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By Whitney L. Duncan

In this piece, I explore both the intimacy and estrangement of ethnographic engagements, especially those that have unfolded during the pandemic, as ethnographic fieldwork and research have blurred even more than usual into accompaniment, friendship, advocacy, and mutual support. During this time, I have struggled with more traditional academic writing; for “D” and others, I have found myself unable to muster case studies or to extract quotations from interviews, conversations, and other exchanges to illustrate broader theoretical and empirical points. What emerges instead is a kind of letter to D, a fragmented reflection on her stories, struggles, and points of resistance, interwoven with my own experiences of the same periods of time and of the ways our relationship has evolved over the past few years. The piece considers how the pandemic has transformed ethnographic being-with, or *convivencia*: over the phone; via WhatsApp messages; through objects, foods, stories, and memories that we exchange in brief masked meetings . . . COVID precautions have flattened dimensionality in some senses but have also opened new space for forms of ethnographic accompaniment, intimacy, imagination, and advocacy. In this sense, the pandemic has illuminated the tendrilled connections between my interlocutors and me in unanticipated ways.

Especially given that I now conduct research and advocacy in the region where I live, I explore and convey the seemingly intractable and violent nature of inequality that shapes our different life experiences and puts D, her family, and the other families with whom I work at elevated risk—for disease, for drowning, for violence, for economic calamity, for invisibility, for grief—all the time, pandemic or not.

Spanish Translation



Storm over South Table Mountain in Golden, Colorado (Photograph by author)

First, I imagine your tongues, yours and your children's, dry as butterfly wings, when they refused you water in the place you're not from.

You made it north, two children in tow. Carrying what you could, you boarded buses that would take you to an aunt's in Chiapas. You don't name the aunt, but you say she angered when you couldn't make enough money to help.

There is a lot you don't say about what happened before Mexico.

I listen, paying attention to what you do say—

Of your home country: your mother passed; her absence is another reason you can't return.

Of your younger brother: *asaltos, balazos, miedo*. Like you, he made his way to Mexico.

Of your father: you and your sister send what you can so he does not have to work—

and then you send what you can for your brother's burial.

What grief, I wonder, will you be spared?

In Mexico, you met your husband and left your aunt's.

You had three children together, birthed at home because the hospitals wouldn't treat you: no Mexican papers.

Still your husband's family denied you water to wash, to drink. You sought out rivers and wells, a baby tightly wrapped to your chest above your pregnant belly, a toddler strapped to your back, the two older children holding on to each hand.

Before your in-laws resorted to death threats—*sicarios*, you wrote—they removed the toilet bowl so you and your children would have to squat outside.

I pause when I translate this detail for your immigration lawyer GoFundMe page.

Later, when I analyze my fieldnotes, shall I code this as:

reasons for migration

family conflict

extended kin relations

hierarchy of needs

assaults on dignity, or simply

cruel ways to fuck with people?

The children beg you to not make them go back to either place.

Seven I-589s sit in some office. No one bothers to give you a court date, so you wait.

What, you ask me, would prove it? Prove your credible fear.

Water wings

You cross the river in an inflatable baby pool with five children, your husband swimming alongside.

Water wings encircle your arms; they bump your baby's head as you clutch him. The floaties squeak and stick when you tug them off and on.

The other four children: winged yet flightless.

The river, starbellied at night and muddied in the day, swallows people whole only to spit them out to news cameras.

I ask if you were afraid.

Confiaba en dios. If I drowned, it was my time to go. Simply.

That is how much you needed to leave.

Squatting for a month on the border, you and your family found an abandoned house before you worked up the nerve to try the river.

You don't mention the squatting until, years later, you watch a video of families seeking shelter in Nuevo Laredo. Mouth dry and veins flush with river water, you remember.

You found some *comida enlatada*, which makes it sound almost fancy.

You slept on the ground if you slept at all—

We tried the shelter, too, but they turned us away because my older sons don't have Mexican papers.

Your children, bodies dry and alive on the other side now, are playing in the next room, one in a diaper, tottering on knobby knees: months later, he's still malnourished, the doctor tells you.

He doesn't eat like the others. His body can't accept the food offered now, having gone so long without.

There were times we had enough for my children to eat tortillas with salt, but sometimes we didn't even have tortillas.

They pulled half your daughter's teeth after that first dentist visit in the United States, but my mind is still in the Río Grande.

Can you swim? I ask. *No—yo no.*

Then a bloom in my chest, an opening fist of guilt.

I think of my nine-year-old body heaving a greased watermelon across the deep end at a pool party. How heavy the melon in the arms, how hard you have to kick, fending off the others. How the melon floats when you finally let it go.

The body remembers

We pile in my car: you, your husband, your three youngest. I buckle two of them into my children's car seats, cinching the straps tight.

You tumble into the third row.

Everyone buckled?

Your husband looks surprised and looks around for his seatbelt in the passenger seat.

Safety first, I say, then blush. As though seatbelts could keep you all safe.

In your bag, candy to keep the kids quiet in court.

You are nervous, though this is not your first time in front of a judge, nor will it be your last.

The forms are relentless.

Weeks before, I advised you to write out all the information in advance, then I showed up at the house with fresh pens.

You held out a tidy notebook, pencil-printed pages filled with names, dates of birth, dates of death, street names, school names—

We sat for hours in the dark basement your church sister rented to you. Filling out blank spaces, crossing Ts, dotting Is, whiting out, writing again, X marking the spots, checked boxes, A-Numbers scrawled across page after page.

No lawyer thinks you have a chance: they won't even take the GoFundMe money.

What if I showed them newspaper articles? About the violence there.

Perhaps.

What if I tell them about the time they shot at my brother?

You probably should.

We parse the details you'll have to trot out.

Did they try to kill you?

I thought they would.

At first, it doesn't come naturally: to tell what brought you here, to tell why you should deserve to stay.

I'm not good at speaking, you kept saying, you keep saying. There's a lot I don't understand—

You call yourself *burra* and I flinch. I hate whoever taught you that.

You say you don't understand how your body still remembers.

Remembers what? I don't ask, knowing that the question bears the moment on its back.

I learn more about what your body remembers when you start working nights, taking the train to the stadium to clean.

Are you afraid, taking the train at night?

It's okay now, you assure me. I don't tremble anymore. At first it made me think of the men.

Now you send me photos of your reflection in the elevator, lifting you to the stadium's mouth at 2 a.m. The white mask covers your face so all I see are your eyes, apron, spray bottle.

The I-589 doesn't mention what the body remembers or forgets. Neither does the judge.

She advises you to get a lawyer.



Mural by Broderick Flanigan in Santa

Fe Arts District, Denver, Colorado
(Photograph by author)

Sugarman

You send me a photo: a small glass jar in your open left palm.

It's dark but I can make out your ragged fingernails and the jar's label:

"The Sugarman: 100% pure maple syrup."

I listen to the voice message you've sent with the photo:

Es que mire que me han dado de cosas pero yo no sé para que es.

Product of USA and Canada, product of NAFTA, sap seeped across borders.

It's just that they've given things to me, but I don't know what they're for.

My mouth waters at sweetness. At sucrose, photosynthesis.

You crossed a bitter river, no honeyed banks—

Jarabe, I tell you, but no maples where you're from. Instead you smelled salvia—peach sage, blue vine sage. Mangrove and mahogany. Yellow lotus.

Here, you are happy to find bananas, to fry an egg on your hotplate.

Here, congregants from a liberal church want to get to know the immigrants
Trump is harassing.

The church won't house you but they'll drop off food and pay your rent directly
to César, though not when he says he won't take a check: cash only.

The place you live after your friend's basement is on one of the city's busiest

thoroughfares. Trucks roar past and you can't escape the smell of fast food.

It lacks a kitchen and its sign lacks a "T." *APARMENTS*, says the hand-painted sign outside. A seedy roadside motel masquerading as a place to live.

Inside, you line your shelves; donated goodwill, *despensa*, sweetest intentions. You say César thinks a unit with a kitchen will open soon—I say César needs to know this place is not to code.

César won't answer my calls.

Later, I urge myself to dream the moment when the syrup hits the tongue: how it might feel if they grant your case.

But I only dream carnage. Syrup doesn't drip from the wounds.

What's the jar for?

Pancakes, I laugh. Did they also drop off mix for the batter?

Now you laugh. You used the mix already: hotcakes on a hotplate in a not-kitchen.

Who knew the amber jar was for those?

You have a headache. We need to get that money to César for one last month then find you a new place before the baby comes.

Your husband can't find work.

The pandemic brings new charitable funds, new programs, at least—we can apply—

When we call, no one speaks Spanish. Irate, I dial through menus and leave messages, finally get callbacks, and realize, once again: the help really isn't for

you.

Everything requires *un seguro*. The way it rolls off the tongue, *security*.

Cockroaches have infested the donated furniture.

None of the kids are citizens? the woman from human services asks me. No, I say. But she is expecting—I don't like sharing the news with this woman, I realize.

That baby might just be her ticket in, she says.

I clench my fist, start to feel flammable.

Now there is nothing to put the maple syrup on.

You pour a teaspoon and taste it, smack your lips, and place the jar back on the shelf.

Reasonable fear

What does it mean for fear to be reasonable?

The lawmakers should hear your stories, you're told. By now, you're an activist.

Needed: testimonial opposing the proposed rule. Congress needs to know what it would do to families. Not much imagination, apparently.

As though it could be otherwise.

As though, once passed, laws live in books and not bodies.

Somehow, it's still 2020.

What does it mean for rage to be reasonable?

"If 'yes,' explain in detail:

1. What harm or mistreatment you fear;
2. Who you believe would harm or mistreat you; and
3. Why you believe you would be harmed or mistreated."

I've never heard you indignant.

You write your testimony in clear print and send me a photo.

You talk to reporters.

You talk to representatives.

You probably did not know you'd be asked to tell "your story" so many times.

Tell it again, D, tell us why you can't go back, tell us why your children can't live there. Tell us what they did and what you lacked and where you were and why you left. Tell us, tell us who else, when else, give photos if you can. How long did you walk and what prayers did your mouth make?

"This is a summary; I will supplement this testimony in court": box checked.

Nuevo Laredo or Piedras Negras?

Your feet felt how? Your children said what?

Wait here while we consider.

What's that? No, you can't have a work permit in the meantime.

Incendio

The days slow, and at home, we learn new sciences: tablespoons of honey measured in hours.

You have a new apartment, finally, and the church will pay the first few months' rent. We even found more furniture to put in it.

Swollen prairie flax, petal and pistil: with my children I comb rockside, newly furred, lichen-spotted.

By summer you, too, are rounding out, beaming: the first actual place of your own. César's *APARMENTS* didn't count, I agree.

Daily I walk through locust throb. My ears prick to static, electricity of femur.

We keep distance measuring the same number of feet people get buried under.

Your new place is thirteen miles east and I wonder if shrieking raptors glide your skies as well.

Whether you watch crested iris, tiger stripes. Caterpillars writhing in silk tents.

A few months in, we mask up and you give me the tour, ask how to work the air conditioning.

A lawyer says he'll represent you, pro bono. Never mind that he's not an immigration lawyer: he knows the basics, and he speaks Spanish.

We learn the doctor's bills they keep sending for every visit, every pulled tooth, were a mistake.

How much will it cost for them to operate on me? you ask. The doctor thinks you should tie your tubes and you agree. Segura? I ask you.

I think finally, maybe, you can exhale.

Then you text me a photo of a charred building: *Do you know of any cheap hotels?*

At first, I don't understand what the photo is: your apartment building. What the flames and smoke didn't ruin, the sprinklers did.

I imagine the match sparking phosphorus to vapor. Or was it lighter, wire, stove, or toaster?

Flames gathered heat to lick and swallow curtains. I think, what are the chances?

The neighbors started the fire, not you. Welcome news: as though they need another reason against you.

Someone else chose what you could take with you.

While you're living in the only hotel that would take a family of seven, I fill a shopping cart with food you don't have to cook: Maruchan noodles in Styrofoam cups, bananas, cereal. The kids like Cocoa Krispies, drink the chocolate milk left over. I put in carrots for good measure, avocados.

Finally, you move back into your church sister's basement; this time it costs more.

I drop off bedding and nursing tops, a green silk baby sling the color of moss when spring juices the mountains.

But by now there are no streams running—the whole state is on fire.

We're all smoke-choked and coughing. Grizzly Creek, Pine Gulch, Cameron Peak, Williams Fork. Ash coats our throats and settles on windows,

windshields. The half-moon turns pink, reflecting blaze.

We're supposed to stay inside but I walk my usual trail and can't see the mountains for the smoke. The vegetables in my garden are dusty, stunted.

We hold our breath and wait.

Parto

Your face starts losing pigment: vitiligo.

In my neighborhood, someone installs a pool filter that sounds like a beating heart, echoed through a fetal doppler. I keep time to its rhythm.

The doctor urges you to stay off your feet. Dizzy, tired, cramping.

What will it be like there? At the hospital.

There is nothing I love more than sharing birth stories, but that's not what you asked.

I birthed at a different hospital, a few miles away, in a private room covered by private insurance with a birth plan that nobody read.

I think of the doctors trained not to listen, even when they speak your language.

Can anyone come in with me? you ask. They have relaxed the rules, so your husband can go, at least. *But you've been like my family.*

I want to go, but somehow, it's still 2020.

We've found more clothes to cover what you lost in the fire: bassinet, booties, hats.

The baby arrives with low blood sugar, low blood oxygen, you tell me in drowsy WhatsApp voice messages. You stay in the hospital a few extra days worrying about your *otros bbs* at home.

The filter-heart keeps beating, seems to quicken and slow with the headlines. Even the squirrels are antsy.

Finally home, you send snapshots: the baby's squished face, his little fists, his curved shins, his siblings holding him with gap-toothed smiles.

Grocery list

For when you move into your second new apartment a few weeks after giving birth and you have COVID but no food or cooking utensils.

Tortillas, eggs, milk

Bottled water

((You text a photo of pink daisy with baby's breath. *Cuando comprendes que Dios esta contigo ya no importa quien está contra di ti. Buenas noches!*))

Dishwashing soap

((*I didn't have a chance to grab it before we left*))

Grapes, bananas, apples

Hot dogs tomato potato

((Emoji with heart-eyes; animated cartoon sticker of two puppies hugging))

Maseca to make tortillas

Salt, broth, pepper

((Do you need formula for the baby?

I still have milk for the baby

He takes cereal once a day but I still have milk for the baby.))

Chiles, the spicy kind

((*We're very cold.*))

((Medicine for your symptoms?

I'm drinking tea with cinnamon))

Onion, lime, garlic

((Sticker of a bear hugging itself that says *un abrazo grandooooote*, huuuuge hugs.))

Lkmmmm

They are tender, the bruises blooming purple-blue-brown on my knee, my thigh: I got them moving furniture from our house to yours.

Does anyone else think it's funny? That the dressers in your bedrooms now are the ones my in-laws had in their bedroom when they were dressing their baby who is now my husband and who has the same name as your baby except my husband's is pronounced with a J and your son's with a Jota. Heavy wooden drawers moved from coast to coast and in between. No? Just me? Maybe *funny* isn't what I mean.

We message—*Me da miedo por lo de la corte*—they still haven't assigned you a

date. You were moving around so much you gave DHS my address, but they've sent nothing; no information online; no calls, no dice.

So we wait and you ask after my *preciosas bbs* and my daughter picks out dresses for yours. Dresses my nieces passed to my daughters passed to your daughter. The way these things move between us as time folds in on itself.

On one visit your daughter hands me two unopened toys: a Pocahontas Barbie and a fat sequined unicorn with sparkly decorative stickers for its belly.

The unicorn joined my older daughter's collection of stuffies lining the perimeter of her bed, each with a name and a birthday. Sometimes, she teaches them classes: reading class, magic class. They watch her, wide-eyed and loyal, while she sleeps.

You send me emojis, cartoon stickers on WhatsApp: Heart-eyes and *te quiero*, a dark-haired beauty blowing hearts.

Lkmmmm, you keep texting.

Finally, I ask what it means.

K la kiero mucho mucho mucho mucho

I remind you to call me *tú* and not *usted*, but you can't get used to it.

Gracias por estar en mi vida, you say in a voice text. Thank you for being in my life, too, I respond.

Your husband and I load the heavy dressers into the van he bought and when we arrive at your apartment you are bleary-eyed, yawning. You cleaned the stadium most of the night, and tell me about the vomit, the spilled beer. But you like watching the hockey.

How do you say hockey in Spanish? I ask. *Hockey*, your husband responds.

Ice skaters, the smooth glide. You say you like the way they scream and cheer.

The older sons run back and forth from the car, bearing drawers.

I stand in the entry room as the other children play at my feet, unloading bags of passed-down clothes and toys. The baby fusses in his seat and I reach for him: finally, for a time I can hold him unmasked, make silly faces, not flinch at the clear drool leaking from his toothless mouth onto my hand.

You say you are making me tortillas: am I sure I like yours better than the store-bought? Again, my mouth waters.

You roll the masa into balls that you flatten with your small palms, fingers outstretched.

The baby clutches my finger, tugs my hair.

I listen for the hiss of first oil on pan before you add the flat discs of masa.

The other children and I practice colors, pushing beads across the curved wire. *Verde*, green. *Rojo*. What's this one? I ask. **YELLOW!** Your daughter announces proudly. *Amarillo*, her younger brother adds.

You hand the tortillas to me in a wrapped stack, still steaming.

Then you take the baby and I clutch the warm bundle to my chest, thanking you, thanking you, thanking you, as I walk to my car and drive the short distance home.

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University of Northern Colorado, is a medical and psychological anthropologist who researches immigration and the sociopolitical, cultural, and global aspects of health and emotion. Duncan's book on globalizing mental health practice and cultural change in Mexico was published in 2018 by Vanderbilt University Press, and she is currently working with other members of the Anthropologist Action Network for Immigrants and Refugees on a volume about anthropological accompaniment.

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