

DECOLONIZING ETHNO GRAPHY

Undocumented Immigrants and
New Directions in Social Science



CAROLINA ALONSO BEJARANO / LUCIA LÓPEZ JUÁREZ
MIRIAN A. MIJANGOS GARCÍA / DANIEL M. GOLDSTEIN

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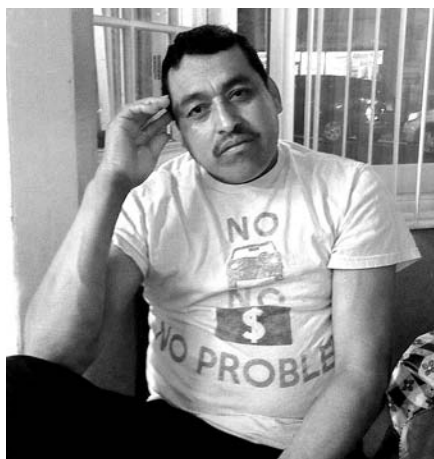
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Para nuestro querido Evandro, Q.E.P.D.



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BROKEN POEM BY MGF

June 17, 2014

one of this day i will find the opportunity to become a president of usa.
opss back to real life, well life is toff in this country usa,
since i come to this country to leave the american dream
so far only leaving by nightmares, so they say going to be easier
 don't worry,
but they never say to do worry to learn english.
do worry to have a legal green card
do worry to pay high price for rent your own habitate
do worry etc.etc.etc . . .
so it is not easier i like to go back to my country wich is brazil . . .
but right now in brasil we have . . . poverty all over.
hospital has no good management people are dieng.
scholls fall a part,has no teacher ,money in people pocket only
 for the rich ones.
i fell bad because right now am leaving in usa . . .
i hope one day everything get in place.

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Preface

“Are you scared about Trump?” Carolina asked Mirian.

It was December 2016, and Donald Trump had recently been elected president of the United States. Carolina and Mirian were in a restaurant in downtown New Brunswick, NJ. They were warm inside the restaurant but it was raining heavily outside.

Mirian looked at Caro for a long time without replying. Then she asked, “Are *you* scared, *nena*?” Caro admitted that she was, and not just for herself but also for so many people she loves. “People like you,” Carolina told Mirian. Mirian said that, to the contrary, she was not more afraid than she already had been. “I am here to stay. *Ahora nos toca organizarnos aún más porque la ilegalidad no es sólo un problema de nosotros los indocumentados*” [Now it’s time to organize even more because illegality doesn’t only affect us, the undocumented immigrants]. She smiled at Caro, who found comfort in Mirian’s kind eyes.

Earlier that day Mirian had spoken to Carolina’s Latino Studies class about her life as an undocumented woman organizer from Guatemala. She told the students about working long days, having a work accident, and becoming an ethnographer and activist in the immigrants’ rights movement. She told them about her daughter who she has not seen in many years, about civil disobedience and being in jail, and about her work as a singer and songwriter. She sang one of her songs for the class, about the need for immigration reform, and told students about the relationship between art and activism.

It was important for Caro to bring Mirian to talk about her work in class that day, only a few weeks after the election, because the debate around immigration was at the core of Trump’s presidential campaign. As poet Nicholas

Powers noted, “He won with a metaphor. He won with the image of a wall” (Powers 2016). Mirian’s story, as well as her approach to activism, recognizes that this metaphorical wall excludes many of us—and not just those of us who are not U.S. citizens.

Much has happened in terms of immigration policy and political rhetoric around immigration since we officially closed our four-year ethnographic project in August, 2015. Despite the fact that the Obama administration’s “deportation machine” was operating at full force during our research and remained unrivaled by the deportation efforts of any previous administration, it was not yet the era of Donald Trump and the open and state-sanctioned hateful rhetoric toward immigrants from the Global South and people of color in general. Under President Trump, the policy of the Obama administration that prioritized the deportation of immigrants with criminal records has been replaced by a “zero tolerance” policy in which everyone—especially nonwhite folks, from toddlers to naturalized citizens—is subject to incarceration and deportation.

This book is based on ethnographic research conducted in a New Jersey town between August 2011 and August 2015, when the policing and harassment of immigrants in the United States was relatively less intense than it would become under the Trump administration. As we go to press, the modified “Muslim Ban” has been upheld by the Supreme Court; immigrant families are being jailed by executive order; thousands of immigrant children have been separated from their families, and many of them remain detained or lost in the system despite a judicial order mandating immediate reunification; a new Denaturalization Task Force is targeting naturalized citizens for deportation; the administration is attempting to end the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program that gives some protection to undocumented immigrants who came as minors . . . The list goes on and on.

Based on our findings, in these pages we stress the rights that undocumented immigrants have in this country. We advocate for undocumented people to engage with the justice system and to adopt direct action strategies in defense of their dignity and rights. And we contend that ethnography can be a tool for undocumented people in these struggles. Lucy and Mirian, the two undocumented authors of this book, continue to follow this program despite the increased risk for folks with their immigration status. In writing this book with Carolina and Daniel they are asserting their right to think freely, to speak publicly, and to exist in the United States. We recognize, however, that the stakes have changed since we researched and wrote our book as a call for action, at a time when a Trump presidency seemed im-

probable at best. In the current era of regular ICE raids in courtrooms across the country, it is becoming increasingly difficult for undocumented immigrants to engage with the justice system to defend their rights as workers and as people. The same can be said about direct action strategies that may result in people's arrest and subsequent deportation.

But people, both documented and undocumented, are also responding to the Trump administration's immigration policies in the massive way that we imagine in this book, and that we believe is necessary to bring about any immigration reform in this country. As Mirian suggested above, people are beginning to realize that the surging sexism, racism, and authoritarianism of the Trump regime harms all of us—citizens and noncitizens. For instance, “Abolish ICE” has become a mainstream idea, as protesters flood the streets and occupy buildings in outrage, especially after seeing and hearing footage of immigrant children being held in cages by immigration officials. In a context of increased policing and demonization of immigrants—particularly immigrants of color—but also of increased public awareness and engagement with the struggle for immigrants' rights, we believe our book to be a timely contribution to the movement for the recognition of the humanity of all people. As Lucy says, today, in the midst of the rise of White Nationalism as a policy of state in the United States, “we have to keep struggling against our oppression. Like in the times of Martin Luther King, when you had to risk something to get something. The history of decolonization continues.”

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Mirian thanks God for giving her the gift of writing and singing songs, and also for giving her the privilege to migrate to this beautiful country and meet wonderful people. She is grateful for her parents on Earth, Pedro Mijangos and María Santos García, and for her two children, Nick Segura Mijangos, who first brought her to this country for his mountain biking competition, and Kimberly Segura Mijangos, who at age twelve supported Mirian in her decision to come to the United States. Her brothers and sisters have also always been there for her. She thanks the organization Casa Hometown for the support and sisterhood she has found there. Don Eugenio and his wife, Aracely, have offered Mirian unconditional support in times of anguish. Don Narciso and his wife, Teresa, were the ones who took her to Casa Hometown when she thought that no lawyer would help her, and Juan Reyes was the first person to welcome her into the organization. Rita Dentino and her husband, Tony Dentino, took Mirian into their beautiful home when she had nowhere to go, and they fought for her life. Sima Milgraum, Mirian's lawyer, also fought for her. The help of John Leschak and his family has been invaluable for Mirian, as was the help from the doctors at Central State Hospital in New Jersey. Mirian also thanks her friends from the Domestic Workers Alliance. Her friend Lucy López was her companion in the field and in the fight for immigrants' rights. Daniel Goldstein, her maestro, took the time to instruct Mirian and help her in this very special project. Doctora Carolina, her friend and maestra, was a great collaborator in doing the fieldwork and writing this book. Finally, Mirian thanks you, the reader, for reading our book.

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Introduction

In 1991, Faye Harrison and her colleagues published a slim volume of essays calling for the decolonization of anthropology.¹ With postmodernist, feminist, and political-economic approaches dominating the discussion of what might constitute a critical anthropology for the twenty-first century, the scholars of “the decolonizing generation” (Allen and Jobson 2016) put forward a different agenda. Perceiving a crisis in both the discipline and the world at large, Harrison and her colleagues looked beyond the Western intellectual canon for their inspiration while envisioning ways in which anthropology might become an instrument for advocacy and progressive social change. They posed questions that addressed anthropology’s colonial past and its continued relevance to contemporary anthropological practice.² “Can an authentic anthropology emerge from the critical intellectual traditions and counter-hegemonic struggles of Third World peoples?” Harrison asked. And, “How can anthropological knowledge advance the interests of the world’s majority during this period of ongoing crisis and uncertainty?” (Harrison 1991b, 1–2).

In the twenty-first century, these questions remain unanswered, their urgency undiminished. The world today continues to present profound challenges that frame anthropological practice: savage inequalities of income and opportunity, sustained by an unbridled capitalism; intractable racism, sexism, xeno- and homophobia, woven into the very fabric of our social institutions; senseless and seemingly endless war; an ever-expanding prison-industrial complex; political corruption and police brutality. Add to this a pervasive feeling of insecurity—a precariousness born of the rapid concentration of wealth in the 1 percent, planetary climate change, and a permanent War on Something (terror? opioids? immigrants? Take your pick)—and you have our society circa the 2020s.

How has anthropology responded to this reality?

The discipline's trajectory has been long and convoluted. Born in the colonial era as part of the broader Enlightenment project of discovering the unknown, early anthropologists studied the peoples of the lands then colonized by Europe and the United States. For much of its history, anthropology—like the other social sciences and related fields—understood itself to *be* a science, basing its conclusions on supposedly objective research and dispassionate analysis while ignoring the obvious political realities in which its work was embedded. In the 1960s and 1970s, some anthropologists—including women, people of color, and anthropologists from the Global South—began to criticize the objectivist stance, questioning the possibility of objectivity itself and shifting the field away from a concern with grand questions of human development toward more focused, problem-driven studies (Pels 1997, 2014). They also called into question anthropology's colonial legacy, drawing attention to the field's origins in and, at times, collaboration with the project of colonial rule (Asad 1973; Stocking 1993). Anthropology—"a child of Western imperialism" (Gough 1968, 12; see also Forte 2014, 2016)—became historicized and often critical, aiming not merely to understand society but to denounce its inequities and cruelties.

These critiques led to significant and enduring changes in the discipline. Anthropologists today are more attuned to the roles of power, history, and political economy in shaping cultural realities and to the relationships between large-scale, often global problems and the local worlds of the people and institutions they study. Feminist anthropology has been influential in making gender-based formations and inequalities central to the study of cultures and societies worldwide and in challenging the power imbalances that exist within all forms of social life, academia included. Feminist and post-modern anthropologies have also inculcated an awareness in anthropologists of their own roles in producing the knowledge they write about, including attention to the author's racialized and gendered "positionality" and the power relations that underlie the ethnographic process itself.³ Applied or "practicing" anthropologists, meanwhile, look to use ethnographic knowledge to make change in the world, taking the discipline's methods and findings and putting them to work in an effort to improve the lives of others.⁴

Nevertheless, mainstream anthropology—what some critics (Restrepo and Escobar 2005, 100) have called "dominant" anthropology—has yet to engage fully with the decolonial challenge. Despite years of critique and the many changes in its theory and method, anthropology, like other social sciences, remains plagued by what we identify here as the *coloniality* at the