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### me tengo que ir

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ME TENGO QUE IR

by

Eddy Leonel Aldana

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska

In Partial Fulfillment of Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

Major: Art

Under the Supervision of Professor Walker Pickering

Lincoln, Nebraska



May, 2022  
ME TENGO QUE IR  
Eddy Leonel Aldana, M.F.A.  
University of Nebraska, 2022

Advisor: Walker Pickering

In Spanish, *me tengo que ir* means “I have to go.” “I have to go” as in go home, or back to one’s home country. As in leaving home for the unforeseeable future, hang up the phone, or pass away. *me tengo que ir* is also the name of a song by Adolescent’s Orquesta — a song about love, loss, and heartbreak over time that was always played at family parties when I was growing up.

In *me tengo que ir*, I use world history and personal memory to examine my family’s place within the Guatemalan diaspora. Diaspora is defined as the movement, migration, or scattering of a people away from an established or ancestral homeland. Existing within the diaspora implies loss, displacement, and emigration because diasporas exist as a result of colonization, nationalism, and in the case of the Guatemalan diaspora, U.S. intervention. From the United Fruit Company’s imperialist business dealings in Guatemala to the Guatemalan civil war, and from my parents’ migration to my mom’s deportation, these events have shaped and negatively affected generations of Latin American families.

Diasporic themes are threaded throughout my work. Familial links are broken and contact is lost through migration. Feelings of displacement are common as people pursue

a new life in a foreign country. Separation occurs both through the migratory process and subsequent deportation, all while trying to maintain communication over thousands of miles. Even food serves as a cultural link, triggering memories of a person or place and connection to home through familiar flavors and smells, while simultaneously keeping culture alive and avoiding full assimilation.

The two opening videos, *UFC and Me* (Fig. 1 & 2) and *The Ten Cannots* (Fig. 3 & 4), both use world history to inform the viewer about the roles that the United Fruit Company and United States have played in the history and modern day perception of Guatemala and Central America. In *Invention, Memory, and Place*, Edward W. Said talks about how American history is repeatedly used to prop up the “big deeds of big people” and how it neglects “to mention what happened to the small ones, the people who built railroads, worked the farms, sweated as laborers in the enormous industrial companies that lie at the heart of this country’s immense wealth and power”.<sup>1</sup> The first video in the exhibition examines colonial practices by the UFC in Guatemala through the crushing of land reform and land redistribution movements. *The Ten Cannots* features a misattribution of William John Henry Boetcker’s text of the same title<sup>2</sup>. In the video, U.S. President Ronald Reagan, in 1992, and Guatemalan Dictator José Efraín Ríos Montt, in 1982, both misattributed Boetker’s text to Abraham Lincoln. The text is meant to sow and maintain class divisions, and inhibit working class and impoverished people from

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<sup>1</sup> Said, *Invention, Memory, and Place*. 2000. p. 176-177

<sup>2</sup> *The Ten Cannots* by William John Henry Boetker was originally published in 1916. The text is commonly misattributed to Abraham Lincoln and was done so by Ríos Montt and Reagan in 1982 and 1992, respectively.

advancing in life. The more didactic tone of these two videos was motivated by the lack of Latin American history taught in U.S. schools. They relay information and facts that remain contested and denied by some people.

When my mom started having kids, she vowed to herself to photograph our family as much as possible because of the lack of images from her adolescence. She has just one blurry photograph to remember her childhood. Likewise, a driving force in this work is my own pursuit of recording and maintaining memories through photographs. In *Carne Guisada* (Fig. 5 & 6), my mom recalls how little time she had with her mother, and consequently how little she remembers her. *Lost in Xocomil* (Fig. 7 & 8), recounts a traumatic experience I had at a water park. *Dad's American Dream* (Fig. 9 & 10) is an attempt to remember things about my dad before he unexpectedly passed away.

The still images in my exhibition are also intended to invoke my own memories. Two framed photographs were images I made as an eight-year old. *Kevin and Dad on the Bed, Comfortably* (Fig. 11) was made by propping a snapshot of my dad and brother on a bed to make another photograph of the setup in an attempt to comfort myself from missing them. *Colina and Mom in Guate* (Fig. 12) is a technically flawed exposure of my mom and sister at my aunt's house, that evokes feelings of uncertainty and uneasiness. The blur represents the memories and feelings that inspired this thesis work.

After weeks of traversing through Guatemala and Mexico, my mom arrived in the U.S. in the summer of 1984. She was detained and let go after paying a bond, but afterwards, she had to remain invisible for as long as possible to stay out of harm's way in

the United States. After getting married and applying for citizenship, she became visible to the immigration system and was subsequently deported. When my dad was nearing the end of his life, he wanted to return to Guatemala because his hope of retiring in the United States was stifled due to debt and his deteriorating health. *Working with Mom* (Fig. 13 & 14) and *Dad's American Dream* both question the power structures in place to deny immigrants a sense of agency while also proving that the American Dream is just a fallacy.

Many of the videos revolve around my parents' adjustment to living in the United States and my family's inability to function without my mom after her deportation. My parents were displaced from Guatemala due to the socioeconomic effects of the civil war. While their families were spared from most of the violence in the north of the country, their lives in the capital city were impacted economically, forcing my parents to make the journey to the United States in search of employment opportunities and a more stable life. During my mom's 2003 deportation, she was again displaced, returning to a country rendered unfamiliar in the intervening two decades. In *Buscando a Oscar* (Fig. 15 & 16), she talks about losing contact with her father and how her return to Guatemala prompted her to look for him. *Lost in Xocomil, ven a comer* (Fig. 17 & 18), and *Tia's House* (Fig. 19) recall the time after my mom's deportation, where my sister and I were also displaced from the U.S. to Guatemala.

My parents were separated from their families during their early adulthood to come to the United States, and American immigration laws forced my family apart for

most of 2003 (Fig. 20). This separation affected all of us differently, but in the triptych image, *Dad's Letter to the Embassy* (Fig. 21), my dad's mental and physical condition due to her distance is laid bare. The letter is a gripping and heartbreaking plea for the U.S. government to let her come back home and be reunited with us. *ven a comer* is told through my voice and goes into more depth about the emotional effects of our separation as my awareness about the reasons we were in Guatemala grew.

Recreating meals and recipes has helped alleviate the pain that physical distance from my family has caused, and allowed me to feel closer to home. Recreating the meals has also allowed for my family and myself to remain, as Steven Nelson says, “unassimilable” and resist complete assimilation by continuing culinary traditions.<sup>3</sup> *Carne Guisada* explores these ideas further through a conversation between my mom and me, and how specific foods can help bridge cultural gaps that happen over time and through displacement. The gestures in the video point towards the labor involved in preparing a meal, the preservation of familial ties, and how cooking and eating can help evoke a memory. *Grocery Shopping* (Fig. 22 & 23) focuses on my dad's inability to shop and cook for us while my mom was in Guatemala. At one point in the piece, I recall a moment where my dad tried to recreate one of my mom's recipes. It was a disaster because he lacked knowledge of cooking and expected his wife to do it all. It serves to challenge those gendered expectations, and is part of the reason I learned to cook for myself.

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<sup>3</sup> Nelson, *Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews*. 2006. p. 298

Notions of loss are woven through most of the exhibition, as many pieces give a glimpse into what was lost by our family and others like mine. This work would be different if my dad was still alive, because I would likely have access to more detailed accounts of our history and could ask him questions to fill in the gaps. I reckon with this loss of context in *Dad's American Dream*, and contend with some of the contributing factors to his death, including lack of health insurance, financial debt, and the related stress caused by simply existing in the United States. In *Carne Guisada* and *Buscando a Oscar*, my mom describes what the deaths of her parents meant to her, particularly after rekindling a brief relationship with her father. In *UFC and Me*, I directly implicate the United Fruit Company — the company now known as Chiquita Banana — as the reason I never met my grandparents. *The Ten Cannots* deals directly with the Guatemalan civil war and the 200,000 lives lost at the hand of the Guatemalan government. This conflict led to mass migration from the country during the latter half of the 20th century and continues to this day as a result.

The statistics surrounding the resultant deportations from the U.S. are staggering. In 2003 alone — the year of my mom's case — 6,674 people were deported back to Guatemala<sup>4</sup>. *Paper Planes* (Fig. 22 & 23) attempts to visualize those statistics, the disposability of immigrants, and the bureaucratic barriers immigrants must endure in pursuit of American citizenship. It is the final, and longest video in the exhibition and is the only video that exists on its own. *Paper Planes* remains a constant as the viewer makes their way through the show and the other videos cycle through their respective

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics on deportations solely from the United States to Guatemala in 2003.

loops. As the bookend to the exhibition, this piece is meant to encourage contemplation while digesting the information, stories, and recollections in the other pieces.

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Nelson, Steven. "Diaspora: Multiple Practices, Multiple Worldviews." Essay. In *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945* : 296-316. Wiley & Sons, Inc. 2006

Said, Edward W. "Invention, Memory, and Place." *Critical Inquiry* 26, no. 2 (2000): 175–92. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1344120>.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security. 2003 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics. Office of Immigration Statistics. September 2004. (United States Department of Homeland Security) (GPO S/N 016-072295-0)



## Photographs and Film Stills

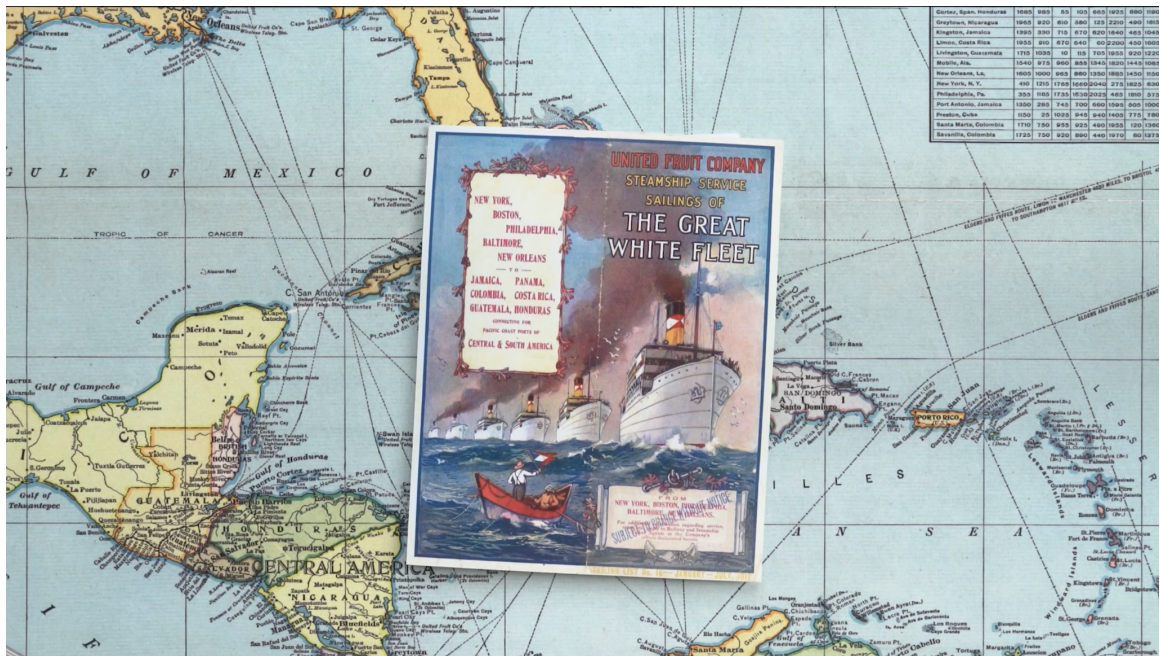


Fig. 1 (Still from *UFC and Me*)



Fig. 2 (Still from *UFC and Me*)



Fig. 3 (Still from *The Ten Cannots*)



Fig. 4 (Still from *UFC and Me*)





Fig. 5 (Still from *Carne Guisada*)



Fig. 6 (Still from *Carne Guisada*)



Fig. 7 (Still from *Lost in Xocomil*)



Fig. 8 (Still from *Lost in Xocomil*)



Fig. 9 (Still from *Dad's American Dream*)



Fig. 10 (Still from *Dad's American Dream*)





Fig. 11 ( *Kevin and Dad on the Bed, Comfortably* )



Fig. 12 (*Colina and Mom in Guate*)





Fig 13 (Still from *Working with Mom*)



Fig. 14 (Still from *Working with Mom*)





Fig. 15 (Still from *Buscando a Oscar*)



Fig. 16 (Still from *Buscando a Oscar*)

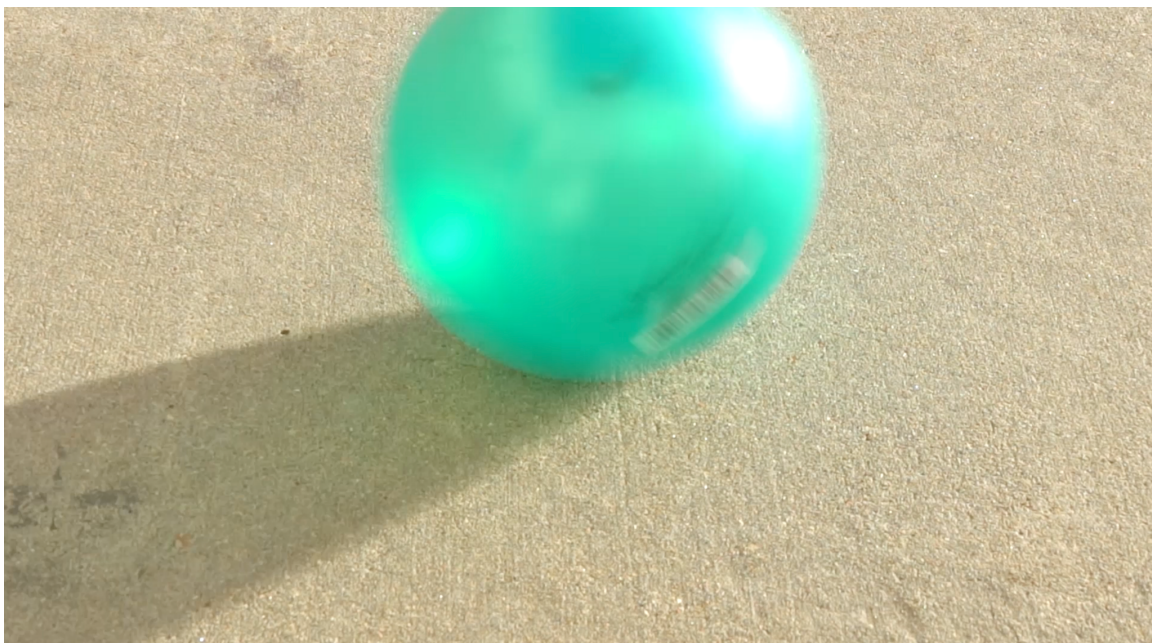


Fig. 17 (Still from *ven a comer*)



Fig 18 (Still from *ven a comer*)





Fig. 19 (Still from *Tia's House*)

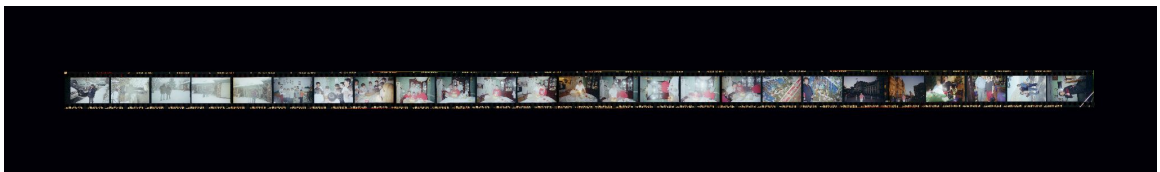


Fig. 20 (*January 2003*)

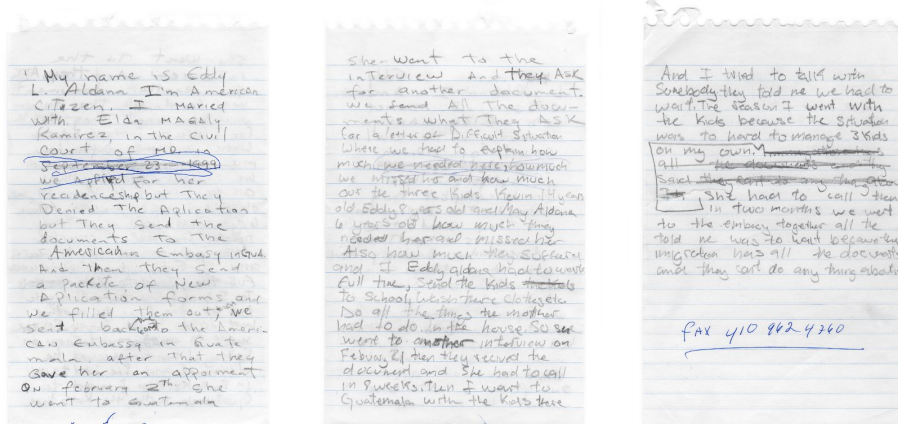


Fig. 21 (Dad's Letter to the Embassy)



Fig. 22 (Still from Grocery Shopping)



Fig. 23 (Still from *Grocery Shopping*)



Fig. 24 (Still from *Paper Planes*)



Fig. 25 (Still from *Paper Planes*)



## Exhibition

