

In the Aftermath of Asylum: Guatemalan Mayan Women's Struggles in Guatemala, Mexico, and the United States

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The two-year ethnographic fieldwork-based research project upon which this talk draws documents the lives of Mayan women in the aftermath of seeking asylum at the US-Mexico border. The majority of these indigenous women have been displaced and dislocated from their traditional territories and communities in Guatemala as a result of gender- and gang-based violence. Over 90% of the petitions for asylum are denied in the US and the women subsequently are deported back to Guatemala. The working hypothesis of this research is that *place*—understood not as a bounded static entity, but rather a nexus of social relations and histories—plays a crucial role in the survival strategies (in the material and meaningful sense) available to Mayan women in the aftermath of their petitions for asylum in the US. The project focuses on the different trajectories that the women may take, with a focus on three distinct places: Guatemala, Mexico, and the US. These three sites are specifically selected to tap into a broad range of strategies that women might utilize to survive under distinct conditions. Little is known about the fate of these indigenous women after deportation, although anecdotal data suggest that they may be the victims of trafficking, exploitation, and displacement, as few are able to return safely to their natal communities. Likewise, there is a dearth of information about the small percentage of Mayan women who are granted asylum status in the US. The everyday struggles that these women face are mostly unacknowledged, even though many of them live the entanglements inherent in mixed (legal) status families.

The project seeks to understand Mayan women's own sense of resiliency, adaptation, and creativity, which indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor calls *survivance* (2008), to capture the multiple cultural and social strategies that indigenous people may utilize to meet their basic needs, not only on their own terms but also in their larger social and cultural sense. Lastly, the multi-ethnic, international team of women draws on the decolonial literature, particularly decolonial methodologies (Smith 1999) as a guide in the project's data interpretation that importantly encompasses indigenous understandings of data collection and data analysis strategies.

This talk explores how a multi-valence of violence perpetrated by both state and non-state actors across the region operates with impunity, leaving many Guatemalan Mayan women brutalized, regardless of their locale.