

Study Guide for Delia's Return

The following study guide accompanies “Delia’s Return: The Migration and Deportation of an Unaccompanied Youth,” an essay in the September 2021 issue of *American Anthropologist*. In this guide, you will find definitions of key terms, discussion questions, suggested activities, relevant documentary films, and additional resources. Materials can be tailored for students ranging from fifth grade through university.

Summary

Delia’s Return is a multimodal narrative that chronicles detention and deportation from the perspective of Delia, an Indigenous youth who migrates unaccompanied from Guatemala to the United States. This public-facing narrative is based upon longitudinal, mixed-methods research with migrant youth in zones of transit in Mexico, detention centers for children in the United States, government facilities receiving returned children in Guatemala, and communities of origin and return. Delia’s experiences of migration and deportation reveal how Indigenous migrant youth negotiate everyday violence and discrimination, how they and their families prioritize limited resources and make difficult decisions, and how they develop and sustain relationships over time and space. The narrative is part of a suite of materials, including a framing essay, this study guide, and a podcast with fourteen-year-old illustrator Gabriela Afable, who accompanied her mother (Heidbrink) during fieldwork in Guatemala.

Key Terms

Counternarratives: Narratives that challenge widely accepted and often value-laden assumptions or stereotypes about people, cultures, and institutions.

Ideal victim: The ideal victim is “a person or category of individuals, who, when hit by crime, most readily are given the complete and legitimate status of being a victim” (Nihls 1986). In other words, an ideal victim is an individual considered most “deserving” of the status of victim.

Indigenous peoples: Also referred to as First Peoples, Aboriginal peoples, or Native peoples, Indigenous peoples are ethnic groups who are native to a particular place.

Politics of representation: The contested meaning between the subject, the representation of the subject, and the subject’s self-presentation.

Positionality: The social and political context that creates your identity in terms of race, class, gender, sexuality, ability status, citizenship, etc. Positionality also describes how your identity influences, and potentially biases, your understanding of and outlook on the world.

Stereotype: A stereotype is an often-fixed, overgeneralized belief about a particular group or class of people. Stereotypes infer that a person has a range of characteristics and abilities that we assume all members of that group have. Stereotypes vary across cultures.

Unaccompanied migrant child: An unaccompanied child is a US legal definition that describes a child (under the age of eighteen) who, when apprehended by immigration authorities, is not accompanied by or has been separated from a parent or legal guardian.

Undocumented immigrant: In the United States, an undocumented immigrant is a foreign-born person who does not have legal status to remain in the country.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss Delia's experience in the US facility for unaccompanied children in Chicago. What are the attitudes of the facility director and transportation officer that she encounters?
2. How does Delia feel as she is deported? How do others in the story feel about being deported? How do government officials respond?
3. Describe the behavior of the staff at the Guatemalan government facility for deported children. How does their behavior make Delia feel as she returns to her home country? How do they treat Delia's parents? Why do you think they treat her parents this way?
4. Compare and contrast Delia's experiences in US and Guatemalan government facilities.
5. What is the significance of Delia's *traje* (traditional dress)? Why do you think her mother gave her these clothes before returning to San Marcos?
6. Describe the role of the author-anthropologist (Heidbrink) in this piece? What methods did she enlist in conducting research? How might her positionality as a US-based researcher and mother affect her research? How might the positionality of the illustrator (Afafe) as a fourteen-year-old shape how she depicts the story?
7. What is your positionality? How does it affect how you view immigration?

Suggested activities

Activity 1: Mapping. On a map, trace Delia's migration and deportation. Mark the places and their significance to her journey.

Activity 2: Counternarratives. In the United States, the media and policymakers often reduce young migrants to stereotypes: the ideal victim, the threat, the economic migrant, the model minority. In contrast, *Delia's Return* provides a counternarrative to some of these stereotypes.

- a. Go to <http://www.youthcirculations.com/>, a media archive of art and writing about and by immigrant youth. On the homepage, pick at least two of the galleries and analyze whether and how young people are represented through the pictures.
- b. What are the strengths and limitations of these representations?
- c. What kind of counter-narratives *about* and *by* youth do you find in the galleries and blogs? How do these counter-narratives contribute to the understanding of child migration?
- d. Does *Delia's Return* provide a compelling counter-narrative? Why or why not?

Activity 3: Media Analysis. Select a recent article from the news media on immigration. Write a possible counter-narrative to that story, offering a different perspective or insight (250–300 words). Illustrate your counter-narrative, paying particular attention to what you illustrate and why. What colors did you choose? What is in the center of the image? What is on the periphery? What falls out of the image altogether? Why?

Activity 4: Research Project. Guatemala has a population of 14.9 million inhabitants, with 60 percent who identify as Indigenous. There are twenty-four ethnic groups, including Maya, Xinca, Garifuna, and Afro-descendants (non-Indigenous). Indigenous Maya include the Achi', Akateco, Awakateco, Chalchiteco, Ch'orti', Chuj, Itza', Ixil, Jacalteco, Kaqchikel, K'iche', Mam, Mopan, Poqomam, Poqomchi', Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi', Sakapulteco, Sipakapense, Tektiteko, Tz'utujil, and Uspanteko. Research one of Guatemala's ethnic groups and present to your classmates on their history, traditions, culture, language and stories.

Activity 5: Film or Book Review. Watch one of the below-mentioned films or read one of the below-mentioned books. Draft a short review discussing how the themes in the film or book are related to *Delia's Return*.

Documentary Films

Eternos Indocumentados: Central American Refugees in the U.S. (2019, 76 minutes)

In 2014, the US media was flooded with images of “unaccompanied children” fleeing from the violent consequences of US intervention in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras. Once in the United States, they were detained in makeshift detention centers around the country. Rather than provide asylum, the Obama Administration used this “humanitarian crisis” to expand the previously defunct practice of family detention. By 2015, more than 3,000 refugee women, children, and members of the LGBTQI community were detained. Based on interviews with recently arrived Central Americans and organizers, this film captures the stories of Central American refugees and explores the causes of their forced migration. In the words of Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton, this film is about Los Eternos Undocumentados (the Eternally Undocumented). Available at: <https://vimeo.com/399545727>. (Grades 9 and up)

Voice of a Mountain: Life after 36 Years of War in Guatemala (2009, 56 minutes)

This documentary film focuses on a Guatemalan farm community of Santa Anita, which consists of ex-combatants who now harvest organic coffee. Members of the community share their story, from decades of fighting in a civil war to the new challenges of harvesting coffee and bananas. Members of the community reveal the circumstances that led them to fight against their government and what they hoped the war would accomplish. The importance of selling coffee on the fair-trade market and migration are also discussed in the film. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fq7EDKgCZ-E>. (Grades 9 and up)

Which Way Home (2009, 90 minutes)

In this gripping documentary, a group of young, unaccompanied Central American children struggle to make their way through Mexico in order to ultimately reach the United States and cross the border to a new home. Director Rebecca Cammisa follows the struggles of these

would-be undocumented immigrants as they battle poverty, dangerous train rides, potential predators, and immigration detention in the United States and Mexico, keeping their sights set on the possibility of a better life that awaits in a new country. (Grades 9 and up)

Additional Resources

Heidbrink, L. (2018, 3 minutes) Care in Contexts of Detention/Protección en el Contexto de la Detención de Menores. Cultural Anthropology.

In response to an influx of young migrants from Central America in 2014, the US federal government readied dozens of facilities to detain children until they could be reunited with family, transferred to federal foster care, or removed from the United States. This short digital story traces an anthropologist's relationship with eight-year-old Gabriela, who is detained in the United States and reflects on her positionality as a researcher, activist, and mother. In the process, she critiques government policies and facility staff who claim to "care for" children like Gabriela while inflicting institutional violence. Available in English and Spanish at: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/care-in-contexts-of-child-detention>. (All ages)

Heidbrink, L. (2020). Migrant Youth: Youth in a New Era of Deportation. Stanford University Press.

In this ethnography on child migration and deportation, anthropologist Lauren Heidbrink examines how Indigenous youth, often cast as objects of policy and not participants, are not passive recipients of securitization policies and development interventions. Instead, Indigenous youth draw from a rich social, cultural, and political repertoire of assets and tactics to navigate precarity and marginality in Guatemala, including transnational kin, social networks, and financial institutions. By attending to young people's perspectives, we learn the critical roles they play as contributors to household economies, local social practices, and global processes. The insights and experiences of young people uncover the transnational effects of securitized responses to migration management and development on individuals and families, across space, citizenship status, and generation. They likewise provide evidence to inform child protection and human rights locally and internationally. (Undergraduate and Graduate)

Menchú, R. (2008). The Secret Legacy. Groundwood Books Ltd.

Written by Nobel Peace Prize recipient Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the novel's seven-year-old heroine, Ixkem, is chosen to tend to the prized cornfields once her grandfather has passed away. But Ixkem is not sure she can accept this great responsibility. Out in the fields, she discovers a legion of tiny people, no bigger than bananas. They are *b'e'n, nahuales*—secret animal spirits—and when they take Ixkem into the underworld where they live, she regales them with tales of the surface. What they offer in return helps Ixkem to accept both her grandfather's wishes for her and the fact that she must soon wish him goodbye. This moving story is rich with emotion and Mayan culture, perfect to captivate any young reader. Available in English and Spanish. (All ages)

Menchú, R. (2010). I, Rigoberta Menchú: An Indian Woman in Guatemala. Verso Books.

The remarkable life of Rigoberta Menchú, a Guatemalan peasant woman, reflects on the experiences common to many Indian communities in Latin America. Menchú suffered gross

injustice and hardship in her early life: her brother, father and mother were murdered by the Guatemalan military. She learned Spanish and turned to catechistic work as an expression of political revolt as well as religious commitment. Menchú vividly conveys the traditional beliefs of her community and her personal response to feminist and socialist ideas. Above all, these pages are illuminated by the enduring courage and passionate sense of justice of an extraordinary woman. Available in English and Spanish. (Grades 9 and up)

Youth Circulations

Youth Circulations is a nexus for research, art, and activism around youth mobility and the politics of representation. Born of a shared frustration over portrayals of young migrants and their families by the media and nonprofits, the site offers a curated collection of images and counter-narratives. An active blog features the diverse perspectives of scholars, activists, artists, and youth from around the globe and seeks to create counternarratives that reflect young people's own perspectives and experiences. www.YouthCirculations.com. (All ages)

Works Cited

Christie, N. 1986. "The Ideal Victim." In *From Crime Policy to Victim Policy*, 17–30. London: Palgrave Macmillan.