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# Interview with Tomás Ayuso, Honduran Photographer, Journalist, and Storyteller

Entrevista con Tomás Ayuso, Fotógrafo, Periodista, y Cronista Hondureño

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**Abstract:** In this interview, I speak with Tomás Ayuso about how he came to be a photographer, his approach to storytelling, and journalism in general in Central America. Ayuso is a self-taught photographer who is devoted to nuanced, complex, visual storytelling, or, as he puts it, “narrative over aesthetics every time.” His work focuses on Latin American conflict as it relates to the drug war, forced displacement, and urban dispossession. In covering the different types of violence confronting the region’s people, Ayuso hopes to create a record of both continental struggles and local successes. The reader can find much of Ayuso’s photography on Instagram @Tomás\_ayuso. An anthropologist of migration myself, I first met Tomás during the 2018 migrant caravan, in the Benito Juárez baseball field turned makeshift refugee camp in Tijuana. I already knew of him, as I had seen his work—*The Right To Grow Old*—while I was living in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, conducting ethnographic research on how young people navigate life after deportation. Over the years since meeting in Tijuana, Tomás and I have had an ongoing conversation about Honduras, migration, violence, and representation, which forms the basis for this interview.

**Keywords:** Honduras, Migration, Displacement, Violence, Photography, Narrative

**Resumen:** En esta entrevista hablo con Tomás Ayuso sobre cómo llegó a ser fotógrafo, su enfoque de la narración y el periodismo en general en Centroamérica. Ayuso es un fotógrafo autodidacta dedicado a la narración visual, compleja y llena de matices; como él dice, “la narrativa siempre por encima de la estética”. Su trabajo se centra en los conflictos latinoamericanos relacionados con la guerra contra las drogas, los desplazamientos forzados y la desposesión urbana. Al cubrir los diferentes tipos de violencia a los que se enfrentan los pueblos de la región, Ayuso espera crear un registro tanto de las luchas continentales como de los éxitos locales. Se puede ver su fotografía en Instagram @Tomás\_ayuso. Yo, antropóloga de la migración, conocí a Tomás en persona, durante la caravana de migrantes de 2018, en el campo de béisbol Benito Juárez convertido en campo de refugiados improvisado en Tijuana. Ya lo conocía, pues había visto su trabajo—*El derecho a envejecer*—mientras vivía en San Pedro Sula, Honduras, realizando una investigación etnográfica sobre cómo los jóvenes navegan la vida después de la deportación. Desde que nos conocimos en Tijuana, Tomás y yo hemos mantenido una conversación constante sobre Honduras, la migración, la violencia y la representación, que constituye la base de esta entrevista.

**Palabras clave:** Honduras, migración, desplazamiento, violencia, fotografía, narrativa

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Tomás Ayuso is a Honduran writer and documentary photojournalist. His work focuses on Latin American conflict as it relates to the drug war, forced displacement, and urban dispossession. Tomás seeks to bind the disparate threads of communities into the interlinked story of the Western Hemisphere. In covering the different types of violence facing the region's people, Tomás hopes to create a record of both continental struggles and local successes. The reader can find much of Tomás's photography on Instagram @Tomás\_ayuso.

Tomás Ayuso is a National Geographic Explorer who focuses on the Palestinian diaspora of Latin America. Tomás was also awarded the Open Society Foundations Moving Walls fellowship for his long-term project, *The Right to Grow Old*, which documents the impact migration has on Honduran youth and identity. He was selected as the recipient of the James Foley Award for Conflict Journalism in 2019. The same year, Tomás was one of the World Press Photo's 6x6 Global Talent Program selected talents in North and Central America. Currently, Tomás is a World Press Photo juror for the 2022 photograph of the year.

Tomás and I first met during the 2018 migrant caravan, in the Benito Juarez baseball field turned makeshift refugee camp in Tijuana. I already knew of him, though. I'd seen his work—*The Right To Grow Old*—while I was living in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, conducting research on how young people navigate life after deportation. Over the years, Tomás and I have had an ongoing conversation about Honduras, migration, and representation, which forms the basis for the interview I conducted with him in June of 2021. Though we were both in Honduras at the time, we recorded the following conversation over zoom, in English.

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IMAGE 1: © TOMÁS AYUSO.

**I know that before you began a career in photography, you were in academia, you were going in a pretty different direction, so what brought you to photography?**

My career goal was to work in diplomacy or foreign aid, humanitarian aid of some kind. I was mostly focused on Conflict Resolution and DDR (disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration). I was pretty far into it, in New York City. Then, unfortunately due to a number of personal and professional reasons, I was forced to abandon that dream, and had to move back to Honduras after living in the U.S. for 11 or 12 years. And I came back to a country where I was very overqualified, with a masters in Conflict and Development. So I came back here, and I saw myself with very limited work options. It was the U.S. Embassy, which was not going to be something that I was too keen on. Or the government. Which I was definitely not keen on. And, thinking about the skill set that I developed while in the U.S., I recognized that a lot of the output of that kind of work, after doing interviews and spending time with the main actors of specific conflicts, was very dry policy papers or white papers. I thought, why not do the same, but with a storytelling voice?

At the beginning, I did that, but I had no legs to stand on. No one would listen to me or accept my pitches. I was just some nobody with a funny name from a country with a funnier name.<sup>1</sup> And I thought there's that adage, that "a picture's worth 1000 words," so I thought, why not try that? And I picked up my sister's camera and started to take pictures of the stories that I was interested in. And my very first story was with the gang. Because this was at the peak—end of 2013, 2014—of the bloodbath that was happening in Honduras. And I felt that there was more to it than just what was being displayed on the front page of media from the North Atlantic, which was just dehumanizing in its more sober moments, and often just wildly, thinly veiled, racist.

**Right, it was portraying *those* people in *that* place like monsters.**

Yes. It was a mix of orientalism and racial determinism; it was very 1800s in its message. The headlines, the texts, sounded like heavy metal songs. Like "rivers of blood," "bones crunch under their boots as they walk down the bleak barren streets of San Pedro."<sup>2</sup> And there I am in San Pedro with my girlfriend, just going to McDonalds.

But this is the reductive way in which everything was done. That's when I saw that photography, not only text, would be the way to go about things to kind of disprove what was shown in these pictures. It's not that there wasn't a modicum of truth in what they were imparting, but it just didn't resonate with me. That's how I got into it, and I was self-taught.

<sup>1</sup> Tomás is talking about competing with the foreign journalists who were covering Honduras and the difficulties of getting foreign media outlets to take him, a Honduran, seriously.

<sup>2</sup> San Pedro refers to San Pedro Sula, Honduras's second largest city and industrial and economic capital. San Pedro Sula made international headlines—like the kinds referenced here—when it became the city with the highest murder rate in the world in 2012.

The first time I saw your work was in the “Right to Grow Old” series. I didn’t know who you were, whether your “funny name,” as you say, was Honduran or not. But the photos immediately felt different—it was an affective difference—than all the other images that have come out of San Pedro Sula about particular neighborhoods and gang adjacent content. I wonder what, in your view, accounts for that difference. Do you think it is because you’re Honduran, and so you come with a different vantage point to begin with? Do you think that’s because you have a different formation? Do you think it’s because of photographic techniques you’ve developed?



IMAGE 2: SCENES OF HONDURAS. © TOMÁS AYUSO.

Well, I don’t know exactly, I don’t know how you see them, I cannot, of course, but I’ve heard commentary similar to yours from other people. But it isn’t limited only to Honduras. I’ve heard the same of the work that I’ve done in Mexico, with Mexicans. And with other Central Americans. And in Colombia (related to my education and preparation in Conflict Resolution and DDR). I spent time with displaced people in other countries and I’ve heard the same commentary. I think that what is unique to me, or maybe not unique to me but definitely how I am, is how I treat the people in the photograph. It’s never just been, like, I cannot physically just take a picture of someone. Since I developed my photography, my writing, and my interviewing into one, they’re part of the same project, the same unified effort is storytelling, so everything falls under the same banner. There’s not one place where one ends and the other begins, and that means that when I speak to people, I speak to them as who they are, I listen to them before I take out a camera. I spend time with them, I think I sincerely

engage with them without the artifice of “the journalist,” or “the outsider in the midst.”

Most people in Honduras think I’m foreign anyway. So I don’t even really have a leg up in that regard, because, you know, when they see me, they see something else. So, I’d say that the first thing is the particular way that I came about this. The second one is that, as a point of origin (for how I think about photography), is that I’ve always maintained the goal to not repeat the messy and reductive photography that I saw when I started, and I still see, unfortunately. And third, it is the focus on empathy and understanding, the way that I engage with people. As much as I can, I always try to take narrative pictures that tell of the person, of the person telling their own story, not putting aesthetic over narrative. So, the formula, if there is one, is narrative over aesthetic all the time. My approach is always to be a person that ferries a person’s story to the greater abroad, with as little filter as I can, with as little me as I can.



IMAGE 3: © TOMÁS AYUSO.

**It’s a huge responsibility, isn’t it? For a long time Honduras, Central America in general, but Honduras especially, was particularly untold in any nuanced way.**

Yeah, there is a responsibility. That is the non-negotiable beginning and the non-negotiable end of it all. There are so many pictures that will never [get] published because they just didn’t match what I was seeing, or they didn’t match the message, or the story of the person, or the importance of the thematic moment that the person’s story has at any given point in the greater project. When

you have a series of pictures that have all that thought put into it, and they're put together into a greater project, then I'm making sure that, from the beginning of the process to its end when it reaches the hands of whoever the audience may be, that there is no deterioration or degradation of the person's identity or message at any moment.

**I think your work, especially how you combine images and storytelling and text together, retains the complexity and even the contradictions. It's not distilled into a single, flat kind of analysis.**

That's my intention. And if I can do it, then I believe that it can be done by people that are not me. I don't think that I have a monopoly on that skill, if it's really a skill at all. One of the first things I did when I started was to work as a local producer for a state media outlet from a country in Europe. I understand that they don't need to know the explicit particulars of the family tree of organized crime in Honduras. But do you really just have to flatten everything to two dimensional shapes? Spoon feed everything? Are people that dumb? I think that if a story is strong enough, and well executed and told, with well-executed pictures that complement the text, you don't need to sacrifice anything. It can all be there. Because people, if they're interested, if you pique their interest, they will do the research. So I choose, whenever and as often as I can, to not sacrifice complexity and assume that people who are going to read this are not as simple as some editors think people are. I've seen the opposite.



IMAGE 4: TOMAS. © TOMÁS AYUSO.

**I think the way that you use Instagram is also really part of this. You have a kind of democratizing approach. You publish so much of your work and your stories there, making it accessible to all kinds of people who aren't going to have a subscription to a magazine or access to other kinds of outlets. And it seems like you get quite a robust response to your stories.**

Yes, democratizing is the right word. And I think this is also what chipped away at the white monolith that existed before, chipped away because it's not been toppled. I always treated Instagram as my own newspaper. I can do whatever I want as long as I stick to my own ethical convictions. I have my own stylistic flourishes; it's how I got my name out. And people respond to it. People actively ask me about some of the stories that I've posted over time, and they ask me "how are these people doing?"; "how are they?"; "how is this family?" It generates actual care and interest, not just weird morbid safari-ism, but real interest in their well-being. The best part of this is that access is there for anyone. Of course, there's a lot of preaching to the choir, that is to be expected. But also you end up with people who had opinions much different to mine—some sympathetic but different, others completely oppositional—that have come to my work and read it and engaged me in conversation, through direct messages (DM), who have had their minds changed.

There was a guy who wrote me a DM saying something along the lines of "I should hate you." And then he went on to say that he had been a lifelong . . . he didn't say racist explicitly . . . but that he hated "illegals" and he really didn't like Mexicans, and he thought the Central Americans were even worse. He happened to find my profile at some point, and he was going to shit talk me or just heckle me but then he actually engaged with the text and the pictures. Over several DMs he tells me, "but then I stopped seeing them as the migrant or the Honduran and I started seeing them as the daughter and the single father and I saw myself and I realized what I was doing was wrong." He ended by saying, "you know all this hate that I had for so long, there's nothing I can do about it now it's been said it's been done, and I feel I should apologize to someone, but I don't know who so it might as well be you." And he apologizes.

And that's not the only time I've had responses like that. And that's why you do it. People preaching to the choir, that's great, it's good to inform people. But they're not the ones who are perpetuating the barbarity, for the most part. Sometimes it does feel like screaming into the void but oftentimes, a lot more often than I would have ever thought, you get responses like that, and it makes it all really worth. It's what keeps a person going.

### **What is next for you? What do you have in the works?**

The work that I just wrapped again seeks to keep confronting simplification and essentialization at all times, at all corners, since that is just beyond unproductive. Reducing migration to "gangs bad," "drugs bad," "America bad," "politics bad." That's been said, it's been done, I don't think anyone's learning anything new. I felt that it was necessary for audiences that are not from here, and even from here, to explain that it isn't just the often-mentioned villains,

it is an accumulation of traumas over generations, over a lifetime, even over the course of a short lifespan. So I decided to focus on how all these separate traumas and indignities, injustices, and misery, in whatever way it comes, affect the youth. It's an accumulation of hardship, trauma that goes unresolved, and the decisions that they make to rid themselves of these burdens. Migration isn't always a singular event but is a product of starving when people were young, of seeing, of being a victim of sexual violence when they were minors, or seeing their mothers suffer through a year of not having work, of droughts and poor living conditions, and going seven months without school. All these things combine and accumulate into a life that makes people seek a way out, whatever way possible. My findings suggest four outcomes here.

One of them is migration, which has been perfectly normalized by this point. But second, we're also seeing a new problem of youth suicide, which has been referred to as an epidemic by a mental health expert. People below the age of 21 either taking agricultural chemicals to kill themselves or hanging themselves. Speculation always happens after a suicide, and you can never get a full answer, but in my conversations with people, it was always because she had spent 18 months without a job; because he couldn't resist the pressures of being around so much violence. Again, you keep seeing that some people's backs are metaphorically broken, and they want out, and what's so desperately awful about this is that there seems to be no bottom to how young people with suicidal ideation would be. I met 12-year-olds, 8-year-olds. If you're talking about an 8-year-old talking about self-annihilation, something is very wrong. *Cómo citar:*

The third way is choosing to defend your land or your community. This is in contested territory, such as places targeted for muscular-forced development that benefits *not* the people that are supposed to be "developed." Such is the case of the Garifuna and the many indigenous peoples of the south and the west as well. But this also can mean choosing to defend your community by way of arms, not with a political project, but just self-defense groups that almost inevitably deform into criminal enterprises.

And then the fourth way, and this is what makes me worried for the future, is the people that have no choice. Because, whether they have children and they can't leave them alone or they're taking care of someone and they don't want to leave them for whatever reason, they are just forced to endure and just keep accumulating the trauma. And people will have a good day, they'll smile, but what I'm finding at a national level is—and it doesn't matter if it's rural, urban, male, female, whatever way you want to disaggregate the demographics of the country—this is a country of deeply, deeply traumatized people.





**IMAGE 5: MIGRACIÓN. © TOMÁS AYUSO.**



**IMAGE 6: MIGRACIÓN. © TOMÁS AYUSO.**

**Do you think the situation has changed from when you first picked up a camera and thought “hold on, this discourse, the heavy metal headlines, are really not getting the whole story,” do you think that has become more nuanced?**

It has changed; but my concern is that it was just a trend. I don't know that the ground gained for diversity or for inclusion or representation with outlets that are based in the North Atlantic will last, to be honest. That [way of thinking] is not just me, it's from a lot of other photographers from more or less my generation from other countries, feeling like we might as well get the work from them now because soon enough they'll just go back to how it used to be. That might just be cynical, the cynicism that comes with being from these parts. Especially in Latin America, I don't know why exactly, there has been more room opened for people of my generation, people who started in the mid 2010s. But the concern is that it's not going to stay. Is it just this moment in time, when diversity was celebrated? Or is it going to be more permanent? And who is responsible for making that a sustainable state of affairs? I am optimistic, but I'm also realistic.

And I encourage my fellow folks from what I understand people in the North Atlantic call us, “the Global South,” to keep working at this [storytelling, photography] and tell our truths and the truths of these countries, as we see them, without ignoring the issues of the country. If I do have a criticism of some photographers or journalists from down here, it's that a lot is reduced to “it's the Americans fault” or “the government's fault.” Yes, of course. But I do believe that the society that we belong to, our own groups, are just as culpable. Here in Honduras, a society that tolerates children picking up a weapon at the age of 13, or children being chronically malnourished, just a couple hundred meters from the center of government, a society that tolerates all these injustices, indignities, and atrocities, I think, is just as much to blame, and it's our job as photographers to reflect that, to reflect these things without just pointing the finger at whatever everyone else does. Our job is to sift through that and reflect the indignity wherever it's from, however it exists.

You know what? Maybe I'm wrong. I recognize that I don't absolutely know if what I'm going to say is the absolute truth, but I do believe that if you offer up a work, a journalistic work, a purely photographic work, or just tell a story, and you tell it without hiding or shying away from complexity and all the different things that come with not reducing the story, then you will have an equally non-reduced response.

**I think it is sort of both a challenge and something very encouraging for people who do the work of documenting messy, complicated, unglamorous, pieces of the world.**

That's how I understand that man's response and other similar responses. I don't know if he would have reached that same conclusion had it been, you know, look at these poor poor people be poor, or look at these people, this is the fault of America. It's in the deeply sullen gray—as opposed to black or white—that is the Honduran tale that you get that type of engagement.



IMAGE 7: © TOMÁS AYUSO.