"Dying of starvation or dying of the virus". The defense of territory in Latin America in times of COVID-19

Elisabet Dueholm Rasch

Abstract

In this article I use the epistolary form (Carroll 2015) to explore how COVID-19 shapes the defense of territory in Latin America, and at the same time reveals and deepens the axes of exclusion and inequality that territory defenders are struggling to transform. The defense of territory is a term that covers a loosely connected network of grassroots initiatives that organize against large scale extraction projects. Although the defense of territory as a movement is not firmly rooted in an anti-racist discourse, it questions structures that are rooted in the racism that came to the continent when it was colonized by Europeans, and it often builds on an indigenous identity that is constructed vis-à-vis a ladino or mestizo identity. The article consists of five sections that are written as personal letters to a dear friend and territory defender who passed away due to an infection with the corona virus, in itself laying bare one of the impacts of the pandemic on the defense of territory. In these letters I explore how the defense of territory is rooted in a past characterized by racism, colonialization and exploitation, the different forms of violence that territory defenders face, and how these issues have become even more manifest during the pandemic. I conclude that for territory defenders in Latin America, the pandemic is one of many other problems; and compared extreme poverty, racism and increasing levels of violence it might not be the most urgent one – but it does deepen and reveal these axes of oppression.

Keywords: epistolary form, defense of territory, racism, COVID-19, racism

****

Hola, hola Jere,

Y ese milagro? This is what you are supposed to say now. But you won't. You won't because you are not here with us anymore. You are with the ancestors, somewhere in the air, floating the river, scratching the treetops. You won't because you were taken away, not by one of the violent actors that you were confronted with numerous times because of your active resistance against mining and hydropower developments in Ch'orti' territory, but by COVID-19 amid the pandemic. An immense loss for your family and loved ones, as well as for the defense of Ch'orti' territory in Guatemala.

The initial idea for this article was that you (well, you don't know this yet) and I would organize a workshop with Ch'orti' territory defenders about the defense of territory in times of COVID-19 and that we then would co-author an article about how the pandemic not only shapes this struggle for land and identity, but how its manifestations and consequences lay bare, reproduce and deepen structures of exclusion, rooted in centuries of racism and exploitation (Metz 2001). Just as I wanted to propose this idea to you (I had just secured a small amount of money to organize such a workshop in a hybrid way – me here in the Netherlands, you there in Guatemala), I learned that you had fallen ill with COVID-19. The prospects were not good, and you had been hospitalized. On a morning somewhere in June I learned that you had passed away. "*Last night* se nos murió", our mutual friend Jennifer (Cassolo) had messaged me via Signal.

I thought of your family, who had been selling tamales for weeks to cover your hospital costs. I thought of all the people that you worked with, territory defenders who are involved in resisting large extractivist projects, such a mining and hydropower projects in their territory, people that deal with violence on a daily basis because of their resistance. I thought about how such loss of life was one of the ways that the pandemic impacted the defense of territory. And like many others, I wrote a small tribute on Facebook as a way of contributing to an online memory book:

> Jere, I've only known you for a couple of years, but the past few weeks the beautiful memories keep piling up. I treasure our conversations that never ended, about justice, territories, socialism, rights, life, and more. The time we shared in the house in Camotán. The laughters. Your confidence. I feel grateful to have met such a dedicated, supportive, beautiful and inspiring person. You guided me through Ch'orti' territory, together with Omar and Jennifer. We will continue your struggle and as such you will always be with us. I hope you get this enormous hug that I am sending you through the air.[i]

I also thought about all the plans that we had made for sharing the results of my work about the defense of territory in the Ch'orti' region. Not only with you and Omar (Jerónimo), your close friend and "partner in resistance", but also with the territory defenders, and how the pandemic had come in-between. And I concluded that I still owe you, big time. So I will continue writing to you, sharing some reflections and thoughts about my time in Camotán, where you guided me through the fieldwork and brought me in contact with many territory defenders from different communities to talk with me about their ways of organizing and how they make sense of, and cope with, all the violence that they face in their everyday life. I will also try to link these reflections some reports that were published by Global Witness and Frontline Defenders, (social) media coverage, zoom presentations that I listened to, and, finally, some phone conversations that I had with other territory defenders in Latin America.

****

Hola Jere,

I don't know, if I ever told you how Omar and I met – which is relevant, because it is through Omar that I met you. During the winter of 2016, Omar visited the Netherlands. He was hosted by Peace Brigades International as part of a program that facilitated frontline defenders a three-months' stay outside their own country as an antidote to all the violence and criminalization they face in daily life. He came to Utrecht where I live and I had been invited to provide a contextual talk about Guatemala. We liked each other's presentations and exchanged e-mail addresses. A little more than a year later, in January 2018, I travelled to Guatemala for my research about territory defenders, criminalization and violence. One of the first people that I called was Omar. Somehow this idea of going to Ch'orti' territory had gotten into my head. We agreed to meet in a café at 7 am for breakfast the next day as he happened to be in Guatemala City. When I arrived, you were there, too. As we ordered breakfast, you both started to update me on community consultations, ongoing criminalization and violence in the territories. It was during that breakfast that we started to plan my first trip to Camotán.

How different was Camotán from all my prior experiences of doing fieldwork with indigenous authorities and territory defenders in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, where I had seen how indigenous authorities and community organizing had been re-instated where it had completely disappeared, and strengthened where it still was present after the armed internal conflict. Indigenous people claimed the rights that were laid down in the Accord on Identity: the right to organize their communities according to their own uses, customs, and spirituality (Rasch 2011, 2017). These forms of organization are also indirectly recognized in the constitution and in the ILO 169 convention and the United Nations Convention on Indigenous Rights (Sieder 2007).

In Ch'orti' territory these indigenous structures were hidden under drought, exclusion, hunger, poverty. I think you know Brent Metz, who has been working in Ch'orti' territory for a long time. As you might remember (but incase you don't here's a small recap), he suggests that Ch'orti' underdevelopment and pervasive poverty are rooted in the racist colonial system. Because of that system Ch'orti' people, like other indigenous peoples, have been denied rights and participation. Indigenous communities were dispossessed of their lands and excluded from taking decisions (Metz 2006, 2010). The very existence of the Ch'orti' as an indigenous group was denied in the population census. The work of (re-) instating ancestral forms of community participation and leadership was therefore a complicated process in all its facets. Of course, this is *always* a complex, negotiated, contested and dynamic process, I had seen that, but I can imagine that this becomes even more complicated when there is nothing concrete, no collective memory, to build on.

As you also explained me, concrete references to indigenous authorities are important, because the defense of territory (*a term that covers a loosely connected network of grassroots initiatives that organize against large scale extraction projects, like hydropower dams and mining*) often builds on these structures. In many cases local, indigenous authorities take part in the defense of territory and organize their participation in ways that are rooted in their indigenous uses, customs and identity (Illmer 2018). I think you would agree with my observation that although the defense of territory as a movement is not firmly rooted in an anti-racist discourse, it does question structures that are rooted in the racism that came to the continent when it was colonized by Europeans, and it often builds on an indigenous identity, that is constructed vis-à-vis a ladino identity (Rasch 2017).

During my first visit to Camotán, back in 2018, you told me how Nuevo Día, the grassroots organization in Camotán that had started the political work of organizing indigenous authorities, was founded in 2003 to organize against the Banco Rural that was confiscating the land of numerous indebted families. Little by little the work became more political, as the reclaiming of the land went hand in hand with being recognized as an indigenous group. Your work also became more political – initially you came to work there as a *técnico*, and only for three months. You ended up working there for years and being completely immersed in the political process of organizing the local defense of territory. Like other grassroot organizations involved in the defense of territory, Nuevo Día today proposes alternative forms of development that are rooted in that identity and local uses and customs. In so doing, they organize community consultations, roadblocks to draw attention to their demands, lay down claims in courts, and much more.

At the time of that first visit in 2018, the Nuevo Día office had been a lively meeting place. Of course, there was the eternal struggle for funding, but people were working, gathering, meeting, laughing, discussing in and around the green house on the top of the hill in Camotán. Two years later, at the beginning of 2020, many things had changed. Omar had already told me that he had taken you out of Camotán six months before ("*lo tengo afuera*") to a safe place when you were accused of killing his brother – a long and painful story that I was able to only partly reconstruct with your and Omar's help. More about that later. What I didn't know, was that you had not been back since. The office was abandoned. No electricity, no Wifi. Stuff lying around. A broken window. Everything had just been left as was. When we arrived at Omar's house where I would be staying during fieldwork, you went to pick up some clothes at the laundry lady's, clothes that you had taken there to be washed six months before.

The abandoned office and you picking up your clothes at the laundry lady's after six months opened my eyes to the enormous impact that violence and criminalization exert on the everyday organization of resistance. The defense of territory is not only about an abstract company and a group of organized community members, or communities protesting against state policies. No. It is also about these companies being part of a web that transcends local, national

and global levels. Webs that connect the state, the company, the judicial system, former militaries, hit men, drug traffickers, and many (armed) others and create an atmosphere in which it is never clear whom you can and cannot trust. A web that became impregnated with COVID-19.

****

Dear Jere,

Today I was thinking about the last time that I spoke to you. I think it was in October 2020 that I phoned you to hear your thoughts about how the pandemic affected the lives and work of the territory defenders. You told me that you had started going to the office again on a more regular basis, although you didn't feel completely safe doing so. This process of rebuilding the office and the network of territory defenders had ended abruptly when you were not allowed to drive to the region anymore because of the COVID-19 restrictions.

It had not been easy to get hold of you. Hurricane ETA was raging over Central America and causing many problems in the Ch'orti' area, on top of food shortage, violence and, of course, the pandemic. On my social media timeline, I saw numerous pictures of flooding rivers, broken bridges, and videos that featured people who had lost their harvest. We talked about how difficult it was to determine the amount of COVID-19 infections at that time. The problem here was of course, among other things, the health system. Indigenous peoples in Guatemala – and in Latin America in general - have poor access to health care (Meneses-Navarro et al, 2020). Many people with COVID-19-related complaints would not get tested. Many people did not get tested - not only because of the shortage of tests and disinformation about testing procedures, but also because if one did test positive with the virus, this could mean being hospitalized in Chiquimula, the departmental capital. I can still hear you say, while laughing cynically, that people would do *anything* to prevent such a situation, as that hospital was the worst nightmare imaginable. People preferred to stay inside if they would have complaints, and community leaders and indigenous authorities would make sure they would keep to this self-isolation. The time that territory defenders dedicated to regulate everything concerning the pandemic in their communities, ate into the time that they would otherwise be able to spend on sustaining in their own livelihoods and organize against mining and hydropower developments in their territories.

So, territory defenders were partly responsible for managing the COVID-19 situation in their communities, looking out for people in quarantine and trying to find information about standardized measures like facemasks and washing hands, as well as about testing. At the same time, they also ran, and still run, like you Jere, the risk of being infected themselves. Other territory defenders would be busy taking care of sick family members. Often, they preferred to heal themselves "their own way" as they do not trust the health care system. This is also the case for many indigenous peoples in the Cauca (Colombia), Nick

Middeldorp told me. And not to speak of mourning about family members who have passed away following a COVID-19 infection, like Sonia, a territory defender from Colombia, told me on the phone: *"Ay amiga, I am recovering from the virus, healing myself with tea and natural medicine. I lost seven family members, my poor mamacita, and six others"*.

We also talked about how the lockdowns that were implemented in Latin America to prevent further spread of the corona virus in March/April 2020, obviously limited the movement of people. In some places even children could go outside only twice a week. Elsewhere, children were allowed to spend a limited number of hours per day outside. In all cases travelling in public transport was restricted. As a result, small-scale farmers could only work several hours a day, and they could not travel to their plots further away from their communities, whereas extractive industries were seen as vital for the economy, working 24/7. *Ay Jere*, I still get so angry when I think about this! This deepens the enormous gap between poor, predominantly indigenous territories and the mestizo and ladino elite, the cleavages in society that are anchored in the racist, colonial history of Guatemala.

You also told me that *"many people have lost part of their harvest because they couldn't go out and buy fertilizer"*. In addition, restricted movement makes it impossible to go out and look for temporary jobs; it is impossible to find other ways of making money. Hence, lockdown restrictions have put more people in a situation in which they do not have enough to eat. A study by Oxfam this year showed that compared to 2019, the number of households that lives in a situation of food insecurity has doubled in 2020 (Oxfam 2020). On top of that, ETA came (and later IOTA). Territory defenders are mostly farmers, so this situation also impeded their work in resistance, "it keeps them busy". At the same time, people do not have another choice than breaking the rules of lockdown and quarantine live simply because they have to provide for food for their families. As Yurany, a territory defender from Colombia said to me on the phone *"It's dying of starvation or dying of the virus"*.

I am sure, that you would agree with my observation is that the defense of territory is not only shaped by COVID-19 (restrictions) because it is not possible to move around and not being able to meet in person. It did have an impact, of course. Territory defenders could not meet and keep their safety networks based on informal contacts intact. Nor could (international) organizations that normally provide for presential protection travel to the territories. The only way to keep in touch was through virtual meetings and phone calls, which only happened incidentally as many territory defenders do not have access to WiFi nor have money to buy data. Sometimes they would gather and attend a phone call together, but it is extremely difficult to provide support in the communities from a distance. But what impacted the defense of territory equally were the many other urgent issues, like health, food and violence that became more manifest during and through the pandemic, revealing and deepening already present racist structures at the same time. For territory defenders in Latin

America, the pandemic is one of many problems; and compared to extreme poverty and increasing levels of violence it's not always the most urgent one.

I will write you more about the violence part tomorrow, as this is the part we also talked most about when I was on fieldwork, but I must take a break now.

****

Hola Jere,

This is me again – a couple of days later than anticipated. As I promised to write you about violence, I reviewed all my fieldnotes that I wrote during my stay in the house in Camotán in January 2020. They are a little bit scattered around; some are on my computer, others in the six notebooks that I filled and then took pictures of, because I was afraid that they would be stolen. And then there are still some unorganized jottings on my phone. Anyhow, going through them, I realized that I had almost forgotten how ingrained fear and feeling unsafe is in the daily life of territory defenders.

I felt that knot in my stomach, the same one that I often felt during fieldwork.

I don't think that I told you a lot about how the fieldwork stories affected me. This knot that I mentioned. was partly caused by stories of direct violence (Galtung and Höivik 1971, Bourgeois 2001). Intense, sad, tragical and frightening stories, like the case of Irma Méndez, whose husband who was very engaged in the defense of territory had died under mysterious circumstances. She was hurt when she took part in a peaceful resistance against the mine and the alleged owner of the mine drove into the group of community members. Or the story of Omar's brother who was killed after a long and complicated process of manipulation, snitching, and bribing. Stories from Ch'orti' territory that resonated with the stories that I collected in 2018 in the Western Highlands, like the one of Elena, who joined the 'defense of territory' after her husband had been tortured and killed because of his actions against a hydropower company. It helped her a lot to work together with the compañeros/as as a way of dealing with her sadness and my loss, but she also feared violence and imprisonment on a daily basis. For example, she couldn't leave the community when her mother fell ill because a court warrant threatened her with immediate arrest the moment that she would leave the community. The territory defenders from other parts of Latin America that we had invited to a workshop in Chile about the politics of care, shared the similar stories, like Rubén, who explained how *"they framed the death of my wife as suicide"*. His wife had been killed because of his engagement in resistance to hydropower developments in Chile. And like Nazareth who during that same workshop shared how she lost her unborn baby because she was "*beaten during a protest*".

These stories were paralyzing, scary, and intense. They were also always narrated and embedded in a broader context of constant fear and unsafety, in a context of innumerable smaller stories about everyday coping strategies,

revealing how fear and feeling unsafe is ingrained in every small part of daily life. The daily impacts of dealing with (the threat of) violence are present everywhere in my fieldnotes from February 2018 and January 2020. They contain so many of these small, repetitive observations and informal conversations that I had jotted down. About how you, Jere, would notify every unknown car that drove around in town. How you would not get out of the car, not to be on the street even for getting lunch. About the jokes about having a price on your head after having visited a bank, employing humor to cope with the implicit existential threat. About Omar, who literally always checks the brakes of his car, and that he would have been dead if he didn't. About the constant balancing of which information to share with whom for the safety of yourself and the other. About how I wasn't left alone not for one minute for my own safety. These observations in themselves may seem insignificant, but together they show us that the impacts of direct violence reach far beyond the experience or threat itself. It becomes part of everyday life.

In addition, what makes violence so all-encompassing is that it takes place within a web spun by a variety of violent actors. Driving around in Jocotán and Camotán, you would often tell stories that reminded me of the Netflix series the *Queen of the South* (you even told me that there is actually a Queen of the South in the neighboring department of Zacapa) and when we crossed the border to Honduras to visit Jennifer, you pointed out which trucks, in your opinion, contained cocaine. The absence of the state also opens a power vacuum; hybrid spaces (Rasch 2017) or "gray zones" (Auyero, 2007) where illicit, armed groups gain ground in local communities and contest power.

You also told me that in some cases, the situation becomes so tense that territory defenders are taken out of the community, to a safe place, waiting for things to calm down. This moving around is an important strategy to keep people safe. Lockdown-related measures that limited mobility, made it a difficult strategy to maintain. Land Coalition also concludes in their report that: "*Whereas moving around is risky because it can cause an infection with the virus, not moving around turns defenders into easy targets for possible violence*". Territory defenders are now extra vulnerable because they must stay inside. Especially in Colombia there have been several cases of territory defenders that were traceable during the lockdown (Land Coalition 2020).

"*The number of threats and assaults has increased, because they know that we cannot act upon them*", you said on the phone when we talked about this in October 2020. The territory defenders could not move around in their territory, protecting themselves and accompanying others. But you could also not act promptly and adequately because you could not be on top of it from a distance. Organizations, including journalists cannot travel to the regions to provide support. Cases cannot be covered. Another reason for an increase of the number of irregularities, is that the eyes of the government are turned on the pandemic. In addition, territory defenders that normally would receive protection (or "protection" as you would say), like police patrols in the community or a

bodyguard to accompany them, now have to do without because all funds and hours are needed to implement corona regulations.

It was not a reassuring sketch of the current situation that you laid out for me during that phone call a little more than a year ago. Whereas territory defenders cannot meet because they are restricted in their movement, large scale extraction of natural resources continue. Assaults and threats towards territory defenders increase. At the same time there is an increased presence of the military, as many governments have declared (parts of) their territories as states of alerts because of the pandemic. In the past, defenders have reported that states of alerts - officially issued because of criminal and illegal activities – always have resulted in more criminalization and police intimidation for the territory defenders. Hence, according to them, the government uses this instrument as a way of controlling the behavior of territory defenders rather than that of criminals and illicit groups.

This is in line with how Latin American governments have used the pandemic as an excuse to restrict land and territory defenders' freedoms, such as the right to protest or freedom of speech. This has made it very difficult for defenders to organize against the destructive extractivist industries and other environmentally damaging projects. In line with such experiences, territory defenders express that the state of alerts that are said to be necessary to control the pandemic, are in reality meant to control the behavior of the territory defenders. To frighten them, and to serve the companies. Or as Maria Chic says in an interview: "*Who benefits from the state of alert? The transnational companies*". I'm sure you'd fully agree.

Well, I guess that's enough about violence for the moment. The main thing that I wanted to share with you today, are my observations about how direct forms of violence – rooted in racism as a structural form of violence and a neoliberal development model - are embedded in, and at the same time, produce a constant form of unsafety and sensations of fear. I do not exactly know how we could categorize this form of violence, but it "eats" people. It makes them depressed, causes headaches, stomach aches, and sleepless nights. It is all-encompassing and further disclosed and deepened during and through the COVID-19 pandemic.

****

Hola, hola Jere,

Bueno pues. Just one and a half years ago, this would have been the moment that we would have gone to *Las 100 Puertas* to drink Gallos and eat nachos and discuss everything that we had seen and heard the days before. This is the final letter that I am writing for the moment, and it is a short one. This, however, does not mean that the topic is closed. *Para nada*. The true impacts of the pandemic on structures of oppression, as well as on the defense of territory

remains to be seen. I promise that I will find my ways of keeping you informed and to contribute to the work that you have started in Ch'orti' territory in one way or another.

Re-reading the other letters, I think that the most important point that I wanted to make is that the restrictions related to the lockdowns also limit the everyday life of social organizing. The defense of the territory has been weakened, and that is not only because of the restrictions on movement. It is also about the meaning that these restrictions attain by being lived in the communities, where many other problems seem to be more urgent: such as violence, hurricanes, and famine. COVID-19 has deepened all these problems, and at the same time taken up lots of territory defenders' time, energy and attention.

Being a territory defender means living in a difficult world, full of fear and unsafety. It also means having a lot of courage.

I will leave it for now, Jere – *cuidate,* wherever you are.

References

Alonso-Fradejas, A. 2015. "Anything but a story foretold: Multiple politics of resistance to the agrarian extractivist project in Guatemala." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 42(3–4): 489–515.

Auyero, J. 2007. *Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bourgois Ph. 2001. "The power of violence in war and peace: Post-Cold War lessons from El Salvador." *Ethnography* 2.1: 5-34.

Carroll, K. 2015. "Representing ethnographic data through the epistolary form: A correspondence between a breastmilk donor and recipient." *Qualitative Inquiry* 21(8): 686-695.

Galtung, J. and T. Höivik. 1971. "Structural and direct violence: A note on operationalization." *Journal of Peace research* 8(1): 73-76.

Illmer, P. 2018. "The defence of territory and local struggle for more democracy in post-war Guatemala." *Democratization 25*(5): 771-786.

Land Coalition (2020) https://lac.landcoalition.org/es/noticias/covid-19-no-da-tregua-defensores-tierra/

Maria Choc (2020) https://nomada.gt/pais/actualidad/vivir-en-pandemia-y-en-estado-de-sitio-una-entrevista-con-maria-choc/

Meneses-Navarro, S., Freyermuth-Enciso, M.G., Pelcastre-Villafuerte, B.E., Campos-Navarro, R., Meléndez-Navarro, D.M. and Gómez-Flores-Ramos, L. 2020. "The challenges facing indigenous communities in Latin America as they confront the COVID-19 pandemic." *International Journal for Equity in Health 19*: 1-3.

Metz, B. 2006. *Ch'orti'-Maya survival in eastern Guatemala: indigeneity in transition*. UNM Press.

Metz, B., Mariano, L., & García, J. L. 2010. "The Violence After "La Violencia" in the Ch'orti'Region of Eastern Guatemala." *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology 15*(1): 16-41.

Oxfam The hunger virus: how COVID-19 is fuelling hunger in a hungry world | Oxfam International

Rasch, E. D. 2017. "Citizens, criminalization and violence in natural resource conflicts in Latin America." *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies/Revista Europea de Estudios Latinoamericanos y del Caribe* 103: 131-142.

Rasch, E. D. 2011. "Representing Mayas: Indigenous authorities and citizenship demands in Guatemala. *Social Analysis 55*(3): 54-73.

Sieder, R. 2007. The judiciary and indigenous rights in Guatemala. *International Journal of Constitutional Law*, *5*(2): 211-241.

About the author

Elisabet Dueholm Rasch is an associate professor at Wageningen University. Her research topics include (indigenous) mobilization toward neo-liberal policies and extractive projects, and energy production in Latin America (Guatemala) and the Netherlands. Her contemporary fieldwork in Guatemala focuses on how territory defenders experience violence and criminalization. Address: Sociology of Development and Change group (Bode 18), P.O. Box 8130, 6700 EW Wageningen, The Netherlands. Email: elisabet.rasch AT wur.nl

[i] Jere, solo te conocí un par de años, pero las últimas semanas los lindos recuerdos siguen amontonándose. Atesoro nuestras conversaciones que nunca se acabaron, sobre la justicia, los territorios, socialismo, derechos, la vida, y más. El tiempo compartido en la casa en Camotán. Las risas. Tu confianza. Me siento agradecida por haber conocido una persona tan dedicada, solidaria, linda inspiradora. Tú me guiaste en el territorio Ch'orti', junto con Omar y Jennifer. Allí continuamos tu lucha y así siempre estarás con nosotros. Espero que te llegue este abrazo enorme que te estoy mandando con el viento.