



Photo by Anthony Fontes.

STUDENT RESEARCH

A vulture lands in Guatemala City's Cementerio General.

Death Dealing in Guatemala City

by Anthony Fontes

The day I am to leave Guatemala City, I meet Guillermo at his home in Zone 3. A daughter answers the door — she has his deep set eyes and round face — and smiles shyly before hurrying upstairs to fetch her father. Juan, Guillermo's protégé at the Ministry of Sports and Culture, sits on an overstuffed couch smoking a cigarette. “*El mormon ha llegado!*” he shouts. The Mormon has arrived. I am not certain how that became my nickname, but I am stuck with it.

Guillermo and Juan grew up in this neighborhood a generation apart. After running away from home at the age of eight, Guillermo lived on the streets, in and out of a local orphanage. At 14 he became the first leader of what would become a central *clika* of the 18th Street gang (M18), one of the two major transnational *pandillas* operating in every major Central American city. He has a round face

and a round belly and looks older than his 39 years, though he often exhibits the energy of a child at play.

In the late 1990s, Juan transported drugs and money for the *narcos* who dominate Barrio Gallito, a subsection of Zone 3, until rivals shot him through the arm as he was delivering a backpack full of cash. For a time, he worked as a junior minister for an evangelical church. He can still entertain a crowd from the stage. Now, working with a laughable budget, the two men crisscross the capital and its dangerous suburbs promoting “peace initiatives”: community-based efforts to end the internecine warfare between rival gangs. Guillermo's network of contacts in the underworld of gangs and prisons is vast, as is his reputation, and he manipulates both to push for solutions to the violence in those neighborhoods where “no one goes.”

I came to Guatemala to learn how the “epidemic of violence” sweeping across the country and metastasizing in its cities affects everyday life for the poor and what it looks like through the eyes of those doing the killing. For four weeks, I shadowed Guillermo and his crew in their work. It was a schizophrenic world of creaking bureaucratic machinery, a defunct and swollen prison system and encounters with the victims and the perpetrators of street violence. In the mornings, I drank sweet Nescafé in the marble-pillared National Palace and played chess with bored government functionaries. In the afternoons, we visited slum dwellings in the city dump, the families of the recently murdered and squatting colonies of street children huffing solvent.

Guillermo is a bridge between the logic of the streets and the rusted mechanisms of state power. He and his crew (composed primarily of an old friend from prison, a teetotaling 23-year-old and Juan) must navigate the bureaucracy of a government in fiscal crisis. I tagged along on various meetings with the “good works” committee, run under the auspices of First Lady Colom — painfully long, somnolent affairs, though the tea sandwiches were divine. Exercising true street wisdom, Juan always polished off the leftovers before the liveried servants carted them away. Seeing as how no one in their department had been paid in four months, this seemed appropriate.

In these meetings, the discussion turned on loads of concrete, light fixtures and event planning for parades in the capital’s blighted neighborhoods. Despite what seemed like good intentions, most, if not all, of the government officials at these meetings hadn’t a clue about the “situation on the ground” in the city’s most dangerous neighborhoods, which have become killing fields for a generation of youth in recent years.

It was Guillermo who spoke for the streets, though it was unclear whether his voice was heard.

But today — a brilliant, hot Saturday — is not for work. We drink beers and walk a few blocks to the national cemetery. Stepping through the metal gate holding up 25-foot walls of cracked yellow plaster, the rush and holler of the city streets fade quickly. Guillermo holds his daughter’s hand, and Juan signals to a cemetery worker, pant legs caked with mud and plaster. Pedaling a rickety bicycle, he leads us to the back of the cemetery, which borders the city dump. Hundreds of vultures perch in trees and on mausoleum roofs and crucifixes. Some take to the air as we approach, greasy wings creaking as they wheel above the trucks and

bulldozers and the countless humans foraging in the trash-filled ravine. Our guide points at a concrete slab half covering what looks to be the opening of a well. Shading our eyes against the glare, we peer in. Somewhere in the darkness below are the disinterred remains of those who did not keep up with their payments. Guatemala City’s population has swollen to 3.5 million, and the cemetery’s authorities have long found it difficult to find space for the newly dead. In recent years, with the capital’s homicide rate peaking at around 109 per 100,000 — slightly behind Mexico’s notoriously violent Ciudad Juárez, which had a murder rate of 130 per 100,000 in 2009 — a plot in the national cemetery has become valuable indeed.

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Juan (left) and Guillermo stand at the border between the cemetery and the dump.



Photo by Anthony Fontes.

Juan steps away whispering a prayer and crossing himself. I linger until my eyes adjust, and I can see the rough plastic bags in a heap about 30 feet down. Sacks of dusted bone and decomposing flesh. Another low, cement *olla* sits nearby, sealed. The cemetery worker says it's filled up already. I give him 10 quetzales, and he goes on his way. We walk away from the mass graves, past the discarded coffins lying among twisted rebar and concrete debris spilling down the slope and into the dump below.

Everyday Homicide

Violent death has become routine in Guatemala City. Officials estimate that 17 to 20 Guatemalans are murdered every day, this in a country of 12 million. The capital and its extensive suburbs form the epicenter of the homicidal violence. Accounts of the killings are smeared across the front pages of the major papers. Accompanied by graphic color photos, the murders are described in morbid but sparse detail: the sex, age and occupation of the victim; the assassins' technique; and perhaps a description of the alleged killers and how they escaped (they nearly always escape). But journalists provide little beyond these cold facts. Reporters often collapse separate murders into a single article. A July 19, 2010, headline from *La Prensa Libre*, the newspaper of record according to the U.S. Press Secretary, reads "Two Massacres Leave 11 Dead." In the closing sentences of the 150 word article, the writer names victims of unrelated homicides in San Benito, Petén and Ciudad Quetzal.

Day after day, such headlines greet readers all over the country. It is as if there is a war going on, and the newspapers are reporting the death toll. But just who the opposing armies are and what they are fighting for remains obscured. And so people rage at the senseless death and the blatant "inhumanity" of the killers as they struggle to make sense of what has become commonplace brutality. The fact that the perpetrators of these crimes are left unnamed and faceless intensifies the fear they provoke. Public discourse is dominated by talk of the violence. Shotgun-toting private security guards slouch in every storefront and bank, parents keep their children home from school, and the streets of all but the poshest neighborhoods empty at dusk.

Extreme times call for extreme measures — and so, mass graves for the paupered and forgotten dead. Guillermo, who is intimately familiar with death, shrugs as we walk back among the large family mausoleums of fine stone filigree. "Even in death, there are social classes," he says. The kind of violent death that has come to dominate Guatemalan society affects all classes but not equally. As in other cities, the majority of murders and other violent crimes take place in poor neighborhoods. The rich have turned inward, cloistering themselves in protected neighborhoods and employing fully equipped,

technologically sophisticated private security corporations (the fastest-growing industry in the country), bodyguards and armored vehicles. Their children attend private schools, and they vacation in Europe. Those who cannot afford such luxuries have little choice but to risk getting caught in the crossfire of feuding gangs and narcotraffickers.

Dealing With Death

The police and judicial system have proved largely useless in combating the violence and impunity that have risen with such vigor since the end of Guatemala's civil war. Only 2 percent of violent crimes committed in Guatemala are ever resolved and the perpetrators punished. The National Police Force, which was formed out of the shards of the civil war-era police as part of the 1996 peace accords, is known to be laughably incompetent and rampantly corrupt. According to some experts, 60 percent are in the pay of narcotraffickers — though mentioning this statistic to taxi drivers, day laborers and shopkeepers around the city center inevitably draws bitter laughs. "Pure bullshit! More like 99.9 percent."

In any case, few Guatemalans put much faith in the authorities. Since the police lack the capacity to catch and punish the perpetrators of violence, the criminals and their motives remain mere ghosts, specters that haunt the collective social imagination. I am reminded of Phillip Gourevitch's writings on the Rwandan genocide. "If everyone is implicated, then implication becomes meaningless." In this case, the inverse is true. When no one can be implicated in daily slaughter, what meaning can be assigned to the recurring violence?

On July 20, 2010, three days before our visit, unknown gunmen shot and killed three people attending the wake of a murdered bus driver. The deceased was the victim of a new pattern of violence targeting urban transportation networks.

Since the introduction of a new bus system in early 2010 that uses a prepaid card rather than cash fares, there have been "terrorist attacks" on public busses across the country. But who is assassinating bus drivers and throwing grenades onto busses, and why? Is it some consortium of disgruntled bus drivers from the old system who have lost their jobs to the new one? Are they members of 18th Street or Marasalvatrucha, whose transportation extortion rackets have been severely curtailed by the introduction of prepaid cards? Or, is it a campaign of random violence pushed by occult powers to destabilize President Colom's regime in the run-up to elections a year and a half from now?

The rationale behind the transport killings are difficult to discern, just as it is hard to understand why that violence spilled over into the funeral of one of its victims. Three men carrying handguns hid behind the mausoleums and fired nearly a dozen shots into the crowd of mourners.



Photo by Bernal Velarde.

Guatemala City at night.

The gunmen escaped through the stone alleys and out the adjoining dump. At the time of reporting, it was unknown whether their targets were relatives of the murdered bus driver or a man working for a private security firm who attempted to hide among the mourners. In any case, three people died. Those who know why will never tell. So it goes.

Death Dealing

I recount this story to Guillermo as we walk through the cemetery. He shrugs and shakes his head. People are murdered every day, and of course, much of the dying is concentrated among those who do the killing. Guillermo began living and fighting on these streets when he was eight years old, and he quickly rose high among those vying for respect and power in the city's poorest quarters. Now, nearly everyone from his past life is dead. We walk down random corridors in the alleys of the dead, cubbyholed mausoleums rising up on both sides of the cracked cement aisles. Every several meters, Guillermo points out a plot belonging to a friend, a kid he knew on the streets, the son or daughter of a neighbor. Guillermo, usually so full of laughter, is quiet now, holding tightly to his daughter's hand. We stop before a makeshift plot, the name etched roughly in the pitted cement. It belongs to the son of an old friend, a boy of 17 who got involved in the gangs and was shot down by a rival outfit. His plot number is scrawled in black paint over his name. Guillermo takes off his hat and lowers his head. I ask him how it is to visit these monuments to the dead. He is quiet for a moment and inhales deeply before replying.

I try to block it in my head and in my heart because, look, it's really sad. There are people who walked through parts of my life. I had a friend who I knew since we were in the jail for orphans together... and he came with me to Mexico after the war. And the police came to where he was working and put bullets in him, and, oh God, my brother who has lived with me all my life, from one night to the morning is dead.

Guillermo closes his eyes and wipes sweat from his face with the back of his hand. "Better not to remember; better to block out their memory. That is what I try to do."

But today, for my sake or for some unspoken reason, Guillermo is remembering. In one breath, he is mourning his lost loved ones and the senseless waste of life. In the next, he is telling a story of how he and his homeboys massacred a rival Marasalvatrucha gang as they mourned their dead leader. He tells it as if describing a scene in a movie: the homies gathered around the coffin, the dirt mounds and piles of flowers. As the body was lowered into the earth, the mourners fired bullets into the sky. Guillermo's M18 gang was there too, burying one of their own. They heard the gunshots. Guillermo and his boys crept up among the tombstones, and on his signal, after their targets' magazines were empty, he ordered the attack. It was a bloody day. They killed six and injured a dozen others.

Those were the days when, in his words, "nothing was of value" to him. When he could eat heartily of his cellmate's dinner as the man sobbed in his plate because the police just shot his wife, who had brought the food, while she ran an

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errand outside the prison. Skirmishes over drug transport routes, rights to street corners and extortion rackets were the bloody business that he and his crew engaged in daily. Another ex-gang member, Juan Antonio, who Guillermo helped escape from his former life, told me: “Killing is easy. When you shoot somebody, you don’t feel anything. But when you get shot, it’s different. You feel the pain.” I don’t believe I’ve ever heard anyone say that out loud — except perhaps James Gandolfini in the 1993 classic “True Romance.” He’s a hired killer, telling Patricia Arquette what it’s like to kill people. “Now I just do it to see their expression change.” But that’s the movies.

Is it the ever-present possibility of dying that makes killing banal for those living “*la vida loca*”? Though reliable mortality records for gang members and other perpetrators of violence do not exist, anecdotal evidence paints a picture of mass tit-for-tat slaughter. Seven years after leaving gang life, 29-year-old Juan Antonio claims that of his 90 compatriots in his former M-18 *clika*, only five are alive today. In his estimation, 40 percent were killed by rival gangs, 30 percent by the police and the other 30 percent by their own outfit. For most *pandilleros*, death seems to be the only exit from a life of killing.

Killing Is Easy; Dying Is Hard

For many city-dwelling Guatemalans, the extermination of criminal youth has become the most viable solution to the endemic violence. Day after day, in conversations with taxi drivers, waitresses and other working class Guatemalans, I heard the same phrases repeated. “The violence is tearing our lives apart. We need a strong hand to come down and clean up the streets.” “Criminals are parasites on society. If they aren’t worth anything, then why not terminate them?” In this logic, served up daily in the country’s conservative newspapers, the constitutional reforms and democratic changes that have taken place since the civil war ended in 1996 have only led to chaos. Civil rights only help delinquents escape punishment. Elections only allow politicians to steal from the country’s dwindling coffers. Among many city-dwellers, there is a deep sense of nostalgia for the days of the civil war. In that epoch, at least, you knew who the targets were and where the bombs would fall. The military offered an ordered violence against the chaos of revolution. Today, the collective hope is that the generals might exact a similar punishment against the enemy within.

Of course, it was never so simple then, nor is it simple now. The threads connecting the past violence of the civil war to today’s exploding murder rates are both obvious and obscured. Members of the military who were discharged at the end of the civil war, according to many experts, are deeply involved in the illicit trade of drugs, international

adoptions, mining and timber. Certain elements in Guatemala’s aristocracy hire gang members as *sicarios* — hit men — to threaten or kill human rights activists or factory workers attempting to organize unions. But all of this is unconfirmed rumor or well-known public secret, depending on who you talk to. At every level of society, there are those who feed off the death and fear caused by all this violence. ...

The light is waning, and I have a bus to catch. I am hesitant to leave, lingering, waiting for some elegiac conclusion to my time in Guatemala. We pause at the final resting place of one of Guillermo’s old friends. They had been *pandilleros* together before leaving that life, and his friend had started him in anti-violence work. Guillermo’s shoulders slump, and he closes his eyes. Aware that I am tearing at old wounds, I ask him how the man died.

“We had been working the whole day removing graffiti when two cars passed by... I usually stayed late to finish the job while he went home, but that day I wasn’t feeling well so he told me, ‘You go. I’ll stay and finish.’ ...and when I got in the car to go, a half block later — PA-PA-PA-PA-PA-PA-PA.” He nearly shouts the staccato gunfire. “I return, and I see him.” Guillermo convulses his body, mimicking the motion of an epileptic seizure. “I thought that he was alive, and I tried to stop the blood. But he was already dead. He was my brother... He showed me how to do the work I do today and be a good person. He was a good person. He was 29 when he died. One of the best people I ever knew. My daughters loved him very much. He was like an uncle.” He looks to his daughter, whose eyes are downcast. Juan, too, is silent.

“Was it a fight between the gangs?” I ask.

“No, it was the police who killed him.”

“The police?”

“The police didn’t want... Look, in that moment it was possible to stop the gangs and go back to something different... But that didn’t suit the police... because then they lose their support, the money they make. So it wasn’t convenient...”

We take a final picture together — Guillermo, Juan and I, flashing mock gang signs before the oversized mausoleum of some 19th-century general, all three of us grinning. But I am left with the image of Guillermo holding his friend’s body convulsing in his arms, the blood pumping away onto the pavement. The chance for some kind of peace, if it ever existed, lost in the now-distant past.

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Right: Guillermo stops before a grave.
(Photo by Anthony Fontes.)

