

Delia's Return Podcast Transcript
With Lauren Heidbrink and Gabriela Afable

(Music)

Lauren: Welcome and thank you for listening in. My name is Lauren Heidbrink. I'm a socio-legal anthropologist and Associate Professor in Human Development at California State University, Long Beach. And, I am here with my daughter Gabriela Afable,

Gabriela: Hello!

Lauren We are here to discuss the collaborative process behind our recent multi-model publication with American Anthropologist entitled *Delia's Return*. The narrative chronicles the experiences of detention and deportation of Delia, a Maya-Mam youth who migrates unaccompanied from Guatemala to the United States. The narrative is based upon longitudinal, mixed methods research in zones of transit in México, detention centers for children in the U.S., government facilities receiving returned children in Guatemala, and in communities of origin and return in Guatemala. The piece is illustrated by Gabriela. Gabriela, will you tell our listeners a bit about yourself and how this collaboration started?

Gabriela: Hello, my name is Gabriela Afable. I am 14 years old. Along with my younger brother and sister, I've spent several months each year in Guatemala with my mom since I was about 7 years old. I am a self-taught illustrator and writer. I've always enjoyed writing and drawing and the pandemic has given me a lot more time to do them. Several months ago, you shared a visual article that you saw on the BBC that featured illustrations that reminded you of my drawing style. The piece combined reporting and graphic art and, for me, really inspired *Delia's Return*.

Lauren: So, you were 7 years and your brother Mateo was 5 and Liliana was 2, almost 3, when you first came to Guatemala. What do you remember from your visits over the years to Delia's hometown in the department of San Marcos? And how did your experiences being in Guatemala inform your illustrations for this piece?

Gabriela: Some things are pretty vague and other details I remember really clearly. I remember traveling in crowded buses on the winding mountain roads and often feeling sick. I remember once an older woman who was sitting next to us on the bus, held my hand and pressed her thumb on my wrist. I still press the same spot when I'm on buses now when I'm feeling sick. I remember playing games at Delia's house with her younger brother, wondering how you all could talk for so long. I still wonder that sometimes. I recall walking around town with Delia, trying to keep Mateo and Liliana out of trouble and stopping at a stall in the market to buy oranges with salt, lime and that spice...what is it called?

Lauren: Cardamom.

Gabriela: Yeah. At that point, I think you were just bribing us to behave!

Lauren That is very likely!

Gabriela: And then there are just general feelings that I remember—expecting it to be warm in the summer but It was cold and rainy; being frustrated with learning Spanish; and wanting to be like other kids in my school and just go to camp at the YMCA with my friends during the summer. I definitely appreciate the opportunity now but I didn't then. And, honestly, I don't think I could've illustrated this story if I hadn't been in Guatemala or spent time with Delia and her family. It helped me to visualize it but also to feel it.

Lauren: When I approached you to ask if you were interested in illustrating, Delia and I had already written much of the narrative. So, what was your artistic process?

Gabriela: I thought about what was important to share with an audience who didn't know much about Guatemala or child migration—the content of the images, colors, shading, facial expressions, and how the text might interact with the images. We sifted through photographs and identified ones that reflected Delia's experiences. I remember some of the people and places; other photographs you took when we were in school learning Spanish. I uploaded each photograph onto a platform called Procreate® on my iPad to start as my canvas and used an apple pencil to experiment with strokes, brushes, and shading.

Lauren: Where did you find the inspiration when there weren't photographs to draw from?

Gabriela: Yeah, we didn't have pictures from inside the detention facility in Chicago. Your and Delia's descriptions guided me. I also have vague memories of going there a few times with you for holiday parties in December when they let us come in with you. I just remember thinking we were going to visit kids in jail—like the ones you see in movies or TV—but it was more like an institution.

Lauren: The facility in Chicago was a converted nursing home.

Gabriela: Yeah, that makes sense. I don't think I really understood everything that was going on there. I just remember it being really hot because there were so many kids and the heat was on full blast during the winter...and that all the kids looked really sad even though there was really loud and up-beat holiday music.

Lauren: Yes, they *were* in jail, even if it didn't *look* like it. They were separated from their families, weren't allowed to leave the facility, had limited information and communication with the outside world. They didn't know what was going to happen.

Gabriela: I remember leaving the party and being so relieved to feel the cold on my face. I know now that I left the detention facility because I am a U.S. citizen. It's just not

right. So, I used that feeling and how you and Delia described detention to draw the facility with limited detail, clean institutional lines, little color, sad, uncertain, bland.

Lauren: What inspired your color palette for the images in Guatemala?

Gabriela: I selected this particular palette for the images based on the *traje* (or traditional dress) from Delia's hometown. In Guatemala, weaving among Maya peoples has a long and rich history. It is both a way of life and a form of storytelling.

Lauren: Yes, *traje* includes specific colors, patterns, and images that represent values, identities, events and places. Each community is identifiable by specific patterns and colors in their dress.

Gabriela: Yeah, it seemed like the natural starting point. Through this process, I learned that red is symbolic of the sunrise and energy. White represents the air and spirituality. Blue represents the color of the sky and the ocean...I remember being in the *campo* and looking up to see the sky. It went on for miles. As a kid growing up in Chicago, I wasn't used to such open and clear skies. It impacted me. Blue is also a color on the Guatemalan flag. The blue on both sides represents how the country is located in between two oceans. The color palette created coherence through the story as Delia moved through institutions and across different countries.

OK, so now it's your turn. Tell us about the writing of this story. And, more importantly, what does Delia think about it?

Lauren: While written chronologically for the reader's clarity, Delia's narrative definitely did not unfold linearly or at once; it was actually compiled over several conversations with Delia and her family within government facilities and in subsequent visits in their hometown over multiple years—whether in the family courtyard and walking through town like you remember. I supplemented the narrative with ethnographic research within the very Chicago facility where she was detained (the one you visited during those unnerving holiday parties) and from firsthand observations at Guatemala City's Air Force base and at the Guatemalan Secretary of Social Welfare facility where she was held until her parents arrived from San Marcos. Delia contributed to both the narrative and illustrations as we devised them. Sometimes in person when we were in Guatemala and later during the pandemic via Whatsapp. She shared her insights, clarifications, opinions, translations of dialogue from Mam to Spanish, and specific ethnographic details like the tip of her dad's hat or the moment when she puts her *traje* back on following deportation. Her initial reaction? I think it was bewilderment—why people would care about *my* experiences?

Gabriela: What did you tell her? Why do you think it is important to share her story?

Lauren : All too often, accounts of young migrants in the media and even nonprofit reports are disembodied, partial, and decontextualized. Disembodied in that depictions of children are often bodiless, or reduced to body parts (their hands, their legs), or the

sum of the toys we presume they should be playing with; Or, they are partial accounts, reductive snapshots of their lives that expose often-spectacular moments of crisis, rupture, or violence in their lives. You might remember the viral image of Maria Lila Meza Castro, a Honduran mother who crossed the U.S. border, gripping her two children's hands as US Customs and Border Patrol tear gassed them. This only tells one fraction of her story. Or, images of children are decontextualized, in that they fail to interrogate how the causes of child migration, particularly of Indigenous youth, are historical, systemic, and policy-made. By engaging Delia in the development of the narrative itself, the narrative attempts to center her own perspectives and experiences. It acknowledges how Maya youth are social actors embedded within and contributors to really rich and expansive kinship, communal, and ethnic networks and values how she is both cared for and a caregiver of these intergenerational relationships.

But, because of the very real concerns about confidentiality and the ethics of using photographs particularly of those under 18 years old, I don't think this story could be told with photos and the text alone felt insufficient.

Gabriela: I don't recall that we discussed it, but I think that I knew instinctively that confidentiality is important given what I've learned about life in Guatemala, and honestly, given so much anti-immigrant rhetoric here in the U.S. These risks definitely influenced how I drew Delia and her family. I tried to conceal details that might identify her and her family, whether the locations, background, or facial features. As I began to trace, fill, shade, modify, and add to or take away from the images, I thought it was important to keep some of their facial features present, just enough to demonstrate that Delia is unique, not just any person or any child. She is not anonymous. She is her own person with her own thoughts, beliefs and experiences.

Lauren: So, Gabriela, what did you learn through this process?

Gabriela: I learned more about the artistic process and incorporating other people's thoughts and ideas along with my own vision of how I want an image to look. There was a lot of back and forth—with Delia, the reviewers and artists at the journal, with you, so I guess persistence too. I also think about being intentional with every choice—with the details, colors, strokes, and the meanings of each. I think drawings can be interpreted in different ways, so I didn't want Delia's experiences to be misunderstood or understood in a way that she didn't want to express them.

Gabriela: And, mom, what did you learn through this process?

Lauren : Collaborating with both you and Delia taught me, what anthropologist Arjun Shankar calls, to listen more attentively and intently to images, people, and the learning process. Early on in this process, you asked a really important but simple question: "Why Delia's experience?" Delia asked this too: "Why my experience?" It compelled me to think about whose voices enter into or don't enter the public domain, why, and

to what consequence. Because immigration detention for unaccompanied children is highly restrictive, scholars often rely on legal service providers to identify young migrants. But, what about the experiences of youth who never arrive, evade apprehension, or, like Delia, are removed from the United States? I also think the public and even scholars have this false idea that “unaccompanied children” are alone or unattached. Initially we included the words and voices of Delia’s parents, but the narrative focused on her moving through these institutional spaces without them. And, the visual presence of Delia’s parents María Isabel and Rigoberto that you so powerfully illustrate amid their presumed absence, at least in part, I think, rectifies this gross misconception about unaccompanied children.

And collaborating with you on this suite of publications feels like a natural outgrowth of your presence and participation in fieldwork—whether in your own journaling or drawings in your notebooks, or the questions you and Mateo and Liliana would ask as we headed to or left meetings and interviews, or the relationships you all developed with peers over the years. You’ve always been a central part of my research. Ultimately, I think you as both an ethnographer and an artist challenged me to move beyond critique and endeavor to create.

Gabriela: Wow, thanks, mom.

Lauren: No, thanks to you and Delia for being such patient and creative teachers. And, I really hope that when we can return to Guatemala when this pandemic subsides that we can record a follow-up podcast with Delia who has been such a generous and incredible contributor to this collaboration.

Thank you all for listening in to this discussion on Delia’s Return. We invite you to view the multimodal narrative on the website of the *American Anthropologist*, as well as to read a framing article in the journal, and to consider using the accompanying study guide, also posted on the website, in your classroom discussions.

(Music)