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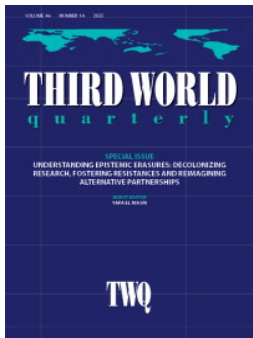
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Divided we stand: gated communities, fear and violence in Guatemala City

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ABSTRACT

Within the academic discourse on enclave urbanism in Latin America, gated communities are frequently portrayed as socially homogeneous enclaves, ostensibly justified by concerns over crime, yet fundamentally shaped by residents' reluctance to engage with social diversity – and thus largely unaffected by broader social currents. In this article, I argue that such a dualistic framing offers too narrow a lens. I demonstrate that the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion underpinning gated communities are inherently flawed. As a result, fear and distrust continue to fragment rather than unify, even within the boundaries of these enclaves. Moreover, I contend that in a city of wild violence, lived experiences of violence should not be too readily dismissed as a driver behind the rise of gated living. Yet I also propose a more fundamental reason to question the stark contrast often drawn between life inside and outside the walls: like many other Guatemalans, residents of gated communities frequently express a deep-seated distrust of their fellow citizens, rooted in the country's long history of exploitation, terror and violence. In this context, the urge to withdraw, also within gated communities, is a response not only to perceived social heterogeneity – the differences – but also to what people have in common.

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Introduction

The proliferation of gated communities in contemporary Latin American cities has had a profound and transformative impact on urban landscapes and the very notion of the 'right to the city' (Harvey 2008; O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013). While crime is frequently cited as the primary justification for their construction, it is often noted that the impetus to retreat behind fortified boundaries reflects a deeper reluctance to engage with social heterogeneity. Gated communities, in this line of thinking, are socially homogeneous enclaves whose residents have turned their backs on public space – for all its insecurity and social diversity – while the masses on the other side of these walls, unable to afford entry, are left to endure the worst of the region's wild and relentless violence (Caldeira 1996; Franko 2020; O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013). If the neoliberal system to which much of the region almost religiously adheres is a system of winners and losers, then it finds its arbiter of power in the security wall: a spatial expression of a model that delegates city planning to

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private contractors and simultaneously fosters the kind of social stress in which security walls, guards and cameras thrive (Harvey 2008; Low 2003).

There is much to say for the above dualistic picture of Latin America's highly unequal cities, which represents the dominant line of thinking within academic discourse, if we were to describe them in broad strokes (Koonings and Kruijt 2007). Yet on the ground, we know that societies tend to lose some of their black-and-white shades, even as others become more sharply defined. A persistent issue in scholarly discussions of enclave urbanism in Latin America, however, is their tendency to fall into the trap of binary thinking (Angotti 2013). One of the consequences of this is that analyses of the securitisation of urban space in Latin America (and beyond) often do not take into account that the poor and lower middle class also build gated communities, even though everybody seems to agree on the fact that they do (Blakely and Snyder 1997; Dinzey-Flores 2013; Rodgers 2004). The description offered by Thomas, O'Neill, and Offit of gated communities in Guatemala City is telling: 'Gated communities', they argue, 'use private security guards, surveillance technology, and imposing walls to protect wealthy residents from actual and perceived threats' (2011, 15). Gated communities are bulwarks of the rich: this tends to be the angle from which they are approached in the literature. This has tainted not only the academic interpretation of the gated community, but also that of the Latin American city as a whole.

In this article, I draw from the case of Guatemala City, a city – like many other Latin American cities – crisscrossed by security walls. These should not be treated as a new phenomenon: their beginnings lie far back in time, in the territorial divisions of the colonial era (Angotti 2013; Peeters 2021). Yet at the same time, they are also a product of more recent forces – more specifically, of what commentators have dubbed the 'neo-liberalisation' (Fischer and Benson 2006) or 'democratisation' (Kruijt and Koonings 1999; Rodgers 2006) of violence. In Guatemala, to put it briefly, within the space of a few decades, the political and often state-sponsored violence of the civil war (1960–1996) made way for a democracy in which violence diffused into the hands of the masses and gained an increasingly criminal and urban character. Within this context, Guatemala City – like many other Latin American cities that have undergone similar processes – has turned into a city of 'violent pluralism', where violence, or the threat of it, is a prerequisite for the organisation of many of the collectives that make up civil society (Arias and Goldstein 2010). A city of gangs, of *narcos*, of a corrupt police force and, indeed, of gated communities.

In what follows, I adopt a focused approach to the concept of the gated community, using the term as a lens through which to examine the social divisions it both reflects and reinforces. Specifically, I ask what is being separated by the gate, and what this separation means for the social composition and interpersonal dynamics of the so-called community enclosed within. In doing so, I advance three key arguments. First, I show that residents' capacity to control their space is far from absolute; gated communities, almost by design, absorb some of the social diversity, threats (real and perceived) and distrust associated with life beyond the gates. Second, I argue that lived experiences of violence should not be too readily dismissed as a driving force behind gating in a city as violent as Guatemala City. Third, I contend that there is an internalised distrust with which Guatemalans view fellow countrymen – one rooted in the country's long history of exploitation, terror and violence. This distrust

undermines social cohesion even within gated communities, though in a perhaps unexpected way: it arises not from differences, but from what people have in common.

The arguments presented in this article are grounded in eight months of ethnographic research conducted in Guatemala City across two periods: May–September 2016 and February–June 2017. The study focused on five case studies, each centred on an individual or small group and their social networks, spanning different positions within the city's social hierarchy (Peeters 2021). Four of these cases are particularly relevant here, as all involved families living in gated communities. These ranged from poor/lower middle class to affluent: (1) Miguel, María Luisa and their three children Daniel, Rosa and Yolanda, who had fled from the marginalised, gang-ridden neighbourhood of Balcón Verde due to extortion to start anew in a rental apartment in El Dorado, a safer large, walled middle-class neighbourhood 'above their paygrade'; (2) Oscar and his daughters, who, especially in the case of the latter, lived an almost reclusive existence in a modest closed condominium surrounded by marginal areas associated with high levels of crime and violence; (3) Gustavo, a middle-class man rebuilding his life with his daughter Valeria after leaving a powerful evangelical sect; and (4) Claudina, who resided with her five children and staff – including two bodyguards – in a villa in an upscale part of the city, though she herself was born in a poor neighbourhood. Beyond these cases, I gained a range of other contacts and research experiences from which this take on the gated community in Guatemala City also benefits. But before getting to Guatemala City, I will first attempt to identify some of the dominant notions within the academic discourse on everyday life behind security walls in Latin American cities.

Detaching from 'city life'

If the academic discourse on enclave urbanism leans towards black-and-white thinking, it is because it places high trust in the ability of gated communities to, on the one hand, include and, on the other hand, exclude (Caldeira 2000). Having said this, the type of inclusion gated communities rely on is seldom explicitly studied beyond the obvious notion that life behind security walls comes with a price tag, which means it is not for everybody. Instead, their power to include is often implicitly assumed through the widely asserted notion that gated communities are socially homogeneous (Blakely and Snyder 1997; Borsdorf, Hildalgo, and Vidal-Koppmann 2016; Franko 2020; Low 2003; Svampa 2001), offering their residents a life among 'social equals' (Caldeira 2000) or 'similar others' (Klaufus et al. 2017).

This homogeneity finds both justification and a new dimension in what Caldeira – whose work on São Paulo is the cork upon which research on urban fragmentation in Latin America floats – calls the 'talk of crime' (2000, 20), the socially constructed stories about crime that primarily revolve around crime but also borrow from other anxieties and prejudices regarding factors like race and class. The talk of crime, Caldeira argues, helps order a fluid and insecure world by demarcating the lines between the civilised and less civilised, and as such gives legitimacy to the 'privatized, enclosed and monitored spaces of residence, consumption, leisure and work' (1996, 303) she calls 'fortified enclaves'. Gated communities, as further illustrated in the work of others (Clos in Provost 2014; Franko 2020), derive their primary justification from concerns about crime but have their sting in residents' unwillingness to live with diversity.

The impact of this social homogeneity on community life within the security walls varies by case and, at times, by author. In most studies, it appears as the basis for a cohesive

community life (Franko 2020; Márquez and Pérez 2008; Moura 2003; O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013; Svampa 2001; Thuillier 2005;), which, in itself, becomes 'a form of privilege' (Méndez et al. 2021, 1691). For example, in their study on Santiago de Chile, Márquez and Pérez state that the city is like other Latin American cities in that gated communities have allowed the upper and middle classes to create a 'setting reflecting their lifestyle among equals and a "sociability among ourselves" and to establish a private "urbanism of affinities"' (2008, 1479). O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela speak of a 'peaceful solidarity' (2013, 379) with which the rich live in the extensive gated communities of Latin America's megacities.

While much of the literature depicts gated communities as socially cohesive and homogeneous, a number of studies challenge this assumption by highlighting internal tensions and divisions. Hurtado-Tarazona (2018) examines Ciudad Verde, a large-scale social housing complex on the outskirts of Bogotá, designed according to the 'city inside the city' logic typically associated with elite enclaves. Although intended for middle- and low-income residents, the project evolved into a site of aspirational middle-class identity formation, where behaviour associated with a 'poor' or 'tenancy' mentality – such as hanging laundry in public view – emerged as markers of social distinction and exclusion. In a related study, Hurtado-Tarazona, Álvarez Rivadulla, and Fleischer (2020) explore various lower middle-class gated communities in Bogotá, revealing how proximity among residents with divergent class backgrounds often generated conflict, particularly over issues like noise and pet ownership. Notably, one of the few shared sentiments among homeowners was a widespread disapproval of renters, who were frequently perceived as lacking the moral and civic qualities of 'deserving citizens' (2020, 643; see also Kopper 2015). Peeters and Hoey (2017) investigate an elite neighbourhood in Quito that had long operated under an unwritten rule permitting only single-family homes, attracting predominantly wealthy residents. However, the eventual introduction of apartment buildings opened the area to more average middle-class citizens. This shift in social composition not only limited interaction among residents but also prompted many affluent families to leave the neighbourhood. Tanulku (2016) offers a complementary perspective in her study of two upper-middle-class gated communities in Istanbul, arguing that such spaces are not only sites of exclusion from the urban poor but also arenas of internal moral and symbolic competition. She illustrates how residents differentiated themselves from one another, and from other gated communities, through economic, cultural and especially moral boundaries. These distinctions were articulated through a form of 'moral capitalism', in which social legitimacy was tied to hard work and personal merit rather than inherited or illicit wealth. Based on this, she advocates for the 'need for studying gated communities in terms of the competition and differences between them in different societies' (332).

A similar insight can be drawn from an aspect of Caldeira's most influential work *City of Walls* (2000) that seems overlooked by many, in which she explores the nature of 'community life' in São Paulo's fortified enclaves. According to her, these are places where disrespect for the law is almost a rule; something she attributes to the weak notion of public responsibility people there are already wired with, which is freed from its last shackles in settings where there is no police control. As a result, it was almost impossible for residents to agree on internal rules. But she goes a step further by asserting that gated community dwellers in São Paulo are not interested in local sociability and a sense of community in the first place, nor are properties sold to them under this premise. A life among equals, she is saying, does not equal peaceful coexistence.

Of course, in a world where inclusion is paired with gates and guards, there is no inclusion without exclusion. The latter, as Franko notes, takes on two directions. 'Members of gated communities', she writes, 'can control and exclude people from their communities, and crucially, exclude themselves from city life as well' (2020, 73). Yet as others have contended (O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013; Rodgers 2004; Thomas et al. 2011), the extent to which gated communities can offer their residents a haven away from 'city life' is dependent on the social, economic and cultural services they offer. Size matters. In megacities like Mexico City and São Paulo entire gated towns have erupted, offering their residents a 'complete' living environment from which they hardly have to leave (Caldeira 2000). There are no such places, however, in Managua, writes Rodgers (2004), for the simple reason that there are not enough wealthy citizens in the city, which means that gated communities are not extensive enough to be fully self-sustainable. Instead, the elite hop from one privately protected place to another through 'a strategic set of well-maintained, well-lit, and fast-moving roads' (2004, 120) that keep them isolated from the high levels of crime and insecurity in the city. As a result, Rodgers argues, 'Managua has undergone a process whereby a whole layer of the metropolis has been 'disembedded' from the general fabric of the city' (2004, 113). The image of disembedding as a strategy is a powerful one that has also been applied to Guatemala City (O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2013; Thomas et al. 2011), although Thomas et al. feel the need to emphasise the attempt behind it:

In many mid-sized Latin American cities [...] the strategies by which the very wealthy 'disembed' (Rodgers 2004) themselves from society differ significantly from strategies observed in larger cities. While São Paulo's demographic contours, for example, allow the wealthy to all but retreat from public life, the practice of security in a mid-sized city, such as Guatemala City, leads to more porous relationships between those who can afford walls laced with glass shards and those who cannot. Segregation is more of an ideology than a lived reality in Guatemala City. (2011, 3)

The weak spot of gated communities in Guatemala City, and cities alike, these authors seem to suggest, is that they are not extensive enough to offer residents a world with everything in it. People have to leave, that is the problem.

Not everyone, however, is equally convinced of the extent to which gated community residents can detach themselves from the type of everyday life found outside the gates (Breetzke et al. 2014; Hurtado-Tarazona et al. 2020; Sarpong 2017; Tanulku 2018). Tanulku, for example, documents several cases of robberies in an upscale gated community in Istanbul, which occurred in houses that were located close to the neighbourhood's outside borders, turning the latter into 'a source of insecurity' (2018, 170). Breetzke, Landman and Cohn (2014) even find that homes in and around gated communities in the South African city of Tshwane have burglary rates up to four times that of the city, which brings them to the conclusion that gated communities 'are not accomplishing their primary goal, which is to prevent crime, or rather reduce the risk of criminal victimization of residents' (2014, 135–136). This observation – that gated communities may in fact attract crime, even as they continue to be perceived as prerequisites for a peaceful life – is less surprising than it might initially seem, given the emphasis literature puts on fear of crime instead of actual lived crime behind the urge to withdraw, which helps to ensure that 'the logic of spatial separation frequently becomes interlinked with a logic of social exclusion' (Rodgers 2004, 114).

The need to look beyond actual crime when analysing fear of crime is perhaps most evident in the observation that the very act of retreating behind gates can amplify fear itself

(Bauman 2013; Blandy 2008; Low 2003; Sarpong 2017). Gated communities, by design, construct a stark boundary between the 'inside' and the 'outside', thereby rendering the external world increasingly unfamiliar and threatening. In her ethnographic study of gated communities in the United States, Low depicts gated communities as embodiments of social splitting – in this case, the oversimplification and dichotomisation of a fluid and insecure world – saying that 'the walls and gates of the community reflect this splitting physically as well as metaphorically, with 'good' people (the good part of us) inside, and the 'bad' remaining outside' (2003, 139). According to her, children raised in such environments often develop an exaggerated fear of others, shaped not by direct experience but by the spatial and social isolation imposed by the gates. This psychological mechanism is echoed in Bauman's (2013) poignant observation: 'The more elaborate the locks, padlocks and chains we install by day, the more terrifying the nightmares of break-ins and lootings that haunt us by night'. The higher the walls, this line of thinking tells us, the deeper the fear: gated communities thus emerge not only as responses to perceived insecurity but also as its producers, reinforcing a cycle in which spatial separation and social exclusion feed into one another.

The capacity to control: inclusion

Anyone who places the hidden worlds of the many security walls and fences of Guatemala City alongside the city's sometimes immense slums with their typical plunge into ravines is inclined to accept the 'crude dualism' (Angotti 2013, 6) towards which the academic discourse leans without problematising it. Those who scrutinise life on both sides of the security walls, however, will find that gated communities there tend to be less shielded from what Franko (2020) calls 'city life' than often suggested in the literature. I will give two reasons that, respectively, bring us to the style of inclusion and, in the next paragraph, the style of exclusion gated communities lean on.

First of all, control in gated communities is principally directed towards outsiders not belonging to the neighbourhood, but there are few possibilities at hand for, say, a neighbourhood committee (and even less for individual residents) to master the process of inclusion and control the way outsiders can become residents. All that one's presence in a certain neighbourhood reveals is one's capacity to buy or rent a place there, which may or may not necessarily place one in the same financial league as the other residents, but does not distinguish between old money, nouveau riche, plantation owners, *narcos* and politicians – to name but some of the flavours available in the more exclusive neighbourhoods. Or, in more mixed neighbourhoods, between renters and homeowners or owners of single-family houses and people residing in apartment buildings (Peeters and Hoey 2017).

Within this context, gated communities in Guatemala City have evolved into spatial manifestations of intra-class competition and moral differentiation – echoing dynamics observed in Bogotá (Hurtado-Tarazona 2018; Hurtado-Tarazona et al. 2020), Quito (Peeters and Hoey 2017) and Istanbul (Tanulku 2016) – rather than enclaves of social homogeneity. In Oscar's neighbourhood Loma Linda (case 2), a group of young residents was held responsible for several burglaries and robberies. The group's presence, Oscar believed, was a consequence of the fact that some homeowners had rented out their places not to 'people of trust', but instead to people from gang-ridden *colonias* who came to Loma Linda to prevent their children from being recruited by the *maras*. A different kind of people, he meant. This may have also been the way residents of El Dorado looked at residents like Miguel (case 1) and

others from marginal neighbourhoods. Once in El Dorado, Miguel's daughters Rosa and Yolanda had quickly made new friends on the football court, where the boys had been impressed by their skills. But when Rosa told them where she came from, they had loudly responded, '*a la gran* [oh my god], a neighbourhood of *mareros* [gang members], they should all be killed!' After that, Rosa chose not to speak of her past again.

Claudina (case 4), due to her modest background and her work managing several motels – which were places where people tended to go for a few hours to be with their lover or a prostitute – embodied how the 'undesired' could enter elite spaces like Vista Alegre by way of legitimate, though socially contested, means. She was looked down upon in her neighbourhood and similarly ostracised by other mothers at the exclusive Colegio Gran Bretaña, where her daughters were enrolled. In response, she kept saying to me every time a chance to do so arose, that she was still the same poor girl she once was, just as she kept calling popular, low-income places 'her world', in this way emphasising the same differentness others used against her – a way of dealing with stigma Goffman (1990) classified as 'militancy'.

The above dynamics also underscore the absence of the communal solidarity often idealised in discourses surrounding gated living. Indeed, the streets of gated communities El Dorado, Loma Linda, Flor del Campo and Vista Alegre were not homes to vibrant community lives. It was each and every one in his own world. And the more exclusive the neighbourhood, the more the individual houses tend to be protected by gates, guards and other individual security measures. In Vista Alegre, houses were shielded from the streets with gates that revealed little of what was hidden behind them. Residents typically traversed the neighbourhood's streets from behind the polarised windows of their cars. In consequence, after nine years in the neighbourhood, Claudina's children had no clue – not even a face – who was living next to them.

This reticence towards the neighbourhood and its people, however, did not stop residents from living in each other's gaze. At least, this is what I took from the competition Claudina described between residents in the neighbourhood over individual security measures, where the upgrading of the visible security measures by one resident tended to inspire others to do the same, or even more. It was a type of arms race that seemed almost inevitable in a violence-stricken country that almost religiously adhered to the logic of the market, as it provided people with a way of distinguishing themselves from others without it necessarily coming at the cost of one's security. This kind of 'aesthetization of security', as Caldeira (2000) calls it, shows that violence is not a collapse of the social order in such settings; it is the social order.

At the same time, it is important to note that not only did the collective control strategies of gated communities have their limitations, this was also true of their residents' more individual efforts on this front. Perhaps most importantly, children were generally less prepared to subdue themselves to the disciplined logic of withdrawal – basically, for being children. This means that they tended to be weak spots in family-wide withdrawal strategies serving the purposes of security, predictability and, where possible, exclusivity. It was why Juan instructed his children not to be too '*meloso*' [literally: honeyed] with people and to be cautious when meeting new ones. 'They could be good people, right', he explained to me, as he had probably explained to his daughters,

but they can have family members that are not such good people and they hear the information and are like 'where is that?' That you don't give information that gets you extorted or that they say: 'Look, I like your daughter to be concubine of the *mareros*', right.

And it was also why parents at the elite school of Colegio Gran Bretaña, where nouveau riche and old money mingled, liked meddling in their children's friendships, as Claudina's youngest daughter Anabél experienced when she was excluded from a group of friends after the mothers of her presumed friends had told their children not to associate with her.

Somewhat paradoxically, children, because of their more open attitude, also tended to be an important source of information regarding what residents knew about their fellow residents. For example, an acquaintance from a wealthy, gated residential area explained to me that his 14-year-old son, by playing with the children of his street, found out much more about the residents of his neighbourhood than he did. One time, his son went home with a boy with whom he played football and found five machine guns hanging on the wall of the garage where they parked their bicycles. Added to the big Hummer and the BMW the owner of the property sported, and the 18 employees he had working in and around his house, my friend suspected it to be the home of a *narco*.

The capacity to control: exclusion

As we have seen, the mechanisms that gated communities employ to control the influx of people are not primarily aimed at those seeking to move into the neighbourhood. When it comes to security, gated communities have their gaze focused on the outside world. At the same time, the style of exclusion these neighbourhoods typically enjoy is accompanied by obvious flaws, which, as others have also suggested (Breetzke et al. 2014; Hurtado-Tarazona et al. 2020; Sarpong 2017; Tanulku 2018), also means that gated communities are not necessarily free from crime coming from the outside.

To begin with, few gated communities are fully enclosed by fences or walls, which heightens the importance of security guards. These guards, however, are often poorly paid and poorly educated, also because there are many illegal private security companies around offering their services at low cost.¹ This also has consequences for the extent to which they can protect the community from external threats. This became painfully evident in Gustavo's neighbourhood of Flor del Campo (case 3), which suffered two break-ins during my fieldwork that went unnoticed by a team of four security guards. Don Benito, the treasurer of the neighbourhood committee, was the first to blame what he had deemed the 'Mafioso' of the illegal company they hired, but he rendered himself powerless as few residents were willing to pay a higher quota to hire a formal company. In Loma Linda, the neighbourhood committee replaced the private security company towards the end of my fieldwork due to their failure to respond to the group of youngsters, something Oscar attributed to fear and low wages. Meanwhile, a former neighbourhood president from a marginal area told me that, while still in office, he had found out that one of the two guards the neighbourhood committee hired had defected to the local gang (he had three phones and a shotgun in his booth that, as it turned out, were supplied to him by the leader of the gang). Such incidents – and the resulting lack of trust in private security guards – made it difficult for many neighbourhood committees to collect monthly fees from residents, and thus to invest in adequate security. In this context, it was no surprise that residents of Miguel's new neighbourhood El Dorado were said to take comfort from the persistent rumour that they lived in a '*narco*' neighbourhood – meaning that it counted *narcos* among its residents – which many in Guatemala City considered to be a more effective protection against criminal enterprises scouring the streets than the one provided by the police or private security.

Crucially, gated communities come in all shapes and sizes, from poor and lower-middle-class *colonias* with no 'extra' protection measures other than a gate and a few guards (if at all) to highly protected neighbourhoods without a single corner lacking camera control. Especially the more privileged neighbourhoods tended to be safe havens compared to the more marginal areas of the city, and their inhabitants usually led safer lives than their poorer counterparts. But even in Vista Alegre, Claudina's upscale neighbourhood, a criminal group had managed to successfully break into a house in the neighbourhood, tying up the old lady who lived there, after which they emptied her house. They had misled the guards at the entrance by pretending they were a group of workers assigned to a job inside. A similar story was told to me by the administrator of another elite gated community, who told me that in the week before, criminals had managed to enter the neighbourhood – and mislead the guards – by dressing up as police officers. Once in the neighbourhood, they had broken into a house.

These and other cases illustrate that the control mechanisms presented as essential to both the inclusion and exclusion processes within gated communities are far from absolute. This also means that the 'disembeddedness' gated community residents seek is hampered not only by the fact that gated communities in Guatemala City are too small to be self-sufficient but also by the style of inclusion and exclusion these neighbourhoods typically enjoy. This, to be sure, did not prevent gated community residents in Guatemala City from making simplified distinctions between those within their neighbourhoods and those outside. But it did provide the ingredients for a less dualistic view of good and bad. For many people in gated communities, the collective security measures that came with being a resident only represented 'the first line of defense but not the last' (Peeters and Hoey 2017, 185).

The violence of the outside world

As has become increasingly evident, the boundaries of gated communities are more porous than often suggested in the literature. An important question that arises from this is what to make of the role of crime in shaping the widespread impulse to retreat behind walls in a city like Guatemala City. The answer, I believe, is not to dismiss the utility of gates and guards in crime prevention, as suggested by Breetzke et al. (2014), who seem to overlook the fact that there are other forms of crime beyond burglary that fortification may – or may not – help to prevent. Nor does it imply that actual crime and violence should be downplayed in analyses of fear and fortification, even though it is clear that 'a city does not need rampant crime for crime to become a problem' (Peeters and Hoey 2017, 23). Rather, what must be emphasised is that in a place marked by pervasive and often brutal violence, where no protection can be expected from the state, it is only logical that fortification also directly interacts with lived experiences of violence and concrete threats.

Miguel's story exemplifies this dynamic. He was one of the many in Guatemala City who were forced to flee from extortion, although it was impossible to quantify the scale of internal displacement. People left in silence to re-emerge elsewhere in silence, as residents of high-crime neighbourhoods frequently distrusted law enforcement, suspecting collusion between police and local criminal organisations, while Guatemala lacks legal frameworks to protect internally displaced persons (Escamilla García 2021; Peeters 2025). In this context, Miguel saw no other option than to seek the (perceived) safety of guards and gates, even though this meant going from one struggle, keeping his family safe in a dangerous neighbourhood, to another, keeping his family in a safer but much more expensive

neighbourhood. It pushed him into a life of grim economic insecurity, working sixteen to seventeen hours a day, seven days a week as a taxi driver, often without being able to pay the bills. He knew at least seven other families from Balcón Verde that had made the leap to El Dorado for reasons of violence, filling the ranks of the lowest class of residents there.

In Loma Linda, the neighbourhood committee had responded to a perceived security threat by increasing the number of private security guards three years before the start of my fieldwork. The catalyst for this decision was the appearance of a red cross spray-painted on the welcome sign outside the community gates. Given the local knowledge that such markings were often used by extortionists to track which households had paid their 'tax' and which had not, the symbol was interpreted as a potential warning that criminal actors had set their eyes on the neighbourhood. This prompted the committee to convene an emergency meeting, during which approximately 70% of the residents – including Oscar – voted in favour of increasing the number of guards from five to seven. The decision also involved raising the monthly security fee from 75 to 100 quetzals (approximately 13 dollars) per household. Ultimately, no extortion attempt materialised, and it remained unclear whether the threat had been real or a false alarm. But even if the threat had been genuine, it remained impossible to determine what had deterred the criminals. Nevertheless, the decision-making process itself produced an effect on at least Oscar's feeling of security, as he took it as a sign that people in the neighbourhood were able to act as one man when faced with a shared threat. However, this moment of unity did not translate into increased day-to-day interaction among residents, highlighting the limits of collective action in fostering sustained social ties within gated communities.

For elites like Claudina, insecurity may have never felt more profound than in the 1990s, when criminal groups launched a wave of kidnappings targeting prominent Guatemalans (Castañón 2015; Schirmer 2002). Claudina herself recalled receiving a postcard in the early 1990s warning that her son Germán would be kidnapped. She no longer remembered whether a ransom was demanded, but she was certain they never paid. The card was signed with the initials J.J., which Claudina – and many other Guatemalans – recognised as short for *Jaguar Justiciero*, Avenging Jaguar (Centro de Estudios de Guatemala 1995); a death squad, as we now know, linked to the military, that would later claim the murder of bishop and human rights champion Juan Jose Gerardi Conedera (killed in 1998). It was this postcard that prompted Claudina and her partner Pedro to hire bodyguards, at a time when many other elites also decided to increase their security measures as crime levels rose while the police proved unable to contain them. The result was a dramatic expansion of the private security industry (Argueta 2010; Keen 2004).

Dagoberto, a wealthy businessman I spoke to, even employed his own investigation unit. This, he believed, deterred criminals from targeting him, as it showed his capacity to deal with problems when such was needed. He also told me he had recently found out his main business rival, one of the most powerful companies in Guatemala, was spying on his employees and threatening his clients with repercussions if they continued their business with him. 'These are things businessmen have to deal with on a daily basis', he said. But the threats had not stopped there. I first met him while working as a security guard at his daughter's wedding.² During the event, I had long conversations with Carlos, one of his two bodyguards, who told me that at one point during the party – which over 500 guests attended – Dagoberto had asked him to stay close, remarking, 'Not everyone here is a friend'. According to Carlos, he had been referring to the business rival who had also shown up at the party. In a later

conversation, Carlos – whose long career as a bodyguard included working for some of the most powerful and well-known families in Guatemala – told me that Dagoberto had received personal threats from this competitor, suggesting they had been death threats. He then said that he didn't know a single businessman in Guatemala who had not received the kind of threats his client was now facing. In business, he explained, 'you either instil fear or let fear be instilled upon you.'

Crime in Guatemala City, one comes to see, is never just something you read about in the paper. Many people have direct, personal experiences with crime and violence, and this reality is reflected in the widespread desire for gated living. This connects to a broader point: people in Guatemala City have every reason to fear crime (Davis 2010), even without having been personally victimised. Still, it must be emphasised that the poor bear the greatest brunt of this violence. In her study of the impact of violence and fear on the upper class in Monterrey, Mexico, Villarreal (2015) may be somewhat uncompromising when she argues that the core question of many studies on fear of crime – 'Why are people so afraid?' – is almost irrelevant in contexts where violence is rampant. Yet her point is clear: Why shouldn't they be?

The talk of the Guatemalan

As the above discussion makes clear, it is only fair to direct those interested in the roots of fear in places marked by extreme violence to the omnipresence of violence itself. However, this should not be mistaken for an excuse to overlook the deeper dynamics of fear of crime and the social distrust it both reflects and reinforces. Those who examine the deeply entrenched social distrust driving the urge to withdraw in Guatemala City, including within gated communities, will notice a peculiar twist: it stems not only from perceived social differences – a lack of social homogeneity – but also from what people have in common.

This is particularly evident in the widespread distrust Guatemalans often feel towards their fellow countrymen. As Claudina put it, 'The Guatemalan doesn't like to see beautiful eyes in other people's faces'. For her, this meant exercising caution when inviting others into her home, as doing so risked exposing her possessions to envious scrutiny. The consequences, she feared, could include intrusive curiosity, gossip and speculation: 'Damn, this one has money! Where does she get it from and what does she do? With whom does she live?' Gustavo spoke of an anti-value with which the Guatemalans were afflicted, as they admired 'the thief, the corrupt one, the one that knows how to cheat', but also claimed that Guatemalans had the habit of stealing from each other. (He knew cases of homeowners in his neighbourhood that had been involved in acts of stealing from fellow residents, and he himself had once caught a lady who was about to load his ladder into her car, which he had briefly left unattended in front of his house. He had also experienced two break-ins in his house. The last time, Gustavo suspected it had been his neighbours, who were distant family members of his ex-wife.) It was all the more reason for him to keep people at a distance, also within his neighbourhood. Due to his overtly critical and often cynical stance towards everything that entailed Guatemala, he deemed himself a *Malinche*, after the Aztec woman who – as the popular version of the story goes – betrayed her people by becoming the interpreter and later the lover of the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, the man who brought large parts of Mexico under Spanish rule.

Apparently, Gustavo considered his criticism a form of treason. But Malinche or not, others came to similar essentialist characterisations of the Guatemalan as a thief, as unreliable, as begrudging. 'The problem with Guatemala', as a popular saying goes that was voiced to me a couple of times, 'is that it contains Guatemalans'. Or as one lawyer phrased it: 'In this country, if we put all the assassins, thieves and corrupt in jail ... Who will close the door?' (in Dewever-Plana 2012, 142). These were characterisations that represented the type of generic talk that, as Appiah explains, encourages people not only to accept it – given that people are more likely to accept generics when they give them reasons for concern – but also to consider its subject 'a kind of people' (2019, 51). It was telling in this respect that the administrator of an elite gated community explained the lack of contact and cohesion among residents there in both cultural and national terms:

The reason I believe is cultural. We as a Guatemalan society, so to speak, have enclosed ourselves in a small circle. We are withdrawing ourselves into our groups, which are often no bigger than our families. I think it's the socio-political and economic situation in our country, the general situation of insecurity, that has led us there, that we're isolating ourselves. And we have lost the pleasantness of being sociable, convivial, and have the ability to say, 'well, I don't know you, but I want to get to know you, let's talk'. This is lost.

The negative outlook that Guatemalans hold towards their fellow countrymen, and the wariness that stems from it, is by no means a new phenomenon: it is rooted in a long history of exploitation, terror, violence and, also, of seclusion, which, as a response to fear of the other, tends to be self-perpetuating in the sense that it also reinforces that fear (Bauman 2013; Low 2003). For centuries, the Guatemalan has been described as reclusive and cautious. To give some examples: in the seventeenth century, during a colonial period that stood out for its brutality, the Guatemalan historian Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán stated that Guatemalans 'have the habit of never affirming the things they see and know, because they always respond maybe it's like that, maybe there will be, even if they know that what they are asked is like that, and they have seen it' (in Zepeda 2012). In 1884, during the rule of major landowner and coffee planter Justo Rufino Barrios – who, in his own words, ruled with the '*fusta* [whip] as constitution' (in Holden 2004, 52) – Nicaraguan journalist Enrique Guzmán wrote that 'it is impossible to find people more reserved than the *chapines* (Guatemalans). Even the drunks are prudent here' (in Zepeda 2012). Almost 60 years later, the American poet Wallace Stevens came to a similar observation when he described Guatemalans as 'men remoter than mountains'.³ And this was still before the civil war that turned into a collective trauma with far-reaching consequences for the mindset of contemporary society and the way Guatemalans perceive one another, not just because of the unmatched brutality of the scorched-earth campaigns of the 1980s, but also because of the number of people who participated in the violence.⁴ Cold war terror, writes Grandin, 'severed alliances between reforming elites and popular classes, disaggregated powerful collective movements into individual survival strategies, extracted leaders from their communities, and redefined the relationship between human beings and society' (2011, 196).

'The talk of the Guatemalan' that resulted from all this, to put it in Caldeiran terms, is at once a form of blaming the other and a critique of the self – an expression of what Bourdieu (2000) calls symbolic violence. This term refers to mechanisms of symbolic domination that reproduce social hierarchies by leading individuals to misrecognise the violence inflicted upon them as something for which they themselves are to blame. The talk of the Guatemalan created the kind of confusion Escher's famous lithograph of a waterfall creates, as he pictured

it as a perpetual motion machine that supplies itself with water, creating the illusion that a waterfall can exist without any external source. It portrays violence – or crime, or transgression, or misbehaviour – as if it is wired into the DNA of the Guatemalans. As if Guatemalans are inherently violent. As if the violence can be understood without taking into account the system within which it thrives: the extreme social inequality, the poverty, the corruption, the centuries of colonialism and disadvantageous dealings with the Global North, and so on.

Somewhat paradoxically, the talk of the Guatemalan exists alongside the ‘talk of crime’, the socially constructed narratives about crime that, as we have seen, help demarcate the lines between the good and the bad, thereby legitimising spatial segregation. No doubt, the talk of crime does all that in Guatemala City as well. The talk of the Guatemalan, however, in a way helps complicate the talk of crime’s simplistic picture by placing all Guatemalans in the dock, though not all to the same extent. In Guatemala City, the talk of crime plays a crucial role in justifying the walls around so-called communities and the deployment of private guards. The talk of the Guatemalan, however, ensures that even in gated communities, the ‘dangerous’ outside world people seek to protect themselves from often begins with one’s neighbour.

Divided we stand

Gated communities are hard to miss when traversing the streets of Guatemala City. They not only determine the streetscape in the more affluent areas, where security walls often appear to be the vertical equivalent of empty streets, but also pop up in many less exclusive parts. In this context, which Guatemala City shares with many other cities in Latin America (and elsewhere), it has become hard to think beyond the walls and not be blinded by them. This is – to be sure – not just a researcher’s thing. As part of a bigger set of security measures on which gated communities thrive, security walls, in the words of Caldeira, ‘cultivate a relationship of rupture and denial with the rest of the city and with what can be called a modern style of public space open to free circulation’ (2000, 258) and as such they carry enormous symbolic weight, especially for those that are not allowed in.

But this does not automatically mean that the reality behind the wall is diametrically different from the one outside it, and that walls are the ultimate arbiters of power, separating the safe from the unsafe and – from the perspective of residents – the good from the bad. The mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion that gated communities rely upon are inherently flawed, and their ability to keep ‘others’ at bay is far from complete. While residents may be united by a shared fear of the external world, the persistence of ‘otherness’ within the gates themselves ensures that fear continues to fragment rather than unify. As Reguillo aptly observes, ‘what is united by fear, is fragmented by fear’ (2005, cited in Santillán 2013, 68). This fragmentation is particularly pronounced in contexts like Guatemala City, where violence not only is pervasive but also has become deeply embedded in the national psyche. The talk of the Guatemalan, as reproduced in everyday conversations, undermines the possibility of coming to ‘a sense of the “we”’ (Heller [1928] 2000), also within gated communities.

As demonstrated, gated communities allow more aspects of ‘city life’ – and all that it entails – to permeate their boundaries than is often acknowledged in the literature. Consequently, they serve not only as symbols of the structural inequalities that underscore the deep divides between the privileged and the underprivileged in Guatemala City and other Latin American cities, but also as reminders that urban violence affects all residents, albeit in uneven ways and to varying

degrees. To fully understand these dynamics, more in-depth research is needed on life on both sides of the security walls. As I have sought to illustrate in this article, such studies must recognise that the collective security measures associated with gated living represent only the first line of defence – not the last – and should not be treated as the final analytical boundary either.

Ethical approval

Over the course of eight months of fieldwork, I developed sustained relationships with participants through repeated interactions in their everyday environments. Informed consent was obtained verbally from all respondents before their participation, and in the case of my main respondents, reaffirmed throughout the fieldwork process. This consent included permission to use their statements in publications. To ensure the anonymity and safety of my respondents, I have used pseudonyms for their names and neighbourhoods in the text.

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Notes

1. According to the director of the *Gremial de Empresas de Seguridad Privada* (Trade Association of Private Security Companies) in 2018, there were 23,000 private security guards legally on the job in the country (in October 2018), which in practice meant that they had followed a required 40-hour training, while the actual number could lie somewhere between 150,000 and 200,000 – compared to 40,000 police officers (in April 2018) (Chávez 2019). It is a reality that cannot be separated from the fact that the security guard industry has access to a “limitless supply of workers [...] and so invest[s] little in each guard and constantly seek[s] new recruits” (Dickins de Girón 2011, 113–114).

2. It was a job offered to me by a friend, who owned the private security company that arranged Dagoberto's security.
3. From the 1942 poem 'Arrival at the Waldorf'.
4. In 1985, almost a million men participated in the civil patrol units (in a country of then eight million), whose members were coerced into fighting subversives and 'guarding' their villages – which included seeking out subversive elements within their own communities – as well as into settling local conflicts and disputes (Davis 1988). A refusal to participate in these patrols could mean that you signed your own death warrant. And the civil patrols were not the only counterinsurgency units that drew on forced recruitment. According to Kurtenbach (2014), youth from the marginalised districts of Guatemala City were simply plucked from the streets and flown into the highlands to join the army in its fight against the rebels. Levenson (2013) describes how Mayas from the highlands were forced into the army and first received three months of training and, especially, abuse that brainwashed them into killing other Mayans. Recruits were pressured into participating in killing and torture rituals to proof themselves to their superiors. The Commission of Historical Clarification (CEH 1999), set up under the peace accords, established that by forcing people to comply in acts of rape, torture and other types of atrocities, the army deliberately sought to cause social disintegration within communities.

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