

HOME IN HONDURAS

Snapshots of life after deportation

AMELIA FRANK-VITALE

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Since September 2017, I've been living in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, conducting research among recent deportees for my doctoral thesis in anthropology. After years studying Central American transit migration through Mexico, I came to Honduras to get a firsthand look at what is driving people to flee this country in steadily increasing numbers. In the process, I've been able to see how those who were sent back negotiate life after deportation.

Maribel.

She didn't know there was a thing called asylum. She just knew she had to go.

Maribel left Honduras three weeks after accidentally witnessing the disposal of a body. A recruiter for Avon, she was making her rounds in the neighborhoods outside of Choloma, a city in the far north of the country, when she saw a group of young men carrying big, heavy bags. At first she didn't realize what she was seeing, but it dawned on her quickly. She averted her eyes and walked away as rapidly and inconspicuously as she could. Maribel is striking. She is tall by Honduran standards and has a distinctive look, with bleached hair and dramatic eye makeup. She's someone you would likely remember. She couldn't be sure they'd noticed her notice them, but she was worried.

Then, about a week later, she saw the same young men hanging around the entrance to the community where she and her family live. They had no reason to be there. Maribel lives in a *residencial*, a gated community located next to one of the big factories outside of Choloma. It's not an upper-class gated community; the almost miniature houses are packed in tightly next to each other. Still, it's a relatively safe neighborhood and is not controlled by any of the gangs or organized crime

groups that operate in many of the areas nearby. The sight of the boys there terrified her.

After speaking to her husband, who works in the factory next door, Maribel took out a \$3,000 loan, sent their 4-year-old son to stay with her mother, and left for the United States as soon as a coyote could take her.

Her husband stayed behind. His job at the factory was too hard to come by for him to walk away from it, and they figured he wasn't directly at risk.

Maribel suspected, for good reason, that the boys with the body were members of a *mara*, one of the criminal street gangs that have become notorious in Central America. In the poor neighborhoods in and around Choloma, different *maras* engage in violent turf wars, sophisticated extortion rackets, small-scale drug dealing, and, in some cases, murder for hire. And while the president of Honduras, Juan Orlando Hernández, has touted a major reduction in crime since taking office in 2014, Choloma has not experienced this almost-miraculous turnaround.

With a population of around 350,000, Choloma recently became Honduras's third-largest city. Nearly half of its population is considered *flotante*, having come to settle from elsewhere in the country. This growing city is made up of 83 *colonias*, most of which started as informal squatter settlements that were eventually incorporated into the municipality.

In 2012, when Honduras made global news by becoming the country with the highest homicide rate in the world, Choloma had a rate of 78.3 murders per 100,000 inhabitants, which is alarmingly high, but well below the national average of 93 per 100,000 people. By 2016, however, while the country as a whole boasted of bringing that rate down to an estimated 42 per 100,000 people, Choloma's

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murder rate increased to 92.6. According to statistics kept by the National Police, Choloma had 220 reported homicides in 2017, and 46 additional people were wounded by firearms. It has become the most homicidal municipality in the Sula Valley, outpacing San Pedro Sula, which was the world's deadliest city in 2012.

Much of the violence in recent years can be attributed to ruthless extortion and disputes over control of territory among *maras*, drug cartels, and groups of contract killers. Located between San Pedro Sula (Honduras' economic capital) and Puerto Cortés (Central America's largest port), Choloma is home to many of the country's textile factories—known as *maquilas*—like the one where Maribel's husband works. The city's location is strategic for both the export industry and the transnational organized crime groups that operate in the region. After importing cocaine and other drugs to Honduras' unurbanized eastern departments, the groups move their cargo across the country, making use of the main highway to get to northern Guatemala and Mexico—the same highway that runs right through Choloma.

Maras and drug cartels intersect and overlap in Choloma, but they have different aims, organizational structures, and relationships to the authorities and community. Sometimes they work together, but often they come into conflict. In Choloma's Colonia Lopez Arellano, residents remember a cartel-dominated period as one of calm and security. When the cartel came into the neighborhood about four or five years ago, they killed most of the *mareros* and made it clear they would not tolerate others. Their interest was in keeping a low profile and enabling the sale and movement of drugs. Homicides dropped dramatically. This "peaceful" era lasted for a few years, until cartel leaders were caught and jailed. Since then, new groups have begun to battle for control of the territory and its drug market, and homicides are on the rise again.

With this reality before her, Maribel opted for the only path to safety she could think of—to cross Mexico in hopes of making it to the United States. She was lucky. She did not suffer in Mexico at all. Her coyote turned out to be a kind, responsible, and well-connected person who made sure his clients got to the U.S. border without incident. Then came the hard part: While walking through the Texas desert, she was stopped by U.S. border patrol.

After being detained, Maribel was crushed. She expected to be deported. Then she was asked if she was afraid to go back to Honduras.

"Yes! Yes!" she answered, truthfully. She didn't know it at the time, but that answer sent her into a parallel system. Her deportation was paused as she waited for an asylum officer to determine whether or not her fear was credible. If it was deemed to be so, she would enter into the lengthy process of applying for asylum in the United States.

After two months in detention in four different Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) facilities, Maribel's claim was rejected and she was deported back to Honduras. She still doesn't entirely understand why, but she never had legal counsel to explain the process to her, and most of the documents she was given were in English, which she is unable to read. It's likely that her explanation of the threat didn't fit her into one of the established categories for asylum.

In the United States, asylum claims are adjudicated based on a set formula: The person seeking asylum has to show not just that they fear for their lives, but also that their life is in danger because of their race, religion, nationality, political opinion, or membership in a particular social group. This final category is broad and vague, but it has come to mean two things in asylum proceedings: that membership is based on immutable characteristics, and that it is visible. However, the kinds of violence from which Maribel is fleeing—along

with many others in Central America—do not fit neatly into these boxes. Many asylum claims are denied not because the judge doubts the veracity of an applicant’s fear, but because the rubric for granting asylum does not reflect the current reality of generalized insecurity and gang-related violence.

There is some precedent to suggest that this may be shifting, as Central Americans, especially women and minors fleeing domestic and gang violence, have convinced some judges of their “well-founded fear of persecution.” Most Hondurans seeking asylum in the U.S., however, still have their claims denied. In 2016, the year Maribel told immigration agents that she was afraid to return to Honduras, 1,505 Hondurans were granted asylum. Meanwhile, 21,891 Hondurans—like Maribel—were “removed,” or forcibly deported by immigration agents, from the United States, while another 646 were “returned”—that is, they left of their own accord to avoid being removed.

Franklin.

While at home in my apartment in San Pedro Sula, I get a text message early one morning: “I have to leave the country; my life is at risk here.”

“When are you leaving?” I text him back.

“Tomorrow,” he replies, “If God lets me live till then.”

Franklin had been deported from the United States the year before, after leaving his country when he was just 15. Now 22, he was back and he was determined to make life work in Honduras. While incarcerated in the U.S. before being deported, he had learned the basics of being a barber and felt he had a knack for it. He found a spot in his neighborhood in Choloma and set up a small barbershop. His dad, who had worked in construction, helped him build the structure. Franklin’s prices were low, his skills were good, and the location was perfect. He quickly developed a loyal clientele.

He met a girl who worked in a beauty salon. They became a couple and she helped him manage the books. They dreamed of opening up a joint business one day, in the center of San Pedro Sula or in a mall. Everything seemed to be coming together.

Franklin has some tattoos from his time in the United States. He’s also got the swagger of someone who grew up in a U.S. city. As soon as he showed up in Choloma, he was warned that his presence might create problems. In February, he got a message from the Mara Salvatrucha (MS-13) saying that he should be careful,

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that they control things in this neighborhood. He made it clear to them that he wasn’t from a gang, he wasn’t trying to start a gang, he wasn’t interested in being in a gang, and the warnings went away. His business seemed to be going well. He worked all the time, 12-hour days, six or seven days a week, never missing an opportunity to give a customer a \$1.69 haircut.

Then, in March, he got a death threat from one of the drug cartels in Choloma. There was no talking his way out of trouble this time. He made preparations to leave as quickly as possible. He gathered a few thousand lempiras, said goodbye to his parents, siblings, and girlfriend, and left the country the next day, taking a series of buses to the Guatemala-Mexico border. He barely made it out of Honduras. He told me later, once he was already in Mexico, that the

night before he left the cartel members who had threatened him killed someone else thinking it was him.

Franklin made his way across Mexico to the United States. He didn't have the money for a coyote, so he climbed aboard *la bestia*, becoming one of the hundreds of thousands of Central Americans who use this infamous network of freight trains to traverse Mexico every year. His girlfriend sent him money now and then for food or a night in a cheap hotel. After more than a month, he made it back to the United States. Once in Texas, he contacted me. I asked him if he was going to apply for asylum. He told me no—since he's already been deported, he doesn't want to risk getting jailed for re-entry. He is just going to pray he can stay under the radar, find work as a barber, and wait until something changes.

Neither Franklin nor Maribel ever thought about going to the police. This instinct is common in Honduras, where police are widely known to be among the most corrupt in the hemisphere. The national police have long been associated with crime, corruption, and violence, and high-level police officials have been accused of working directly for the *maras*. In 2016, Hernández formed a “police purification” commission to deal with endemic corruption. While it stalled at first, a purge eventually did take place. Approximately 4,000 police officers—including generals and other high-ranking officers—were suspended or fired from the police force. While many Hondurans do think the national police are more trustworthy now, some believe the purge got rid of the honest policemen.

They may be right. Just recently, the Associated Press reported that the newly appointed head of the national police, José David Aguilar Morán, helped secure the safe passage of nearly a ton of cocaine from the port city of La Ceiba to the home of a recently convicted trafficker. Echoing popular sentiment, the former

head of the police's internal affairs division told the AP that the police reforms and purge were a failure, that “it was more of a source of official protection for people who have been tied to drug trafficking.”

Yet even if police could be trusted to act as agents of law and order, a mere 1 percent of the homicides in Honduras's three largest cities lead to convictions. There is little incentive for victims of threats and witnesses of violent acts to cooperate with police. There is, however, ample reason to distrust them.

Omar.

The fact that the Honduran government continues to tout its security gains has presented a new challenge for some asylum-seekers. Just last month, Omar, a 22-year-old man with perfectly coiffed hair and a little gap between his front two teeth, tried to ask for asylum in the United States. He's from another neighborhood in Choloma. He was fleeing an area rife with gang violence, and the local *mara* had been pressuring him to join. However, the asylum officer told him that the Honduran government “says it has the problem under control.”

A week or so after Omar was deported back to Honduras, his younger brother and mother, María, witnessed the murder of a neighbor's son. The man had been visiting his mother, and the gang in charge of the area didn't recognize him. María cupped her hand over her mouth to keep from screaming, and her 19-year-old son told her to keep quiet. Watching from her house, she agonized over the fact that her neighbor, a woman she had known for years, didn't yet know that her son was dead.

Later, the body was “found” when the murderers returned to the scene and pointed it out. Only then, with the neighbors gathered and the family coming to identify the deceased, did someone ask María, “It was so

close to your house, didn't you hear the gunshots?" "No," she said, "I was watching TV. And cooking. And talking to my mom on the phone. I didn't hear anything." Her son nodded in approval.

This murder never showed up in the news, she said. The police never even came to register it. Omar, meanwhile, is trying to decide whether or not to leave again. He knows that this time, since he already had an asylum claim denied and has been deported, he'd have to sneak across the border and live in the U.S. without documents. He'd be vulnerable to deportation, like Franklin, but at least his mother wouldn't worry about him getting killed in their backyard.

Furthermore, if he stays in Honduras, he'll likely be condemned to a circumscribed life. Many young people in the San Pedro Sula area have told me that the only way to stay safe in their neighborhoods is to leave the house as infrequently as possible, only during the day, and never alone. Hector, a young man who has been deported four times, described his life in his neighborhood as *encuevado*—encaved.

For young men like Omar and Franklin, the only other path to survival is leaving the country. Relocation within Honduras is not an option. Omar lives in an area controlled by the gang Barrio 18. If he leaves his neighborhood to get away from forced recruitment, he cannot safely resettle in another 18 neighborhood. If Omar tried to settle in a neighborhood controlled by the rival gang, Mara Salvatrucha, he would immediately become a target simply for having moved there from a competitor's zone. In effect, all the densely populated outskirts of Honduras' urban areas are off-limits.

Honduras, however, is largely rural. With a national population over 9 million, roughly 55 percent of people live in cities. Resettling outside of urban centers, though, is difficult. There are few opportunities for work (hence the constant influx of people from rural regions to places like Choloma) and people from Tegucigalpa, San Pedro Sula, Choloma, and other cities are viewed with suspicion if they do not have family ties to the area. People I've spoken with from Intibucá and Lempira, two other largely rural departments, say some towns have banned new people from moving there out of fear that they may bring gangs.

Omar, Franklin, and Maribel are stuck. They can either risk being targeted in Honduras or try to sneak back into the United States and stay off the radar of immigration officials. Franklin made his choice: Almost two months after leaving Honduras, he sends me a photo in which he's working in a barbershop in the U.S. Omar winces at the thought of possibly being detained again, but he knows that he cannot remain at his mother's house. For now, he lives with his girlfriend, hoping he isn't putting her or her family at risk. Maribel tells me that, more than anything, she is deeply disappointed in her country. She would rather stay in Choloma, take her son to the park, maybe get a degree in psychology. She has big dreams, she says, but she's not sure that she can achieve any of them in Honduras. ●

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