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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Racialized Guatemalan Migrant Labor and Grassroots Civil Societies in the Greater Los Angeles Region

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Abstract

This paper examines the complex political-economic processes that shape contemporary forced displacement from Guatemala to the U.S. The study was driven by the following research question: How does capitalism and the historical context of forced migration in Guatemala relate to the creation and development of migrant-led organizations in the U.S. and the various types of leadership and political participation? Examining the political economy of Guatemalan migration to the Greater Los Angeles region and the activities of migrants and community organizations, I argue that neoliberal capitalism not only provokes the displacement of Guatemalan migrants as a social class of people from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds, but it has also contributed to the emergence of distinct political Guatemalan diaspora organizations in the U.S. at the community, national, and transnational level. Furthermore, due to historical social relations in Guatemala, organizations have emerged in Southern California along ethnic, racial, and gender lines. Moreover, activism emerges within destination countries because exploitation and exclusion take on distinct forms beyond the specific economic and political forces that generate displacement in migrants' origin countries. As such, these organizations have made significant contributions by safeguarding the human rights of Guatemalan migrants in the U.S. and have emerged based on the differences and inequalities faced by indigenous communities compared to non-indigenous (mestizo/ladino) groups as they and their organizations endure processes of "exclusionary inclusion" in the U.S.

Keywords: Guatemala; Migration; Latino Politics; Latino Studies; Central American Studies; Latin American Dependency Theory; Los Angeles; Inland Empire; Southern California; Capitalism

Introduction

Guatemala is a nation that is still recovering from the open wounds of a U.S. backed 36-year counter insurgency war (Schlesinger and Kinzer, 1983; Booth, Wade, and Walker, 2020) and genocide, where over 200,000 people were murdered by the state (McAllister and Nelson, 2013); most victims were indigenous people

from the country's Maya majority (Burns, 1993). Historically, Guatemalan society has maintained a specific social and class hierarchy made up of four distinct racial and ethnic groups: Maya, Ladino/a, or Mestizo/a, Xinca, and Garifuna. Ladinos continue to enjoy a relative amount of social and economic power as the dominant racial group (Hale, 2006), and multiple indigenous communities continue to be a super-exploited class. Nevertheless, ruling Ladino classes, consisting of eight wealthy families, continue to own most land, control over 250 companies, manipulate Guatemalan electoral outcomes through authoritarian means (Velásquez Nimatuj, 2005), and have ties to transnational capitalist classes (Robinson, 2008). While an understanding of Guatemala's history, its peoples, and their reasons for migrating remains invisible in popular and academic discourse, migration has continued in the postwar period after the signing of the 1996 Peace Accords. In fact, while migration from Mexico to the United States has been in decline since 2014 (Goodfriend, 2022), migration from Guatemala has continued to increase, especially during the early part of the twenty-first century. This specific period is characterized by forced migration among all Guatemalan racial and ethnic groups, including minoritized indigenous communities and racially dominant populations. In addition, this period has witnessed the emergence of Guatemalan political organizations that began to form within the U.S. over the last forty years because of their displacement. This study was driven by the following research question: How do capitalism and the historical context of forced migration in Guatemala relate to the creation and development of migrant-led organizations in the U.S. and the various types of leadership and political participation?

Examining the political economy of Guatemalan migration to inland Southern California and the activities of migrants and community organizations, I argue that capitalism not only provokes the displacement of Guatemalan migrants as a social class of people from multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds, but it has also contributed to the emergence of distinct political Guatemalan diaspora organizations in the U.S. at the community, national, and transnational level. Furthermore, due to historical social relations in Guatemala, organizations have emerged in Southern California along ethnic, racial, and gender lines. Moreover, activism emerges within destination countries because exploitation and exclusion take on distinct forms beyond the specific economic and political forces that generate displacement in migrants' origin countries. Within the U.S., irregular Guatemalan migrants are threatened by the constant threat of deportability (Genova and Nicholas, 2005; De Genova, 2005) and they are targeted by the racialization of "illegality" (Menjívar, 2021) within an anti-migrant context that has become sharpened after the 2025 election of Donald Trump. Since the Guatemalan community lives within a state that does fulfill its obligations to protect the human rights of irregular persons, various organizations, small in scale, take it upon themselves to engage in the invisible and unpaid labor of migrant-led advocacy. These forms of advocacy include cost-free translation services in detention centers, repatriation processes, and labor rights. In some ways, this unpaid work is the migrant communities' subsidy to local, state, and national governments as people work voluntarily to fill the gaps left by states, particularly those under neoliberal forms of governance that continue to reduce the social welfare state (Harvey, 2007).

Among the merits and contributions of this study is an original analysis of an invisible sector of the Latinx population in an understudied region where these communities constitute most residents. Not only does this challenge common-sense assumptions about where Guatemalan migrants are living, but it reminds scholars and the broader public of the relationship between globalized neoliberalism and racialized migrant labor. For example, my study unearths how Guatemalan migrants have emerged in new destinations (Zuniga and Hernández-León, 2006) such as Southern California's Inland Empire. Furthermore, as Guatemalan migrants grow as a Latinx subgroup away from traditional gateway cities and are pushed into the periphery of the metropolitan Los Angeles region, Guatemalan grassroots organizations view inland Southern California as an area of interest that will be discussed in the present paper.

Theoretical Framework

Within the social science literature on Latin American migration to the United States, hegemonic conceptualizations based on rational-choice theories (Sjaastad, 1962) argue that individuals take part in carefully calculated cost-benefit analysis before making the choice to migrate. Other scholarship on migration has collectively yielded important insights for understanding displacement. For example, previous research has established that migration from Guatemala to the U.S. began as early as the 1950s and 1960s (Menjívar, 2011; Rocco, 2014; Chinchilla and Hamilton, 2011). Amidst the country's 36-year armed conflict from 1960–1996, migrants primarily arrived in states such as California, Florida, and Texas (Fink and Dunn, 2003; García Bedolla and Hosam, 2021; Jonas and Rodriguez, 2014). However, forced migration from Guatemala to the U.S. is not fully understood as there are potential limitations with regard to understanding how Guatemalan migration and migrant communities' experiences with racialization, exploitation, and resistance in the United States are linked to important political-economic processes. In contrast, a critical approach theorizes that the global political economy creates the conditions for migratory patterns to take shape, which are collective, forced, and ultimately economic (Roldan, 2013). As such, my analysis in this paper is grounded in a critical Latin American Dependency Theory framework to interrogate how such processes relate to historic political-economic exploitation and Guatemala's integration into the global capitalist economy (Torres-Rivas, 1969).

Originating from Latin America in the 1960s and 70s, critical Latin American Dependency Theory is premised on the analysis of economic development of the Global North at the expense of the Global South's underdevelopment through historical processes rooted in colonization, imperialism, and uneven development (C., Arancibia Córdova Arancibia, 2011; Delgado Wise, 2009; Marini, 2022). In other words, centers of racialized capital accumulation such as the U.S. and Western Europe did so at the expense of the Global South's economic development. As such, the historical processes from which Central American nation states emerged in the postcolonial period during the early part of the nineteenth century continue to keep countries across Latin America in a perpetual state of dependence with the Global North, to varying degrees. What is more, these forms of underdevelopment have occurred through the historic and ongoing expropriation of land, labor, and natural

resources. These dynamics continue to be expressed spatially through the uneven geographic development (Smith, 2010) between regions of the globe such as the United States and Central America. Such processes have shaped forced migration across the world, and in general, the direction of migrant flows of labor travels from the periphery to various metropoles across the West.

I employ Latin American Dependency theory to understand displacement and migration from Guatemala over time. Dependency theory permits me to theorize the macro-structural forces that forcefully displace migrants from Guatemala and absorbs them into the U.S. labor market essential services (Ness, 2023). Overall, dependency theory demonstrates how, rooted in histories of colonization and an international division of labor, value, in the form of migrant labor as one very particular example, travels from peripheral economies to centers of capital accumulation, therefore, re-entrenching unequal social relationships between the Global North and South. As a macro conceptual framework that foregrounds the unequal structural conditions between two poles, the Global North and Global South, dependency theory provides scholars of migration studies with tools to understand the complex political-economic forces that produce displacement of vulnerable mobile populations across the globe. As such, dependency theory emphasizes how in particular regions of the world such as Central America, return migration is unviable due to dire political-economic conditions, authoritarian regimes, and violence which challenge the refugee/migrant binary (Cintra et. al, 2023). This is especially true in the case of contemporary Guatemalan migrations that are not occurring during times of war, when return migration poses a threat to migrants' livelihood. Latin American dependency theory provides a macro-theoretical framing for understanding Guatemalan migration among multiple racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups, especially since the 1990s, as most Latin American migrants are in search of work and fleeing the intersecting social and economic crises that neoliberal capitalism has generated across the region.

My research questions are informed by Mexican economist Genoveva Roldán Dávila's concept of "complementariedad subordinada" (subordinate complementarity) (Dávila, 2013; Roldán, 2011). Dependency theory and subordinate complementarity have their roots in the historical materialist critique of political economy and offer a critical approach to migration by emphasizing how the economies of the U.S. and Guatemala share a complimentary yet highly uneven relationship, given the conditions of dependence of Guatemala towards the U.S. At a global level, they become dependent on one another through their economies and by the social reproduction of each nation's population. This highly uneven relationship is not unidirectional, but dialectical. According to Roldán (2011), the migratory relationship, which emerges after the restructuring of the production process during the neoliberal period, is characterized by "the particularities of underdeveloped countries and their incorporation into the reproduction of the global-capitalist system, and in particular, the relations between dependency and inequality that they maintain with industrialized or receiving countries, are the ones that generate the conditions of subordinate complementarity, that permit the impulse of those migratory labor flows from those countries." In addition, Roldán suggests that the migratory patterns which emerge during the neoliberal period (1980–2009)[1] have transpired during a particular stage of capitalist development. During the colonial

period, imperial metropoles such as the U.S. extracted value through forced labor and the exploitation of natural resources. During the neocolonial period, capital accumulation was achieved through economic policy and reinforced through military intervention. In the current neoliberal period, surplus value from the periphery to the metropole is partly achieved through the exportation of human resources—namely migrant labor. This contemporary stage of capitalist development is part of a long historical trajectory that has expressed itself during key moments of labor migrations. The first of these is the "classical" migrations from the 19th century to the early 20th century, the Fordist migrations from 1945–1970 and the neoliberal migrations from 1980–2009.

Furthermore, Latin American dependency theory foregrounds modern political-economic and sociocultural conditions in the historical context of colonialism and uneven capitalist development, where contemporary patterns of forced international migration unfold. Although these migrations take shape at a collective level among thousands and even millions of people, they are nonetheless decisions taken by "necessary fleers" at an individual level in the interest of themselves, their families, and, in the case of women, their unborn children (Cintra et. al, 2023). Thus, migrants exercise limited forms of agency extremely constrained by the social and political-economic conditions of origin countries shaped by extreme precarity and poor or non-existent social welfare systems which, combined with intersecting structural inequalities, make access to basic services such as sexual reproduction nearly impossible (Cintra et. al., 2003). Scholars such as Achiume (2019) have argued that economic migrants displaced from former colonial territories to Western nations should not be barred from entry since their countries historically developed at the expense of migrants' origin nations, as would be the case of Guatemalans migrating to the U.S., given the former country's permanent dependency to the latter via neocolonial mechanisms. As such, Achiume advocates for a framing of "migration as decolonization" demonstrating the limits of describing the drivers of movement solely as "economic" by giving them historical and political context and complexity, as in the analyzed case in this paper. Moreover, although economic migrants' decisions are shaped by desires to live dignified lives, their individual agency acts as a form of "migration as decolonization" (Achiume, 2019) as they seek improved material conditions for themselves. Nevertheless, these acts of agency at the individual level do not amount to structural forms of decolonization that would have a collective impact.

In summary, dependency theory and subordinate complementarity provide an overarching framework to understand international Guatemalan migration from the perspective of critical political economy. This macro-theoretical framework provides the context for the conditions that migrant-led organizations have emerged within the diaspora because of their displacement during key moments in time within the last seventy years. These concepts allow me to theorize how as a country on the periphery of the global-capitalist system, people from all regions of Guatemala, experience forced international migration, including both marginalized and dominant groups.[2]

In addition to Latin American Dependency Theory, I draw on critical theories of Latinx racialization from the Latino Politics scholarship to understand how Guatemalans' racialization is rooted in how they are differentially incorporated into

the U.S. body politic as racial others based on their national origin (Sampaio, 2015; Bedolla and Hosam, 2021; Valdez, 2023). This is especially true for those who have historically arrived in the U.S. as irregular migrants which has posed challenges for them towards obtaining permanent residency and citizenship status. In particular, I draw upon Rocco's (2014) concept of "inclusionary exclusion" concept to theorize how Guatemalans have been differentially incorporated into U.S. society. This framing is useful since Rocco (2014) explains how various sectors of the U.S. Pan-Latinx community continue to lack social belonging in dominant U.S. institutions and the broader American society because of their racialization. In addition, Rocco (2014) discusses how migrant communities engage in political processes within the "submerged networks of everyday life." The various forms of political activity which can serve as a basis for mutual-aid societies, voter mobilization, mass demonstrations, and transnational activism, across the political spectrum, emerge within a political-economy established on colonization and racialized forms of capitalist accumulation. As such, neoliberal capitalism—the current mode of production rooted in dismantling the social welfare state at a global level—is the social and economic context where Guatemalan grassroots organizations emerge. It is within these political-economic conditions where these relatively small organizations try to exercise forms of agency within extreme limitations. These constraints should not be underestimated since American and Guatemalan political institutions are not free of social conflicts which reproduce class power and racial advantages within Western democracies that have increasingly become authoritarian (Gonzales, 2017).

Central American Studies, Latinx Politics, and Transnationalism

There is an urgency for Central American Studies to counter misinformation, racialization (Abrego and Villalpando, 2021), and injustice across the region in relationship to insecurity and false representations confronting migrants in their countries of origin, in transit, as in Mexico and within the U.S. (Menjívar and Abrego, 2012; Abrego and Cárcamo, 2021). Part of this scholarship has focused on multi-sited experiences of insecurity (Menjívar, 2006), agency (Menjívar, 2000; Zimmerman, 2010; Dorrington, 1992; Coutin, 2003), identity in the U.S. (Chinchilla and Hamilton, 1960; Valle, 2017), and resilience. Others have contributed to this field by theorizing and contesting U.S. imperialism, global capitalism, neoliberalism (Osuna, 2020; Chinchilla and Hamilton, 1994), structural racism, and patriarchy in Central America (Abrego, 2014; Chinchilla, Hamilton, and Loucky, 2009; Portillo, 2012; Osuna, 2017; Velásquez Nimatuj, 2005; Robinson, 2003). In addition, some scholars have focused on how the logic of settler-colonialism throughout the Americas (Batz, 2022; Boj Flores, 2017; Speed, 2017; Herrera, 2016) impacts indigenous migrants in very specific ways, particularly Mayan communities in relationship to dispossession, language, "racialization of 'Illegality'," (Menjívar, 2021) cultural memory, and epistemological decolonization (Lopez, 2017).

Building on Latinx Politics scholarship that has examined the ways in which Latinx communities in the U.S. have organized within civil society in general (Bedolla, 2005; Apostolidis, 2019; Rocco, 2014; Felix, 2019; Gonzales, 2014; Beltran, 2010; Garcia-Bedolla and Hosam, 2021; Hardy-Fanta, 1993; Pardo, 1998; García-

Bedolla, 2005) and Guatemalan migrants (Jonas and Rodriguez, 2014; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001), of both Maya and ladino/a communities in the Greater Los Angeles region. Using Latinx Politics methods from scholars focused on theoretically driven approaches allowed me to capture the rich nuance of root causes of migration and why grassroots organizations emerge within the margins of the dominant political institutions and create parallel institutions or subaltern counter-publics (Fraser, 1990) that engage in "Latinx Politics" at the community, national, and transnational level (Orellana, 2024; Fox, 2005)

I theorize how many of the Guatemalan migrant-led grassroots organizations found in Southern California display transnational characteristics. Like other Latin American origin populations such as indigenous Oaxacans and non-indigenous mestizos from the state of Zacatecas (Félix, 2019), migrants have created their own transnational and binational organizations (Bada, 2014; Fox and Salgado, 2004; Smith and Baker, 2008; Fox and Bada, 2011). Transnational organizing has focused on dynamics such as labor organizing during the 21st century through indigenous cultural practices (Ramirez-Lopez, 2023), binational migrant civil society associations (Bada et al., 2010; Fox and Salgado, 2004) and "transnational political belonging and membership" (Félix, 2019), all of which have developed globalized public spheres and their manifold citizenship practices. Similarly, Guatemalan migrants continue to maintain ties to their origin states through various types of organizations, and Guatemalan migration is not unidirectional in the sense that migrants continue to be tied to their origin countries in numerous ways including being part of transnational collective actions (Steigenga and Williams, 2009) mobilizing Mayan pan-ethnic identities at both ends of the migrant circuit (Popkin, 2003), cultural practices, remittances, and familial ties. These contributions are significant for this paper because they shape my theorization on the local and transnational dynamics of Guatemalan politics, and it allows me to show how migrants engage in forms of Latinx Politics that are not bound to the unit of the nation-state.

As such, just as the drivers of migration are not limited to one nation state, forms of activism will continue to emerge among migrants in destination countries so long as they are displaced by contemporary political-economic forces (Delgado-; Gonzales, 2014). In the case of Guatemalan migrant communities, some sectors have joined U.S.-based social movements such as the historic immigrant rights movement along with other Central American populations (Gonzales, 2014; Zepeda-Millán, 2017), while simultaneously being involved in the politics of their origin country. And in the case of indigenous migrant organizations, such as Maya Vision, they have participated in global efforts that have revolved around indigenous rights by participating in delegations at the United Nations. These multiple levels of active engagement among a heterogeneous migrant community with diverse political and ideological orientations, demonstrates how their organizing efforts will focus on specific sociopolitical contexts including those at the community, national, and international level.

Methodology

Based on over three years of active ethnographic participation in Guatemalan migrant communities in Southern California and 30 structured and semi-structured interviews with migrants, this paper challenges our assumptions about where Guatemalans migrate to by focusing on the inland region of Southern California, an understudied geography within the Greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. The Inland Empire, or "IE" as it is locally known, does not pertain to a specific government territory, but is vast region that encompasses Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. In other words, the Inland Empire does not have a larger legal jurisdiction, but contains and cities with their own governing bodies and elected officials. The area includes "eastern suburbs of Los Angeles County, divided by the Interstate 10 freeway and State Route 57, and western portions of Riverside and San Bernardino Counties. Its western edges, bounded by the mountains to the north and desert to the east, extend south from San Bernardino to Temecula and stretch westward from Redlands to Pomona. But it has not always been so. Rather than forming around static political or even geographic boundaries, regional borders have stretched and twisted with the contours of equally supple cultural and economic identities. As regions without strict governmental boundaries, places such as the Inland Empire, the Sunbelt, and the Gunbelt reflect how regions are actively constructed around their topography, economy, memory, and race" (Carpio, 2019). This theorization of the Inland Empire is useful because it demonstrates how regions are constructed, contested, and remade at the material and ideological level (Law and Wolch, 1993). A fundamental driver of the changes that have occurred in the Inland Empire is founded upon regional demographic transformations that have global implications rooted in the world capitalist system (Lara, 2012; Bonacich and Wilson, 2008; Bonacich and David Lara, 2009; De Lara, 2018).

Part of the way in which the Inland Empire, and by extension the Greater Los Angeles region, is being transformed is by the large influx of Guatemalan migrants from multiple regions and from various racial, ethnic, and linguistic groups. These migrant communities transform regions through the social production of space (Lefebvre, 1992) by establishing areas into arenas of social practice including the development of migrant advocacy organizations, collectives, and broader networks that span across nation-states and regions (Jonas and Rodríguez, 2014). Primarily, these labor migrations into the Inland Empire demonstrate that Guatemalans are living in areas outside traditional receiving cities such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, California and Houston, Texas where these migrants have historically lived (Fagan, 1994). As I will demonstrate throughout this paper, these multi-dimensional Guatemalan migrations are primarily driven by global economic precarity, both in Guatemala and the U.S., which has been shaped by over forty years of neoliberalism.[3] Finally, inland Southern California and the Greater Los Angeles region are excellent sites to understand what Guatemalan grassroots organizing can teach us about Latinx politics, broadly conceived, through theoretically driven approaches grounded in empirical research.

My examination entailed collaborating with migrant-led Guatemalan grassroots networks for over three years to carry out the research. Through structured interviews and informal conversations with migrants and activists, I came to learn about the life

stories of 30 people and their reasons for leaving Guatemala roughly between 1980 and 2022. In addition, I captured the demographic profiles of approximately 200 Guatemalan migrants across the Greater Los Angeles region, including the eastern Inland Empire region. The Inland Empire is an area that encompasses the cities of Riverside and San Bernardino. The region is located east of Los Angeles and Orange County, and North of San Diego County. This area experienced rapid demographic transformations beginning in the 1990s, which have accelerated in the twenty-first century due to political-economic transformations across Southern California (De Lara, 2018; Gonzales, 2014; Scott 2024). The Inland Empire has a population of more than four and a half million inhabitants, of which multiple Latin American origin groups now form the majority. I made the expert decision to develop an original survey instrument to amass additional information that would complement my structured/semi-structured interviews and ethnographic research. The survey was disseminated within the Inland Empire at key sites of everyday migrant life such as the Guatemalan consulate in San Bernardino, Latino bakeries, flea markets, grocery outlets, and Home Depot hardware stores. By creating an original data set focused on the Guatemalan migrant community in Southern California,[4] I was able to triangulate this quantitative fieldwork with my qualitative information.

I was actively engaged by collaborating with migrant-led grassroots Guatemalan organizations (Table 1) such as Maya Vision, Tejiendo Centroamérica, and Alianza Nueva Guatemala, and taking a lead role in organizing events that leveraged university resources with Guatemalan grassroots organizations. Part of this work included my ethnographic approach to research based on "accompanying"[5] (Abrego, 2024; Gilmore, 1993) these groups by being physically present in intimate spaces and settings such as funerals and fundraisers. In addition, by showing up to virtual spaces such as political rallies for Temporary Protected Status (TPS) and various fundraisers, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, physical distance was necessary, but where being socially connected could continue. These forms of solidarity built the trust required to carry out collaborative research (Gonzales, 2018). In other words, my approach to ethnography was not passive but very involved. By the time it was safe to conduct fieldwork, I had already built the necessary rapport to conduct the research successfully. I was uniquely situated to conduct this research as both an insider to the Guatemalan migrant community and an outsider Guatemalan migrant-led organizations.

The Local and Transnational Character of Maya and Ladino Guatemalan Grassroots Organizations in Greater Los Angeles

A key observation and theoretical insight that came out of this research is how the migrant-led organizations I worked with all have ties to political organizations in Guatemala. While these organizations in the Greater Los Angeles region are concerned with and advocate on behalf of migrants in Southern California, they consistently keep an eye on the situation in Guatemala. They are inherently transnational because they belong to the first waves of migrants to the United States and had a deep connection to the social conditions in Guatemala when the large migrations began. Not enough time has gone by, and the first generation of these migrants is still organizing and trying to keep historical memory alive.

Table 1. Guatemalan Grassroots Civil Societies in Greater Los Angeles

Organization	Community Level	National	Transnational
MAYA VISION	• Language Interpretation • Collaborates with Los Angeles Police Department • Cultural Celebrations • Works with local Latinx elected officials. • University partnerships	• Immigrant Rights	• United Nations • Global Indigenous Rights
Tejiendo Centroamérica	• Covers local issues impacting the migrant community • Organizes Local Events • Organizes Fundraisers	• Covers national news that impacts the migrant community	• International news source of information for Guatemalans about U.S. based events and migrants' social conditions
Alianza Nueva Guatemala	• Local Fundraising • Voter registration for co-nationals to vote in Guatemalan elections	• Organizes national migrant forums	• Anti-Corruption efforts
Consejo Franciscquense Los Angeles	• Local Fundraising • Cultural Events	n/a	• Anti-mining organizing

Author's own elaboration.

Notwithstanding, not all political actors engage with the electoral politics of their home country, as many continue to be distrustful of political parties and the mainstream institutions of the state. In the case of indigenous communities, they are especially critical of a settler state (Speed, 2019) that has never been in the service of the nation's working-class, poor, and peasant majorities.

"Este Es Un País De Leyes" (This is a Country of Laws): The Emergence of Maya Vision and Efforts Towards Indigenous Migrants Social and Political Incorporation

As an organization, Maya Vision emerged as a response to the needs of indigenous Guatemalan migrants. A primary need particular to indigenous migrants is language interpretation. Guatemalan migrants are a Central American migrant population that has been historically racialized in the U.S. as "illegal" writ large (Abrego and Villalpando, 2021) and one that has experienced social, political, and economic "inclusionary exclusion" (Rocco, 2014). Such challenges founded upon racial discourses and cultural constructions, immigration law, and U.S. foreign policy have made it extremely difficult for Guatemalan migrants to incorporate

themselves into the social and political institutions of the U.S. Nevertheless, as a Guatemalan social class who carries with it a legacy of colonization, war, and genocide; the challenges that indigenous migrants face are compounded by the fact that they may only know and understand non-Western indigenous languages such as Q'anjobal and K'iche. Although ladino/mestizo migrants may also find themselves disadvantaged because they are monolingual Spanish speakers, they are more likely to find Spanish language interpreters. During an interview with Maya Vision member Edgar Chaj, he explains how the organization emerged when they noticed a pronounced lack of indigenous language interpreters at court hearings and during migrant detention. In addition, finding interpreters is difficult since the number of those trained to do such specialized work is few in numbers.

Nevertheless, I want to emphasize that although indigenous migrants face challenges related to language, by no means does this indicate that mestizo and ladino experiences are free of exploitation and discrimination as their racialization as "Latino" immigrants is based on their national origin regardless of immigration status and generation. This form of racialization is based on multiple factors including phenotype, national origin, and ethnicity are attached to negative perceptions about Guatemalans and Central Americans more generally that have criminalized these groups (Chomsky, 2021). Historically, these ideological investments within U.S. society have justified differential pay rates and labor market segmentation among Latin American origin populations across racial and ethnic differences (Barrera 1979; De Genova, 2005; Almaguer, 2009). In the case of Guatemalan migrants, both indigenous and non-indigenous, they enter and become incorporated into U.S. society with specific racialized social relations (Omi and Winant, 1986; Robinson, 1992).

Although migrants in legal and court proceedings are entitled to interpretation based on U.S. law, indigenous Guatemalans, and Guatemalan migrants in general, historically have not attained the political power necessary to build institutions that address their specific needs (Bedolla and Hosam, 2021). Despite being a migrant population that began to grow since the 1980s, one reason the Guatemalan community has not been able to build up political institutions may be time, resources, and social and political divisions within the community itself (Jonas and Rodríguez, 2014). In addition, irregular Guatemalan migrants have been incorporated into the U.S. mainly as a group that is perceived and constructed as having "voluntarily" migrated to the U.S., making their entry "illegal" since they have not been considered refugees or asylees, and thus have made it difficult for Guatemalans to gain permanent legal status and build political institutions (Bedolla and Hosam, 2021; Jonas and Rodriguez, 2014).[6] Moreover, since the specific issue of indigenous language interpretation impacts communities at the extreme margins of Guatemalan society, indigenous communities themselves have taken up this work since it is not an issue that impacts ladinos and mestizos similarly. In fact, when it comes to interpreting within the court system, this can have life-and-death consequences for indigenous migrants, as understanding legalese in a foreign language can prevent them from signing their own deportation orders, which can potentially place them in migrant detention and expel them back to their country of origin where they may die due to social, political, gendered, and structural violence (Alvarez, 2020). In fact, during an interview with Maya Vision member Edgar Gutierrez, he explained how the emergence of the organization came about when

the Mayan community and its leaders in Los Angeles took notice that K'iche and Q'anjobal speakers were repeatedly losing their court cases due to being misinformed and even signing their own deportation orders. In addition, research shows that the number of interpreters fluent in Mesoamerican indigenous languages is scarce (Solis, 2021). Not only is this a matter of supply, but it also challenges understandings about Guatemalan migrants by rendering visible their indigeneity (Blackwell, et al., 2017), which may be overlooked or erased.

Part of the advocacy work taken up by indigenous organizations such as Maya Vision entails both language interpretation and the work of navigating American social institutions. Most of this community-responsive labor is a way to prevent indigenous migrants from becoming entangled within the U.S. legal system. As indigenous migrants who have lived in the U.S. for decades, and some of whom have attained legal status in the form of permanent residency and citizenship (although not all), they understand how recently arrived migrants may engage in activities that are deemed "illegal." For example, migrants may not understand all traffic regulations or "break" laws by engaging in social practices from their communities of origin in new social contexts. For example, indigenous migrants may have older children take care of younger siblings without parental supervision, something not uncommon among other working-class groups, regardless of race and ethnicity, who may lack the economic resources necessary for childcare in a society where these services have become highly privatized markets. Specifically, Maya Vision leader "Juan," (a pseudonym) who lacks legal status after living in the U.S. since the late 1990s and having U.S.-born children, underscores how Mayan migrants have repeatedly had their children taken away from them by the state because they do not understand U.S. law and societal norms which stem from the American legal system. Juan stresses how migrants struggle to navigate a social setting alien to them and how not speaking English or Spanish increases the precarity experienced by migrants forcibly displaced from Guatemala.

In part, the organization's goal is not to change or assimilate indigenous migrants but to prevent them from becoming unknowingly criminalized. As a community that continues to be overwhelmingly undocumented and of mixed legal status (confirmed by my own original research), organizations such as Maya Vision seek to address the specific needs of indigenous migrants, whose legal status is compounded by the reality that they are monolingual speakers who cannot readily access indigenous language interpreters due to lack of access and infrastructures which address these linguistic and cultural needs. In other words, indigenous migrations disrupt taken-for-granted understandings about who Guatemalans are, and it reveals the heterogeneous character of Guatemalan society, especially when indigenous organizations such as Maya Vision emerge within the diaspora because of their communities' specific needs.

In addition, this foregrounds how they are a racialized and exploited class at multiple levels, both as transnational migrant labor (Robinson, 2003) and at the level of everyday personal discrimination, such as the experiences of adolescent students in American schools (Barrillas Chón, 2022). They are a class of migrants who experience linguistic barriers tied to their indigenous communities. Although ladino migrants also experience language barriers as forcibly displaced laborers who only speak Spanish, they are part of a language community that spans much of the

Latin American continent through a shared history of colonization that continues to impact indigenous migrants negatively in different ways.[7] What is more, the broader Latinx community and its civil society organizations may not understand the resources necessary for indigenous migrants to navigate American society successfully since it may be assumed that all Guatemalan migrants are Spanish speakers. Both within and outside the Latinx community, it is also assumed that all Latinx may be of Mexican origin, especially in the Western U.S. and the Southwest that borders the Mexican border.[8]

The organization's approach to targeting the barriers that indigenous migrants face in the U.S. speaks to the varying political ideologies present not only within the Guatemalan migrant population itself but also within heterogeneous indigenous communities. Like other social groups, indigenous Guatemalan communities are by far anything but monolithic in cultural and linguistic terms, and their political orientations are just as diverse. Maya Vision has worked with state representatives such as local Latinx elected officials whom they have used as brokers to connect them to dominant political institutions (Zepeda-Millán, 2017) and the Los Angeles Police Department to create indigenous language cards. In contrast to other Guatemalan activist organizations, the political practices of Maya Vision may seem counterintuitive by working with the U.S.—a government that was involved in a 36-year counterinsurgency war in Guatemala and one that continues to criminalize migrants at the border, within the interior (Varsanyi, 2008) and one that has externalized the U.S. border into Mexico (Osuna, 2021). These approaches may seem contradictory since the Los Angeles City Council and its Latinx elected officials were publicly exposed for making racist remarks against their own constituents in 2022. In addition, language cards were created through working with the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) when officers fatally shot indigenous migrant Manuel Jaminez Xum for allegedly not dropping a knife he was brandishing. He could not heed the officers' orders because he did not understand what they were saying to him in Spanish.[9]

However, these relatively small organizations, comprised of about ten core members at most and a membership base that remains unclear, use any tools at their disposal to make citizenship claims (Rocco, 2014) and create spaces of belonging as subaltern "Latinx" groups. Nevertheless, the vital element to note here is not so much how to locate where on the political spectrum (i.e. liberal, conservative, radical, abolitionist, etc.). Maya Vision falls, but why do these organizations within the spaces of civil society emerge in the first place? My argument is that these indigenous organizations with very specific objectives emerge because they have historically had no political power in the U.S. as a vulnerable community forcefully displaced by the conditions created by neoliberal capitalism. They come from an economically dependent nation where indigenous majorities hold little to no power within the state and where they continue to experience "accumulation by dispossession" (Harvey, 2004), organized abandonment (Gilmore, 2008) and authoritarian political violence. In addition, within the U.S., no political parties represent their specific needs. Even Latino elected officials may not understand or care about their communities' wants and needs.[10] Although these organizations identify first and foremost as "Mayan" or "Indigenous," they understand the material and discursive realities of becoming "Latinx" (Castellanos, 2017; Sandoval,

2015) in the U.S. and how resources can be mobilized around a category that collapses differences related to heterogeneous Latin American origin populations (Beltran, 2010; Mora, 2014). However, returning to the original premise of this paper, I theorize that these organizations have emerged within the U.S. as a direct result of Guatemalans' forced displacement within a globalized neoliberal economic system. In addition, these organizations spring up within post-migration contexts characterized by local, national, and transnational forms of organizing.

Moreover, these semi-autonomous civil society organizations (Fox and Bada, 2011), which may work with mainstream political institutions and non-profit organizations, understand the need to be pragmatic in addressing the urgent issues of indigenous migrants. In other words, these relatively small organizations exercise limited forms of agency within the "submerged networks of everyday" (Rocco, 2014). They operate within a neoliberal political order that limits migrant communities' ability to expand their political rights and increase their social and economic mobility at levels that fully incorporate them into the social, political, and economic institutions of U.S. society (Rocco, 2010). This speaks to a broader condition not only for migrants but for other racial minorities and working-class groups in the U.S. who may use any means at their disposal since they have not been able to build sufficient political power within the dominant two-party system. This leaves them to voluntarily engage in forms of localized political activism at the grassroots level and organize within the social justice model centered around non-profit organizations that have come to dominate U.S. society.

Since the 1970s social justice organizations have operated primarily through the 501(c) (3) non-profit model whereby private foundations can make tax deductible donations to these groups. Historically charitable organizations such as the Ford Foundation were created by wealthy individuals and their families to shield their capital from taxation (INCITE, 2017). While these foundations support organizations engaged in valuable community-based efforts at multiple levels, the limitation of these charities, for example, has been a focus on addressing the needs of individuals in poverty instead of supporting campaigns for higher-wages that would ameliorate the condition of economic precarity at a systemic level for large segments of the population (ICITE, 2017). In turn, the non-profit industrial complex comes to stand in as a "shadow state" by doing much of the work that government agencies are responsible for in the areas of education and social services that should be done with tax money (INCITE, 2017). Although many of the organizations discussed in this article do not hold non-profit status, Guatemalan civil society groups nonetheless engage in politics within a broader social context that is always operating within neoliberalism and its accompanying political-economic structures.

In other words, this points to how invisibilized Central American communities (Arias, 2003) such as indigenous Guatemalans seek a politics of representation both outside, within, and at times against dominant U.S. political institutions. For instance, organizations such as Maya Vision, among other indigenous-focused organizations in Los Angeles, have worked with the U.S. Census to accurately count indigenous populations, making them more visible to state institutions with the end goal of mobilizing material resources. At the same time, organizations such as Maya Vision have engaged in collective action by joining mass national mobilizations such as the Immigrant Rights Movement (Voss and Bloemraad, 2011) in addition to

localized forms of grassroots organizing. Guatemalan migrant-led civil societies that have emerged across Southern California are semi-autonomous (Fox and Bada, 2011) at best. In the face of the major obstacles that they confront as they learn to navigate the American system of social institutions, migrants and their grassroots associations exercise limited forms of political power within the dominant political structures of American politics that have increasingly become corporatized. Within this contemporary social context where political campaigns are funded by billionaires such as Elon Musk, groups such as Maya Vision engage in forms of politics that are pragmatic by working with brokers such as local elected officials, police departments, and university research centers that rely on funding from philanthropic donors such as the Mellon Foundation.

In other words, they are semi-autonomous as they work within the same social and political matrix that has historically shaped indigenous communities' displacement and which continues to keep Guatemala in a permanent state of economic dependence. These small organizations are not able to ignore the power of elected officials and electoral politics, the state, or the limited resources they can mobilize through the non-profit industrial complex. Doing so would make their organization's outlook idealistic by assuming they can empower themselves in isolation without alternative models, such as viable third parties within a two-party system, that do not rely on large private donations for campaign spending. In relation to Latinx politics, this also disrupts our understanding of how and, in this case, why indigenous "Latinx" groups behave the way they do politically. Rather than make sense of their political practices as an identity group, organizations such as Maya Vision teach scholars that minoritized groups on the extreme margins have tendencies to be politically moderate, and potentially conservative, as they navigate social terrains that have become increasingly hostile towards racial minorities, migrants, and oppositional groups.

Ladino and Maya Organizations: Local and Transnational Dimensions

Aside from groups such as Maya Vision, many organizations, most of which are small, have proliferated in the U.S. The social and political objectives of these groups and their demographic makeup are as varied and richly diverse as the social dynamics found in Guatemala. These groups may focus on objectives as varied as repatriation of the deceased, fundraisers because of the ecological crisis and COVID-19, transnational development projects (Popkin, 2003), and the restaging of religious celebrations such as La Fiesta de la Virgen de Candelaria (Steigena and Williams, 2009). In relation to these forms of transnational organizing, such practices began to take shape during the 1980s and 1990s when Guatemalans were displaced by the country's U.S. backed counter-insurgency war and while the Central American region became fully integrated into the world economy under neoliberal globalization (Robinson, 2003).

In addition, organizations have been created by and for women Guatemalan migrants in Los Angeles, such as GuateMaya L.A. Mujeres en Resistencia that organize transnationally around issues related to racialized gender violence and intergenerational trauma (Macal, 2024). What is more, grassroots radio programs such as Tejiendo Centroamérica emerged in 2016 after the election of Donald

Trump. As program host and long-time migrant activist and journalist who was forced to leave Guatemala in the 1990s due to political violence, Azalea Vásquez Ryckman explains that Tejiendo Centroamérica was created so that families and friends in Guatemala could understand Guatemalan migrants' social conditions in the U.S. under an anti-migrant context. Azalea has further elaborated by stating that the radio program is a transnational effort to connect the Guatemalan community through alternative media networks necessary to tell the truth about what Guatemalans endure in both origin and destination countries. Others, such as Alianza Nueva Guatemala and Consejo Francisquense Los Angeles, are transnational organizations made up of a loose global network of activists, organizers, and political exiles. This transnational network comprises individuals and adjacent organizations found in Guatemala, the U.S., and Europe. As a case in point, during a conversation with a founding member of Alianza Nueva Guatemala, Erick Valdez describes the organization as "unitaria y amplia" (unitary and broad), meaning it is open to people with diverse political orientations. During our conversation, Erick stressed how the organization emerged around 2021 in the San Francisco Bay Area in response to the forces that continue to displace Guatemalan migrants. Alianza is not tied to any political party or funder and focuses on working with progressive groups that want to improve the conditions in Guatemala. The organization also supports indigenous movements that are leading the fight against extractivist corporations, as previous research has shown (Batz, 2022). They support human rights efforts, and they respond to natural disasters through fundraising due to state abandonment that was led for many years by a criminal ruling coalition known as the "pacto de corruptos" (pact of the corrupt). Within the U.S., the organization advocates on behalf of Guatemalan migrants (regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation) by working with and making demands upon the Guatemalan consulate in Southern California.

Although the racial and ethnic leadership of these organizations is more mixed than collectives such as Maya Vision, their rise stems from many of the same root causes. After interviewing leaders of numerous Guatemalan civil society organizations based in the Greater Los Angeles area, it became clear that many of the social and material conditions that drove them to leave Guatemala during the armed conflict overlapped with dire conditions such as economic crisis and political violence. In addition, these leaders articulate and understand the factors that continue to force people to migrate in the post-1996 Peace Accords era. Although most of these political actors arrived in California in the 1980s and 1990s during the height of Guatemala's armed conflict, they can articulate the conditions that are driving migration in the present moment due to their on-the-ground engagement with Guatemalan migrants in Southern California and because of their continued involvement with transnational political networks. When triangulated with my survey research and follow-up interviews, civil society organizations and respondents expressed that the primary force driving migration is economic across racial and ethnic groups. In addition, through structured interviews with both activists and migrants, they expressed that although poverty and underdevelopment plague the majority of Guatemalans writ large, there is a common understanding that most poverty is found in the Western region of the country in regions such as Huehuetenango (Orellana, 2023). In addition, a significant portion of the migrants I surveyed were from Huehuetenango, and

a recent study published by Plaza Publica, a popular newspaper in Guatemala, found that a high number of deportees who have returned to Guatemala are from the same area. In other words, the underlying causal mechanism driving migration is economic; nevertheless, this class-based force has specific implications for indigenous majorities who are forced into the migrant stream, thus finding themselves in new social contexts (Orellana, 2023). Nevertheless, as highlighted earlier in this piece, economic precarity impacts and shapes migration in Guatemala across racial and ethnic groups and these migrant communities continue to experience exploitation and discrimination in various ways in the U.S.

Due to the specific barriers that Guatemalan migrants confront as a transnational labor force, organizations such as Maya Vision and Alianza Nueva Guatemala have been formed. These organizations constitute migrant-led civil societies at multiple scales (Fox and Bada, 2011; Blackwell, et. al., 2017). Such migrant-led civil societies are not only heterogeneous in their constitution but also in their form and political objectives. In other words, these migrant-led organizations operate at multiple scales within local, regional, and transborder contexts. While organizations such as Maya Vision focus on accompanying (Tomlinson and Lipsitz, 2013) migrants at the local and regional level as they assist them with navigating quotidian life in new social contexts, they have also engaged in global advocacy efforts. They have advocated on behalf of indigenous peoples across the Americas at the United Nations under the leadership of such political actors as the late Maya K'iche Policarpo Chaj, whose body was repatriated to his birthplace in Totonicapán, Guatemala during the COVID-19 pandemic.

As stated earlier, the specific character of organizations such as Maya Vision is shaped by the implications of forced displacement among indigenous people as subaltern groups located at the periphery of the centers of capital accumulation. As a super-exploited class shaped by colonial social relations (Batz, 2022; Nimatuj, 2005; Grandin; 2014; Arzú, 2018), Mayan migrants face very particular forms of precarity because of their displacement and post-migration within new American contexts, such as language interpretation and preservation. Because indigenous communities' collective identities and languages are tied to the specific regions in Guatemala and foster language acquisition, displacement has immense implications for indigenous migrants and their children in the diaspora. These challenges include cultural preservation (Boj-Lopez, 2017), historical memory, language acquisition (Chon-Barillas, 2022), criminalization (Abrego and Villalpando, 2021), inter-ethnic discrimination (Herrera, 2016) and challenges of belonging and being indigenous within the broader "Latinx" community. For instance, in the Inland Empire, Maya Vision has taken up the task of partnering with school districts to address the challenges that indigenous students face in high schools. Prior research has established that indigenous students experience discrimination because of the Mesoamerican languages they speak and their colonial relationship to the Spanish language (Chon-Barillas, 2022). As such, within the Inland Empire, where recently arrived indigenous children are outpacing Mexican students, Maya Vision is engaged in efforts to hold parent workshops on health and "know-your-rights" in indigenous languages such as Q'anjobal and K'iche.[11] However, as semi-autonomous groups, they do form relationships with governmental institutions including local government officials, police departments, and school districts. That is to say, although groups such

as Maya Vision organize cultural events, they understand how state institutions can impact their material realities and how they cannot simply opt to not engage the state.

In part, this illustrates how indigenous groups have specific needs as subaltern and racialized groups that are marginal within the heterogeneous Guatemalan migrant community and within the broader U.S. Latinx community. This example speaks to how they share a common class experience with ladinos but also conveys how their experiences are different because they are indigenous. Furthermore, this example helps me advance my argument by illustrating how the economic conditions that displace both Maya and ladino migrants have varying implications in transit and because of their new post-migration contexts in the U.S.[12] However, despite these groups' differences and the racial antagonisms present in Guatemala, they still come from an origin nation that continues to be shaped by the underdevelopment that neoliberal globalized capitalism produces.

The limits of "resistance" under Neoliberalism

It is worth mentioning that although migrants, and the Guatemalan populace more generally, are impacted by the complex forces of contemporary capitalism and legacies of over 500 years of colonization, their civic associations are relatively small and contingent upon voluntarism since members engage in activism outside of their regular work hours (Orellana, 2023). Guatemalan civil societies in the Greater Los Angeles region constitute a constellation of highly heterogeneous political formations made up of actors from various racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds with various ideological orientations. The leadership of these activist organizations serves as a reflection of the larger multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and multi-linguistic population that is displaced from Guatemala. As illustrated earlier, grassroots organizations will work with representatives of the state, such as the U.S. Census, in efforts to accurately capture the demographic profile of indigenous populations or engage with the Guatemalan consulate to register voters so they can participate in elections from abroad. However, not all grassroots organizations that work with the Guatemalan migrant community agree on what are worthwhile organizing efforts for Guatemalans in the U.S. or in their communities of origin.[13]

Nevertheless, I do not want to embellish or exaggerate the work that these small migrant-led organizations with relatively minimal autonomy (Fox and Bada, 2011) are able to accomplish within capitalist structures that keep labor migrants in a "near universal complex of unfreedom" (Apostolidis, 2019). Freedom under capitalism means that the only choice migrants have is to sell their labor within a capitalist marketplace since it is the only means by which they can socially reproduce themselves. While it is important to highlight the work that these groups do, their organizations unfold within the same economic and legal structures (i.e., mode of production) that keep migrants in a state of dependence and in labor markets where they are exploited. That is to say, the forms of agency that they exercise are limited under neoliberal forms of governance.

Moreover, working within the institutions of liberal democracy that ultimately stem from the emergence of a bourgeoisie society poses extreme limitations. Because the state and its institutions are used under neoliberalism to liberalize the marketplace and produce "illegal" populations (De Genova, 2005) of migrant labor

from the Global South (Ness, 2023) that have no legal protections or union membership, it has been difficult for migrant groups to build political power, especially in the case of Guatemalan migrants. In truth, migrant groups and the larger Latinx community in the U.S. have not been able to achieve comprehensive immigration reform (Gonzales, 2014) in the face of bi-partisan resistance and the demobilization of immigrant rights groups through significant concessions such as Deferred Action for Childhood Arrival (Zepeda-Millán, 2017). As mentioned earlier in this piece, Guatemalan migrants arrive to the U.S. with very little social and political capital since they are fleeing a captured state that has abandoned the population for decades and is in the service of capitalist interests.

Taken as such, migrant-led organizations and their leaders understand the limitations they are working within, some of whom were forced into exile because of political violence during the height of Guatemala's civil war, and they know all too well the limits of working within these structures. In this sense, these organizations use multiple tools at their disposal to address the immediate conditions of the migrant community. Transnational organizations such as Tejiendo Centroamérica and Alianza Nueva Guatemala view migration as a national issue because the large numbers of migrants living and laboring abroad (approximately 4 million) are Guatemalan nationals that should not be twice abandoned; first in Guatemala and second when they are forgotten after being displaced abroad. In addition, the leadership of these organizations articulates the relationship between migrant labor and the dependence that Guatemalan society has on these remittances and how U.S. society's standard of living is improved by migration.[14] Although these transnational organizations may not necessarily use the language and concepts of Latin American Dependency Theory, they consistently articulate the social and economic relationship between the two countries. In addition, they demand that Guatemalan nationals laboring abroad should have a stake in the political process since a large portion of the country's gross domestic product is based on these remittances. These transnational organizations have a tacit understanding of the ways in which Guatemala continues to be in a state of dependency that produces uneven development reinforced through U.S. foreign policy.

At the same time, organizations with ladino and indigenous memberships also emerge for similar reasons. Although ladino migrants, members of Guatemala's dominant group, are a relatively privileged group, their racial and ethnic categorization is also transformed in transit to the U.S. Although ladinos continue to enjoy a level of social, political, and economic power as the dominant group, when they arrive to the U.S., they enter a nation with historically specific racialized social relations (Robinson, 1993) and a history of racialization premised on where they have migrated from (Ngai, 2004) and for being perceived as racial others (Beltran, 2020). In other words, these groups are a social class that becomes racialized and are by no means dominant once in the U.S. as they live and labor in a new geographical context with a history founded upon indigenous genocide, slavery, colonization, and white supremacy. Although ladinos may bring with them privileges from Guatemala as members of the dominant group rooted in the nation's ethnonationalism and eugenicist ideology, once in the U.S., indigent ladinos forced to migrate are not so dominant and become part of a broader Latin American origin laboring class (Robinson, 1993). For instance, the contemporary migrations into

Southern California's Inland Empire, from approximately 1980 to 2022, which I investigated (Orellana, 2023), reveal that despite these privileges, self-identified ladinos and mestizos find themselves in many of the same precarious labor markets as a racialized labor force.[15] Interestingly, these jobs filled with racialized migrant labor (Olivos and Sandoval, 2015) serve as the underlying social condition for these groups to work together within political organizations because of their structural position within the U.S.' class and racial hierarchy.

Conclusion

We continue to live in a globalized world under neoliberal capitalism. If an international division of labor predicated on the uneven development between the global North and South remains, we will continue to witness migration from nations such as Guatemala to the U.S. These mass human movements are rooted in and shaped by a history of colonization and Guatemala's incorporation into the world capitalist system (Camayd-Freixas, 2013). As a result, we have witnessed large numbers of migration from Guatemala to the U.S. during the 1980s, and they have continued into the contemporary moment. Because of these factors, grassroots organizations have emerged within the diaspora as a response to forced displacement from Guatemala. Being that Guatemalans are a relatively new migrant population in the U.S., the grassroots organizations I have accompanied emerged during the 1980s and 1990s. Although economic conditions in Guatemala cut across racial, ethnic, and linguistic communities and geographic space,[16] migration has various impacts on these groups. Specifically, Mayan migrants are impacted by forced displacement in ways that ladino and mestizo populations do not experience and may not even fully understand. My intention in this paper has been to demonstrate these differences and how grassroots formations reflect those racial and ethnic differences in the diaspora.

Nevertheless, the racial dynamics within the U.S. are different, and these organizations' political orientations and dynamics change. There are many implications for the Guatemalan community in the U.S. But, as a group that will continue to migrate because of neoliberal reforms and uneven development, the question remains of how these groups will organize themselves not only within the U.S. with other Guatemalans and broader Latinx civil societies but also transnationally. In the future, it will be essential to understand how Guatemalan migrants from multiple racial and ethnic groups organize within the U.S. and how they continue to be involved in the politics of the home country, as my original research has shown.

Ethical statement. The identities of individuals that participated in this study were protected by remaining anonymous. In some cases, participants wanted their real names to be revealed. If a pseudonym was used, I indicate it in the paper.

Notes

1 However, I would like to highlight that the above periodization is for analytical purposes only and by no means suggests that we are out of the contemporary phase of neoliberal capitalism that continues to shape migratory patterns to the present day.

2 It should be noted that the costs of migration among indigenous and non-indigenous groups are extremely high. My interviewees shared that migrants normally pay human smugglers ("coyotes" in Spanish) anywhere from $11,000 to $18, 0000. However, the dangerous migrant journey from Guatemala to the U.S./Mexico border by land is by no means guaranteed. Typically, migrants take an average of two years to pay back family members, human smugglers, and increasingly co-operatives. Moreover, migrants will use any small plots of land they may own as collateral, and they enter contracts with human smugglers and co-operatives. Migrants can lose their land if they do not pay back their loans which highlights the extreme vulnerability and choices migrants are forced to make shaped by extreme economic precarity. For those Guatemalans that are the most bereft and with no means, some will leave Guatemala without the guidance of human smugglers because of extreme desperation.

3 Neoliberalism is a concept that has been defined and applied in various ways. For the purposes of the present paper, I rely on David Harvey's definition of the term from his book *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) which defines the term as: "Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices."

4 I want to underscore that a major contribution of my survey is that I was able to collect original data on a hard-to-reach and mobile Central American population that continues to be invisibilized in the scholarly literature and broader American society.

5 This approach to *political accompaniment* was inspired by the work of scholars such as Barbara Tomlinson, George Lipsitz, Leisy Abrego, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Shannon Speed, and Alfonso Gonzales Toribio. These scholars argue that critical scholarship should be in the service of, and embedded within, the working-class communities we serve. These thinkers urge us to use our position within the university as organic intellectuals, in spirit of political theorist and revolutionary Antonio Gramsci, by collaborating with communities outside the halls of academia and by debunking hegemonic ideas which mask power relationships.

6 It is critical to underscore that under the context of the Cold War, the United States engaged in counter-insurgency wars across Central America to neutralize revolutionary movements seeking to transform their economically dependent position with the United States. Most Guatemalan migrants fleeing an ongoing civil war during that period were not granted refugee status. In contrast, Cuban and Nicaraguan migrants were welcomed as refugees since they were constructed as exiles fleeing undemocratic socialist regimes that successfully altered exploitative conditions through revolutionary means. In part, I mention this because who is constructed as a "refugee" has been a geopolitical matter based on U.S. foreign policy and political-economic interests. Please see Orellana (2025, Forthcoming).

7 Through the process of learning Spanish, a process of forced assimilation, indigenous people in Guatemala continue to have colonial languages and thought systems imposed on them. At the same time, indigenous youth begin to mix Spanish with indigenous languages such as Q'anjobal, a language spoken in Huehuetenango. In this process, indigenous languages begin to be lost, and according to Mariana Xuncax Che from Maya Vision, acquisition of the Q'anjobal language has experienced a decline for at least the last four generations.

8 This is also a barrier that Oaxacan organizations such as Comunidades Indígenas en liderazgo (CIELO) in Los Angeles, CA address since Oaxaca is a Mexican state that is majority indigenous who speak various branches of Zapotec and Mixtec.

9 The irony here is how the LAPD's ranks are filled with working-class Latinx officers (Ibarra, et. al., 2018) since law enforcement remains one of the only professional fields with job security under a neoliberal economy with few secure employment opportunities. This is a point political theorist Cristina Beltrán discusses in a powerful 2023 New York Times opinion-editorial entitled "America's Increasingly Diverse Security State is Changing Communities." What is more, in the future it would be of interest to assess the extent to which "Latinx" officers come from indigenous communities.

10 Maya Vision was campaigning for Gil Cedillo when the LA City Council's anti-indigenous comments were leaked.

11 As part of my *accompaniment*, I was involved in the process of working with local school personnel. In addition, my survey research and follow-up interviews reveal that indigenous migrations in the Inland Empire are on the rise which my empirical evidence points towards.

12 In fact, during a recent online meeting with Guatemalan activists based in Guatemala and the U.S. who met with a U.S. based Guatemalan representative of newly elected president Bernardo Arevalo responsible for assessing the needs of migrants and their relationship to Guatemalan consulates, it was expressed how when going through Mexico in transit to the U.S., indigenous migrants experience compounded levels of criminalization when they are detained within Mexican prisons since they are non-Spanish monolingual speakers. In addition, within this transnational virtual public sphere among Guatemalan activists, they also underscored the lack of support Guatemalan consulates provide to migrants.

13 Recently, during the 2023 LA Festival of Books, a talk by American archeologist Richard Hansen was shut down by protesters. Hansen has garnered controversy because of his proposals to develop the El Mirador archeological area as a tourism site in the northern Peten region of Guatemala. Hansen has been criticized for attempting to develop the archeological complex as a tourism site. Some organizations such as Maya Vision support Hansen's work as they see it to preserve ruins in a rural region run by illicit networks that deal in drug and human smuggling. In the case of the archeologist, Maya Vision invited him to speak at a community event so that the public could engage him at a venue in the Westlake District that has served as a hub for the indigenous Guatemalan migrant community. Nevertheless, at a separate event during the Los Angeles Festival of Books, a loose group of activists against these development projects shut down the talk by calling the speaker a "colonizer" and "imperialist." This example amplifies the various political, ideological, and tactical leanings that Guatemalan civil society groups possess. Also, there is an assumption that Mayan communities do not desire forms of economic development that they autonomously advocate for as in the case of Maya Vision's Hansen event in Los Angeles.

14 Based on my long-term ethnographic research, I have repeatedly heard these statements articulated by activists regarding the relationship between remittances, development, and American standards of living. One statement I heard several times emphasized the fact that remittances sent to Guatemala by co-nationals living and laboring abroad.

15 One of the most interesting findings of my research was how race and ethnic categories are not so rigid and fixed, and are in fact unstable, which points the ways in which race and ethnic categories change over time and space. And how these categories are not as stable as may be thought in Guatemala and the U.S.

16 My survey research corroborates that Guatemalan migrants come from all 22 *departamentos* in Guatemala and from all the major racial and ethnic groups. Be that as it may, most migrants come from rural areas with high indigenous populations such as Huehuetenango.

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