Blas López, a teacher and leader of the indigenous group Pech and member of the resistance, 2) the kidnap of two young cameramen, Manuel de Jesús Murillo Varela and Ricardo Rodríguez both working with local TV news, and 3) the murder of Claudia Larissa Brizuela, militant of the resistance and daughter of Pedro Brizuela, a local leader of *Frente Nacional de Resistencia Popular*<sup>39</sup> (National Front of Popular Resistance). Claudia was shot three times in the head in front of her 2 and 8 year-old children.<sup>40</sup>

These examples illustrate the violence sponsored by Lobo's regime in his time governing Honduras. Lobo's regime was never able restore the democracy that the Obama Administration was celebrating and hoping for. On the contrary, Honduras went to even darker waters after the 2009 military coup. Both Micheletti and Lobo caused several damages to Honduras' democratic principles and created a human right crisis from which the country is still struggling to recover. The repression and silence of voices is a common strategy among Honduran political leaders. By kidnaping, assaulting, and assassinating those who resist to accept and engage with corruption, illegitimacy, and tyranny the state sows terror in the life of Honduran citizens. Since the 2009 military coup, Honduran citizens have lost the sense of being in a sovereign and democratic nation whose main purpose is to serve its people and protect their rights. Unfortunately, for Honduran citizens, Micheletti's and Lobo's regimes were only the beginning of a life of terror and horror.

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<sup>38</sup> Joaquín A Mejía, "La Situación de los Derechos Humanos en Honduras en el Escenario Postgolpe de Estado," *Universitas: Revista de Filosofía, Derecho y Política* 12 (2010): 4.

<sup>39</sup> The National Popular Resistance Front (FNRP) is a social organization in Honduras that emerged in response to the coup d'état of June 28, 2009. See more at [The National Popular Resistance Front](#).

<sup>40</sup> Mejía, "La Situación De Los Derechos Humanos En Honduras," 12.

## 1.5

**Juan Orlando Hernández: The Honduran *Narcodictador***

“During my campaign, I stated, 'I, Juan Orlando Hernández, am going to do whatever I have to do to bring peace and tranquility to the country, within the law and with the support of the Honduran people,’”<sup>41</sup> said Honduran former President Juan Orlando Hernández (JOH) during his inauguration speech on January 27, 2014. Despite the fact that his opponent Xiomara Castro, spouse of overthrown former President Manuel Zelaya, alleged that the elections were fraudulent and claimed they were a robbery of her victory,<sup>42</sup> The Honduran Electoral Tribunal (TSE) declared JOH the president-elect for the term 2014-2018.<sup>43</sup>

During his political campaign, JOH launched his 2014-2018 Government Strategic Plan “Plan de Todos para Una Vida Mejor” (The People’s Plan for a Better Life), where he stated his political principles and commitments to the Honduran people. In his plan, he compromised to restore democracy, implement social protection policies for the most vulnerable communities, create jobs, and to return the peace and tranquility that the Honduran people needed after the 2009 Coup and its aftermath.<sup>44</sup> While JOH’s supporters were celebrating their victory in the streets of Honduras with loud music and blue flags to represent the Partido Nacional de Honduras (National Party), others had strong reservations about the execution of JOH’s Strategic Plan. *Campesinos*,<sup>45</sup> Lawyers, human rights defenders, and the rest of the opposition did several

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<sup>41</sup>George Rodríguez, "Honduras' New President Juan Orlando Hernández Pledges to Respect Human Rights While Providing Security," *University of New Mexico UNM Digital Repository*, 2014, 1. <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/noticen/10130>

<sup>42</sup> She argued that many of the votes in favor of JOH were of deceased people or people that disappeared or were out of the country.

<sup>43</sup> “Honduras: Juan Orlando Hernandez Confirmed as President,” *BBC News*, December 12, 2013, sec. Latin America & Caribbean. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-25346676>.

<sup>44</sup> Plan Estratégico De Gobierno 2014-2018: Plan De Todos Para Una Vida Mejor (Presidencia de la Republica de Honduras: Secretaría de Estado De Coordinación General de Gobierno, December 2015), [https://www.sefin.gob.hn/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Plan\\_Estrategico\\_Gobierno\\_Diciembre\\_2015.pdf](https://www.sefin.gob.hn/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Plan_Estrategico_Gobierno_Diciembre_2015.pdf).

<sup>45</sup> People from the rural areas.

demonstrations against what they believed to be an illegitimate president. Bertha Oliva, a Honduran human right activist and head of the “Comité de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos en Honduras (COFADEH),” declared that JOH’s administration would take Honduras to deeper and darker waters than the last president Porfirio Lobo.<sup>46</sup>

Certainly, Oliva anticipated almost a decade of a dictatorship that cost the lives of many Honduran citizens. In a perception survey in 2014, the National Autonomous University of Honduras (UNAH), under the University Institute for democracy, peace and security, found that 70.47% of the interviewees considered security one of the main problems of Honduras.<sup>47</sup> By 2016, Honduras became one of the most dangerous and hostile areas in the Latin American region targeting human right defenders and the most vulnerable population.<sup>48</sup> The topic of security became one of the main ones post-2009 military coup. As gangs and drug traffickers were taking over almost every corner of Honduras, everyone in Honduras wondered how it had happened and why these perpetrators of violence felt so powerful and comfortable inflating violence in the streets of Honduras. The comfortability and accessibility these actors had over the Honduran society was given by the elites and the governments who sought the perfect solution for the rise of resistance and compliance from the Honduran people. Supporting gangs and drug traffickers to do the dirty work would, first, clean the name of the past Honduran governments (Micheletti, Lobo, and Hernández) and clean the name of the National Party; second, it would distract the Honduran people and the post-2009 military coup from continuing protesting against the state for human rights abuses and lack of legitimacy and transparency; and third, the Honduran government would finally have someone or something to blame internationally for all

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<sup>46</sup> George Rodríguez, “Honduras’ New President Juan Orlando Hernández Pledges to Respect Human Rights While Providing Security,” 3.

<sup>47</sup> Ana Ortega, “Percepción Ciudadana Sobre Inseguridad y Victimización en Honduras: Informe Ejecutivo 2014,” *Tegucigalpa, Honduras* (2015): 16. [https://www.iudpas.org/pdf/Estu\\_InvestNacionales/2014\\_percepcion\\_ciudadana\\_inseguridad\\_victimizacion.pdf](https://www.iudpas.org/pdf/Estu_InvestNacionales/2014_percepcion_ciudadana_inseguridad_victimizacion.pdf)

<sup>48</sup> “Honduras, One of the Most Dangerous Countries for Human Rights Defenders – Experts Warn.”

the human rights abuses and other atrocities the past governments have perpetrated against the Honduran people.

This strategy used by the government to cover their illegitimate acts did not last for a long time as the lies started to come out one after another. Although poverty, gangs, and the problem of drugs have kept the Honduran people afraid, they have become even more aware of the conditions in which they have lived for almost a decade. It was in 2015 and 2016, that JOH's true intentions were finally exposed. Article 239 of the Honduran Constitution establishes that:

A citizen who has held the Office of President under any title may not be President or a Presidential Designate. • Head of state term limits Any person who violates this provision or advocates its amendment, as well as those that directly or indirectly support him, shall immediately cease to hold their respective offices and shall be disqualified for ten years from holding any public office.<sup>49</sup>

Meaning that no president can serve more than one term and that if a president tries to re-elect him or herself, immediate removal from office must occur. But in April of 2015, JOH influenced and coerced the Honduran Supreme Court to rule that Article 239 wasn't valid, "because they violated international norms on human rights."<sup>50</sup> The reasons why it violated international norms on human rights is still an enigma for many. Soon after this ruling, JOH started his illegitimate political campaign to re-elect himself and began his military dictatorship in Honduras.

Despite the many accusations of fraud and corruption, JOH has sworn again as the Honduran president for the term 2014-2018 after defeating his opponent Salvador Nasralla. Initially, Nasralla, a representative of the left-wing alliance, was leading the elections and appeared to be on the right track to becoming the next president of Honduras. However, the following day the Honduran Supreme Electoral Tribunal (TSE) reported that JOH was now as close to winning as Nasralla. Then, the TSE and public reporters stopped updating the tally and

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<sup>49</sup> "Honduras's Constitution of 1982 with Amendments through 2013."

<sup>50</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 236.

argued that it was due to a problem with the electric system. Soon after TSE reported that JOH had overpassed Nasralla in votes<sup>51</sup> and not later after that the electoral commission announced JOH as the winner with fifty thousand votes above Nasralla.<sup>52</sup>

From November 2017 to the end of January 2018, the resistance and Nasralla's supporters brought their fear, worries, and hopes to the streets of Honduras to protest the impunity and lack of justice in the country. Although these demonstrations started peacefully, they became a bloody war when JOH declared martial law.<sup>53</sup> The same tactics that were used to overthrow Zelaya and repress Honduran civilians after the 2009 military coup, were used once again by militants who were given authority by JOH to end the protests one or another. Honduran civilians and demonstrators were attacked by the military with live bullets, haunted down to their homes, disappeared, and some killed.<sup>54</sup> The international eye watched the fragility of Honduran democracy and the implications that came with that but still did nothing to hold the principles of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>55</sup> Even the media coverage in the United States covered up the fraud and evidence of human right violations leaving the Honduran people <sup>56</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Lee Fang, Danielle Mackey "The President of Honduras Is Deploying U.S.-Trained Forces Against Election Protesters," *The Intercept*, accessed April 29, 2022. <https://theintercept.com/2017/12/03/the-president-of-honduras-is-deploying-u-s-trained-forces-against-election-protesters/>.

<sup>52</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 240.

<sup>53</sup> Although its definition is unclear, martial law occurs when civilian law is replaced by military law. It has been commonly used in times of conflict, rebellions, natural disasters and any other emergency. When martial law is declared, the military has unlimited authority to command and enforce laws. Joseph Nunn, a reporter from the *Brennan Center for Justice*, states that it should be clear that a president of a nation "lacks the authority to declare it." See more at [Martial Law](#)

<sup>54</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 241.

<sup>55</sup> "OHCHR | Universal Declaration of Human Rights - English," OHCHR, accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/human-rights/universal-declaration/translations/english>.

<sup>56</sup> "Honduras Begins Vote Recount in Unresolved Election | CNN," accessed April 29, 2022. <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/02/americas/honduras-unrest-post-election/index.html>.



Figure 2. Honduran civilians protesting in the streets of Honduras during the 2017 elections.<sup>57</sup>



Figure 3. Former Honduran President Manuel Zelaya during a tear gas attack during a protest in January, 2018.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>57</sup> “Honduras Begins Vote Recount in Unresolved Election | CNN.”

<sup>58</sup> Jorge Cabrera, “Honduran Military Clash With Protesters, Over 20 Injured,” accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.telesurenglish.net/news/Honduran-Military-Clash-With-Protesters-Over-20-Injured-20180113-0012.html>.

## 1.6

### *Narcodictador*

The violence, corruption, impunity, deaths, and fear continued haunting Honduran citizens after the 2017 elections. If there was one thing the Honduran people knew, it was to not give up fighting, even if it meant risking their lives. Although their demonstrations and agony were ignored by many, they were key to helping reveal the crimes of many in power both on the collective and individual levels. This was the case of JOH who, after defending himself for years against the accusations of his involvement with massive cocaine transport, was finally extradited to the United States for drug trafficking and firearms charges.<sup>59</sup>

JOH arrived in the Southern District of New York on Thursday, April 21, 2022, to present himself before U.S. District Judge P. Kevin Castel the following day. According to the United States Department of Justice, JOH allegedly “partnered with some of the largest cocaine traffickers in the world to transport tons of cocaine through Honduras to the United States.”<sup>60</sup> Attorney Damian Williams also stated that “Hernández is alleged to have used his vast political powers to protect and assist drug traffickers and cartel leaders by alerting them to possible interdictions, and sanctioning heavily armed violence to support their drug trade.”<sup>61</sup> JOH’s illegal drug empire allegedly started around 2004 and grew as the former president became more involved in politics. He started his political career first as a congressman, then he was elected to

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<sup>59</sup> “Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras,” Justice.gov, April 21, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/juan-orlando-hernandez-former-president-honduras-indicted-drug-trafficking>.

<sup>60</sup> “Juan Orlando Hernandez, Former President Of Honduras, Extradited To The United States On Drug-Trafficking And Firearms Charges,” April 21, 2022. <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/juan-orlando-hernandez-former-president-honduras-extradited-united-states-drug>.

<sup>61</sup> “Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras.”

be the President of the Honduran National Congress in 2010 to become president for two consecutive terms.<sup>62</sup>

During the beginning of his political involvement, JOH allegedly worked with transnational drug organizations to receive and transport cocaine to Mexico and the United States from countries such as Colombia and Venezuela. In the allegation, it was divulged that around 2004 drug trafficking organizations received, moved, and transported more than 500,000 kilograms of cocaine through Honduras with the support of government officials like JOH. In exchange for money to enrich himself and aid his political campaigns, JOH provided maritime and air access to move tons of cocaine to dangerous drug traffickers, such as Honduran narco trafficker Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez and famous Mexican drug leader Joaquin Guzman Loera, aka El Chapo.<sup>63</sup> These illegal alliances turned JOH into one of the most powerful and important actors in drug trafficking and aided him to stay in power for two consecutive terms and secretly continue to move drugs through Honduras to the north.<sup>64</sup> The 2021 elections, however, ended almost a decade of JOH's *narcodictadura* and gave hope to the Honduran people. After his ally Fuentes Ramirez<sup>65</sup> and his brother Tony Hernández<sup>66</sup> were both sentenced to life in prison by U.S. Attorneys in the Southern District of New York, JOH was also accused, arrested, and extradited to the U.S. to face his charges.

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<sup>62</sup> “Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras.”

<sup>63</sup> “Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras.”

<sup>64</sup> “Juan Orlando Hernández, Former President of Honduras, Indicted on Drug-Trafficking and Firearms Charges, Extradited to the United States from Honduras.”

<sup>65</sup> Geovanny Fuentes Ramirez was sentenced “life in prison and ordered to forfeit \$151.7 millions for distributing tons of cocaine and related firearms offenses” by a jury in the District of New York in March 2021. See more at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/honduran-national-geovanny-fuentes-ramirez-sentenced-life-prison-and-ordered-forfeit>

<sup>66</sup> “Former Honduran Congressman Tony Hernández Sentenced To Life In Prison And Ordered To Forfeit \$138.5 Million For Distributing 185 Tons Of Cocaine And Related Firearms And False Statements Offenses.” See more at <https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-honduran-congressman-tony-hernandez-sentenced-life-prison-and-ordered-forfeit>

Based on the accusations, JOH is estimated to be charged with a minimum of 10 years to life in prison-like his ally and brother. Although this would never make justice to a *narcodictadura* and terror that the Honduran people had to unjustifiably endured for almost a decade, it does brings back the spirit of justice and hope that many Hondurans needed for the longest. The outcome of the 2021 Honduran elections gave Honduras the opportunity to finally breathe freely again and restore its democratic principles. After her two failed campaigns in 2013 and 2017, former first lady Xiomara Castro became the first female President in the history of Honduras. Castro never imagined that leading a protest demanding the return of her husband former president Zelaya in 2009 would lead her to now lead an entire country and have the task to restore the principles of freedom and justice that have been broken by previous corrupt leaders.<sup>67</sup> Although President Castro is hopeful that Honduras would change, there is still a lot of work to be done, and many corrupt individuals to prosecute.

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<sup>67</sup> Karol Suarez, "From First Lady to First Female President: Meet the New Honduran Leader Xiomara Castro," CNN, January 26, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/26/americas/iris-xiomara-castro-honduras-new-president-intl-latam/index.html>.



Figure 4. Juan Orlando Hernandez is escorted by police to be extradited to the United States, on April 21, 2022 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras.<sup>68</sup>



Figure 5. Drug Trafficking Routes in Honduras.<sup>69</sup>

<sup>68</sup> Brian Vitagliano, "Former President of Honduras Makes Initial Appearance in US Federal Court - CNN," CNN, April 22, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/04/22/us/honduras-juan-orlando-hernandez-us-court-appearance/index>.

<sup>69</sup> Héctor Silva Ávalos, Alex Papados Vassilakis, and Victoria Dittmar, "GameChangers 2020: The Resurgence of the Central American Cocaine Highway," *InSight Crime* (blog), December 28, 2020, <https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/resurgence-central-american-cocaine-highway/>.



## **CHAPTER II**

### **Decolonizing Knowledge Production: *Testimonios* of Migrants and Refugees from Honduras**

## 2.1 Introduction

### *Testimonios*

What are they? What do they do? And why?

*Testimonios*, both as a narrative and methodology, have been used as a way of liberation around the world. It originates from the memories of personal archives to deliberately allow the receiver to understand the nature of a particular event from the perspective and social lenses of the one telling it. *Testimonios* “offers one particular way, or methodology, of telling a story about how the social landscape actively shapes and affects the personal lives at the center of a narrative account.”<sup>70</sup> In *testimonios*, the “I” is the focal point as the narrative centers around the experiences of the narrator; however, the “I” is also very close to the “We” narrative because of the type of the narrative.<sup>71</sup> This, nonetheless, does not mean that the individuality of the narrative is obliterated. On the contrary, the closeness dynamic between the “I” and “We” narrative help provide a collective understanding of the issue discussed or shared in the *testimonio*.

Moreover, *testimonios* also center around the art of decolonizing knowledge production. There have been debates about what is considered “truth” and what is not in the academic world. Because of the nature of *testimonios*, many scholars in academia argue that this type of framework should not be taken for knowledge production in academia. Other scholars, however, counter that telling stories is a way of decolonizing knowledge production in the academic world.<sup>72</sup> So what do *testimonios* do? Besides providing the opportunity to cultivate critical consciousness, it is also a form of resistance to social conditioning and provides a different narrative.

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<sup>70</sup> Kathryn Blackmer Reyes and Julia E. Curry Rodríguez, “*Testimonio*: Origins, Terms, and Resources,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 45, no. 3 (July 2012): 525–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10665684.2012.698571>.

<sup>71</sup> Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, “*Testimonio*,” 525–38.

<sup>72</sup> Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, “*Testimonio*,” 525–38.

*Testimonios* give recognition to the ones that have been voiceless and marginalized. It also allows for an active power dynamic switch between who gets to tell the *testimonio* and who does not. Those who get to tell their *testimonios* “actively reject the vision of them as powerless”<sup>73</sup> and resist falling into the helpless victim categorization. The world of academia often portrays and treats migrants and refugees as objects of study and victims only. This is not to say that migrants and refugees are not victims of crimes and violence, but it is essential not to only categorize them as such. *Testimonios*, therefore, provide an opportunity to reimagine and redefine migrant narratives and stories and allow the world to understand their migration from the inside out.

## 2.2 Yannis

### Between The War of Two Political Parties

Yannis is originally from San Luis, a small town of about 5,857 inhabitants in the municipality of Santa Bárbara. With an area of 1.94 mi<sup>2</sup> and a population of 462,774 (2019), Santa Barbara is one of the 18 departments into which Honduras is divided. Besides its beautiful landscapes and cultural wealth, Santa Bárbara is also known for being one of the leading country's economic centers. Its historical sugarcane and coffee production contributed to the department's economic suitability and the Honduras economy as a whole.<sup>74</sup>

After Yannis shared where he was from, I proceeded to ask him if he could share a memory of when he lived in Honduras. Yannis looked at me in the eye and then looked down to think. The first thing he said was: “*A raíz de que yo anduve en el proceso de la política yo estaba*

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<sup>73</sup> Reyes and Curry Rodríguez, “*Testimonio*,” 525–38.

<sup>74</sup> “Santa Bárbara, Honduras,” accessed May 2, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/place/Santa-Barbara-Honduras>.

*allá recibiendo amenazas de muerte e incluso fui golpeado salvajemente por el partido y actual gobierno, junto con la policía militar. Eso me hizo venirme para este país.*<sup>75</sup>

My intention in asking this first question was not to push Yannis to tell me about the horror he had lived in Honduras. None of my questions ask, “*what traumatic events did you experience living in Honduras?*” Instead, I intended to provide him the opportunity to reconcile with his more vivid childhood memories. However, his positive memories had been replaced by the fragments of traumatic events and experiences he lived in Honduras. Yannis did not care that we had just met; in the first five minutes of our interaction, he had already told me his life story, and I became part of it.

Before coming to the U.S. Yannis was part of the political campaign outreach team for the Libre-PINU party during the 2017 elections. At that time, Former President JOH re-elected himself after manipulating the constitution of Honduras to allow his reelection. These illegitimate manipulations deeply affected Honduran people like Yannis. In Honduras, Yannis’s job consisted in “*poner afiches en los postes y enseñarle a la gente de la tercera edad a marcar.*”<sup>76</sup> However, helping expand more liberal ideas among the unprivileged almost cost Yannis his life. Not only did he receive deadly threats, but he was also physically assaulted by the members of JOH’s political party and the military police. As a result, Yannis was left with two scars on his face, which he now sees as a reminder of the violence he endured.

During JOH’s regime, corruption and impunity were at their peak; the state and its branches abused the power and authority they held to legitimize the harm and violence towards their most vulnerable and unprotected population. Even lawyers, human rights defenders, and environmental activists were severely affected by state violence. According to a United Nations

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<sup>75</sup> “As a result of my involvement in politics, I was receiving death threats and I was even savagely beaten by the current government, along with the military police. That made me come to this country.”

<sup>76</sup> “Put up posters on poles and teach seniors how to mark their votes.”

special rapporteur in 2018, Honduras was one of the countries in Latin America with the highest human rights violations and the least safe country for human rights defenders. In his report, Michel Forst invites the Honduran Government “to take strong actions against impunity and for the recognition of the role that human rights defenders play here in Honduras and across the world.”<sup>77</sup> However, the essential question is: how could Juan Orlando Hernández's government do as Forst suggested when the government itself is the cause of violence and insecurity? This is a common phenomenon in countries like Honduras, where the state is one of the actors in violence proliferation.

Like many other Hondurans, Yannis was forced to leave the country to save his life; he described JOH's regime as the *"peor Gobierno que hemos tenido en Honduras."*<sup>78</sup> He added that this government had everything controlled: the armed forces, the preventive police, and even people dedicated to extorting and killing people on behalf of the elites. In his *testimonio*, Yannis alleged that JOH's government was the reason Hondurans are fleeing the country and coming to the United States: *"Ese gobierno ha sido pésimo y es por eso que muchos Hondureños hemos inmigrado para este país."*<sup>79</sup>

### Fleeing

After Yannis shared the horror he experienced in Honduras, I asked him if he was comfortable sharing his journey to the US. He took a deep breath and said: *"Esa es una historia*

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<sup>77</sup> Michel Forst, “End of mission statement by Michel Forst, United Nations Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders on his visit to Honduras, 29 April to 12 May,” United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, May 11th, 2018. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/statements/2018/05/end-mission-statement-michel-forst-united-nations-special-rapporteur-situation?LangID=E&NewsID=23063>

<sup>78</sup>“The worst government we ever had.”

<sup>79</sup> “That government (JOH's government) has been awful and that is why many Honduran have immigrated to this country (the U.S.).”

*muy dura, muy difícil.*”<sup>80</sup> Right after he said this, my heart ached because I felt the pain in his eyes and the act of crossing hit very close to home. Crossing the U.-Mexico border is as violent and terrifying as not doing it. Many migrants and refugees who cross the border are forced to choose between staying in their home countries and facing the challenges it entails or risking their lives trying to escape. This was the case for Yannis; he had to choose between staying in Honduras and hoping he could survive the threats or risking his life in the pursuit of refuge. Although some argue there is always an active decision-making process in migration, in the case of Yannis and many other Honduran migrants and refugees, this decision process is not active but a consequence of many other factors. This decision-making process is forced, and there is no room for a choice when being in a life or death situation. In the case of many migrants and refugees from Honduras and other fragile nation-states, migration is not a choice but an accumulation of violence and the only way of surviving.

The night Yannis left his family was one of the worst nights of his life. “*Eso fue muy difícil porque dejé a mi esposa con mis niños. Mis niños eran muy pequeños, deje a mi mamá también.*”<sup>81</sup> said Yannis with watery eyes. “*¿Me entiende?*”<sup>82</sup> he concluded. “*Sí, lo entiendo*”<sup>83</sup> I replied. I sensed a need to be understood without having to explain much. Telling his story and being understood precisely was a fundamental step towards finding refuge. As drastic as it might sound, one word in the immigration courtroom had the power to determine the rest of his life. Therefore, he could not afford not to be understood. Unlike his experiences with asylum officers, judges, and immigration lawyers, there was not a power dynamic between Yannis and I. Perhaps that is why he looked deep into my eyes to find reassurance and comfort. Although Yannis did

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<sup>80</sup> “That’s a tough story, very difficult.”

<sup>81</sup> “That was very hard because I left my wife and kids. My kids were little, I also left my mom.”

<sup>82</sup> “Do you understand me?”

<sup>83</sup> “Yes I understand you”

not know my personal migration story, there was a feeling of *compañerismo y entendimiento*<sup>84</sup> in our words.

Yannis was smuggled into Mexico and to the U.S. southern border by a *Coyote*,<sup>85</sup> to whom Yannis paid around 10,000 U.S. dollars for protection. At the beginning of his journey, Yannis told me that he traveled mainly in buses and taxis, and the only discomfort he had was not being able to move and stretch his body. However, after crossing Guatemala and entering Mexico, he was put in the back of a tractor trailer from Villahermosa to Reynosa, Mexico. Being in the trailer for four consecutive days is one of the most harrowing memories Yannis has of his journey to the U.S.

During his time in the trailer, Yannis said he and the other migrants could not eat or use the bathroom properly because they were locked inside the trailer and were not let out until they reached near the border. The only food Yannis had on the entire trip was water given by the coyote and his guides and an apple he had. Although Yannis told me he did not suffer anything else physically, he did tell me he is still dealing with a lot of emotional distress from the memories of being locked in the trailer.

### **La llegada**

Although Yannis's journey to the U.S. was unimaginably difficult and highly dangerous, Yannis does not regret coming to the U.S. I asked him if he had ever thought about going back to Honduras, but he said that, although he misses his mother, going back to Honduras meant going back to death. He said to me, worried, "*La gente que me amenazaron siguen en Honduras,*

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<sup>84</sup> "Companionship and understanding."

<sup>85</sup> A coyote is a person who smuggles migrants across the U.S.-Mexico Border.

*entonces si yo decidiera regresar, correría peligro más porque ellos siguen con esa cosa, peor ahora que perdieron las elecciones.*”<sup>86</sup>

As Yannis continued telling me why he could not go back to Honduras because the people who threatened him are in Honduras, I was very intrigued about his usage of the word “*cosa*” meaning “thing.” Honduran people are nationalists by heart, and almost everyone identifies with a political party. The November 2021 elections, however, changed Honduras’ political atmosphere and the future of Honduran political affairs. The election of the first Honduran female president, President Xiomara Castro, under the Liberty and Refoundation party, had JOH’s supporters furious and based on Yannis *testimonio* they are capable of harming others. The “*cosa*” that Yannis talked to me about is the feeling of revenge those who lost the elections have. Because Yannis worked to support the 2017 elections and was part of the resistance movements, he is afraid they might seize their revenge on him.

Yannis was detained and held for three days in the U.S. Customs and Border Protection detention facilities on the southern border. Yannis’s first night after being released and sent to New York to meet his brother was the best night he had ever had in a long time. I saw the relief in his eyes and a smile on his face as he told me how happy, safe, and at peace he felt that night. With a big laugh and his eyes wide open Yannis told me how he asked his brother to get him some Chinese food because, in his own words, “*eso es lo que estaba deseando.*”<sup>87</sup>

After working and earning enough money in the U.S., Yannis was able to bring his ex-wife and two kids to the U.S. The U.S. government granted political asylum to Yannis and his kids not long before we met in the cafe back in January. Yannis now works at his brother’s tire shop and takes care of his two kids. When I asked Yannis what he thought of his life now in the

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<sup>86</sup> “The people who threatened me are still in Honduras, so if I decided to return, I would be in more danger because they continue with that thing, it is worse now that they lost the elections.”

<sup>87</sup> “That was what I was craving.”

U.S., he told me that this country, referring to the U.S., was the country of “*oportunidades y seguridad*”<sup>88</sup> while Honduras was a country of “*pocas oportunidades.*”<sup>89</sup> With a smile on his face and a tone of relief, he concluded saying that everything is going well for him: “*Me está yendo bien aquí gracias a Dios.*”<sup>90</sup>

### 2.3 Eduardo

#### Home: Café, Maíz y Frijoles

Eduardo is originally from a small village in the department of Comayagua, in the west-central area of Honduras. Growing up in a predominantly agricultural area, Eduardo spent most of his childhood helping his dad sow coffee, corn, and beans to help support his mother and two siblings. As a child, he enjoyed horseback riding and helping his dad with work. His face brightened up as he told me about his childhood memories. Every day after school, he would go back home, pick up the food his mom had cooked, and then drop off the food and stay to help his dad with work. His dad taught him the secrets of growing food and selling it because it was the only way to provide and sustain themselves. He dreamed of having his own farming business one day, as he said to me, “*Siempre me puse que yo quería tener lo mío. Nunca pensé que el estudio sería importante en mi vida. Siempre quería tener mi finca.*”<sup>91</sup> Eduardo dropped out of school after finishing 5th grade; even at that young age, he never thought that education would be necessary for his life. Instead, he decided to work with his dad and start working towards his

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<sup>88</sup> The U.S. is a place of “opportunities and safety.”

<sup>89</sup> “Limited opportunities.”

<sup>90</sup> “I am doing well here, thank God.”

<sup>91</sup> “I always said that I wanted to have my own things. I never thought that studying would be important in my life. I always wanted to have my farm.”

dreams. Dropping out of school at a young age is a common trend in Honduras due to the lack of resources in the education system. The rural areas of Honduras are often the most affected ones because of the scarcity of schools and teachers.

Although young people drop out of school in hopes of working and helping their families financially, the reality is that the lack of job opportunities makes it almost impossible for them to find a stable job. When this happens, they have no choice but to find other avenues, such as immigrating to the U.S. This was the case with Eduardo, his dream of having a farm was interrupted by the reality of Honduras's economy. When young people do not have access to education or a stable job, they usually have two options: one, do anything that can provide them with economic security, even if this means joining gangs and doing criminal activities, or two, leave the country and risk their lives to find a better life. The ones that are not lucky enough to leave perish in the hands of the country's gangs and other criminal organizations.

Eduardo's perception of Honduras is the one of who loves his country, when I asked him to describe Honduras he said, "*Honduras es lo mejor que tenemos. Siempre digo que hay muchas islas como las Islas de Roatán, que tenemos mucha cultura. Es bonito Honduras, lastimosamente los gobiernos son malos.*"<sup>92</sup> Eduardo described Honduras as a beautiful country with a terrible government. Unfortunately, Honduras' cultural richness and beautiful landscapes were not enough for Eduardo to stay, and in 2017 he decided to come to the U.S. The reason why he left Honduras was for a better future and better opportunities as he stated it: "*La razón por la que dejé el país fue por un futuro mejor. Siempre me dijeron que en Estados Unidos iba a tener todo lo que necesitaba y por eso me arriesgué a venir.*"<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> "Honduras is the best we have. I always say that there are many islands like the Roatan Islands, that we have a lot of culture. Honduras is beautiful; unfortunately, the governments are bad."

<sup>93</sup> "The reason why I left the country was for a better future. I was always told that in the United States I would have everything I needed and that is why I took the risk of coming."

### First Attempt: La Bestia

The first time Eduardo tried to cross, he was detained in San Luis Potosí, a northern state in Mexico, and was deported back to Honduras. With a sad and melancholic expression on his face, Eduardo said the hardness of his journey. He said to me, *“Pasé mucha pena. Sufrí mucho para llegar a San Luis Potosí. Agarré el tren, sufrí mucho, pasé mucho y luego regresé a Honduras.”*<sup>94</sup> I could see the pain in his eyes everytime he mentioned the word suffer; his voice dropped as if something in his throat was stopping him from talking. *“Yo tomé la Bestia”*<sup>95</sup> he continued. I asked him what his experience had been taking the train, and he said, *“Se sufre mucho, siempre y cuando tengas que tomar la medida de que el tren no vaya tan rápido porque te va a cortar una pierna o una mano. Tienes que saber agarrarlo en las estaciones, a veces ves tantos accidentes, te da pánico y se sufre hambre, frío, de todo.”*<sup>96</sup>

Despite the many challenges it poses, many migrants and refugees from Honduras and other Central American countries ride the trains that transit from the southern border of Guatemala to the north of Mexico to travel faster and safer. The train *La Bestia* has been one of the most popular forms of transportation for many Central American migrants and refugees. To avoid dangerous Mexico’s drug cartels and gangs such as *Los Zetas*, many migrants decide to board *La Bestia* and hope they will survive the deadly rails. Some are stopped by the rails of the train, others are kidnaped, extorted, sexually assaulted, and murdered by bloodthirsty gangs. The experience of riding the train is the same: everyone is the same on top of the train. They all hang as the train moves. Some choose to talk, some others choose silence. But the most important

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<sup>94</sup> “I went through a lot of pain. I suffered a lot to get to San Luis Potosí. I took the train, I suffered a lot, I went through a lot and then I returned to Honduras.”

<sup>95</sup> “I rode the Beast.”

<sup>96</sup> “You suffer a lot, as long as you know when to get on the train when the train doesn't go so fast because it could cut you off a leg or a hand. You have to know how to get on it at the stations, sometimes you see so many accidents, you panic and you suffer from hunger, cold, everything.”

thing is to stay on the train and not fall in the deadly rails.<sup>97</sup> The survivors like Eduardo describe their experiences riding *La Bestia* as going to hell and encountering the devil itself.

Riding *La Bestia* was one of the most dangerous things that Eduardo encountered on his first trip to the U.S. Eduardo spent three days on the train's roof without food and water. On the third day, he said that he knew something was wrong with him and decided to get off the train to avoid falling off and onto the rails. After getting off the train, he desperately went to ask for help to the nearest town and that was when the Mexican police saw him and arrested him.

Although Eduardo was glad to be alive and had survived the rails of *La Bestia*, he knew his journey had come to an end. Unfortunately, he was going to be deported back to Honduras but he stayed positive and told himself that he would recover and come back stronger as he said: “*voy a Honduras a recuperarme y a ver cómo hago las cosas mejores para llegar a los Estados Unidos.*”<sup>98</sup> As he said he would, he waited eight months to recover and decided to make one more attempt to cross. He was successful the second time; nonetheless, it almost cost him his life.

### **Second and Last Attempt: El Refrigerador**

In his second attempt, Eduardo was determined to enter the U.S. He did not travel with friends; instead, he paid a coyote to take him through the journey. As far as he knew, paying a coyote guaranteed his entrance to the U.S., as well as safety and protection on the trip. On the day of his departure, the people that worked with the coyote he had paid came to his house and picked him up in a car. He was taken to Corinto that same day, a small town near the Honduras-Guatemala border. He spent about a day and a half in a bus traveling from Honduras to

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<sup>97</sup> Oscar Martínez and Francisco Goldman, *The Beast: Riding the Rails and Dodging Narcos on the Migrant Trail*, Paperback edition (London ; New York: Verso, 2014).

<sup>98</sup> “I am going to Honduras to recover and see how I can do things better to get to the United States.”

Guatemala and from Guatemala to Mexico. After arriving in Chiapas, Mexico, he was then taken to Palenque, where he was stationed for two days.

Around 10:00 pm on the second day one of the guides told Eduardo “*Venías muy tranquilo y muy feliz en autobús pero ahora van a cambiar las cosas... no te vas a ir en bus, te vas a ir en un trailer.*”<sup>99</sup> Eduardo sensed something amiss in the guy’s voice and immediately understood that something was wrong. He had paid his coyote \$10,000 to be transported safely. Nonetheless, being transported in a trailer was far from what he promised. Eduardo and about 120 other people were put in a refrigerated truck for 2.5 days until they reached Reynosa, Mexico. With terror in his watery eyes, Eduardo described the feeling of panic he felt while being packed like a sardine into the cold truck container to arrive at the border area.

Eduardo’s tone of voice when he told me “*me mintieron, pasé mucha pena*”<sup>100</sup> still haunts me. He said that despite all the money he paid to the coyote, he felt lied to and betrayed and thus endured a lot of pain in the trip. He also saw others suffer with him: dehydrated kids crying for food and water, afflicted mothers for their kids, and men who felt impotent under the circumstances. At some point in the trip, all the 120 people in the trailer thought they were going to die. At some point in the trip, Eduardo said that they heard the trailer’s wheels burst and immediately knew that something was wrong. Everybody, including Eduardo, cried and implored the two guards to do something and help them, but instead of helping, they were told that they would be killed one by one if they kept talking.

Everybody, including Eduardo, had no choice but to stay quiet and hope for the best. As he was explaining to me the way he felt at that moment he said that he could not even look them

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<sup>99</sup> “You came very calm and very happy by bus but now things are going to change... you are not going to go by bus anymore, you are going to go in a trailer.”

<sup>100</sup> “They lied to me. I went through a lot.”

in the eye, “¿cómo te explico?”<sup>101</sup> he told me while trying to find the right words to use. Then he proceeded to explain to me how he saw the people that smuggled him being under the influences of drugs. He included that smugglers do not care about the people they smuggle; on the contrary, they only care about money, “*Siempre la gente en México cuando jalan gente... andan drogados. A ellos no les importan los seres humanos, ellos solo quieren la plata.*”<sup>102</sup>

At that moment, Eduardo had lost contact with the *coyote*, and the only way to communicate with him was through the *coyote's* men or guides. After luckily arriving in Reynosa, the *coyote's* men told Eduardo that he would now travel by bus to near the U.S.-Mexico border. The guides told him that if someone asked him something where he would get off the bus to give “*la clave.*”<sup>103</sup> This “*clave*” or password was a color that Eduardo needed to use to identify who he was traveling with. Eduardo got off the bus in a clandestine bus station where every migrant traveling looks for their people based on their passwords. Eduardo was able to identify his group soon after he got off the bus, but he made a very important observation about the other migrants: he realized that the migrants that did not have a password were taken by what Eduardo believed to be “*la mafia Mexicana.*”<sup>104</sup> He said “*la mafia*” kidnaps migrants and extorts their families, “*la mafia te agarran y secuestran para pedirle mucho dinero a tus familiares... A mí me dieron mi color y yo lo di por eso no me pasó nada.*”<sup>105</sup>

Eduardo was fortunate enough to have had a password. After he gave his color, Eduardo and the rest of his group was taken to what he called a “*bodega*”<sup>106</sup> where he was given food and was allowed to take a shower and clean himself. As Eduardo was eating a full meal for the first

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<sup>101</sup> “How can I explain to you.”

<sup>102</sup> “People in Mexico that smuggle people are always drugged... They don't care about human beings, they just want the money.”

<sup>103</sup> “The password.”

<sup>104</sup> “The Mexican Mafia.” Here Eduardo refers to drug traffickers, human traffickers and Mexican gangs groups.

<sup>105</sup> “The mafia kidnaps you to ask your relatives for a lot of money... They gave me my color and I gave it, so nothing happened to me.”

<sup>106</sup> Here Eduardo is likely to be referring to a migrant smuggling house.

time in a very long time, he felt as if, besides preparing him to cross the Río Bravo, they were also preparing him for something that he could not quite understand at the time.

### Crossing

“*Como quiera voy a salir*”<sup>107</sup> Eduardo told himself when he saw the water going into the inflatable boat crossing the Rio Bravo. He was crossing the river with seven others in the boat. Everything was going great, but unexpectedly halfway through, they noticed that the boat was punctured and could no longer hold more weight. Everybody started panicking and screaming, but Eduardo tried to keep his composure. When the boat could no longer hold any weight, everybody started swimming to the surface. He was lucky he learned how to swim in the rivers of his town.

As soon as Eduardo and the others made it to the other side, they heard the sound of a helicopter and saw men in green with barking dogs rapidly approaching. They all started running, and hiding; Eduardo had no choice but to hide in a swamp where he spent three hours covered with dirt until the U.S. border patrol agents gave up on looking for him. When the agents left and he no longer heard the sounds of the helicopter, he came out of the swamp and gathered back with the rest that had hidden close to him. Crossing the river was only the beginning of their crossing through the borderlands. Eduardo knew that if they wanted to make it to the next point successfully, they needed to stay together. As he said: “*si agarran a uno, nos agarran a todos.*”<sup>108</sup>

After they all gathered back together, the guide took them to the fence to cross to McAllen, U.S. When they arrived at the fence, Eduardo asked how they were going to cross the

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<sup>107</sup> “Regardless, I will get out.”

<sup>108</sup> “If they caught one, they caught everyone.”

fence, so the guide started digging in the ground and, in the blink of an eye, Eduardo saw a ladder appear. Eduardo said that the *coyotes* have their own system to cross: “*ellos tenían una escalera escondida, la pusieron y todos nos íbamos tirando para el otro lado y el último que iba a cruzar tenía que darle una patada a la escalera para que se cayera y que no supieran por donde habíamos cruzado.*”<sup>109</sup> Eduardo said that after they crossed the fence they were picked up in another truck and were taken to their next destination.

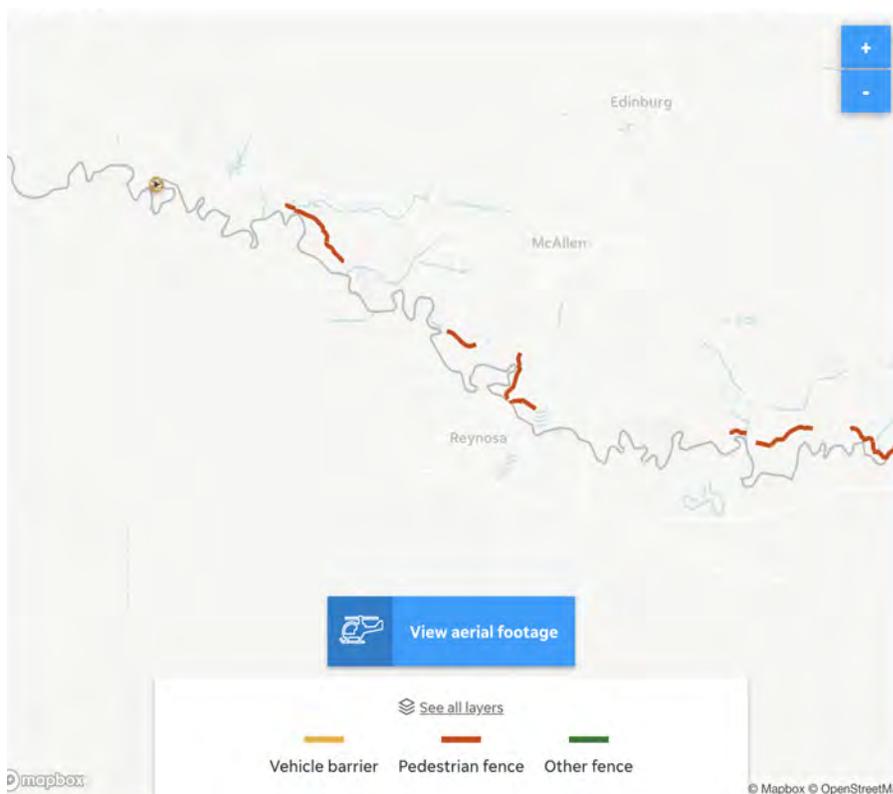


Figure 6. Border Fences in the U.S.-Mexico border<sup>110</sup>

Although Eduardo did not know what his next destination was, he felt a relief that he had finally crossed: “*sentí un alivio porque ya habíamos cruzado el río, lo más peligroso, ya pude hablarle a mi familiares y decirles que ya estaba en Estados Unidos.*”<sup>111</sup> The feeling of relief,

<sup>109</sup> “They had a hidden ladder, they put it up and we all went to the other side and the last one who was going to cross had to kick the ladder so that it would fall and they would not know where we had crossed.”

<sup>110</sup> “The Wall – Interactive Map Exploring U.S.-Mexico Border,” USA Today.com, accessed May 3, 2022, <https://www.usatoday.com/border-wall/us-mexico-interactive-border-map/>.

<sup>111</sup> “I felt relieved because we had already crossed the river. The most dangerous thing, I was able to talk to my relatives and tell them that I was already in the United States.”

however, did not last for long, as he said that he did know the worst experience of his life was approaching: “*no sabía que me faltaba lo peor de mi vida.*”<sup>112</sup> In his eyes there could not be anything more terrifying than riding *La Bestia*, almost dying in the back of a trailer, and crossing the Rio Bravo in a punctured inflatable boat. However, just two days after he arrived at the McAllen house, the guides made 70 pieces of paper for 70 people, but only 17 of them were marked. It meant that whoever drew one of the 17 market papers would be lucky to leave before the others and go to the following house location in Houston. Eduardo was glad to have drawn one of the 17 lucky numbers. He was told that it would take them two days to get to Houston and that the provisions he was given should last him for the entire trip. As the 17 selected people packed their few belongings, the guides gave them a bottle of water, blended beans, and a pack of *tortillas*.

The white truck came back to the house, and he was told to get in the back of the truck along with the other 16 people. His family was happy that he was already in the U.S. because the danger was over. Eduardo was the second person in his family to cross the border; the first person had been his uncle, who never warned him of the danger of crossing. Eduardo did not care about getting in the back of the truck; the only thing he could think of was that he was one step closer to his final destination.

The two men in charge of transportation covered the 17 people from head to toe with a big piece of nylon tarp and began to drive. Eduardo remembers seeing the two men smoke before; although he was concerned, he did not pay much attention to the detail. Although nobody could see each other under the tarp, they were all awake. Suddenly, they all heard the sounds of police sirens and the car accelerating. As the car accelerated more and more, Eduardo and his 16 compañeros started to bounce from one side to the other. Eduardo remembers how the car was

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<sup>112</sup> “I didn't know that the worst of my life was approaching.”

going so fast that he even lost control of his own body. As soon as the tarp lifted, he realized that there was not only one police car following them but four of them. Everybody in the car cried and screamed for help as the car reached its maximum speed. *“La gente suplicaba pero el carro no paraba,”*<sup>113</sup> said Eduardo.

When I asked him what he was thinking about during that particular moment, I saw how his facial expression drastically changed. He paused, looked down, made some gestures with his lips as he wanted to contain a cry, and said, *“Pensé que nunca volvería a ver a mi familia.”*<sup>114</sup> At that moment my eyes became as watery as his because I completely understood that feeling. He made another pause, I gave him his space, and then he continued telling me the story. He added that besides the cars, there was also a helicopter following them and that at the moment, he lost all hopes and told himself *“only Dios con nosotros.”*<sup>115</sup> The roughness of the road made the car slow down until it stopped altogether. Eduardo thanked God the car had stopped. As the police approached, everybody ran in different directions. Once they got there, the police let their dogs free and apprehended the majority of the group. Eduardo ran and did not look back, *“este era mi viaje, nadie me iba a parar, ni siquiera los perros”*<sup>116</sup> said Eduardo in between laughs.

Once he knew he was safe, he noticed another person from the group following him. He was a young boy from Guatemala. Eduardo and the Guatemalan boy realized that they had run to a desert area and that it probably had been the reason why the police did not follow them more. The Guatemalan boy was scared and told Eduardo to go back and turn themselves in. Eduardo refused and told him that if he wanted to go back, he could but that he would continue with his

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<sup>113</sup> "People begged but the car wouldn't stop."

<sup>114</sup> "I thought I would never see my family again."

<sup>115</sup> "Only God with us."

<sup>116</sup> "This was my trip, no one was going to stop me, not even the dogs."

journey. The night came, and Eduardo could only see a red light in the distance; he proposed to the Guatemalan boy to follow the light and see where that red light would take them.

They walked for about one hour; then, an unexpected rain made the red light disappear. Eduardo and the Guatemalan boy endured the cold rain under some dry shrubbery, with only the clothes they had on that day. Once the rain stopped, they decided to continue walking. Eduardo stepped on something that curled on his foot as they were walking. When he realized he had stepped on a giant snake, he ran full of fear, “*sufrió mucho*”<sup>117</sup> said Eduardo as he was telling me the story. They walked until they encountered the sun, and once again, they had lost the red light. They walked the entire day with no sense of direction. He told me “*no sabíamos por dónde caminar; es muy largo el desierto.*”<sup>118</sup> They walked the entire day without water or food and when the night came back, so did the red light. They were happy to see the red light because it meant hope. They realized that the more they walked, the farther they were from the red light. Eduardo could not comprehend what was happening; he said they both were “*hambrientos y deshidratados.*”<sup>119</sup> Nevertheless, they pushed through the night and completed another night of walking. Throughout the journey, Eduardo said that the Guatemalan boy cried a lot and that he would tell him to have faith. The Guatemalan boy was younger than Eduardo and scared because his brother-in-law had perished in the desert while trying to cross. Eduardo got nervous for a second, but he told the Guatemalan boy not to worry because that would not happen to them.

Eduardo said that the desert was so hot during the day but so cold during the night that he felt as if the desert would be the last thing his eyes would see. Eduardo is not a religious person, but his grandma’s prayers kept him alive in the desert. After walking for half a day, he found a

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<sup>117</sup> "I suffered a lot."

<sup>118</sup> “We didn't know where to walk; the desert is very long.”

<sup>119</sup> “Hungry and dehydrated.”

fence and felt “*un alivio*”<sup>120</sup> because that meant people were around. He was ready to turn himself in to the police because he could not endure any more pain; his skin was burnt because of the sun, and his feet had blisters and had thorns all over his body. Suddenly he saw the fence moving, and he looked to the sides and saw a group of people crossing the fence. He and the Guatemalan boy ran to the group of people, and, as soon as they were close, they both realized that it was another group of migrants. Eduardo described that moment as if “*Dios hubiera bajado del Cielo.*”<sup>121</sup> At that moment, he thanked God and told himself he would not die.

When Eduardo and the Guatemalan boy finally arrived at where the group was, a man from the crowd came to him and told him that they could not join the group because they, referring to Eduardo and the Guatemalan boy, had been abandoned by their group. Eduardo told him what had happened to his group and that they desperately needed help. The man said that he was going to Houston and would only take them if they had someone who could economically respond for them. He asked for \$3,000 each and told them that as soon as they reached their next destination, he would give them a phone so that they could call their families. In his desperation, Eduardo immediately agreed to pay all the money; the only thing he could think of was surviving for his family. The man gave Eduardo an apple and a bottle of water. Eduardo told me that he had never liked apples the way he did that day.

The man then told the Guatemalan boy that he would also need to pay the same amount of money if he wanted to join the group. The Guatemalan boy responded, saying that he would only pay \$1,000. The man did not like the Guatemalan boy’s proposal and told him that he would have to stay in the desert. When Eduardo heard the man saying that, he immediately got up and went to talk to the Guatemalan boy. He told the Guatemalan boy to listen to him and pay the

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<sup>120</sup> “A relief.”

<sup>121</sup> “God would have come down from Heaven.”

money. When I asked Eduardo why he intervened, he told me that he had become his *compañero* and that *“dejarlo atrás era triste para mí.”*<sup>122</sup> The Guatemalan boy accepted the proposal, and they both joined the group. Three hours after walking, they reached the pickup point. Another truck was waiting for them; they got in the back of the pickup truck, one on top of the other, but Eduardo did not care to be crushed by his *compañeros*; he was happy everything was finally over.

### **New Home**

After almost five days of not knowing from him, Eduardo’s family finally received the call. It was Eduardo already in Houston. After he paid the money, the man that had helped him in the desert gave him a pair of clean pants and told him he could shower in the house where they were. Eduardo had not showered since the day he separated from his group. He stayed under the shower contemplating everything he had been through; as the dirt was dripping from his skin, he also noticed that the bath sponge was getting stuck in his skin. When he paid close attention, he noticed that most of his body was covered with thorns. Surprisingly, he was not in pain and took out all the thorns until the bath sponge was no longer getting stuck on his skin. After he showered, he put the pants on; they fit him very loosely, so he used the laces of his shoes to tie them. His first meal was Chinese food, and he said he almost threw up because his stomach could not tolerate anything. Eduardo had lost much weight; it was hard for him to recognize himself.

It took Eduardo about a day to get to NY from Houston. He traveled in a van with other migrants. The driver, a Panamanian man, was a lovely man in his eyes of Eduardo. He had told the entire group, laughing, that he only had one rule in his van: nobody could fall asleep because

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<sup>122</sup> “Leaving him behind was sad for me.”

if someone fell asleep, he would want to sleep as well. He said that it was for everyone's safety. He would open the window every time someone fell asleep, play energetic music, and make multiple stops in coffee shops. Eventually, the caffeine, the outside views, the music, and the mixed emotions did not let anyone close their eyes.

Although Eduardo was very excited to get to NY, he was also very nervous and anxious, especially whenever he heard the sounds of the police sirens. In his own words he said "*Yo venía muy nervioso porque cuando escuchaba los sonidos de la ambulancia y de la policía pensaba que nos iban a parar.*"<sup>123</sup> That fear did not disappear until four months later. The van arrived in the Bronx, NY; after 22 hours on the road, his uncle went to pick him up at the drop-off point. When Eduardo got off the van and stepped onto the floor, he took a deep breath and told himself that he was finally safe.

When he saw his uncle, he could not recognize him. His uncle had eight years already living in the U.S., and according to Eduardo, he dressed and smelled differently. His uncle took him to Eduardo's new home and gave him a room and money to buy clothes and a phone to call his family in Honduras. The first thing he asked his uncle for was Honduran food; he said he wanted "*Frijoles, tortilla, crema, y aguacate,*"<sup>124</sup> his uncle cooked for him, and with each bite, Eduardo felt as if he was a kid again. Eduardo's first night resting his head in a safe place was unimaginably painful. What he thought would be a restful night became a horror of nightmares. That night he realized how much he had been affected because of the trip. "*Sentía que venía en el camino todavía, me despertaba a cada momento y miraba hacia arriba y le daba gracias a Dios que estaba en EEUU. Siempre le doy gracias a Dios que me despierto y estoy en EEUU.*"<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> "I was very nervous because when I heard the sounds of the ambulance and the police I thought they were going to stop us."

<sup>124</sup> "Beans, tortilla, cream, and avocado."

<sup>125</sup> "I felt that I was still on the road, I woke up every moment and looked up and thanked God that I was in the United States? I always thank God that I wake up and I'm in the U.S."

said Eduardo. It was hard for Eduardo to get used to having a safe space and trusting that he would be fine the following day. His body and mind were used to working together to protect him from possible danger, and now it was hard for him to trust both the spaces and people around him.

His first job was in a Dominican restaurant, where he learned all the fine art of Dominican cuisine. He said to me laughing *“yo te puedo hacer un sancocho, quipes, y todo lo que te puedas imaginar.”*<sup>126</sup> He worked for three years in the kitchen, but then he realized that going from the kitchen to the basement of the restaurant every day would not give him what he dreamed of when he was in Honduras. Thus, he spoke with the restaurant owner and told her that he needed to leave the job and find something else. Eduardo said it had been hard for him to leave the job because they welcomed him with open arms but understood he had dreams and goals to accomplish.

*“Amo el trabajo que tengo hoy”*<sup>127</sup> said Eduardo, when I asked him if he had found what he was looking for. He now rides and drives the big trucks to make deliveries in the state of N.Y. A day in Eduardo's life consists of waking up almost every day at 4:00 am, making his coffee, and going to work. He gets home late at night, depending on how much work he has. He showers, cooks, and drinks more coffee when he is back home. I asked Eduardo if he has ever considered going back to Honduras, and he said, *“No deseo volver a Honduras. A vivir nunca”* because for him *“aquí puedes sobrevivir mejor que en Honduras.”*<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> "I can cook you a sancocho, quipes, and everything you can imagine."

<sup>127</sup> "I love the job I have today."

<sup>128</sup> "I do not wish to return to Honduras. To live never" because for him "here you can survive better than in Honduras."

## 2.4 Jaime

### *Living With the Enemy*

“*Imagino que tienes mucho tiempo*” said Jaime between laughs when I asked him about his life in Honduras. He then formally introduced himself with his full name and age. He grew up in an impoverished and dangerous neighborhood in the city of San Pedro Sula, Honduras. His mother raised him with the economic support of his father who had been living in the United States for 16 years after crossing the U.S.-Mexico border. With the help of his father, Jaime was able to go to school and graduate from high school and start college. Unfortunately, he had to drop out of school when he realized he would become a young father. Due to this unexpected event, he lost the economic support from both his parents and had to start working full time.

In Honduras, Jaime worked at a store as a salesman, but right when he had six months working, he was told that his contract would not be renewed and was fired. Losing his job meant that he needed to find another one as soon as possible. One day of no work meant one day of not being able to provide for him and his then pregnant girlfriend. He was able to find a job in a textile factory in the city, where he was able to get a promotion as a supervisor of materials later. Besides economic difficulties, Jaime also had safety concerns while living in Honduras. He lived his whole life in La Rivera Hernández, a war zone for gangs or in Jaime 's words “*una zona muy pero muy complicada respecto a las pandillas. Una zona peligrosa.*”<sup>129</sup> Besides being one of the most dangerous places where gang groups fight for their dominance, the Honduran neighborhood is also one of the most vulnerable and poor ones. Jaime said that not everyone in the neighborhood had the luxury to have a car or things of that nature and people that had things with economic value were many times in the eyes of the gangs. This was the case of Jaime, his

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<sup>129</sup> “A very, very complicated area regarding the gangs. A dangerous zone.”

father had given him a car for him to be able to mobilize but what Jaime did not know is that he would become a target for the gangs in his neighborhood.



Figure 7. Gang members' house in the Rivera Hernandez neighborhood. Illustration by German Andino Woods.<sup>130</sup>

Someone like Jaime, who had the means to leave and enter the neighborhood whenever he liked, was a primary target for the gangs. Jaime said that he had various encounters with gang members from his neighborhood who targeted him for his car, he said: *“Tuve varios encuentros con personas muy malas: me asaltaron pero alguien intervino por mí y dijo que yo era un buen muchacho y me devolvieron mis cosas.”*<sup>131</sup> He was lucky to get his belongings back after the robbery, but it was not enough for him to feel safe in his neighborhood, *“ya no podía entrar a altas horas de la noche ni siquiera me sentía seguro,”*<sup>132</sup> said Jaime. He knew the gang members were still watching every step he made.

<sup>130</sup> “Poor ’hood, Mean ’Hood: The Violent History of Rivera Hernandez, Honduras,” *InSight Crime* (blog), March 27, 2017. <https://insightcrime.org/investigations/gang-history-rivera-hernandez-honduras/>.

<sup>131</sup> “I had several encounters with very bad people: I was mugged but someone intervened for me and said that I was a good boy and they gave me my things back.”

<sup>132</sup> “I couldn't get in late at night anymore I didn't even feel safe.”

Shortly after his attack, Jaime lost everything due to hurricane Iota. The only thing left for him was his car, the clothing he had on that day, and his family. The country was highly affected by the hurricane as he said: *“la situación en Honduras era muy horrible, respecto al gobierno, al trabajo, a todo.”*<sup>133</sup> Jaime said that very often, Honduran people do not believe that the decisions and actions of the government affect them but that in reality, they do matter. According to Jaime, during the hurricane and the pandemic, Honduran people were able to see the lack of government support. During the pandemic, there were several curfews in the country, and many people could not go out of their homes and work. Only those with a permit were allowed to work, but these permits were limited to the elite class. The issue with this, according to Jaime, is that for the majority of Honduran citizens, a day of work is worth a day of food and other necessities for their families.

Jaime disclosed how in the eyes of the public, the government was helping its citizens with the hurricane and pandemic relief. *“La ayuda va en camino”*<sup>134</sup> the government would say in the news every morning but *“la ayuda nunca llegó”*<sup>135</sup> said Jaime. He said that in the news, they would always say that millions of Honduran Lempiras in food had been donated for the most affected sectors; however, the food never arrived. *“Esos millones fueron robados por el gobierno”*<sup>136</sup> said Jaime firmly. He said that there are many videos of government officials secretly selling donations to other countries on the internet. *“Por eso hubo tantas protestas”*<sup>137</sup> said Jaime.

Jaime participated in many of these protests against the JOH government and witnessed the military police violently assault the protesters. Jaime said that during the protests they were

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<sup>133</sup> “The situation in Honduras was very horrible, regarding the government, work, everything.”

<sup>134</sup> “Help is on the way.”

<sup>135</sup> “The Help never arrived.”

<sup>136</sup> “Those millions were robbed by the government.”

<sup>137</sup> “That's why there were so many protests.”

many deaths: *“hubo muchos, muchos muertos. Tantos muertos que la gente se cansó”*<sup>138</sup> and when the protesters saw violence they responded back using the same force as the police. Fortunately, Jaime did not suffer any physical violence from the police. His opinion on the JOH government hasn't changed much since 2017, *“En estos 8 años que estuvo gobernando el presidente Juan Orlando Hernández fueron horribles”*<sup>139</sup> said Jaime. His facial expression showed anger, disappointment, and sadness. Jaime said he would always describe Honduras as a beautiful country, but the government is the bad face of the country: *“El gobierno es la mala cara del país.”*<sup>140</sup>

In the same conversation, Jaime disclosed that the government had a huge influence on his migration. He said: *“Mi migración no fue por falta de trabajo, mi migración fue por falta de seguridad. La falta de seguridad la da el mismo gobierno. Yo sufrí el asalto en mi colonia y recibí amenazas de que no me querían ver en mi colonia.”*<sup>141</sup> After his assault, Jaime no longer felt safe in his neighborhood and had no hopes that the government would help; therefore, he had no choice but to leave his home with his wife and kid. Jaime and his family left Honduras on July 27th, 2021. Leaving his family behind was one of the hardest decisions he has ever experienced, *“fue difícil ver a mi mamá llorar”*<sup>142</sup> Jaime said.

### Leaving

*“Ese día nunca lo voy a olvidar, como el día que nació mi hijo. Dos días tan marcados que nunca los voy a olvidar,”*<sup>143</sup> Jaime said when sharing how he felt the day he left Honduras.

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<sup>138</sup> “There were many, many deaths. So many dead that people got tired.”

<sup>139</sup> “These 8 years that President Juan Orlando Hernández was governing were horrible.”

<sup>140</sup> “The government is the bad face of the country.”

<sup>141</sup> “My migration was not due to lack of work, my migration was due to lack of security. The lack of security given by the government itself. I suffered an assault in my neighborhood and I received threats saying that they did not want to see me in my neighborhood.”

<sup>142</sup> “It was hard to see my mom cry.”

<sup>143</sup> “I will never forget that day, like the day my son was born. Two days so marked that I will never forget them.”

The day Jaime left Honduras is marked in his life as the day his son was born; two days that he will never forget. When talking about his journey to the U.S. he said that it is not an easy trip: *“no es un camino muy fácil, no es solo montarse en un avión y estar al otro lado.”*<sup>144</sup> According to Jaime, traveling to the U.S. across Mexico is not as easy as just taking a plane; on the contrary, Jaime said that he experienced so much and had so many mixed emotions that his journey is indescribable. Jaime said that he lost the freedom of walking freely in the streets the moment he left Honduras. Although he always had to be careful when walking in the streets of Honduras, he never imagined that this would turn ten times worse. Even though he was nervous from the moment that his journey began, he had to put his fears aside and be extremely careful to protect his family.

Jaime and his family were in a car for 12 hours non-stop from Honduras to Guatemala. They arrived at the Guatemala-Mexico border around two in the morning. To Jaime’s surprise, they were not taken to a hotel or anything close to one; instead, they were brought to what Jaime said to be *“una casa de migrantes.”*<sup>145</sup> He said that it was both mental and physical torture to retain themselves from the basic need to use the bathroom. Jaime described the house as a horrible experience: *“solo te daban acogimiento y baño por dos o tres días pero no era sanitario. Era tanta gente y había tantas necesidades que a la gente se le olvidaba que el baño se limpiaba también.”*<sup>146</sup>

Jaime described his first night sleeping in the migrant transit house as horrible and terrifying. He slept on some dirty and wasted mattresses that have been used by other crossing migrants like him, he said that *“Eran cientos de personas en una habitación en donde ya habían*

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<sup>144</sup> “It is not a very easy road, it is not just getting on a plane and being on the other side.”

<sup>145</sup> “Migrant House.” Here Jaime is likely to be referring to a smuggling house.

<sup>146</sup> “They only gave you shelter and a bathroom for two or three days, but it was not sanitary. There were so many people and there were so many needs that people forgot that the bathroom needed to be cleaned too.”

*pasado cientos de personas.*”<sup>147</sup> Jaime said that everything around him was dirty, so he carried his son on his chest the entire night.

### **Traveling During A Global Pandemic**

The 2019 Covid Pandemic was still happening when Jaime and his family traveled to the United States. Before starting their journey, Jaime said that he and his wife agreed on being extra careful and making sure they were taking care of themselves and their kid to avoid getting sick. They brought extra clothing for their kid, a first aid kit, used hand sanitizer as much as possible, and changed their facemask every time they entered a new place. Jaime said they were scared to get sick in an unknown place where they were not allowed to be or welcome to stay.

### **Mexico and the Border: Una zona privatizada**

“*Cruzar México es una cosa de locos*”<sup>148</sup> said Jaime about his experiences traveling across Mexico. Jaimes’s biggest fear while in Mexico was not getting caught by the Mexican police and being sent back to Honduras; his biggest fear was falling into the hands of gang members, human traffickers, or narcotraffickers. Jaime said that if the police caught a migrant, they would be fine, but if someone else caught you, you would not survive: “*si te agarra la policía te deportan, si te agarra alguien más no las puedes contar.*”<sup>149</sup> While Jaime and his family were traveling in combis, small Mexican buses, Jaime noticed multiple cars following and inspecting the buses to see if they could find and kidnap traveling migrants; luckily, nothing happened to him or his family.

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<sup>147</sup> “There were hundreds of people in a room where hundreds of people had already passed.”

<sup>148</sup> “Crossing Mexico is a crazy thing.”

<sup>149</sup> “If the police catch you they deport you, if someone else catches you you would not make it.”

Besides this incident, there is another incident that Jaime remembers until this date: When he arrived in Reynosa, he and his family and three other compañeros were brought to another transit migrant house, where they encountered the mafia. He and his group were asked to stand in a line and say where they were from. The mafia then asked every migrant to sign the national anthem of their country of origin to prove themselves. Jaime said that if the migrant had lied or simply could not remember his or her national anthem, the mafia would “*matarte o secuestrarte o hacer lo que ellos quisieran hacer contigo.*”<sup>150</sup> Jaime still remembers the feeling in his stomach while being pointed at with a flashlight and asked to sing the Honduras anthem. He said he still has vivid memories of the men with flashlights and heavy guns in their hands. At the moment, he feared for his life and his family's lives.

As he and his family got closer to the border, the journey became more dangerous. Although getting through Mexico can be very dangerous, Jaime said you could make it to the border without any inconvenience if you have the right connections such a *coyote* and luck. However, once you get to the border, according to Jaime, things become more complex, and you will need more than luck and connections. Jaime said that Narco Traffickers and their drug cartels govern the U.S.-Mexico border and that nobody can cross without their permission: “*El río es la frontera y está gobernado por narcos. No se puede ni cruzar una hormiga porque ya la matan. Tienes que pagar el cruce.*”<sup>151</sup>

As a result, Jaime had to pay additional fees to access the border and the Río Grande. He said that the way he analyzed the situation is that the further your country of origin is, the higher the tariff and the more the migrant would have to pay for the crossing. Before crossing, Jaime and his family were brought to another migrant house by the border in Reynosa. This house was

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<sup>150</sup> “Kill you or kidnap you or do whatever they wanted to do to you.”

<sup>151</sup> “The river is the border and it is governed by drug traffickers. An ant can’t even cross because they already kill it. You have to pay for the crossing.”

cleaner and more sanitized than any other place he had been to in Mexico. On the day of his crossing, he was told that he and his family would cross at 2:00 am in the morning. When the sun went down and the night arrived, he and everybody else who was crossing the border that night were told that they had to build their inflatable boat to cross the river. Jaime and his family crossed the river in the boat with around 15 other migrants. He said that the guides did not care that the boat would flip or sink; they only cared about crossing them all simultaneously. To fit in the boat, they all had to kneel and stay in the same position while crossing. Jaime said that when they were about halfway through the river, the guides stopped the boat and told everyone to get off the boat and swim to the other side. Luckily for those who did not know how to swim, the river was on their side and was not as deep as they thought it would be. One by one, he left the boat until the boat was empty; Jaime carried his son on his back and crossed to the U.S. with his wife.

As soon as they arrived in the U.S., they started looking for the border patrol to turn themselves in. Because most people were families and mothers with their kids, the goal was to turn themselves into border patrol and ask for help. Jaime remembers being very cold in the water of the Río Grande, but he did not care about himself; he only wanted his son to be okay. He carried his son in his arms and although he would get tired he *“seguía porque pensaba que esa sería la última vez que lo tendría en sus brazos.”*<sup>152</sup> Jaime knew of many cases of migrants where only one parent was allowed to enter and stay with the child. Although he loved his kid to death, he wanted his wife to be his kid because he could return to Honduras and try to cross again.

Around 60 migrant families were looking for border patrol to turn themselves in, but they were concerned they could not find border patrol as time passed. Jaime was the only person with

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<sup>152</sup> “I kept going because I thought that would be the last time I would have him in my arms.”

a cellphone and GPS. Since they did not have a guide, he became the group's guide after they crossed the river. It was him and his GPS against the nothingness of the borderland. Even with the difficulties of the internet, Jaime managed to get the group to the nearest street, about 6 hours from the river. Once they arrived on the street, he was thrilled to see a car approaching. However, the rest of the group was not as happy as him. Jaime said that they were scared of being kidnapped, so they ran to hide. He asked them why they were hiding and if “*entregarse*”<sup>153</sup> was not the purpose of their trip from the start. Soon after, they heard another car approaching but this time they realized that it was border patrol. When the border patrol official saw the group, he stopped the car and asked the group to come out from where they were hiding. Then, the border patrol official asked them to follow the car until they arrived at a border detention checkpoint.

They were given food at the detention center; a doctor saw the kids and ensured their safety and health. After the immigration agents collected Jaime’s and his family's personal information, he thought that that moment would be the last one with his family. Nonetheless, to his surprise, he and his family were asked to board a bus which transported them to an immigration advocacy Catholic Church. They were given shelter, food, and clean clothes at the church. Although Jaime was grateful for the shelter, the people in the church were offering to him and his family, staying in the shelter triggered J's past experiences. He said that he felt that he was “*traumado porque se miraba como las bodegas en México.*”<sup>154</sup> The similarities between the church and the migrant houses he had been to in Mexico did not allow him to stay in the shelter for long. Instead, he called his dad and asked him for money to find a hotel near them. Not knowing much, Jaime and his family could rest at a hotel in McAllen for three days until his plane tickets to New York were ready to be reunited with his dad.

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<sup>153</sup> “Turn yourself in.”

<sup>154</sup> “Traumatized because it looked like the migrant houses in Mexico.”

## Documenting the Undocumented

*“Yo documentaba cada pedacito que podía del viaje. Lo grababa”<sup>155</sup>*

One of the unexpected topics brought up in our conversation was documenting the migrant experience. Jaime shared a video that went viral on his TikTok account where he shows a brief clip of women and their kids walking to find border patrol after crossing the river. The video has over 40k views and many likes and comments. One of the most surprising things about this video is the comment section: it is composed by people leaving comments reflecting on their own experiences such as *“gracias a dios ya estamos en USA después de 5 intentos,”*<sup>156</sup> people desiring to leave *“algún día viajaré si Dios quiere,”*<sup>157</sup> and people asking for information and details on how they could do the same, *“cómo hacer pasar con mi familia y mi hijo... quién me da información cómo hacer.”*<sup>158</sup> Under almost every comment or question, there is a conversation happening. Many people give information and others respond to questions about the journey and their experiences. The conversation feels almost unreal; it is a network where everybody is exchanging information and helping each other find a way to cross borders.

When I asked him about his experience documenting his journey, Jaime said that *“documentar el viaje fue una experiencia para mí”*<sup>159</sup> and that he could publish more videos and information but he understands the danger that it implies. He explained that his video is a way to show people the hardship of the migrant journey, he said, *“En mi video se ve gente caminando por el desierto, intentando buscar una mejor vida y dando un mensaje a la gente de que no es*

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<sup>155</sup> “I documented every bit of the trip that I could. She recorded it.”

<sup>156</sup> “Thank God we already are in the U.S.A after 5 attempts.”

<sup>157</sup> “Someday I would travel (cross the border) if God allows it.” Note: Although the sentence is grammatically incorrect in Spanish, preserving the originality of the sentence was intentional for the nature and purpose of this project.

<sup>158</sup> “How do I cross my family and son... who can give me information on that?”

<sup>159</sup> “Documenting (the journey) was an experience (mix of positive and negative feelings) for me.”

*nada fácil, es algo viral. Todo mundo de Centroamérica y de Sudamérica quieren emigrar a los Estados Unidos.*”<sup>160</sup> He added that his video does not show the identity of people, only the process because he wanted to make sure he protected his *compañeros*. Jaime added that he still has plenty of videos of his journey to the U.S., but that these videos are not for the public; instead, he said “*estos videos los documente para mí, para mi hijo y para mis familiares.*”<sup>161</sup> Jaime documented these videos for him, his son and his family. He concluded saying that these videos are a reminder of all the hardship he and his family had to endure to find refuge.

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<sup>160</sup> “In my video you see people walking through the desert, trying to find a better life and giving a message to the world that it (the journey) is not easy, it is something viral. Everyone in Central and South America wants to immigrate to the United States.”

<sup>161</sup> “I documented these videos for myself, for my son, and for my relatives.”

## CHAPTER III

### **In a Non-Conventional World: Academia and *Testimonios* Meet**

### 3.1

#### Introduction

Since the 2009-post coup, many scholars have attempted to understand the political crisis and the causes of migration from Honduras in the past decade. Since the instability of Honduras has different layers of violence and various actors of such violence, the reasons why people migrate or flee the country vary. These reasons go from family reunification and a better economic life to violence and persecution. For this reason, it is crucial to examine the individuality of Honduran migration stories and avoid generalizing the reasons for migration from Honduras. I would like to clarify that although I believe in the value of individual stories, I equally acknowledge the importance of these stories on a collective level for studying migration. I believe that it is critical to look at the bigger picture with the only omission of not taking away the agency of migrants and refugees and their stories or *testimonios*. Therefore, in this and last chapter, I attempt to discuss the arguments presented by scholars on Honduras' causes of migration with the experiences of Yannis, Eduardo, and J. I have divided it into three sections for the three different *testimonios*. First, I focus on the arguments around economic instability in Honduras, its poverty levels, and lack of employment as causes of migration. Second, I talk about the violence perpetrated by criminal organizations and how this has caused massive migration from Honduras. Lastly, I center on the political crisis, lack of impunity, and violence executed by the government.

## 3.2

### Poverty as an Indirect Form of Violence

Violence and insecurity are not the only reasons people from Honduras are forced to flee. The high poverty levels and lack of employment and opportunities have always been a push factor for Honduras's migration. Poverty and violence became intertwined in the last decade and created unbearable living conditions for most Honduran citizens. According to Senior Research Associate Jake Johnston, the 2009 military coup has drastically affected the economy of Honduras and its growth in the following years. Johnston argues that since the 2009 coup, Honduras' labor market has worsened and that "more than 63 percent of the economically active population is either unemployed, working for less than minimum wage, or working fewer hours than desired."<sup>162</sup> The unemployment of more than half of its population has caused Honduras to have one of the highest poverty rates in the region. The poverty levels during the post-coup era dropped significantly to 66.5 percent, meaning that most people in Honduras have been living in extreme poverty for the last decade. For the most part, this has been because of corruption and spending priorities from government officials.<sup>163</sup> Johnston argues that the spending on military and public security increased under JOH's administration while the spending on education alarmingly decreased. According to a Honduras educational system study, Honduras has the third-highest illiteracy rate in Central America. In addition, the rural areas are the most affected by the lack of education compared to the urban population. This, reveals the study, is "indicative of the economic inequality in Honduras."<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>162</sup> "Honduras: Social and Economic Indicators Since the 2009 Coup - Center for Economic and Policy Research," accessed May 1, 2022. <https://cepr.net/honduras-social-and-economic-indicators-since-the-2009-coup/>.

<sup>163</sup> "Honduras: Social and Economic Indicators Since the 2009 Coup - Center for Economic and Policy Research."

<sup>164</sup> Manuel Orozco and Marcela Valdivia, "Educational Challenges in Honduras and Consequences for Human Capital and Development," 2017, 15.

Extreme poverty, lack of employment, and a weak educational system forced people like Eduardo to leave their homes to find better economic opportunities and life. Eduardo said that he left Honduras and came to the U.S. to look for a better life because he never thought that education would be necessary for his life, "*Nunca pensé que el estudio sería importante en mi vida.*" There is the possibility that JOH's administration intentionally did not invest in the economic development of Honduras for the low-middle class Hondurans. Scholars Ben Bartenstein and Michael D McDonald argue that many Central American countries, including Honduras, encourage migrants to leave and then take advantage of the migrants' economic labor in foreign countries..<sup>165</sup> The authors argue that not investing in necessities allows the government to save cash, hold down their budget deficits,<sup>166</sup> and boost emigration among their poorest population. The authors discuss that one of the things that drive the economy of these countries is the remittances that immigrants send to their families back home. In December 2020, Honduras received 592.20 USD Millions alone from immigrants living in the U.S.<sup>167</sup> Bartenstein and McDonalds argue that this is an economic model that the Honduran regime has adopted. The government exports migrants like Eduardo to benefit from their labor in foreign countries.<sup>168</sup>

### 3.3

#### **Gangs: Chronic Violence in the Streets of Honduras**

Salvadorian journalist Oscar Martínez, Mexican author Valeria Luiselli, and U.S. scholars Peter J. Meyer and Maureen Taft-Morales agree that violent street gangs are another major cause

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<sup>165</sup> Ben Bartenstein and Michael McDonald, "Central America Encourages Migrants to Leave—And Then Rakes in U.S. Dollars," *Bloomberg.Com*, June 19, 2019.

<sup>166</sup> A budget deficit occurs when a government spends more in a given year than it collects in revenues, such as taxes. As a simple example, if a government takes in \$10 billion in revenue in a particular year, and its expenditures for the same year are \$12 billion, it is running a deficit of \$2 billion.

<sup>167</sup> "Honduras Remittances - April 2022 Data - 1998-2021 Historical - May Forecast - Chart," accessed May 1, 2022. <https://tradingeconomics.com/honduras/remittances>.

<sup>168</sup> Bartenstein and McDonald, "Central America Encourages Migrants to Leave—And Then Rakes in U.S. Dollars."

of Honduran migration. Meyer and Taft-Morales argue that the prevalence rate of gang activity in Honduras significantly increased in the early 2000s. The authors report that two predominant Honduran gangs - *La Mara Salvatrucha* (MS-13) and *La Mara/Barrío 18* (M-18) - have turned Honduras' neighborhoods into war zones as gang members seek to have full control of local drug distribution, extortion, and other illicit activities. They concluded that these events have caused many Honduran migrants and refugees to be displaced and find refuge in the United States.<sup>169</sup>

Luiselli goes more in-depth and shares the stories of many Central American children seeking asylum in the United States. In one of her study cases, Manu, a Honduran child who sought asylum in the United States, revealed that he left Honduras because he got a recruitment message to join M-18 saying that if he did not join he along with his family were going to be murdered. Luiselli reports that Manu and many other youths from Honduras do not have a choice but to leave their homes and start a journey to the U.S-Mexico border in hopes to find refuge.<sup>170</sup>

In his study on Central American violence and its causes, Martínez argues that many times what many Honduran migrants like Manu and people in the 2017-19 migrants caravans see as a refuge -the United States- is, in reality, responsible for initiating what they are running away from. With this new argument, Martínez reports that the two gangs, MS-13 and M-18, originated in Southern California. Martínez argues that Central American migrants were not the ones who initiated the gangs. The fact is that during the 1980s, many migrants came from Central America, and, as a way of surviving and adapting to their new environment, joined these gangs or created their own.<sup>171</sup>

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<sup>169</sup> Peter J. Meyer, "Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy," *Central American Migration: Root Causes and U.S. Policy* 1 (April 22, 2021): 1-3.

<sup>170</sup> Valeria Luiselli, *Tell Me How It Ends : An Essay in Forty Questions* (Coffee House Press, 2017).

<sup>171</sup> Óscar Martínez, John (Translator) Washington, and Daniela Maria Ugaz, *A History of Violence : Living and Dying in Central America* (Verso, 2017).

### 3.4

#### **Running Away From A Totalitarian Government**

The scholars Mark B. Rosenberg and J. Mark Ruhl give a thoughtful explanation of what has happened in Honduras politically in the last decade and how this has caused people to migrate. On one hand, Rosenberg pays special attention to the emergence of what he called a new “powder elite” and its relation with the politics of drug trafficking. On the other hand, Ruhl analyzes the political corruption in Central American countries and argues that Central American nations like Honduras suffer from “grand corruption by senior officials and petty corruption by lower-level functionaries.”<sup>172</sup> In the case of Honduras, the arguments presented by Rosenberg and Ruhl are to a certain extent accurate. Not only from the academic point of view but also from the *testimonios* of those like Yannis who lived under corrupt institutions. In his *testimonio*, Yannis expressed how his involvement in restoring civil society and Honduras’ democratic principles almost caused his life. Yannis was part of the political campaign outreach team for presidential candidate Nasralla in 2017 and helped the most vulnerable population to mark their votes instead of having them stolen or bought. This, however, caused Yannis to be a target by the national police under JOH who threatened and physically assaulted him to the point of leaving his face scarred for life.

Yannis stated that JOH’s regime has been the worst government Honduras has ever had. Certainly, Yanni is right, since the 2009 military coup, every government Honduras had has been the reflection of one another. That is to say, the corruption and state-sponsored violence reproduced with each regime and became a disease in the history of Honduras politics. This disease, however, is not one to be cured from one day to another. Although Yannis is hopeful that

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<sup>172</sup> J. Mark Ruhl, “Political Corruption in Central America: Assessment and Explanation,” *Latin American Politics and Society* 53, no. 1 (April 1, 2011): 33–58.

the issues of corruption, impunity and security in Honduras improve, he would not feel safe going back to the place he one day called home. His *testimonio* discloses the painful memories Yannis has to live with for the rest of his life. From being threatened with death, to risking his life coming to the United States to find refuge, Yannis's journey to finding refuge has not been the easiest. His *testimonio* helps us understand the trauma that JOH's regime has inflicted in Honduras citizens and how this has forced them to migrate.



## **CONCLUSION**

“What we say and what we do ultimately comes back to us so let us own our responsibility, place it in our hands, and carry it with dignity and strength.”

— Gloria E. Anzaldúa

In the previous chapters, we learned about the roots and causes of migration from Honduras in the last decade from the standpoints of both academia and from the *testimonios* of migrants and refugees from Honduras. Taking these two different but very important approaches – from academia and *testimonios* – it became clear that the fragility of democratic institutions and corruption by government officials following the 2009 military coup are the leading causes of forced migration from Honduras in the last decade. Following the 2009 military coup, Honduran people have suffered from both physical and institutional violence. On the one hand, we have seen how institutional violence has been embodied in the high levels of poverty, lack of employment, and weak educational and healthcare institutions. This type of violence has forced Honduran people like Eduardo to flee their homes in hopes of finding a better life. On the other hand, the presence of physical violence has been embraced in the human rights abuses, violence by the military, gangs, and transnational organizations like drug cartels, resulting in turning Honduras into one of the most dangerous places in the world.

The purpose of this project is to understand the historical events after the 2009 military coup and the corrupt regimes that followed. I argue that the U.S. hegemony and military presence in Honduras have contributed to the causes of migration from Honduras. On the one hand, the U.S.- based banana companies took over Honduras's economy and left Honduras with no choice but to stay under the U.S. economic domination.<sup>173</sup> On the other hand, the U.S. also used Honduras as a training ground for its “effort to overthrow the Sandinista governments in neighboring Nicaragua”<sup>174</sup> leaving all the military training and guns in the wrong hands. Furthermore, the U.S. backed the 2009 military post-coup Honduran regime to “re-establish and

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<sup>173</sup> Joseph Nevins, “How US Policy in Honduras Set the Stage for Today’s Migration,” *The Conversation*, accessed May 2, 2022, <http://theconversation.com/how-us-policy-in-honduras-set-the-stage-for-todays-migration-65935>.

<sup>174</sup> Nevins, “How US Policy in Honduras Set the Stage for Today’s Migration.”

expand US political power in Latin America.”<sup>175</sup> Most recently, the U.S. under the Trump administration, recognized Former President Juan Orlando Hernández's re-election “after a process marked by deep irregularities, fraud, and violence.”<sup>176</sup> The presence of the U.S. hegemony in Honduran affairs has caused corrupt and violent governments to stay in power and has intensified economic disparities and high levels of violence in the streets of Honduras.

Moreover, I also intended to emphasize the importance of *testimonios* as a way to understand the roots and causes of migration from Honduras. We explored *testimonios* as a methodology and as narratives that proliferate truth and promote critical consideration of events. In addition, we learned from the *testimonios* of Yannis, Eduardo, and Jaime that academia is not the only way to study and understand the causes and effects of migration. Their *testimonios* also serve as a way to decolonize knowledge production about topics surrounding migration. We further analyzed the world of academic knowledge production in conversation with knowledge produced by individual narratives and concluded that they are both essential for the understanding of migration and displacements from Honduras. The findings of this collective knowledge are that the leading causes of forced migration from Honduras in the past decade are 1) poverty and economic inequality, 2) the chronic presence of gangs and the epidemic of drugs and 3) the corruption and totalitarianism in the Honduran governments post the 2009 military coup.

The 2018-2019 Honduran migrant caravans are a result of all the injustice and violence that Honduran citizens endured in the past decade. They also produce new political claims to challenge social norms and concepts of human rights, citizenship, and borders. The individual and collective political claims of the migrant and refugees in the caravans are also an example of

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<sup>175</sup> Frank, *The Long Honduran Night*, 245.

<sup>176</sup> Nevins, “How US Policy in Honduras Set the Stage for Today’s Migration.”

solidarity and provide “powerful tools for coping with the collective trauma of generalized terror and violence”<sup>177</sup> that they experienced in Honduras. Their claims also speak on behalf of the ones that could not make it out and the ones that have perished at the hands of corruption and violence. Their *testimonios* whether they were part of the 2018-2019 migrant caravans or fled by themselves like Yannis, Eduardo, and Jaime reveal the terrifying experiences of living in an unstable nation like Honduras. Furthermore, their *testimonios* reveal that the causes of their migration go beyond violence in the streets: the root of all the violence, whether it is physical or systematic, has been cultivated, in ways both tacit and explicit, by the state.

Honduran migrants and refugees seek refuge because their homes have been turned into war zones. Their *testimonios* are the only evidence they have of the horror they lived in Honduras. They run from poverty, inequality, gangs, drug traffickers, and the corruption of the state. They do not want to look back because there is only horror and death. They do not have the luxury of time either: the clock says *your turn to flee has arrived, or else you would perish*. They take their kids in their arms and run to find refuge. The survivors must survive to tell their stories but also need their stories to survive<sup>178</sup> in a world where their *testimonios* are the only way to be listened to and understood. Perhaps their *testimonios* cannot change or fix their past, nor can they erase the trauma of violence that they must live with for the rest of their lives, but they do offer an opportunity for reconciliation, at the very least with their consciousness and memories. It is now our turn as witnesses to decide what to do with these *testimonios*. Whether you decide to do something or stay silent, no one can undo the process of witnessing and becoming part of the *testimonios* of migrants and refugees from Honduras. The truth is now in your hands.

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<sup>177</sup> Heather M. Wurtz, “A Movement in Motion: Collective Mobility and Embodied Practice in the Central American Migrant Caravan,” *Mobilities* 15, no. 6 (November 1, 2020): 930–44, 942. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17450101.2020.1806511>.

<sup>178</sup> Dori Laub, “An Event without Witnesses: Truth, Testimony, and Survival,” *Le Coq-Héron*, Dori Laub: Treating the extreme, 220, no. 1 (April 9, 2015): 83–94, 78 <https://doi.org/10.3917/cohe.220.0083>.

## Author's Note

I am Yohely, and her story belongs to me. I am the young girl who fled Honduras and crossed the U.S.-Mexico border at fifteen seeking refuge. I never thought that my life would become what it is today: a student at Bard College writing her senior thesis on Honduras migration. My passion and desire to write about the roots and causes of migration and displacement from Honduras came from understanding my migration story. My migration was forced, violent, and painful. It is an open wound that bleeds at times. I spent hours and hours in the Bard library trying to understand the knowledge that academia offered me about my migration. I agreed, disagreed, cried, and sometimes laughed about the things the academic world said about migrants and refugees in the world. Other times, I sat in many of my classes, listening to my classmates and their absurd assumptions about migration. Many times I had to contain the tears to prevent them from falling down my face. Other times, I just let them roll down. Little by little, I gained the courage to scrutinize and understand my migration story. Although I am still learning and healing from the violence I suffered, I now have a better understanding of the events that led to my forced migration. I want to thank Professor Miles Rodriguez for supporting me in this slow and painful process. He provided me with the scholarly knowledge to learn about migration and displacement while also pushing me not to forget about my voice and *testimonio*. I was privileged enough to learn many different ways to tell my *testimonio* under my own terms and conditions. For my senior thesis, I decided to share my story in the third person because it was Yohely who fled and escaped death. Although I am still Yohely and her experiences are mine, I have had the privilege to grow, learn, and become an expert in my field. The third-person method is active and it is intentionally designed to protect my *testimonio* while also giving me the agency and recognition I deserve as a scholar in academia.

This project is dedicated to all the migrants and refugees who identify with the *testimonios* of Yannis, Eduardo, Jaime, and Yohely, an asylum seeker herself who recognizes her privilege and positionality in the world and who is still seeking – and will perhaps forever seek – refuge and agency in her *testimonio*.

I hope to continue with my studies on migration and displacement around the world and use my privilege and positionality in the world to help share more *testimonios* and help migrants and refugees get back the power and agency over their narratives.

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