# Maya Youth in Los Angeles: Telling Oral Narratives on Border Crossings and Survival

**By Alicia Ivonne Estrada**

It has been nearly two decades since the signing of the Peace Accords in Guatemala that officially ended the country's U.S. sponsored Civil War (1960-1996), but the violence and massacres against the population have not ceased.[i] In this two-decade period, Maya leaders and community members continue to be abducted, tortured and murdered by state forces in retaliation for speaking against mining and privatization, as well as for claiming land and cultural rights. These sociopolitical structural conditions have forced thousands of Mayas, including women and children, to immigrate to the United States.[ii] In 2014, numerous media outlets made the increased immigration of unaccompanied Central American minors front-page news.[iii] And though these mainstream media reports did not mention the ethnic background of the minors a close examination of the news articles illustrates that the majority of the Guatemalans attempting to cross the U.S./Mexican border were Mayas.[iv]

While not all Maya minors are able cross the U.S./Mexican border, with many dying in the process or among the hundreds deported daily, the immigrants who do reach the United States continue to encounter varied forms of violence, disposability and erasure. This is particularly evident in the ways mainstream media records, writes, represents and supports official national narratives that erase the social marginalization confronted by Mayas as well as their experiences and existence.[v] The death of Hugo Alfredo Tale-Yax is an emblematic example of the varied forms of violence and sociopolitical invisibilities encountered by the Maya diaspora in the United States. On 18 April 2010, Tale-Yax bled to death on the streets of New York City. After saving a woman from being mugged, Tale-Yax was stabbed by the assailant and left to die. Later, surveillance cameras in the area showed that over twenty people walked past him, some taking cell phone photos of the Maya-K'iche' immigrant's dying body, but no one assisted him.[vi] When firefighters found Tale-Yax, he had already died. Though U.S. news media focused on the assumed character of New Yorkers as too busy, and careless, not one outlet mentioned Tale-Tax's indigenous identity, or the structural conditions that forced him to live in New York.[vii] These varied silences evident in the responses by New Yorkers as well as the media showed the ways in which Mayas are already, to use Ruth Wilson Gilmore's term, "dead-to-others" even before their physical death. For critical race theorists like Sharon Patricia Holland, this is because racially criminalized populations, like undocumented Maya immigrants, "*never* achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of living" (Holland 15).

In this article, I examine eight oral narratives by young Maya immigrants in Los Angeles on their lived experiences of border crossings and survival. These narratives were recorded, aired and archived on the Los Angeles-based Maya radio show *Contacto Ancestral*.[viii] I argue that the young Maya immigrants narrate their experiences of border crossings from a position of what Orlando Patterson calls *social death*.[ix] Further noting that by making their personal stories public the narrators not only contest the inhumanity of immigration laws, but also make visible the ways in which their existence is materiality marked and configured by transnational, violent racist structures. Thus, the oral narratives deconstruct mainstream images and numbers that accompany official discourses on Guatemalan immigrants. The contestation to these official discourses is apparent in the vivid depictions used by the Maya immigrants to narrate their

multiple border crossing experiences as well as the deeply physical, emotional and psychological impact of immigration for the immigrants, their families, and their communities.

Moreover, by remembering, telling, sharing, and archiving their oral narratives of border crossing and survival, Maya youth in Los Angeles publically assert and continue ancestral oral textual practices. Specifically, the transmission of their oral narratives on the radio creates a public space from which they are able to construct their own personal stories and collective im/migration histories. In doing so, they simultaneously assert agency over their own stories and histories in a medium and country that have historically excluded, erased as well as misrepresented their voices and participation.

I begin the analysis of these oral texts by framing them within Maya textual practices of storytelling. Then, consider the ways in which they highlight varied types of social and geographical border crossings, specifically noting how the multiple migrations depicted by the narrators expose the violent character of transnational global capital and its impact on indigenous communities. At the same time, these narratives demonstrate the varied forms of survival and coping strategies employed by the young Maya narrators. Thus, it is through the public act of telling their border crossing experiences as well as the different forms of survival and coping strategies, like spiritual and cultural practices, used during their migration that Maya youth in Los Angeles make visible the dehumanization, violence and erasure experienced in their journey and arrival to the United States. My conclusions highlight that in publically and collectively telling their personal narratives Maya youth assert agency over their own im/migration stories and collective histories. Additionally, they contribute to the construction of transnational (hi)storical Maya narratives that denounce the structural violence of global capitalism. And as a result, these oral narratives also suggest that the use of ancestral cultural practices functions as an essential mode of survival in the diaspora.

**Framing Maya Migrant Textualities**

Maya scholar Irma Otzoy explains that in Maya languages *tz'ib'* is the root for words meaning to write (alphabetically or hieroglyphically). She notes that the root word *tz'ib'* encodes elements of the ways Maya communities conceptualize textual practices (151). Her linguistic definition further notes that *tz'ib'* "encompass[es] other forms of 'writing' such as painting…drawing [and weaving ]" (151). In this way, Otzoy's linguistic definition also provides a theoretical framing of Maya textual practices. This framing highlights the heterogeneity of Maya textualities and in doing so, expands Western literary traditions by contesting the values and roles ascribed to alphabetic literacy. In effect, Irma Otzoy's theoretical approach to Maya textualities is characterized in the structural heterogeneity employed in numerous Maya texts that blend, or reject, alphabetic writing. The blending of oral as well as alphabetic literacies is evident in foundational texts like the *Popol Wuj*, but also in contemporary writings as for example, Calixta Gabriel Xiquín's *Tejiendo los sucesos en el tiempo/Weaving Events in Time* (2002). Moreover, as Maya Q'anjob'al writer and critic Gaspar Pedro González notes Maya writers today also maintain the use of orality, the literature of their ancestors, as a base for contemporary poetry, novels, short stories and testimonials (98).

Otzoy and González's theoretical framing of Maya textual practices is shared by Laguna Pueblo writer Leslie Mormon Silko, who further highlights the centrality of oral storytelling in Native American communities. Silko explains that for Laguna Pueblo communities "storytelling among the family and clan members served as a group rehearsal of survival strategies that had

worked for the Pueblo people for thousands of years" (xviii). She particularly stresses that telling and sharing these oral stories is not simply relegated to "writers" that "'make-up,'" or create "'fictional'" stories, but rather has focused on "narrative accounts of incidents that the teller has experienced" (xix). Hence, in Silko's explanation of oral storytelling the act and practice of this tradition is one shared by everybody in the community and not relegated to a particular person, or profession. She notes that in the Laguna Pueblo communities "everyone [can] tell stories, and everyone [feels] responsible for remembering stories and retelling them" (xix). Her depiction of Native American oral storytelling further situates oral texts and the collective act of telling these narratives as a central aspect and practice of indigenous textualities.

It is within these textual practices and theoretical frameworks that I situate the eight oral narratives examined in this article on and by Maya immigrant youth living and working in Los Angeles. Specifically noting that the oral narratives need to be analyzed as part of continued Maya textual practices in the diaspora. Like Maya studies scholar Paul Worley, I also argue that the analysis of these im/migration narratives should not simply fall to "the disciplines of anthropology, linguistics, archeology, art history, [psychology, sociology], and history" (3). And also suggest that these narratives reproduce elements of the oral storytelling practices outlined by Otzoy, González and Silko.

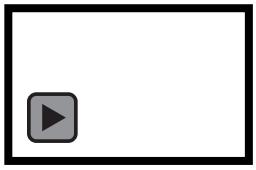
For instance, similar to the ways in which Leslie Mormon Silko depicts oral storytelling in the Laguna Pueblo communities, the narratives by Maya youth in Los Angeles were initially told during informal group meetings, or after sharing meals, with members of the mainly Maya-K'iche' grassroots support group *Diálogo de Esperanza*.[x] Created in 2010, by William Pérez and José Miguel Ruiz, the group provides much needed emotional support and guidance to Maya immigrants who often arrive to Los Angeles alone as minors.[xi] Faced with numerous social challenges including paying heavy debts to *coyotes* (smugglers), supporting their families in the Guatemalan highlands as well as fending for themselves in Los Angeles, the young immigrants encounter numerous personal and collective issues like depression, anxiety, violence, racism, exploitation, discrimination, cultural alienation, alcohol and drug abuse, among many others. As the group's name suggests, *Diálogo de Esperanza,* it is through varied forms of dialogues, which often includes sharing stories of their everyday lived experiences, that young Maya immigrants collectively create a space for self-reflection, life skills learning and healing.[xii]

After several experiences where the young immigrants' border crossing stories were organically shared in informal collective spaces, several members of *Diálogo de Esperanza* in collaboration with members of the Los Angeles-based Maya radio show *Contacto Ancestral* decided to record, transmit and archive these accounts.[xiii] The retelling and remembering of these border crossing experiences through the use of radio technology allowed for the young Mayas to claim the public airwaves in southern California and on the World Wide Web. At the same time, the incorporation of K'iche' in their narrations aided in the creation of a familial and communal space even as the stories are told mainly in Spanish to a larger heterogeneous audience. And as these personal stories are shared and made public they simultaneously construct an audible record of the traumatic memories of their individual im/migration, but also their collective survival.

The use of radio technology visibilizes performative elements of storytelling such as expression and range of audible emotive tones like sighs, tears, irony, sadness and laughter. Likewise, apparent in the oral narratives examined are "considerable details and vivid descriptions" as well as repetitions of words, phrases and events. These repetitions, according to Silko, ensure that "the listeners remember" central aspects of the narrative (xviii). Although the

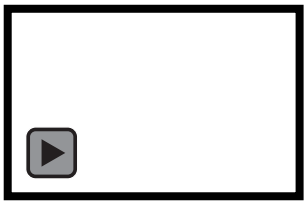
visual performative aspect of oral storytelling is not evident in radio transmissions, the audible elements like shifting tones, emphasis on words, repetitions as well as linguistic transgressions are present.

For instance, Gabino (Maya-K'iche') begins his oral narrative by noting he was twelve years old when his father had a stroke and was unable to work.[xiv] Gabino repeats his age when he explains that his father's illness forced him to provide for the family. His age is reiterated as he narrates life changing decisions as well as traumatic parts of the border crossing experience. Gabino notes, for example, that he was fifteen years old when he decided to immigrate to the United States: "*Yo tenía quince años cuando tomé la decisión de venirme a Estados Unidos*/I was fifteen years old when I made the decision to come to the United States." In addition to his age, he repeats the words *difícil*, difficult, and *decisión*, decision, to not only highlight the urgency and limits of his socioeconomic position, but also the adult decisions the minor makes as the family copes with their dire conditions:



By repeating his age Gabino ensures, as Silko notes, that the listeners remember this central part of the narrative. Additionally, it forces the audience to recognize that as a minor Gabino is forced to live and undertake traumatic decisions and grave responsibilities. And though Gabino's decision becomes one of utter survival, the use and repetition of the pronoun *yo*, I, asserts agency over the construction of his own personal story and by extension of the Maya diaspora's collective history. His narrative strategies also illustrate that "indigenous peoples have always sought to maintain control over their cultures [and stories], even from within images controlled by hegemonic culture itself" (Worley 24).

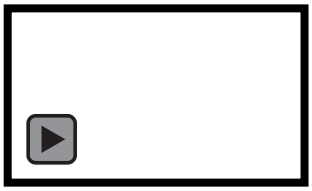
Similar to Gabino's narrative strategies Francisco's oral story maintains elements of Maya storytelling through the repetition of the phrases: *Así pasó el tiempo*, that's how time passed, *así pasó*, that's how it happened, and *así fue*, that's how it was. The recurrence of these phrases are analogous to narrative methods present in the Maya-K'iche' text *Popol Wuj*. In both Francisco's oral narrative and the *Popol Wuj*, the repetition of the phrases signal a transition between time and place as well as the text's intertextuality. In Francisco's narrative, as compared to Gabino's, his age is not stressed. For Francisco the important actions in the story are the familial connections and disconnections created as a result of his cousin Jorge's im/migration to the United States. What is emphasized in his oral narrative is the trauma created as a result of his cousin's abrupt temporal and spatial movement:



Francisco and Gabino's employment of storytelling elements transmit and recreate central aspects of Maya textual practices, which are fundamental in community construction. Geographer Leah Alexandra Huff reminds us that for Latin American scholar Mario Valdés "it is

the stories that are told within a community that allows that community to (re)create and transmit cultural identity." (86). By telling their own stories, the young Maya immigrants not only challenge the ways these im/migration stories are told, but assert their agency by publically shaping the form and languages in which they are told. At the same time, these stories told in the diaspora also (re) create and transmit for multiple generations' Maya cultural identity in Los Angeles.

Bayron, for example, ends his oral narrative by highlighting for other *jóvenes*, youth, an important lesson from his personal story:



Before Bayron begins his lesson and advice to other *jóvenes* he establishes his authority. This is particularly evident in the ways he draws attention to his ability to speak Maya-K'iche', Spanish and English. Then, Bayron directly addresses the *jóvenes* urging and noting the importance of maintaining K'iche' in the diaspora. He observes, and advises, that learning and using Spanish and English is essential, because these languages create the possibility for social mobility. His use of K'iche', Spanish, and English, not only highlights his proficiency in these languages, but also his ability to cross these linguistic and cultural borders. Hence, the narratives also make visible the varied types of borders Maya youth are forced to traverse. These crossings take place before they cross national borders, on their route to *el norte*, and once they arrive to the United States.

**Unaccompanied Maya Minors: Border Crossings**

During Guatemala's postwar period the process of reconstruction was halted by the failure to implement the Peace Accords and the rapid execution of unrestrained neoliberalism. These predominately U.S.-sponsored neoliberal policies, evident in the signing of the *Central American Free Trade Agreement* (CAFTA), further reinforced the social inequalities and violence that already existed in the country. The eight narratives examined in this article are told by young Mayas who were born in Guatemalan highland communities that lived and survived the country's recent genocide and therefore, born in a country plagued by violence, impunity, and tremendous socioeconomic inequalities.

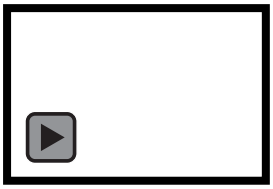
For anthropologist Victoria Sanford the "backdrop of genocide and impunity" in Guatemala has further intensified the extreme violence that plagues the country today (104). Similarly, for Native American anthropologist Shannon Speed it is "under this [transnational neoliberal multicriminalist] system [that]…human lives, particularly those of the most oppressed [like poor Maya youth and women], are rendered irrelevant." (85). For this reason, Guatemala and Mexico, two countries with large indigenous populations and immigrant flows to the United States, "are characterized by an extraordinary level of violence and impunity which are products" of these globalized neoliberal structures where "the only law that matters is the law of supply and demand and the only logic is that of the profit motive." (Speed 85). Thus, faced with the often-violent structural denial for their subsistence and existence, in the past three decades thousands of unaccompanied Maya minors have immigrated to the United States.

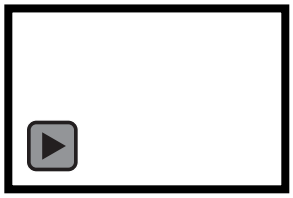
As a result, in their national and transnational im/migrations unaccompanied Maya minors encounter that far from the borderless world that dominant globalization discourses promote, sociopolitical borders continue to violently impact their daily lives. Indeed, border and borderlands scholarship suggests that the physical manifestation of borders is "often rooted in powerful cultural, economic and political inequalities" (Minghi and Nicol 681). The violent manifestation of these social inequalities is clearly reinforced at the U.S./Mexican border through a militaristic paradigm that not only regulates entry, but also reproduces racist structures (Acuña; Kil and Menjívar; Palafox; Robinson). In these racist structures indigenous immigrants are located at the bottom.

The eight compelling oral narratives by Maya youth in Los Angeles vividly and emotionally depict the ways which the transnational violence of neoliberalism impacts the daily lives of the narrators. Recorded between January and March 2015 at the KPFK community radio studios, the narratives center on the personal im/migration journeys of eight unaccompanied Maya minors, who came to adulthood in Los Angeles.[xv] The narratives often begin in the immigrant's Guatemalan highland community. For most of the narrators, their initial migration is not to the United States, but internally to other Guatemalan cities.

While the Maya immigrants' physical border crossing to the United States is the organizing theme, in these narratives they also highlight the varied forms of violence and erasure they face in Guatemala as well as in Mexico. They particularly make visible the ways in which these social inequalities, often promoted by racist structures, become part of their daily-lived experiences and in so doing, providing a socio-historical context to their lives in the United States. Implicit in the narratives are the ways in which crossing these borders becomes a desperate form of survival as Maya immigrants are systematically and violently denied subsistence and existence often because they are indigenous.

For example, Abraham notes that he was eleven years old when he first left his family and community in the Guatemalan highlands. He joined his father and worked in the Petén, the northern part of the country. At the age of thirteen, Abraham returns to the highlands and then continuously migrates for work from Guatemala City to Playa Grande, Ixcán, Quiché, where he is employed in different industries from selling cleaning supplies to selling shoes:





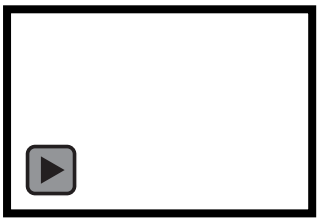
Abraham's re-mapping of the forced migratory movements of his childhood serves to highlight an awareness of the conditions that impeded him from attending school, which he observes influenced his ultimate displacement to the United States: "[*por eso*] *ya no tuve la oportunidad de estudiar*/ [that is why] I did not have the opportunity to attend school." In doing so, Abraham's narrative contributes to the creation of a transnational Maya history of im/migration. That is, his personal narrative not only serves to map the varied forms of national Maya migration movements in Guatemala, but also to give a socio-historical context to his eventual displacement to the United States.

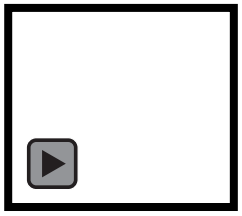
Given the substandard conditions in which he and his family lived in and, as he observes, "already used to migrating," at seventeen, Abraham makes the difficult decision to immigrate to the United States. He explains that his determination is informed by the socioeconomic

inequalities he faced in Guatemala as well as by globally circulated images of the United States as a "Land of Opportunities." Growing up he was exposed to these widely circulated stories often represented in the media as the "American Dream." The now-adult narrator, living and working in the United States, reflects that the "American Dream" is far from the "American Reality" immigrants like him encounter:

His reflection publically deconstructs the globalized U.S. national fictions he grew up hearing and watching. In particular, his narrative makes visible the ways in which images and stories that promote the United States as the "Land of Opportunities" serve to perpetuate the illusion of American social equality. This is because globalized images and stories about the United States as the "Land of Opportunities" ideologically justify social inequalities and criminalization, since they obscure the racist histories and hierarchies that systematically deny the presumed "American opportunities and dreams" to racialized populations like undocumented Maya immigrants.

While for Abraham the fictionalized narratives and images of the U.S. as the "Land of Opportunities" also influenced his decision to immigrate, for Carlos it is his experience in *maquiladora*, sweatshop, work that forces him to leave Guatemala. Carlos's story illustrates the ways in which global capital directly contributes to the over-exploitation and disposability of Maya minors. Like Abraham, Carlos had limited access to formal education and as a result he is forced to migrate to Guatemala City, where at twelve he is employed in what he calls "traditional work" for many of "us" alluding to that specific Maya community's long history of garment production.[xvi] He observes that his migration to Guatemala City created long periods of separation from his family and community, which he notes was difficult:

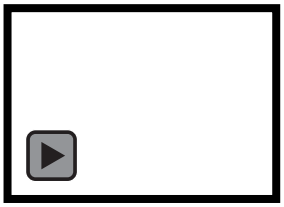




At fifteen, Carlos leaves Guatemala City in route to the United States. Unable to provide Carlos with better living conditions, his parents accompany him to one of several departure points in the migrant journey to *el norte*. Still moved by the separation, the now twenty-two-year-old Carlos shares: "*No quería llorar enfrente de ellos [sus padres]. Me fui rápido…al autobús…y allí en el autobús lloré*/ I didn't want to cry in front of them [his parents]. I left quickly… and quickly I went to the bus…it was there that I cried." His quivering voice makes evident the *emotional memory*, to use African-American writer Toni Morrison's term, of the trauma created by the family's separation. Carlos's narrative also shows that the emotional scars of forced im/migration continue with him in the United States. In the act of publicly sharing this deeply

emotional moment, Carlos vividly captures the ways in which separation is another form of violence and trauma for the minor and his family.

These transnational systems of violence are further marked in the im/migration journey to the United States. Victor, who immigrated when he was seventeen, explicitly depicts the dehumanization of immigrants in their journey to *el norte*:



Placed inside a cargo truck that presumably carried bananas from Guatemala, Victor and the other three hundred immigrants symbolically and literarily become an extension of the cargo the truck transports as well as the nation's historical export economy. [xvii] Moreover, in the context of the recent genocide in Guatemala this symbolic movement of bodies across borders also represents how Maya lives are socially marked as "something living that is other than life." (Butler 15). That is, Victor's narrative illustrates the ways in which the social value that is assigned and denied to Mayas, like the unprotected immigrants that ride on the cargo truck, situates them as "living nonbeings" (Cacho 4-6). This is because under racist neoliberal structures their right to live and existence is systematically denied.[xviii] Victor's narrative also serves as reminder that the very humanity of Mayas, which has historically been questioned and denied, continues to be "represented as something that one becomes or achieves." (Cacho 6).

As their im/migration journey takes the unaccompanied Maya minors to the U.S./Mexican border, they encounter a militarized space that further brutalizes them. Mike, who was fourteen when he crossed the Arizona/Sonora desert, remembers the loud sounds of gunfire in the middle of the night:

His performative attempt to reproduce the sounds of gunfire brings attention to the fear and trauma it created for the fourteen year-old immigrant. Mike's understanding of where the gunfire was coming from is based on the *coyote*'s response: "*es el avión de la migra*/it's coming from the border patrol agents' plane." Thus, in the narrative the U.S./Mexican border is represented by the young Maya narrator as a war zone where U.S. border patrol agents view immigrants as the "enemy."

The construction of the U.S./Mexican border as a war zone is also visible in Angel's narrative. When sixteen-year-old Angel is caught and detained by border patrol agents he is systematically denied legal representation and any means to seek asylum. Instead, what Angel depicts is a fast-track system in which indigenous immigrants like him, who are unable to speak Spanish or English, are quickly processed for deportation:

Now twenty-five years old, Angel's narration of his experiences with border patrol agents creates a form of public awareness. Caught, detained, and deported Angel attempts to cross a second and third time. In his third attempt he is detained and the then sixteen-year-old is brutally beaten in the middle of the desert by one of the border patrol agents:

Still emotionally pained by the brutalized beating he experienced, Angel's depiction of the incident shows the legal forms of violence and abuse Maya minors experience once they enter the United States. By graphically describing the physical and emotional pain of his experience and stressing the *susto* and *miedo*, fear, he felt, Angel's narrative also records the *emotional memory* produced by the violence at the border. With the support and encouragement of two young Maya-K'iche' women in the group, he decides to cross the border a fourth and final time. In this way, Angel's narrative, like the seven others, graphically illustrates not only the systematic violence Maya youth encounter as they cross multiple borders, but also tells of the ways in which Maya youth attempt to survive and cope as populations who are denied their existence and "rights to have rights" (Arendt 296).

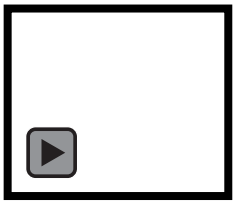
**Authoring Survival Stories**

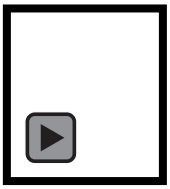
While the oral narratives by Maya immigrants focus on the transnational violence, marginalization and erasure they experience in their journey to the United States, there are also various moments in the narratives where the narrators share survival and coping strategies. The narratives examined here, like feminist and postcolonial scholars such as Norma Long and Leslie Mormon Silko, deconstruct binary constructions of victim/victimizer and illustrate the spaces where the narrators assert their agency. Feminist scholar Norma Long frames agency as "attribute[ing] to the individual actor the capacity to process social experiences and to devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion. Within the limits of information, uncertainty and other constraints that exist, social actors are 'knowledgeable' and capable'" (23). In the act of publically telling their stories of im/migration the young Maya immigrants in Los Angeles not only assert themselves as historical actors, but also impart lessons on survival. These public lessons often addressed to other Maya *jóvenes*, youth, instruct the listeners' survival and coping strategies as they cross the border and arrive to the United States. As Leslie Mormon Silko observes it is through telling stories that Laguna Pueblo communities share their knowledge, since it "serve[s] as a group rehearsal of survival strategies" (xviii).

Similarly, in his work on Palestinian families' geographer Chris Harker notes that under the dire conditions of Israeli Occupation, Palestinian families learn ways to "quite literally 'deal with' more hegemonic power relations" (308). He warns, however, that the survival strategies employed by the families "are not [explicit] forms of resistance to [Israeli hegemonic] power

relations" (308). Harker further suggests that it is important to recognize the families' survival strategies, since Palestine is often "stereotyped as a place of violence and suffering, and in this process Palestinians themselves become discursively erased as active subjects." (307). He also acknowledges that it is essential to "not ignore the violence of occupation, but rather seek to foreground more prosaic practices of dealing with it or simply 'getting by'"(307). Borrowing from both Long and Harker's farming of agency, in this section, I examine the ways in which the narratives analyzed illustrate how Maya immigrants assert agency as they "deal" and cope with the transnational violence and erasure they encounter in their daily lives in Guatemala and at the U.S./Mexican border. In particular, noting that part of the varied forms of "dealing" and coping with the violence and erasure of their subsistence and existence includes the strategies employed to survive their im/migration experiences to the United States.

Faced with the structural denial of her family's subsistence, Mary, now twenty-five, immigrated to Los Angeles when she was fourteen years old. While Mary stresses that both her parents attempted to impede her im/migration to the United States, it was her conviction that convinced her mother:



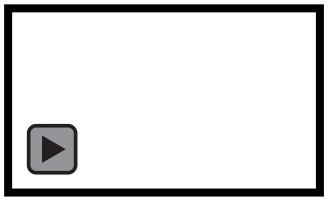


Though Mary admits that in the Guatemalan border town of La Mesilla she reconsidered returning home, her commitment to her family's well-being obliged her to continue on the journey. As the fourth daughter of ten children, Mary expresses her agency by trying to help her parents provide a sustainable livelihood for the family. Unable to foresee a viable socioeconomic change for herself in Guatemala, Mary's decision to immigrate becomes the only route she sees will ensure her siblings access to better living conditions: "*y a veces no teníamos zapatos…a veces no teníamos…o sea todo*. /And sometimes we didn't have shoes…sometimes we didn't have…well everything." After eleven years of living and working in the United States, Mary continues to help her younger siblings attain the formal education she was systematically deprived. Her conviction and ability to help the family challenges presumed gender roles of Maya men as the breadwinners and women as caretakers. The firmness in her decision to immigrate as well as her actions are an attempt to take back some sense of agency "and its correlate—dignity" (Hammami 24).

Moreover, as anthropologist Rema Hammami notes in her work on Palestinian survival strategies and hope under Israeli Occupation, "although people cross by necessity in order to go to work, school, or simply to continue with their lives, they imbue this act of survival with a sense of agency and defiance" (24). Similarly, the Maya youth's decision to cross the militarized U.S./Mexican border can also be read as act of "survival with a sense of agency and defiance." This is evident in Abraham's narrative as he notes and depicts his decision to immigrate to the United States:

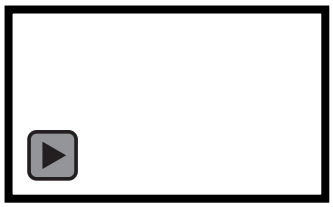
In his statements that "*Yo quería estar en los Estados Unidos*/I wanted to be in the United States" and "*Yo tomé la decisión de venir a los Estados Unidos*/I made the decision to come to the United States," the use of the pronoun, *yo*, I, highlights a desire to shape his life. Even as this action takes place within hegemonic structures that attempt to impede and limit his ability to claim life, Abraham claims authorship over the decision to immigrate. Thus, both Abraham and Mary's narratives refuse one-dimensional images of Maya youth as eternally victimized and highlight a sense of agency and dignity.

Other modes of survival noted in the oral narratives are the use of spiritual and cultural practices. For instance, after eight days of walking in the Sonora desert, Manuel, who immigrated to the United States when he was eighteen, says he felt defeated. For Manuel it is his spiritual practice, and the desire to fulfill his dream of building a family home, that allows him to survive the arduous migratory journey:




The prayers to God and the Virgin of Guadalupe not only serve to give Manuel a sense of hope in a situation of life and death, but also to envision his journey and dream as having moral, and celestial, authority. As a result, his narrative suggests another important space from which unprotected immigrants, whose very existence is questioned and denied, to claim their humanity as children of God.

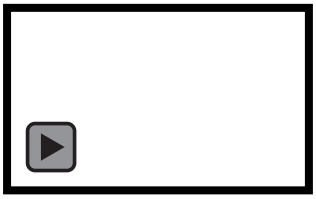
In some cases, unaccompanied immigrant youth maintain and (re) create a sense of community as a means of survival in their journey to the United States. Gabino's poignant narrative shows these transitory forms of community formation. Assaulted by organized crime on their second day crossing the Sonora desert, he notes that one of the six women in the group was raped. Though the rape is not discussed among the immigrants, according to Gabino, the trauma and pain of the rape becomes evident in the woman's inability to continue walking. Under such an extremely dire and vulnerable state Gabino, and two other friends, "deal with" and "get by," to use Harker's terms, the life and death situation by ensuring the female companion continues on the journey. Defying the orders of the *coyotes del desierto*, smugglers at the U.S./Mexican border, Gabino and his friends help the young woman cross the desert:



Thus, they literally and metaphorically carry the young woman as well as her additional twenty five pound backpack until she is able to walk: "[*le ayudamos a*] *cargar la mochila de ella y llevar a ella entre nuestros brazos [sic]*/we carried her backpack and took her in our arms." Their defiance towards the *coyote*'s warning not only ensures that their female companion,

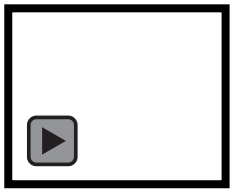
whose name he omits in the narrative, does not die in the desert, but also illustrates their literal response to the weight of the violence they collectively endure.

This defiant response to the *coyotes*' warnings, to leave anyone who could not walk behind, occurs again on the seventh day as they are attempting to cross the U.S./Mexican border. After seven days of walking in the middle of the Sonora desert with no more food, or water, an older Ecuadorean man begins to faint and is unable to continue walking. Gabino explains that the man's feet were too swollen. Once again, he is warned by the *coyotes*, but he defies their orders: "*lo fuimos a traer porque para mí dejar uno de nuestros compañeros fue difícil…yo pensé en la vida de los demás no solo en el mío[sic]…porque somos seres humanos*/ We went to help him, because to leave one of our fellow immigrants would be difficult…I thought about the life of others not just mine…because we are humans." His second defiance to the *coyotes*' warning results in a beating:



Yet, both Gabino and his friends carried the Ecuadorean man for twenty-four hours as they crossed the desert and until he is able to walk again. In this way, the young immigrants "recode the dynamics and meaning of the interaction [with the *coyotes*] and take back some sense of control…" (Hammami 24). Moreover, in their repeated defiance Gabino and his companions claim life and assert agency "in the process of simply trying to stay human in the face of a dehumanizing reality" (Hammami 26-27).

This sense of community is similarly articulated in Angel's narrative. While Angel and two Maya female companions are caught and deported by U.S. border patrol agents three times, he continuously encourages the young Maya women by reminding them of their dreams to provide a sustainable livelihood for their families in the Guatemalan highlands:



The use of Maya-K'iche' in his encouragement to the young women constructs a sense of intimacy and community. Moreover, the use of Maya-K'iche' provides a connection to home, the communities they left, but also to the Maya communities in the United States where they now live and publically share their narratives. At the same time, the incorporation of Maya-K'iche' in the predominately Spanish narrative helps maintain a cultural link between, within and across generations of Maya immigrants. In addition to the varied survival strategies employed by the immigrants in their route to the United States, their oral narratives also illustrate an effort to forge an imagined community that is inherently transnational, since they provide a socio-historical context to their im/migration and life in the United States.

**Telling Transnational Maya (Hi)stories**

The eight oral narratives examined in this article allow us to see some of the ways in which Maya diasporic youth understand their own im/migration. Through publically telling, recording and archiving their oral texts, the narrators open up spaces from which other Maya immigrants can frame, visualize and tell their own histories and experiences of im/migration from within the diaspora. Moreover, the telling and archiving of these oral narratives produce a space, unlike traditional historical archives, that is inclusive of the deeply emotional and traumatic memories of the Maya immigrants' journey to the United States. In this way, the narratives transmit a sense of intimacy, since they express deeply personal experiences and sentiments. In doing so, the public telling of their personal border crossing stories, and collective histories, simultaneously express an effort to construct Maya transnational communities.

Additionally, the narrative strategies employed by the young immigrants ground these oral texts within Maya cultural frameworks. The affirmation of Maya cultural practices is particularly visible in the incorporation of Maya-K'iche' as well as the use of oral storytelling elements in the narrations. These eight oral narratives (re)create a sense of community through the telling of their individual and collectives histories. This is because in publically telling their personal stories and employing Maya cultural frameworks the narrators affirm a shared Maya identity and historical memory on im/migration that is inherently transnational. Consequently, they begin to weave a series of transnational stories and histories that serve as an essential tool for survival in the diaspora, since, as Native American writer Leslie Mormon Silko reminds us, "old stories and new stories are essential: They tell us who we are, and they enable us to survive…because if you don't have the stories, you don't have anything." (xxvi). Indeed, the eight oral narratives by Maya youth are both old and new (hi)stories that (re)create an imaged heterogeneous and transnational Maya community in Los Angeles.

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[i] At the end of the Guatemalan thirty-six year civil war (1960-1996), the United Nation's Truth Commission reported that over 200,000 people were killed, more than 40, 000 widows and 1.5 million displaced living in exile or as refugees. The report also states that military, police forces, or government officials committed 93% of these crimes. It further notes that 83% of those killed were Maya.

[ii] The presence of the bourgeoning Maya diaspora in the U.S. is evident in analysis of the 2010 census' statistics by Maya studies scholars. For instance, several of these scholars state that of the estimated 1,044,209 Guatemalans living and working in the United States approximately 500,000 are Mayas (Jiménez Mayo; Brown and Odem). And while scholars point to the limits of state taxonomies, an analysis of census data does mark a growing Maya diaspora in the United States (Estrada 2015).

[iii] See for example, Christopher Sherman's "Boy's Death Draws Attention to Immigration Perils," in *El Paso Times* (2014), http://www.elpasotimes.com/latestnews/ci_26062650/; Devin Dwyer's "Obama Warns Central Americans: 'Do Not Send Your Children To The Borders'" *ABC News* (2014), http://abcnews.go.com/Politics/obama-warns-central-americans-send-children-borders/story?id=24320063; Cindy Carcamo and Rebecca Bratek "U.S. in Talks with Central American Officials About Immigrant Children," *Los Angeles Times* (2014), http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-ff-immig-children-20140613-story.html.

[iv] See for example, the *Los Angeles Times*' report titled "117% increase in children 12 and younger crossing border alone" (2014) http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-na-illegal-immigration-unaccompanied-minors-20140724-story.html#page=1. Also, see the *New York Times'* "Children at the Border" (2014); http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/07/15/us/questions-about-the-border-kids.html

[v] In "*Ka Tzij:* The Diasporic Voices from *Contacto Ancestral*" (2013), I note that indigenous immigrants face multiple forms of racism from hegemonic structures and within Latino immigrant communities.

[vi] See Ikimulisa Livingston's "Stabbed hero dies as more than 20 people stroll past him" in the *New York Post.* http://nypost.com/2010/04/24/stabbed-hero-dies-as-more-than-20-people-stroll-past-him/

[vii] There have been numerous killings and beatings of Maya immigrants in the United States. Some include the severe beating of Antonio López Chaj by a Los Angeles security guard and which left López Chaj with half of his skull permanently caved in as well as the killing by an LAPD officer of the Maya-K'iche' day laborer Manuel Jaminez Xum in 2010. While in 2013, Luis Jiménez (Maya-Q'anjo'bal') was hit by a drunk driver that had a long police record in South Florida. As a result of the accident, Jiménez became paraplegic with brain damage. Later, Jiménez was deported by the hospital to his home in the Huehuetenango highlands with no medical attention. A few of the murders cited have been reported in newspapers and only one, the killing of Maya-K'iche' day laborer Manuel Jaminez Xum, brought people together to rally for days against police brutality. Official and public responses to the murders of Maya immigrants have been minimal or non-existent. I read these reactions as exemplifying the status of Maya immigrants as, to use Lisa Marie Cacho notion, "ineligible for personhood." Besides these forms of physical violence the two largest deportations in U.S. history, Postville, Iowa (2010) and New Bedford, Massachusetts (2010), mainly impacted Maya-K'iche' and Kaqchikel immigrants.

[viii] For more on *Contacto Ancestral* see "*Ka Tzij:* The Diasporic Voices from *Contacto Ancestral*" (2013) in *Journal of Latino Studies.*

[ix] In his foundational text on slavery and *social death*, Patterson notes that when slaves were "freed" by their masters this "freedom" did not signal emancipation from the master. It simply redefined the relations between the master and the "former slave." Under this new social structure the master maintained sociopolitical power. In this way, "freed" slaves continued to live in what Ruth Wilson Gilmore suggests as an "abstract existence" since "living [became] something to be *achieved* and not *experienced*" (16). Thus, for Lisa Marie Cacho under these continued sociopolitical structures criminalized U.S. people of color are "ineligible for personhood" and this in turn, "is a form of social death" (6).

[x] In consultation with and as requested by the co-founders, William Pérez and José Miguel Ruiz, the name of the grassroots group appears in this article.

[xi] William Pérez, a Salvadoran immigrant and catechist, is co-founding member of the group. In *Diálogo de Esperanza*, Pérez helps provide the young Maya immigrants with much needed life skills and guidance. Additionally, José Miguel Ruiz, co-founding member of the group and a graduate from UCSC with training in Mental Health Rehabilitation, has helped the young immigrants learn self-healing strategies through urban gardening and other psychosocial interventions. Other influential members in the group include Salvador Zacarias (Maya-Q'anjob'al) and José Vásquez (Maya-K'iche') who offer classes that teach young immigrants Spanish as well as public speaking skills. Another key member is Rogelio Hernández (Maya-K'iche') who actively aids in leading discussions during the group's weekly meetings.

[xii] For other recent studies on Maya immigrant youth in Los Angeles see Pierrette Hondagneu-Sotelo's "Paradise Transplanted" (2014) and Stephanie L. Canizales' "American individualism and the social incorporation of unaccompanied Guatemalan Maya young adults in Los Angeles" (2015).

[xiii] My article "*Ka Tzij:* The Diasporic Voices from *Contacto Ancestral*" (2013) in *Journal of Latino Studies* discusses the space on the airwaves, created by Maya immigrants in Los Angeles, as one that attempts to construct an audible transnational archive on contemporary and historical indigenous movements, struggles, and culture.

[xiv] The names of the Maya narrators have been changed to protect their identities. In most cases, the young Maya narrators selected the pseudonyms used in the article. Their highland communities in Guatemala have also been omitted to protect their families.

[xv] The Maya immigrants and *Contacto Ancestral* recorded a total of thirteen oral narratives between January and March 2015 at the KPFK radio studios in North Hollywood, California. These narratives were told organically in the presence of other Maya *jóvenes*, members of *Diálogo de Esperanza*. At times, Manuel Felipe Pérez, founding member and producer of *Contacto Ancestral*, José Vásquez, Maya-K'iche' teacher and member of *Dialogo de Esperanza* and *Contacto Ancestral*, William Pérez, founding member of *Diálogo de Esperanza* and counselor, and I would ask the narrator questions to further help clarify points in the story. At the time of writing this article, the oral narratives are in the process of being edited by the Maya-K'iche' narrators. The narratives are scheduled to air in Fall 2015 during *Contacto Ancestral*'s regular broadcast (Mondays from 10:30PM-11:30PM) and will be archived on the World Wide Web. The audios used in this article are unedited and have the permission of the narrators.

[xvi] Carlos is from a small town in the highlands. The region, as scholars Omar Ortez and Néstor Rodríguez have noted, has a long history of large-scale textile and garment productions. Jorge, one of the young Maya immigrants, told me that the department is also known as Guatemala's "little Taiwan," because of the vast garment production in the area.

[xvii] Symbolically, the bananas and human cargo the truck transports is also a reminder of the long and violent history of banana production in the region. It brings attention to the extensive violent presence of the United States via the United Fruit Company (UFCO). In particular, the U.S. sponsored coup against democratically elected President Jacobo Arbenz Guzmán in an effort to protect the UFCO's interest, the U.S. sponsored thirty-six year Civil War that followed and the implementation of the neoliberal policies in the region. For more on the UFCO, banana production and violence in Guatemala see Stephen Schlesinger's *Bitter Fruit: The Untold Story of the American Coup in Guatemala* (2005); Paul J. Dosal's *Doing Business with the Dictators: A Political History of the United Fruit in Guatemala, 1899-1944* (1993); *Banana Wars: Power, Production and History in the Americas* (2003).

[xviii] See Lisa Marie Cacho's *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*.

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