

## AARON MONTENEGRO'S STORY



My colonized name is Aaron Montenegro and the photograph shows my bloody face from the military in Honduras. They tried to criminalize me and said that I was an international terrorist training fieldworkers for a communist takeover. They said I was in the country illegally, when I had my passport and visa all in line.

As a disclaimer, I don't really like telling my story. I challenge how narratives can be framed, especially within the non-profit industrial complex. I don't want to be tokenized and don't want much attention centered on me. Instead, I'd rather use my position to share space and highlight more of the stories that have been systematically silenced. I also don't want to portray myself as a victim. I am a survivor. Although, I did experience some physical and psychological abuse on behalf of the US-trained Honduran military, I do not consider my experience as torture. What the soldiers did to Maria Guardado was torture. How prisoners are held in solitary confinement is torture. My case is exceptional, but it's just as important as any other narrative of resistance.

Using my social position, I try to highlight more the cases of the people who've been killed, disappeared, and displaced.

This narrative is based on the Bajo Aguan region, of the land we refer to as Honduras. First off, I would like to challenge this concept of the nation-state, because "Honduras" is the name Columbus put on us. When he invaded, he said "Gracias a Dios que hemos salido de esos honduras/ thank god we have left those depths" referring to deep waters off the coast. The departments (states) in which he landed are named Colon (after him) and Gracias a Dios, the country: Honduras. Using this language perpetuates a colonized mentality that reinforces the colonizers' rule over our land, language and customs. So part of my resistance is to deconstruct this mentality by first of all not identifying with nation-state. There are numerous indigenous groups that have been lumped together between these borders. As a persyn ["son" perpetuates patriarchal bias] of Lenca descent, my family has survived the genocidal campaign that has worked to systematically erase the population through different forms of violence. Apart from the outright murder of indigenous communities, our language and many customs have been sadly erased. However, there are some pockets in isolated regions in which there are still some remnants of its existence. For the most part, our language is gone, but there is a cultural and social revitalization which is trying to bring back our traditions and ceremonies, as well as actively protect our lands from capitalist exploitation.

My ancestors are from the southwest are of "Honduras" near the border of "El Salvador"; but due to forced migration our family ended up living in different regions. I do not have much knowledge on my great-grandmother, except that she migrated to the northern coast and died at a young age. My grandmother, Zoila Marina, has a story in

herself, which I'd like to highlight first and foremost. If it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be the person I am today. She faced many different forms of violence and was able to overcome so much indescribable adversity. She loved poetry, started a school for young girls, and was able to dream big. She came to the US in the 1960's and left everything that had to do with Honduras behind. She had nine kids and eventually brought them all up along with her siblings and extended family. She lived in Hollywood and started a housecleaning business all on her own. She never wanted to talk about 'Honduras', so I had to learn about our family history on my own. My grandma never went back. She didn't want to go back. My parents didn't either. But I didn't know my roots. I was lost. I didn't know who I was or where I was going or what I was going to do. I'm the only one in my family that decided to go back and over time I grew a great affinity with the people and land so chose to stay there.

I had a strong relationship with my grandmother so I got to learn a lot from her but certain things she wouldn't share. That's what led me to go down. I was in school and would go on and off to 'Honduras'. As I was finishing my thesis in Washington, DC as part of my Masters program, I chose to stay down in 'Honduras' as part of an independent study.

Initially, I went down to the Bajo Aguan as a student, an independent journalist, and as an international human rights observer but I challenged the "nonprofit industrial complex"—the salaried positions, people getting paid, while fieldworkers were being used as the face. I didn't really appreciate that or agree with it politically so I left these organizations and got involved with the actual fieldworker movement. I connected with the people and was invited to become a member of one of the farmworker cooperatives. They taught me how to grow my own food, ride a horse, fish and helped me build an

adobe home. By living in harmony with mother earth in my ancestral homeland, I felt spiritually fulfilled.

There have been many cases of state-sponsored violence, including extra-judicial killings and forced disappearances, in the region where workers have organized a social movement to recuperate stolen land that had been used to create African palm plantations. The fruit from this plant is used for many products including vegetable oils, makeup products and most recently biofuels. It is a huge industry and many fieldworkers were forced to sell their cooperatives to big landowners through violence and intimidation decades prior. It's a struggle that's been going on for generations, since colonization, but it's been exacerbated since the coup. [In June 2009, democratically elected President Manuel Zelaya was abducted and forced into exile by the military.] There have been new cooperatives of campesinos and campesinas organizing and reclaiming the land, growing their own food and building their own homes. For this, they've been constantly attacked and criminalized.

Since the coup, there have been an increase in militarization and everywhere one goes, there are always numerous military checkpoints. There has always been corruption and due to the influx of funding coming from the Central American Regional Security Initiative (CARSI) and other imperialist programs promoted by the US State Department. There have also been numerous accounts of extrajudicial killings and State-sponsored violence that go unresolved. I personally worked closely with families that were affected directly by the high levels of impunity, who had loved ones killed or disappeared, as well as families that were violently evicted from their recuperated lands. One of the first times I was confronted by the military was on a bus during a checkpoint. As usually they would take the men off the bus to be searched and identified.



They went through my belongings and all I had was my camera and dirty clothes. I complied but I also made a comment. I asked if they found what they were looking for. They didn't like that. They kicked me off the bus. They encircled me, twelve soldiers heavily armed, and they took me to the jail for disrespecting an officer of the military. I was confronted face to face with German Alfaro who is now the head of the military police. He asked me a couple of questions as they had me handcuffed. I refused to comply and give information because I saw their power as illegitimate. They didn't like that either.

People who were driving by saw and other people, particularly vendors who I have built a relationship with, kept an eye out for me. The military took me to a holding cell in an isolated region and told me they were going to leave my body under a bridge, and that my family was going to receive bad news. From there they took me to the regional police station in Trujillo and by that time I had people from the capital, people from local communities, people from the US calling and pressuring them to let me go. So after finding out who I was, an international student, they thought twice about detaining me and decided to let me go.

Their intelligence was already working on me but they didn't have a face to go with the name. So after that incident it became a bit more difficult for me to do my work. I was still growing food, corn, beans, squash, and I would get on my motorcycle and take part in whatever was happening with the locals, with the evictions, killings and disappearances.

Then a case came up. A year before I had helped a family looking for somebody that was disappeared and never came home. Jose Antonio Lopez Lara wasn't involved with any social movements. He was just a fieldworker who wanted to go fishing in the river which is located around the plantation of Miguel Facussé [the richest man in 'Honduras', whose private plane transported President Zelaya out of the country when he was kidnapped and deposed]. His Dinant Corporation has private security that worked hand-in-hand with the police and the military. No one knew what happened to the man. He just didn't come home. So a year later we found his body buried under a palm tree with fish bones, with his boots, with his machete. I was there taking pictures and providing emotional support for the family.



Then the military came. They saw me present, and this reaffirmed their despise for me and the work that I was doing.

A day or two later there was a meeting with ambassadors, with the municipal government leaders, the police, and with tourist destination businesses. I questioned why a tourist business was at this meeting during a time in which disappeared bodies were being discovered. So I went as a journalist to cover that issue, but didn't have the opportunity. Once the military saw me they ran me out and I had to go into hiding. I was transported to a safe place and I become a little hesitant to leave after that but then I came out for the upcoming May Day march.

We marched from one end of the city to the other and we were going to end in the central park but instead we got word that some of our comrades were being attacked on one of the plantations so we went to support them instead. And that's when the military and police came to violently evict us, it was around 200 armed personnel in total.



When we left the plantation peacefully we gathered outside the gates. I sat for about two minutes to eat some tortillas and cheese and that's when the military came

down with tear gas and targeted me, they wanted to take me in, they beat me across the head, and along my back. My comrades began throwing rocks at them to protect me and I was able to run out and get to a safe space.

I had to go into hiding. I was in a state of constant paranoia. But I had my ticket to leave. A week later I had my graduation to go to so I was lucky to get to the airport and since my paperwork was all in line, I got on the plane got back to DC in time for my graduation. Then I came back to California, never went back to Honduras. I wanted to live the rest of my life there. I hope to go back sometime but don't know when. Despite the distance that separates us, I am still connected to the communities of the Bajo Aguan. My role now is to build more international support for the farmworkers. Since my return I have helped start an autonomous community center in which we host events highlighting these struggles. It's been difficult for me to make this transition back to life in the north, but I try to stay balanced within this concrete jungle through art, creativity and protest.

For me, all our struggles are interconnected. I do not want to simplify things too much, but it all relates back to our resistance against all different levels of oppression manifested through patriarchy, white supremacy and capitalism. I just don't want to see us repeat the same cycles. Different forms of violence and oppression have been ingrained in us through colonization and reinforced through some of our practices. So we've really got to challenge it every day. I think we're all on a journey. We all learn from each other and it's an intergenerational struggle. We're all connected and there is beauty in our struggle.