

# Guatemala—Paradise Lost: The Journey Away from the Land of Eternal Spring



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## Historical Background

Guatemala is known as “the land of eternal spring” (von Humboldt, 1799–1804). This small country holds the beauty of nature and the devastation of historical and current colonialism. The topography of Guatemala contains a paradise of diversity in its landscape, its flora, and its people. Guatemala is the most populated country in Central America and was once the epicenter of Maya civilization that extended throughout Mesoamerica (Hawkins, McDonald, & Adams, 2010). In 1523, Pedro de Alvarado was sent to conquer the land region of Guatemala and its indigenous peoples. By 1540, the Spanish Conquistadores had complete control of the area. During this period, indigenous people were forced to convert to Christianity and leave their traditional beliefs and practices behind. They were stripped of the silver, gold, and jewels found on their land. The theft of natural resources allowed the Conquistadores and their families to become wealthy, powerful people. A societal hierarchy was created and placed the Spanish people who settled in Guatemala as the highest rank. People who were born in Guatemala and had Spanish descent ranked the second highest, those with mixed Spanish and indigenous blood (Ladinos) were ranked third, and the indigenous people held the lowest rank (Grandin, 2000).

Colonial rule lasted until 1821 when Guatemala declared independence as part of the Federal Republic of Central America that disbanded in 1840. Unfortunately, Guatemala’s independence did not lead to a stable economic or social existence. Centuries of colonial ruling that stripped the Maya people of their way of life (i.e., economy, rituals, organization) through dispossession, dislocation, and murder left Guatemala vulnerable to chaos and corruption. In the late nineteenth century, Guatemala’s agricultural resources were exploited by several foreign entities, one of

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the most prominent being the United Fruit Company (UFC). These companies supported dictators whose governmental policies exploited the local labor force. These inhumane policies were backed by the US government who supported the harsh labor policies and provided exception to policies for wealthy landowners (Green, 2009).

Beginning in 1944, the people of Guatemala enjoyed “10 years of Spring” under Presidents Juan José Arévalo and Jacobo Arbenz from 1945 to 1954. During their terms, their administrations worked toward abolishing forced labor and returning lands to the indigenous people. When President Arbenz was elected to office, he announced a plan to nationalize and redistribute undeveloped lands. At that time, the United Fruit Company, an American business, owned 42% of the land used to cultivate bananas. During this time, the wealthiest 2% of the population owned 70% of the land. Soon after President Arbenz made the decree to nationalize lands, Guatemala seized 40% of the lands owned by the United Fruit Company. Politically and financially affronted by President Arbenz’s seizure, the US government staged anti-communist propaganda throughout the country and arranged a coup to be led by Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas of the Guatemalan Army (Morales, 2013; Dosal, 1993; Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014; Schlesinger, Kinzer, & Coatsworth, 2005).

After the coup ended, Colonel Carlos Castillo Armas became the military dictator of Guatemala in 1954. He launched a campaign to smoke out any communist sympathizers but was assassinated in 1957. His successors continued the campaign, igniting a strong resistance and insurgency from the people of Guatemala. The first phase of counterinsurgency started in 1966. Opposition leaders were targeted and killed. The second phase of the counterinsurgency took place in the 1970s and focused on snuffing out guerillas in the highlands which were inhabited mostly by the Maya (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014). According to the Guatemalan army’s report, the campaign destroyed 440 highland villages, killed or “disappeared” 150,000 (primarily Mayas) in the early 1980s alone, and displaced over one million people, 200,000 of whom fled to Mexico (Jonas, 2013).

On December 29, 1996, the final peace accord known as the Agreement for a Firm and Everlasting Peace was signed, detailing seven substantive agreements and three operational agreements negotiated under the mediation of the United Nations (Mersky, 2005). This peace agreement took over 10 years to come to fruition. Human rights continued to be a major factor in the process of establishing peace. After the signing of the peace accord, Guatemala held its first democratic election in 1999. Sadly, the country continued to struggle with issues of poverty, drug cartels, and high crime including femicide (Bellino, 2009). For example, since the year 2000, more than 6500 women have been murdered in Guatemala (Migration Policy Institute, 2018).

Poverty rates have increased over the last few decades (Focused Economics, 2018) creating ripe conditions for desperate survival strategies. Corruption, drug trafficking, and government impunity plague a nation that has been under attack since the 1500s. These factors have created a psychology of “no future” for many in Guatemala, and especially among Guatemalan Maya. After decades of exploitation, displacement, and persecution, many Maya men and some women have taken

the risk of potentially losing their lives crossing international borders into Mexico and the United States in hopes of earning an income that will allow them to send remittances to their children and other family members in Guatemala. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the accompanying immigration policies have increased the dangers faced by undocumented Guatemalan immigrants.

While the official war ended, the violence has not. The extreme acts of violence during the decades of war and the years after having left a state plagued by femicide. Femicide entails more than murder and extreme hatred. It is an act of terror aimed at women in a public display of total control and perverted objectified mutilation. Femicide draws attention to the complicity of the state in the continued murder spree and violence against women (Bellino, 2009). Governmental impunity is another contributor to the flight of female immigrants to the United States. Unfortunately, many have found themselves facing rape and degradation during their journeys and even within the US borders in government detention centers.

The ongoing violence in “postwar” Guatemala has forced parents to part from their children in hopes that they stand a chance for a better, and longer, future in the “land of opportunity.” These familial sacrifices give rise to the emergence of unaccompanied children crossing the border into the United States in the last few years. The desperation for a “possible future” weighs heavily on the impossible choices made by many Guatemalan families, particularly indigenous Maya families.

## **Guatemala’s Migration and Settlement Patterns in the United States**

The migration pattern of people from Guatemala to the United States came in waves. The US backed military coup that overthrew President Jacobo Arbenz and the civil war that followed triggered the first wave of Guatemalan immigration to the United States in the 1970s. Additionally, immigration patterns of Guatemalans seem to be impacted by immigration policies in the United States. As a result, we saw periods of increases and decreases in migration to the United States from 1970 to 2012.

### ***The 1970s***

In 1970, the United States saw more immigration from Guatemala than ever before. Specifically, the U.S. Census estimates that 5138 Guatemalans migrated to the United States in 1970 (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014). The next surge of migration occurred in 1977 when 13,785 Guatemalans were estimated to journey to the US border (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014). The civil war prompted immigration northward on foot, bus, or train. On the journey through Mexico, immigration officers boarded transports and operated checkpoints. Guatemalans who reached the United States often settled in Mexican–American neighborhoods in Los Angeles and throughout Southern California (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

## *The 1980s*

By the 1980s the service industry was strong and attracted migrants looking for an opportunity to live and work in the United States. Overtime, Guatemalans came to settle in places where the service industry was growing creating a significant increase and impact on the Latinx population. Some primary settlement areas included Houston, Chicago, New York City, Washington DC, and Southern Florida (Hiller, Linstroth, & Vela, 2009; Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

When immigration policies granted residency in the United States, immigration of Guatemalans increased. Specifically, the Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA) was signed into law in 1986 and allowed undocumented immigrants who arrived in the United States before January 1, 1982 an opportunity to apply for amnesty. However, IRCA also required that employers know the immigration status of their employees and made it illegal to hire undocumented employees. Applicants were required to: pay a fine and back taxes, to prove that they had no criminal record, have knowledge of US history and government, and fluency in the English language. Over 113,000 IRCA applications were submitted by people from Guatemala, 19,942 were granted amnesty. Later in 1989, over 50,000 Guatemalans received residence through the IRCA (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

The newly documented immigrants became more socioeconomically mobile because they qualified for higher wage job employment and had English-language fluency. Those who were granted amnesty were able to sponsor others to migrate to the United States and were finally able to visit home without worrying about not being able to return. Many returned to Guatemala, connected with family, built homes, and shared money and goods with their communities. This time period saw an increase in flights to Guatemala offered by the airline industry (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

## *The 1990s*

The Immigration Act of 1990 spurred another surge of immigration to the United States. The Act raised the number of immigrants who could be allowed into the United States to 700,000 for 1992–1994 then back to 675,000 in 1995. In 1994, 21,749 Guatemalan's were estimated to migrate to the United States. At this time, immigrants are concentrated in large cities where the service industry continued to grow like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Houston. Additionally, immigrants also worked agricultural jobs and settled in rural areas in the southeast, namely in Florida (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014). For example, since the 1970s the number of Maya who settled in Indiantown, FL increased as word spread that it was a haven for refugees and had opportunities to work on surrounding farms, albeit for low pay (Bogin & Loucky, 1997; Hiller et al., 2009). Overtime, Guatemalan immigrants created similar enclaves in the south including Morgantown, NC where they took jobs in a local poultry plant. Even after their journey to the United States, Maya people continue to experience economic exploitation through low wages for their hard labor.

The brewing anti-immigration sentiment became more politically and publicly prominent in the 1990s. For example, in 1994, California passed Proposition 187 (also known as the Save Our State Initiative) proposing the development of a state citizenship screening system and disallowing undocumented immigrants from using social programs provided by the state. The proposition was later deemed unconstitutional. Furthermore, the Mexican government increased border patrol at its most southern border and there were 126,000–133,000 cases of deportation of Guatemalans from Mexico (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014). More people died attempting to cross the desert to avoid cities where there was concentrated immigration enforcement. Soon after Proposition 187, the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA) was passed and developed criminal penalties for racketeering, smuggling undocumented migrants, and the use or creation of fraudulent immigration documents. In 1996, 2106 Guatemalan immigrants were deported from the United States. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Department of Homeland Security was created along with the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency significantly tightening immigration policies on all US borders.

### *The 2000s*

Fast forward and deportations of Guatemalans go from 9729 to 30,313 in 2004. Steel barriers are built along the US–Mexico border and immigration enforcement personnel increased by 85%. In 2005, Guatemala found itself in dire economic conditions and experienced natural disasters (e.g., volcanic eruptions, mudslides, Hurricane Stan, and Tropical Storm Agatha) that may have incited 56,737 undocumented and documented Guatemalan immigrants to make their way into the United States. This represented a 127% increase in immigration that included a rising number of younger immigrants. Specifically, Guatemala experienced some of the highest levels of economic inequality in the world at this time. A significant number of rural workers were unemployed and impoverished. The country also endured Hurricane Stan, Tropical Storm Agatha, and drought conditions that induced famine and starvation. Incidence of femicide was also on the rise. Women were often found raped, tortured, and killed. No government intervention was attempted in the city or rural areas (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

In 2007, immigration to the United States from Guatemala decreased. The United States plunged into a recession which meant that Guatemalan immigrants started to send less money home. In kind, the lesser amount of remittances sent home impacted the Guatemalan economy since the money sent home made up 11% of the country's GDP. In 2008, there began reports of Guatemalan gangs targeting people who were receiving remittances from their family members in the United States, at times holding them for ransom (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

In the United States, the war on terrorism and the accompanying anti-immigrant sentiment led to an increase in raids in known immigrant hiring industries. One

event that sent a clear anti-immigration message to the Guatemalan community was “The Postville Raid.” On May 12, 2008, ICE agents raided Agriprocessors Inc., a kosher slaughterhouse and meat packing plant in Postville, IA. Seventy-five percent of the company’s employees were Guatemalan, and many identified as Maya. ICE agents arrested 398 employees who were arraigned and detained at the National Cattle Congress, a facility typically used to show livestock. Employees were pressured into pleading guilty of aggravated identity theft. ICE reported that they arrested 230 defendants who were sentenced to 5 months in prison and 3 years of supervision for using false identification to obtain employment after admitting to using an actual person’s identity (McCarthy, 2010). Since the raid, the plant closed its doors and the town of Postville has been withering away economically.

By 2012 the US economy had rebounded from the recession and the Executive Order signed by President Obama, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DREAM) Act was announced. DACA gave residency to undocumented children who came to the United States before reaching their 16th birthday. There were several requirements including needing to prove that they resided in the United States from June 15, 2007, up to the present time, had to be in school/obtaining their GED, graduated, or were an honorably discharged veteran of the Coast Guard or Armed Forces of the United States. At the time, 11,395 Guatemalans received DACA status (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

## **Personal Narrative: One of the Lucky Ones**

My (first author) re-immigration into the United States was spurred by the devastating earthquake of 1976. The earthquake killed approximately 22,000 people and left one million others homeless. The foundation to our home had been destroyed. My mother had moved to the United States for a job just 4 days earlier. I was 10 years old at the time and had been left under my grandmother’s care until my mother established herself in the United States. My immigration story to the United States is filled with pure luck: (1) I was born in the United States and moved to Guatemala at age 2; and (2) My mother had a US residency card and was able to move back to the United States without fear of border patrol intervention. My biological father had the economic means to facilitate the attainment of my mother’s residency card (a luxury reserved to only a few in Guatemala given the economic conditions required for US residency cards). I had technically become an undocumented immigrant in Guatemala at age 3 when my visa expired but I remained in the country with my mother and family. During my undocumented time in Guatemala, I attended school, participated in activities in my community, and visited other communities without a care in the world. After the earthquake, when my mother wanted me to come back to the United States with her, all she had to do was pay a fine for overextending my stay (by 7 years old) and I was given 2 weeks to leave the country. No prison time. No deportation holding center.

I have been back to Guatemala to visit family and have taught at one of the universities several times since then. There was no shaming or banishment from the

Guatemala's state department. On the contrary, I have been welcomed back and have enjoyed the warmth of my family members as they greet me at the airport. My family members never had to worry about my physical safety beyond the usual concerns of air travel. They did not have to worry about whether I could obtain a job and receive decent pay for my work (gender salary gaps aside). While the actual migration back to the United States was smooth from a legal standpoint, the trauma of leaving loved ones in Guatemala and entering a whole new culture was and continues to be a challenging journey.

### *The Migration Journey*

Residents of Guatemala have immigrated for a myriad of reasons through the generations. During the 36-year war (1960–1996), many residents were forcibly pushed out of their homes and lands. The United Nations-sponsored Truth Commission called this time a “genocide against the Mayan people”. There is an irony about the migration of the Maya to the United States given the instigation and involvement of the World Bank, USAID, and the United States in the crimes waged against the Maya people during times of war and peace (Green, 2009). One study assessed the reasons why Central Americans left their homes and found that 35 of the 46 Guatemalan participants cited threats of violence as the reason for leaving the country (Keller, Joscelyne, Granski, & Rosenfeld, 2017). The CIA World Factbook estimates that the displacement of the Maya, in addition to those who fled their homes to avoid the violence, created approximately one million refugees.

Some people migrated out of Guatemala in search of more economic opportunities. More than half of the population lives in poverty. Poverty most severely impacts indigenous communities, 79% of indigenous people live in extreme poverty in Guatemala. Furthermore, the country is rated as having one of the highest levels of malnutrition leaving one out of five children under the age of 5 chronically malnourished. One research study found that, when asked why Guatemalan migrants migrated to the United States, 59.8% of participants reported that they came to the United States “for a better future” (Dunn & O'Brien, 2009).

**Making the decision** Those who make the decision to immigrate to the United States do not do so lightly given the cost and potential risk. Often coyotes are employed to help them make the journey to the United States. However, their asking price is often above and beyond the budgets of those trying to migrate. Families put up their homes and lands up for collateral, promising coyotes payments once the family member has made it across the border. These high stakes make it imperative that the journey and settlement in the United States be successful. Those choosing to migrate might also consult their local pastors about whether to make the move. These consultations can happen over several months before a final decision is made. Should they decide to migrate, pastors may help make arrangements with other churches for safe passage along the way and upon arrival into the United States (Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003).

Spirituality can also play a large role in the migrant's journey north. Specifically, researchers found that spirituality played a large role in making the decision to migrate through to the settling or deportation of the migrant (Hagan & Ebaugh, 2003). For example, in the Pentecostal Tradition, migrants and their families turn to pastors for "migration counseling," whereby the pastor gives the final decision on whether the trip would be a successful one. After deciding to make the journey, migrants and their families pray, gather for blessings, and bring their coyotes to be assessed by the pastors for their trustworthiness. Along the journey migrants call pastors to pray for safe passage as they approach Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) checkpoints or when they are apprehended by law enforcement.

**Making the journey** Those making the journey northward must cross the Mexican and the US border to get to their destination. Between the two borders are ten formal checkpoints. As mentioned previously, migrants make the journey on foot, bus, boat, and train as arranged by coyotes to avoid contact with border patrol officers. In 2014, Mexico engaged in the *Plan Frontera Sur* (Southern Border Plan) to increase border enforcement. As with other efforts to tighten immigration laws, this forced migrants to take alternative routes. Examples of their journey may include hopping a train and laying down on its roof, hoping not to be seen; or walking through miles of burning dessert lands to avoid immigration law enforcement on the way to the border. Migrants are more at risk of being victimized by gangs in-place along these alternative routes. While many make it to the border, many die trying, or get deported along way. Should immigrants not make it to the border, their families are often responsible for paying the loans and sometimes are evicted from their homes and lands (Jonas & Rodriguez, 2014).

**The impacts** Maya from rural areas of Guatemala make up a majority of those who immigrated to the United States. The Maya have a long history of intergenerational trauma since they were targeted for genocide and dispossession of lands by the Spanish during the conquest of Latin America and then again by the government during the civil war in the 1970s–1990s. One study suggests that the exposure to war and violence predisposes people of Maya descent to cumulative trauma (Millender & Lowe, 2017).

The economic benefit for the families is dependent upon the success of the migration journey. As stated previously, much is at stake for the families of the undocumented immigrant. Failure to make it across the border means potential loss of already limited resources for the family. For those who successfully make the journey, the remittances to the family back home mean that they will stand a chance to survive and potentially thrive in their home countries. The economic impact for US companies entails workers who provide labor at minimal cost thereby increasing profits for their companies.

Emotional impacts for the undocumented immigrants include feelings of loneliness, the loss of cultural home, and guilt of survival. For the families left behind, there is loss of loved ones for support and, sometimes, physical protection. For family members on both sides of the border, it represents an unknown as to when they will see each other again, if ever. News of older members passing away can lead to compounded grief for the family member that was not able to say good-



bye (Poulsen & Estrada, 2014). Technology has facilitated some connection for those who have gained enough resources to afford technical equipment such as cell phones and computers.

Research study results on the health impacts of Maya immigrants indicate that the children of those who immigrate to the United States have better health outcomes. Specifically, Maya children in Los Angeles and Indiantown, FL, were found to be taller and have longer legs than their counterparts in Guatemala. However, Maya-American children were found to be less physically active and more overweight, increasing their risk of diabetes and hypertension. More interestingly, the same study found that children of parents who were less assimilated (i.e., preferred Spanish, continued to observe their cultural traditions), were healthier than those with parents who were more assimilated (Bogin & Loucky, 1997).

## Current Demographics

The current population of Guatemala is 17,091,591 (World Population Review, 2018). Ethnically, Guatemala is a very diverse country. The 2010 census found that 41% of Guatemalans are Mestizos (Ladinos), a mixture of European and indigenous ancestry. Amerindians make up 39% of the population, the largest indigenous population in the western hemisphere, mostly Maya descendants: K'iche (11%); Q'eqchi (8%); Kaqchikel (8%); Mam (5%); and other Maya (7.5%). Whites of European descent make up 18.5% of the population and are mostly of Spanish and German heritage. There are also small percentages of settlers from Norwegian, French, Italian, English, Irish, and Russian background. The remaining 1.5% of the population is made up of Garifuna, Black Africans who intermarried with indigenous peoples; Mulattos and Afro-Guatemalans, descendants of slaves who worked on plantations; and a large number of Asians mainly of Chinese and Korean descent.

**Guatemalans living in the United States** The Pew Research Center (2010) reports that approximately 1.1 million people of Guatemalan origin are living in the US. Guatemalans make up 2.2% of the Latinx population making them the sixth largest population of Latinxs in the country. According to the American Community Survey, two out of three Guatemalans are foreign born and more than seven out of ten Guatemalan immigrants in the United States arrived in or after 1990 (Pew Research Center, 2010). Twenty-four percent of Guatemalans are US citizens. The majority of Guatemalan immigrants are younger, averaging 27 years of age. In comparison, the median age of United States, population is 37 years old. Less than half (41%) of Guatemalans are married. Guatemalans have lower rates of education (8% have a college degree) compared to the Latinx population at large (13%). The median annual income for Guatemalans 16 and older is \$17,110. Comparatively, Guatemalans have lower median annual incomes than the overall U.S. Latinx population (\$20,000) and the general US population (\$28,500). Twenty-six percent of Guatemalans live in poverty compared to 25% and 15% of Latinxs and the general population in the United States, respectively (Pew Research Center, 2010).

## The Post-migration Era

The post-migration era of Guatemala immigrants in the United States is reflective of the diversity within Guatemala. It is noteworthy to mention that this chapter has focused heavily on the Guatemalan Maya immigrant because they make up the largest percentage of immigrants to the United States since the end of the “10 years of spring” (1944–1955). Therefore, the post-migration stories are varied based on the immigrant’s identity as Maya, Ladino, or Guatemalans of European ancestry. Researchers state that multiple factors can impact the post-migration experience. One of the most significant factors is the make-up and attitude of the receiving community in the new country. Issues of language, ethnic identity, colorism, and socioeconomic status are mitigating factors in the experience of pre- and post-migration stories. For example, a Maya immigrant who speaks an indigenous dialect and does not speak Spanish will have additional challenges in their acculturation journey even if they find a home in a Latino community in the United States. Issues of ethnic identity compound acculturative stress in ways Guatemalan Ladinos may not face and vice versa. Thus, it is important to note that the challenges and the successes of post-migration are complex and varied based on multiple sociocultural and sociopolitical factors.

### *Post-migration Challenges*

**Acculturative stressors** Acculturative stress refers to the level of psychosocial strain experienced by immigrants and their descendants in response to challenges faced as they adapt to the culture in a new country (Cervantes, Padilla, & Salgado de Snyder, 1991; Mena, Padilla, & Maldonado, 1987). Acculturative stress is positively correlated to psychological distress (Hovey, 2000). In particular, anxiety and depression have been found to be associated with specific dimensions of acculturative stress including stress from immigration, culture/family expectations, and discrimination experiences. Caplan (2007) describes the acculturation process using a three-dimensional conceptual framework which includes the following factors: (1) instrumental and/or environmental (e.g., lack of education, financial barriers); (2) social and/or interpersonal (e.g., loss of social network or social status); and (3) societal stressors (discrimination, documentation status). This framework suggests that the context of the receiving community where the immigrant resides could be a major factor in the immigrant’s experience of acculturative stress (Schwartz, Unger, Zamboanga, & Szapocznik, 2010). Acculturative stress can also intensify in this environment.

In the case of Guatemalan immigrants, the acculturation process is one that may involve multiple contexts of acculturation. For example, the Maya immigrant may have faced dispossession and dislocation within their home country of Guatemala making them regional migrants within their own country. The differences in lifestyles between rural and urban Guatemalan are quite dramatic and important to keep in mind while assessing the migration process. Many Guatemalans first

migrated to Mexico before immigrating to the United States, thereby experiencing multiple receiving communities before their arrival to the United States. While there are no specific studies focused on Guatemalan immigrants and acculturative stress, studies of Latino immigrants that include participants from Central America found that lack of family cohesion, adherence to Spanish, and limited time of residence in the United States had a positive correlation with increased acculturative stress (Miranda, Estrada, & Firpo-Jimenez, 2000). Another study inclusive of Central American immigrants investigated the differences between undocumented and documented Latino immigrants in the prevalence of three immigration challenges (separation from family, traditions, and language) to acculturative stress (Arbona et al., 2010). The study found higher levels of all three immigration challenges for undocumented immigrants, suggested that the undocumented immigrant population is more susceptible to depression and anxiety. Interestingly, the study also found that both documented and undocumented groups reported similar levels of fear of deportation, and this factor was found to be a unique predictor of both extrafamilial and intrafamilial acculturative stress. The fear of deportation by documented and undocumented immigrants might be partially explained by their experience of racism and discrimination in the host country. In the presidential campaign of 2016 and subsequently, the 45th president of the United States has continued to assail Latinx people and, in particular, immigrants.

**Racism and discrimination** What does it mean to be Maya? LeBaron (2012) broadly defines Maya as “indigenous groups in Southern Mexico and parts of Central America who speak one of the languages that relate linguistically to the ‘proto-Mayan’ language of some 4000 years ago. Thus, they have ancestors among the ancient and pre-conquest Maya” (p. 180). Maya in Guatemala have long endured racism and discrimination from non-indigenous Guatemalans which evolved out of the Spanish conquest. According to Reeve’s (2006), “few Ladinos were inclined to think of indigenous people or their culture as anything more than a necessary evil” (p. 192). Despite the genocide and violence, the Maya in Guatemala suffered by the conquistadors and then the government, their cultural and ethnic identities held strong. Thus, many Maya immigrants in the United States, especially older generations, have a strong connection to their indigeneity and an aversion to “Latino” or “Hispanic” as ethnic labels. While there is a deep connection to their ancestral indigenous heritage, Maya people also carry an old shame that is compounded by being oppressed as immigrants in the United States. Shame is compounded by the fear of being detained which forces Maya from Guatemala to stay invisible (Alberto, 2017; LeBaron, 2012).

Racism toward Maya immigrants shows up in a myriad of ways, from non-Latino and Latino groups. One interviewee remembers his grade school years after immigrating into the United States not knowing Spanish or English, “...we weren’t really ridiculed by the Americans or African-Americans, we were ridiculed by the Mexicans and Latinos—Spanish people... in hindsight, the reason why is “cause we were trying to learn Spanish first and our Spanish was broken, ah, so then they would ridicule us regarding that” (Hiller et al., 2009, p. 2). When asked about how he coped with everyday racism, the same interviewee stated, “I’ve had this armor

built over the years and it's so strong that it doesn't really affect me..." (Hiller et al., 2009, p. 3). This interviewee speaks to the intra- and inter-group conflict that Maya immigrants face as a population that have held on to their indigenous heritage and culture. Not only do Maya immigrants need to navigate US culture, but they must also navigate the Latinx culture in the United States.

As a response to racism and discrimination, some Maya immigrants from Guatemala break with their traditions to survive. They may abandon their Maya identities and mirror Mexican behaviors or claim Mexican heritage given that it is seen as a higher valued cultural and racial identity. It is also common for Maya people to legally change their names to "noble-sounding Spanish names" when they obtain legal residency to avoid being disparaged for their Mayan names (LeBaron, 2012, p. 118). LeBaron (2012) explains that a typical Mayan name may include all four of a person's family names which are considered first names in Spanish. He offers the name "Francisco Antonio Pedro Francisco" as an example of what might be a typical Mayan name.

**Mental health challenges** Researchers have highlighted how immigrants managing issues of acculturation often experience dealing with acculturative stress and mental distress. Higher rates of depression and anxiety have been found in the latest wave of immigrants from Central America living in the United States (Keller, Ford, Trinh-Shevrin, Meserve, Sachs, Leviss, Singer, Smith, Wilkenson, Kim, Alden, & Ford, 2003). The atrocities of war and the hazardous life-threatening conditions of border crossing as an undocumented immigrant provide a plethora of factors leading to diagnosis of post-traumatic stress disorder among many undocumented immigrants (Keller et al., 2017). Femicide in the country of origin, tales of rape during the journey of immigration, and rape and sexual abuse in detention centers in the United States contribute to high rates of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression among women and adolescent girls (Bellino, 2009; Brobeck, Lykes, & Hunter, 2014; Sanchez, De la Rosa, Blackson, Sastre, Rojas, & Dillon, 2014). A study surveying 102 Maya from Guatemala in Southeast Florida found a positive correlation between trauma occurrence, alcohol use, and depression (Millender & Lowe, 2017). More specifically, men were more susceptible to alcohol use while women were more susceptible to depression. Arguably, substance abuse is a symptom of distress associated with depression. Another study assessed a group of 46 Guatemalan immigrants for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression. The data showed that 30% of participants exhibited symptoms of PTSD and 8% exhibited symptoms of depression.

We cannot think of individual immigrants and the impact on their mental health without also considering the impact on family members' mental health and well-being both in the United States and in Guatemala. There have been multiple studies and book chapters published on the importance of family in Latino and indigenous cultures (Arredondo, Gallardo-Cooper, Delgado-Romero, & Zapata, 2014; Falicov, 2014). The impact on the physical and mental health of family members that are separated due to ICE raids and detention at the border are particularly poignant in cases of parents and young children. Brabeck, Lykes, and Hunter (2014) report on

the psychosocial impact of detention and deportation on US migrant children and their families. It is estimated that 4.5 million US citizen children live in families where at least one family member is an undocumented immigrant (Passel & Cohn, 2011). Research on risk and protective factors in the development of children highlight the importance of understanding the context of a child's life. In the case of undocumented and mixed status families, reports indicate that deportation leaves family members vulnerable to exploitation, stigma, discrimination, economic disadvantage, and social marginalization. The impact of parental deportation on children has been documented as contributing to a range of disorders including depression, anxiety, and PTSD (Henderson & Baily, 2013). Developmental, behavioral, and academic difficulties are also reported for children whose parents (from Guatemala and El Salvador) have been detained and deported (Brabeck, Lykes, & Hershberg, 2011). Instances of double and triple trauma have been reported for children who have seen their parents physically removed from their homes and who have already experienced violence and trauma in the country of origin and/or during the migration journey (Brabeck et al., 2013). As much of a protective factor as family can play in the lives of children and adolescents from Guatemala, intergenerational conflicts in the process of acculturation can still exist, and uncertainty of deportation is a huge factor.

**Intergenerational conflicts** For Latinos in general, intergenerational conflicts have been associated with the process of acculturation. Specifically, the impact of language barriers for Latino parents that leads to their dependence on their children for translation in business and other transactions. The need to have children involved in adult transactions on behalf of their parents, not typically practiced, creates an imbalance in the hierarchical positions in the family. Traditional Latinx families, support the notion of parents being at the top of the hierarchy and being the mediators between the family members and the outside world. When a child is the primary interpreter in a family, the child is in direct contact with the outside world, giving them a more powerful position in the hierarchy. However, some adolescents may become resentful of being in this parentified position (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001); they may feel robbed of time with friends or other social activities.

Conversely, parents' ecological fears (e.g., gangs, racism, discrimination, sexual assault for daughters, and criminal activity in poor neighborhoods) can often lead to more restrictive adolescent experiences which can create intergenerational tensions (Falicov, 2014). The rules and roles in the family can be confusing for adolescents as they have more power in one context (translators) and less power in another (individual freedom from the family). Family members' ability to manage these contradictory roles impacts a family's general sense of cohesion. This dynamic has been prevalent in families the first author has come to know and worked with. In the Martinez family, the teenage daughter, Lupe, expressed frustration over the freedom and responsibilities associated with managing the family's business interactions due to her English language ability while at the same time not being allowed to make decisions about what items she could buy with her own money. Her parents expressed their concern over the choices she made when she was away from the family and hanging out with her friends. The parents did not approve of the friend's

emphasis on outer looks and material things. While Lupe wanted to respect her parent's guidance, she also wanted to have the freedom to make choices. Her parents had brought the family to the United States so they could have "a better way of life" which she interpreted as financial and material resources.

**Contacts in the home country** Newer studies of acculturation highlight the impact of technology on the development of biculturalism for many Latino adolescents (Suarez-Orozco, Suarez-Orozco, & Todorova, 2008). Access to information and communication via the web inform children of immigrants as well as child immigrants about the current way of life in the country of origin. This allows a process of connection with the home culture that facilitates family interactions in the host country. Additionally, family members who engage in the process of reciprocal acculturation, adolescents who actively embrace their parents' native culture, and whose parents become more involved in US culture (Smokowski & Bacalloa, 2011), stand a greater chance of developing healthy behaviors and avoiding the risks of substance abuse, school dropout, and suicide attempts (Smokowski, David-Ferdon, & Stroupe, 2009).

### *Maintaining Cultural Values, Identity, and Sense of Belonging*

The importance of biculturalism for good mental health cannot be overemphasized. The research continues to show that good mental health for immigrants is embedded in their ability to navigate a fluid movement between adapting to the new host culture and maintaining a sense of connection and belonging in the traditional culture, and by extension, their homeland. Factors impacting this sense of belonging for many Guatemalan and Maya immigrants include participation in cultural traditions from an ethnic and spiritual lens.

**Participation in cultural traditions** Claiming and engaging in Maya culture is one reinforcing activity that helps immigrants to maintain a sense of community and belonging. For instance, many Maya immigrants participate in churches that host native rituals and provide a space to develop community. When asked how they socialize their adolescents, one study cited Guatemalan mothers intentionally engaging their children in cultural events, language, food, and visiting their home country to instill a sense of pride in them for their heritage (Umaña-Taylor & Bámaca, 2004). For example, the Maya-American identity evolved as the first and second generations moved toward biculturalism. Some hold on to their parent's native languages, some continue to observe cultural traditions such as wearing *traje típica* (traditional clothes) by women specifically.

Another Maya tradition that continues to be transmitted through the generations is the game of soccer. The "Mayan Ballgame" is an ancient game that was played as "ritual combat" symbolizing the fight against light and the dark in the underworld. The game has survived hundreds of years of colonization, acculturation, and evolution and continues to be a force of bonding today, especially among men (Morales, 2013).

**Spirituality** Often when migrants settle in the United States, they attend churches that are partnered with churches in Guatemala. Church communities often link newcomers with resources to help them settle into the United States. Newcomers continue participating in church, however, the practices are not the same. Specifically, there are less *ayunos*, or fasting and informal prayer services on sacred grounds in Pentecostal churches in the United States. Migrants begin to contribute financially to the church and send money back home. Another study surveyed Guatemalan and Salvadoran immigrants to assess psychological health and how participants found meaning in life and found that 50% of the sample (58% were people from Guatemala) reported that they attended church once a week, sought counsel from clergy, and engaged in prayer regularly. The results reflected that the sample had high levels of social support and religious coping (Dunn & O'Brien, 2009).

Though these studies suggest that immigrants are practicing religion, some also keep up with their indigenous spiritual traditions. For example, a subsection of the Pastoral Maya congregation in Georgia holds a community meeting that blends Catholic and Maya traditions (LeBaron, 2012). Tobar (2013) recalls being feverish in his childhood home in Los Angeles with a medicine woman applying “pungent ointments” on his body while his family quietly prayed around him. Groups in the Bay Area organize events where a Maya priest presides over a sunrise ceremony where the community is invited to bring marimbas and offerings for the alters. Events like these give those of who immigrated from Guatemala an opportunity to reconnect to rituals they might have done in their homeland. It also gives their children who might have been born in the United States the experience of connecting to their culture’s spiritual roots. Morales (2013) suggests that these practices may increase one’s sense of belonging to the Maya culture.

## **Success Stories: What Has Worked for Guatemalans in the United States?**

Formal and informal studies suggest the importance of a very welcoming receiving community, a connection to cultural information and traditions of the home country, language acquisition, and family cohesion as important factors in the success of Guatemalan Maya immigrants to the United States (Dunn & O'Brien, 2009; Roblyer et al., 2017; Schwartz et al., 2010). In this section, these contributing factors to success will be discussed.

## **Welcoming Receiving/New Arrival Communities**

Most immigrants that succeed have something in common, a welcoming community that supports their existence in that community. In a news report sharing the narrative of two immigrant brothers (Julio and Diego) from Guatemala, the children

discuss the impact of caring teachers at their school who facilitated their academic success and eventual college admission. Julio states that the teachers allowed time for them to get help from translators and provided them with tips on how to complete their work in order not to be left behind (Short, 2016). The teacher's efforts were applauded as the two boys have now received scholarships to attend college. Similar stories are shared by various immigrant young adults who were able to succeed academically when teachers were culturally responsive to their learning needs. This experience is not only shared in the K-12 educational system but has also been found to be a crucial component in the success of college and graduate level students (Hipolito-Delgado, Estrada, & Garcia, 2017). A sense of safety, acceptance, and welcoming helps immigrants to establish themselves in the host country in a more expedient and confident manner.

### *Language Acquisition*

In a research study of adult English language learners, participants reported feeling the most amount of discrimination based on their ability to speak to English. The ability of the immigrant to learn English facilitates the navigation of social systems in the United States thereby making language acquisition a crucial component of success. Ek (2009) highlights the importance of language in the experiences of Guatemalan immigrants in the United States, particularly in academic success. Adult immigrants' English proficiency is an important factor in their ability to secure higher wages and thereby ease extreme financial stress for their families. Furthermore, immigrant adults' ability to acquire English language proficiency allows them to maintain their hierarchical position when navigating interactions with the outside world which eases tension within the family unit.

### *Family Cohesion*

Family cohesion is a protective factor against acculturative stress and distress (Miranda et al., 2000). A study investigating psychosocial factors associated with depressive symptoms in Latina immigrant women living in a new arrival community found that lower levels of family cohesion and social support were associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. The authors of this study found that access to community resources served as a protective factor against depression for undocumented women. For example, several local foundations in Oklahoma have targeted Latinx communities with resources to aid with family and mental health needs thereby communicating a sense of support for these women. The same type of support does not appear to be as readily available for documented immigrants who may be perceived as not necessarily having the same need. Therefore, strengthening family cohesion and fostering higher levels of social support for all



foreign-born Latinas is highly encouraged (Roblyer, Carlos, Merten, Gallus, & Gryzwacz, 2017). Family cohesion has also been found to be an important mitigator of acculturative stress in Latinx populations (Miranda et al., 2000).

### *Resilience Stories*

Guatemalan Maya migrants can take comfort in the work of Rigoberta Menchú, Nobel peace prize laureate (1992), who endured tremendous losses of family, community, and homeland but who did not stop working to organize and protest for farm workers' rights and other social justice causes. She began this work with her family during her teenage years. After her father, mother, and brother were arrested, tortured, and killed, she continued the fight in Guatemala until 1981 when she was forced into exile in Mexico City, where she continued her work in order to honor her family and her indigenous community ([NobelPrize.org](http://NobelPrize.org)). Her efforts have paved the way for other migrants who have dealt with oppression in education and racism in Guatemala and in their new "home countries."

The resilience of Guatemalan immigrants in achieving educational success is well documented in the story of Sandra Ramirez (pseudonym), a 27-year-old Guatemalan woman who arrived in the United States at age 15 to reunite with her mother who had left Guatemala 5 years prior (Borjian, 2016). Sandra attended 2 years of high school in the United States, then took 1 year of adult classes and 3 years of classes at a community college before going to a major university and earning her bachelor's in accounting. Sandra's story depicts the challenges of the educational journey while simultaneously navigating the changing landscape of a new culture, new family dynamics, and a new language. Her story details the need for teachers to understand the complexity of the journey and provide migrant students with detailed feedback, and opportunities to re-do work that allows them to learn and succeed in the mastery of a new language and new cultural concepts. Sandra's story also highlights the importance of being encouraged to attend college. This message needs to be supported by school officials since the "survival" mode at home may not allow for dreams to be dreamed or achieved.

### **Closing Thoughts: Maintaining Identity and Integrity During the Next 50 Years**

One of the greatest dangers to mental health is ambivalence and uncertainty. A relentless sense of fear of deportation, impending potential family separation, and a loss of hope can endanger the human spirit with constant cognitive and emotional dissonance. Thus, maintaining identity and integrity require a resolution to the question of immigration reform in the United States. Latinx communities and specifically Guatemala Maya communities require a sense of safety and belonging in

order to address the centuries of oppression faced by their people. Welcoming communities play a crucial part in constructing hope and opportunity for immigrant children and their families. A longitudinal study of the role of religious identity in the life of a Guatemalan immigrant reported that the role of churches in creating a connection between the host country and the home country can be beneficial to the immigrants' sense of identity and belonging (Ek, 2009). Educational and social networks have the potential to provide a launching pad for success by implementing culturally responsive learning and service strategies that support the growth and adaptability of immigrant members of the community.

Latinx community members, as well, need to face their own internalized oppression in order to become bridge makers in the life journey of new immigrants. The potential benefits for generations of immigrants who have been in the United States longer is the ability to stay connected to the home country via the stories of the new immigrants. Factors that impact the success of Guatemalan migrants include access to education and teachers that see the potential of students. Emotional support alongside academic mentorship serves as a protective factor against the barriers of racism, discrimination, sexism, and xenophobia faced by so many Latinx migrants. Family, community, and mentorship provide fertile ground to grow the flowers of the land of eternal spring. Unidos si se puede (united, yes we can).

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