

My work centers around the general ideas of borders, exploring motives in immigration, liminality, and the diversity of human tendencies of thought towards migration and openness (allowing for adaptation, inclusivity, and change) versus the fear of “the other” and the resulting need for security and ideological and religious certainty. I explored these subjects by analysing the story of an undocumented transgender immigrant and her journey to the US - Mexico border in the context of Central American history and US involvement, politically and economically. I also tried to give my personal reaction to the story as well as the many concepts within it.

Through painting and drawing I attempted to convey these themes - liminality, borders, abuse. For my first painting, I used acrylic paint on canvas and old newspaper to add texture. It was a very abstract piece and essentially depicted different boundaries of colour blending with each other while still being divided. For my second painting, I used oil paint on canvas and tried to create faceless figures contrasting with a dark background. With this painting I was trying to explore the idea of liminal space, the waiting area between one point in time and space and the other, also attempting to represent the many nameless undocumented immigrants at the US - Mexico border and their connection in that space. Lastly I did a simple drawing using pencil and paper, depicting three large male figures, one of them eating an anonymous female figure. I tried to relate this painting more directly to the story of the transgender migrant and the abuse that she received on her journey from Honduras to the US - Mexico border.

I used all of these pieces together to create a general (although missing many aspects) picture of the journey of immigration, the many borders and obstacles faced in that journey, and the idea of fluidity and ambiguity in the process of transition. I feel that the message of my work is the importance of acknowledging and understanding perspectives that we are not usually accustomed to. With stories like that of this anonymous immigrant, even people of the greatest privilege can begin to understand the indirect roles that they play within the world and, through acknowledging these perspectives from different cultures, religions, nations, and languages, our own systems, and most importantly ourselves, we can become more connected, accepting, and nuanced.

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Crossing Borders

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Author's Note:

My essay will look at the story of one migrant's journey, taking into consideration the issues of Central America and the historical involvement of the United States in that region. The essay will conclude with a consideration of the broader themes and issues shown within the particular migrant's story under consideration and migration in general.

Introduction:

The idea of motive has for decades been an undying presence in the discussion of immigration. It is a subject surrounded by countless assumptions, broad speculation, and very little actual understanding. Clearly, the history of the human species is one of migration. Indeed, the general, scientific consensus is that all humans originated in Africa (though populations exploded only when humans left that continent), and that all humans in the pre-Columbian Americas originally arrived over the Bering Straits. This same history is also, roughly speaking, marked by two broadly opposing human tendencies: migrational diversity and openness (allowing for adaptation, inclusivity, and change) versus a fear of “the other” and the resulting need for security and ideological and religious certainty. Today, while a great number of people, including the current US administration, believe (or at least claim to believe that) the motivation of most people migrating within the Americas is rape, murder, and gang-related pursuits, this is actually extremely far from the truth. The majority of forces driving people to leave their homes and put their lives at risk to get to the US border are deeply rooted in the love of one's family, the hope of a better life, and Central America's history of inequality and violence, in which the U.S. has long played a defining role. We constantly fail to understand the dire situations and environments that many ordinary Central Americans live in, partly through being overly preoccupied by our own lives and privileges. This ignorance is exacerbated by the American Media, which either negatively depicts Central America and its people, or ignores the issue entirely. My essay will look at the story of one migrant's journey, taking into consideration the issues of Central America and the historical involvement of the United States in that region. The essay will conclude with a consideration of the broader themes and issues shown within the particular migrant's story under consideration and migration in general.

██████████'s Story:

██████████¹, a transgender migrant from Honduras, is yet another victim of not only Latin American prejudices and sexual abuse but also the long, dysfunctional relationship between the US and its southern neighbours—a relationship that, on the whole, has cost countless lives over the past half-century or more.² Born into an economically disadvantaged family in the rural village of Santa Teresa (a municipality of San Manuel de Cohete), she started school at the age of six, when a primary teacher arrived in her village for the first time (until then the government did not fund education at kindergarten level). During this time, she was very effeminate and did not participate in the activities that boys would normally take part in, but would rather play with girls. This became very clear to her classmates and teachers, and she was viciously bullied and harassed, though she never mentioned any of this to her parents. She was also still quite naive at

¹ Her name is Blacked out for privacy and safety purposes

² This is not to deny that, over millennia, there have not been many positive interactions between cultures throughout the Americas.

the time and couldn't understand why words like "Fag" or "Woman" were being yelled at her in the street.

As the years passed, she began to understand the differences between men and women she was becoming aware that she was different from the gender she was born with because she felt like a woman. When her mother left the house she would dress up in her mother's clothes and shoes without anyone knowing. During this time, the bullying and machismo-aggression she received began not only to come from her schoolmates but also her own cousins and uncles, the people whom she had known all her life.

When she had finished the sixth grade of primary school her parents decided that she should be enrolled to complete secondary school, because they felt that continuing her studies might bring about a change in her manner of being. At this school, she experienced bullying and abuse (including sexual abuse) even greater than before from both students and teachers. Even her father, having taken notice of the scolding and beatings she received from people in the community, began to distance himself from her and renounce her as his child. During this time the only support she could receive was from her mother and grandmother. And so, eventually, she was enrolled in night school with the hope of employment. She was forced to move alone to the city of Gracias, Lempira, Honduras, where she experienced the same aggression and assault with no one to console her. After a few months her father informed her that she would have to withdraw from the school because he did not have enough money to continue paying for her studies.

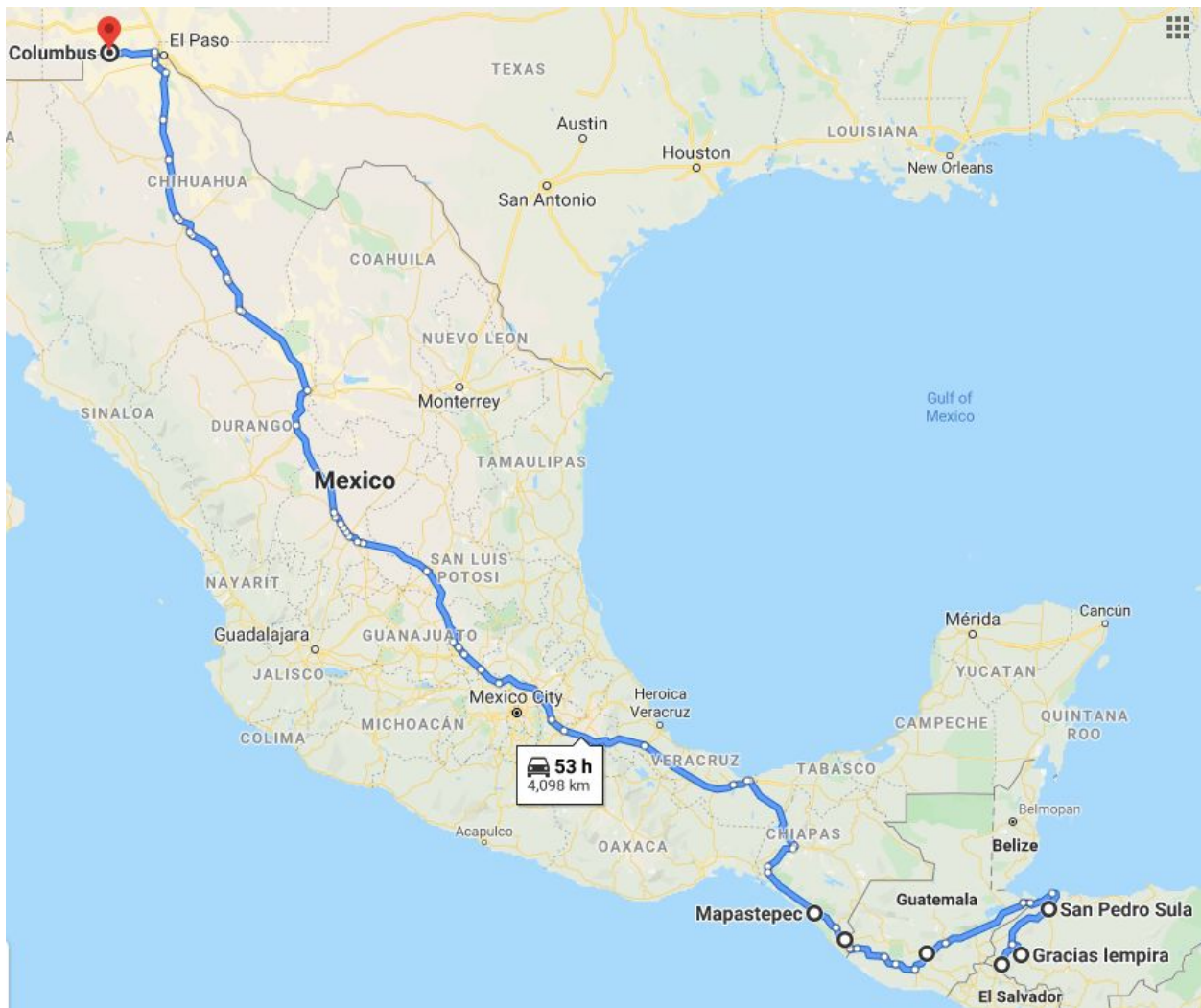
After coming back home, while her parents were finding a new place to harvest coffee, she decided to travel by herself to the city of San Pedro Sula, Cortes, Honduras (the "murder capital of the world" until early 2016 when Caracas, Venezuela, surpassed its homicide rate), where she was offered a job selling personal hygiene products door to door and a place to sleep (Borger). For nine months, she stayed there, making no money, sleeping outside on an old mattress, and being constantly harassed in a large and dangerous city. After coming home again to work in the coffee fields from dawn to dusk, she decided she had endured enough and planned to leave her country.

She left Honduras alone with two changes of clothing and nine hundred Honduran Lempiras (thirty six USD) with the hope of reaching the United States, eventually arriving at the outskirts of the capital city of Guatemala, famished and tired. From there, thanks to the help of certain people, she was able to reach Mexico, where she worked as a waitress in a bar, suffering further sexual abuse from her boss and coworkers. After about a month, she became aware, from watching the television, of a caravan which had left her own country and was headed to the United States.

She was able to join the caravan in Tapachula, Chiapas, Mexico, stopping in Mapastepec and eventually reaching the U.S. - Mexico border. Even on this journey, she was constantly abused and mistreated by men in the caravan and on the streets, only keeping faith and

perseverance through ‘the necessity to find refuge in a country where [she] might be able to find safety in [her] life.’³

An Estimation of [REDACTED]’s Journey:



³ Citations taken from a translation by my father of a personal account for Santa Fe Dreamers Project.

The Historical/Political Context to ██████████'s Story:

Just as with countless other undocumented immigrants, the rest of ██████████'s story is unknown and it is unlikely that she will be able to remain in the U.S. Just like so many others, she will probably not be given the life or residency that she worked so hard and traveled so far to get, but instead be sent back to her hometown where she is certain she 'shall be murdered or abused by the gangs and the government' (Anonymous Account). She claims that the coup d'état against the government of Manuel Zelaya Rosales in Honduras has been a setback for her country and that the entrance of the government of Juan Orlando Hernandez, in 2018, has detrimentally impacted the economy in its totality, with the two major gangs (Mara Salvatrucha/MS13) taking the reins of the communities, resulting in the deaths of many people (Anonymous Account). ██████████ reflects on the status of her country, "Unfortunately my country is broken and I no longer know whether anyone may live in peace, most especially those of us who are [and were already] persecuted, assassinated, and violated because of our sexual preferences." (Anonymous Account). Not only does her story uncover the motives behind immigration for what they are (the search for betterment in life and safety), but it also highlights first-hand the economic and political instability of neighboring nations. Her story also highlights the violence in many of these Central American countries that many migrants are fleeing. Often this violence is rooted in current and historic US involvement in these nations.

Guatemala's civil war can in fact be traced back to a 1954 coup, backed by the US, against a democratically elected president, Jacobo Árbenz. ██████████ briefly mentions her parents having to travel to locations in order to harvest coffee. Small-scale farmers in Honduras and Guatemala are being driven off their land to make way for agro-industry producing sugar and biofuels. Often the people behind these land grabs are active or retired military officials who are deeply involved in organized crime, and in some instances funded by the United States (Borger). Washington backed the Guatemalan military under Jacobo Arbez, which was responsible for genocide against the native population. An estimated 200,000 people were killed between 1960 and 1996 (Borger).

Another example of corruption and violence being deeply rooted in the US' actions is the gangs ██████████ talks about. MS-13, one of the gangs most frequently referred to by Donald Trump in justification of his immigration policies, was not formed in Central America but in Los Angeles, being introduced to El Salvador (another country and civil war, where US interests backed a vicious, right-wing regime) only after members were deported - often to a country they hardly knew (Borger). The current president of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernandez, referred to earlier by ██████████, not only has further militarized the police force, but has also spread organized crime throughout the country's institutions and caused the murder rate to soar, all while being supported and congratulated by the Trump administration (Borger).

Conclusion:

While many aspects of ██████████'s story relate to and directly show the corruption and violence in Central America and the US' historical involvement in that region, they also raise even broader questions and ideas, most of which pertain to the two aforementioned opposing human tendencies: migrational diversity and openness (allowing for adaptation, inclusivity, and change) versus a fear of "the other" and the resulting need for security and ideological/religious certainty. While humans have been known to exhibit the first tendency of diversity and acceptance to change, they also exhibit the other tendency of division, segregation, and fear just as strongly through hatred and xenophobia. In periods of fragility, weakness, and fear, people of differing ethnicities, cultures, religions, nationalities, and languages are often used as scapegoats and blamed for the problem at hand, enabling unscrupulous politicians to point away from real and complex issues.

According to Yuval Noah Harari, author of *Sapien: A Brief History of Humankind*, one of the greatest differences between humans and all other animals is that humans are able to construct cognitive frameworks in which they adhere and believe in something that there simply is not proof or evidence of (e.g., a wrathful, monotheistic god). The fact that this ability exists in us is not only a strong cause for these sanctions and divisions that we create in our own society. These internal belief systems in and of themselves act as boundaries and borders. We are able as a group to harness hatred toward another group simply because we share the same belief system while they share a different or opposing one. With this tendency, we create things such as borders, definitions, identities, and nations - all things that give us the perception of security and certainty (another deep human need or tendency). On the other hand, with the tendency of cultural and ethnic mingling and connection, we exist in a state of liminality where we are neither on one side nor the other (culturally/sexually/politically), but rather in between the two, constantly transitioning. Within this tendency, we are open and generous to others and their perspectives, while also ready for evolution and adaptation.

To my mind, ██████████'s story exhibits many instances of liminality: sexual, geographical, national, etc. It also highlights the importance of diversity and fluidity in humans and the sadness that this is denied of so many societies and people. This idea of liminality opens the door to countless new ways of thought and interpretation in a way that no border or boundary ever could. Any social system is bound to contain these borders and divisions, but the better system is the one that has adaptability, diversity, inclusion, and ambiguity built into it. Historically, the contrary (i.e, rigid definition or boundaries) seems in most cases to have resulted in needless and unjust violence and oppression. Also found in ██████████'s story is the necessity of real, unedited perspectives and their influence on outsiders. With stories just like hers, even people of the greatest privilege can begin to understand the indirect roles that they play within the world and, through acknowledging these perspectives from different cultures, religions, nations, and languages, our own systems, and most importantly ourselves, we can become more connected, accepting, and nuanced.

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