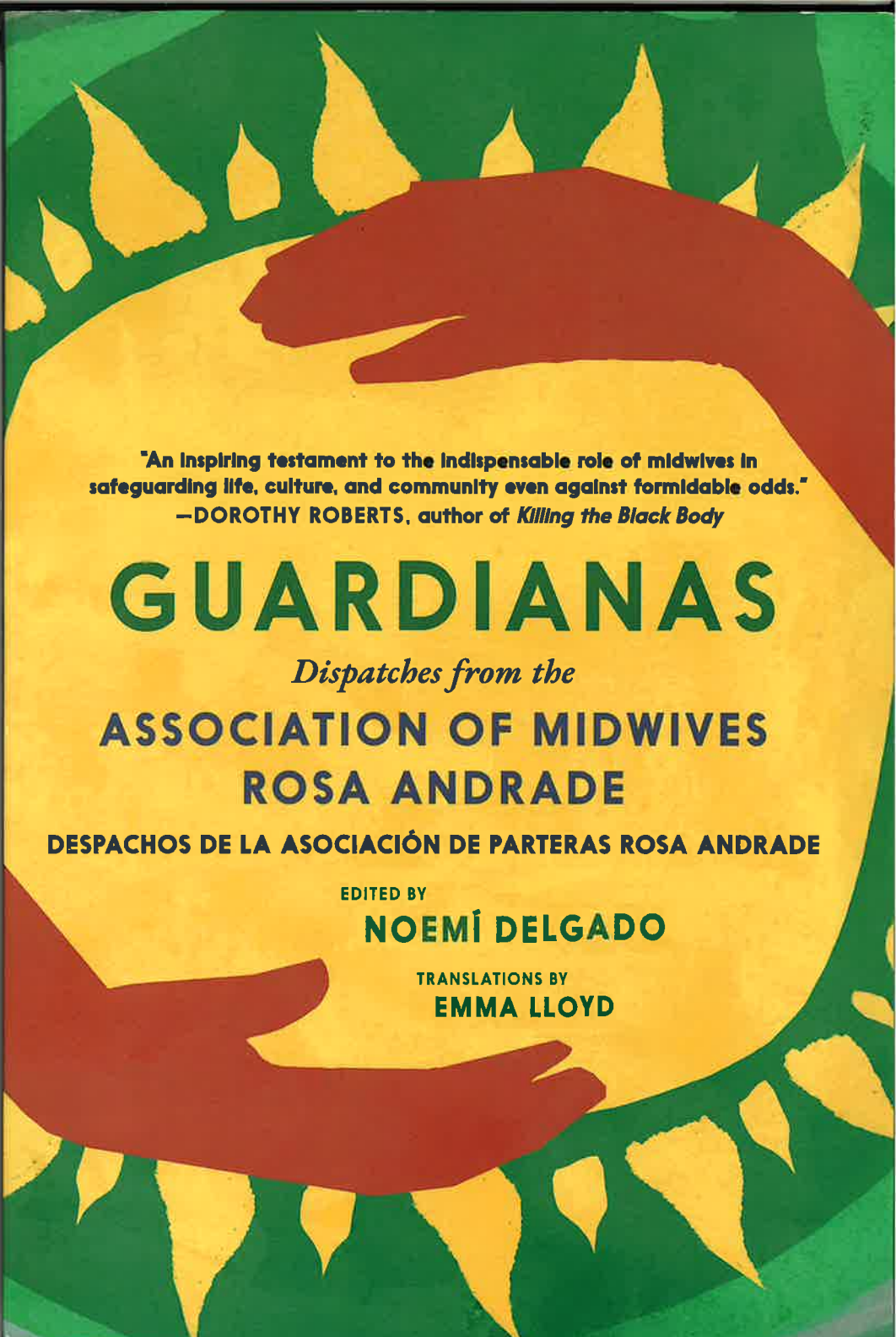




"An inspiring testament to the indispensable role of midwives in safeguarding life, culture, and community even against formidable odds."

—DOROTHY ROBERTS, author of *Killing the Black Body*

GUARDIANAS

Dispatches from the

**ASSOCIATION OF MIDWIVES
ROSA ANDRADE**

DESPACHOS DE LA ASOCIACIÓN DE PARTERAS ROSA ANDRADE

EDITED BY

NOEMÍ DELGADO

TRANSLATIONS BY

EMMA LLOYD

"In this book we get to listen to elders, warriors, guides whose love, care and support for the autonomy of people giving birth models the world we deserve."

—ALEXIS PAULINE GUMBS,

author of *Survival Is a Promise: The Eternal Life of Audre Lorde*

"A book we need to read, as across the world we face a relentless war against the main conditions of our reproduction."

—SILVIA FEDERICI, author of *Caliban and the Witch* and *Wages Against Housework*

DURING the twelve-year-long Salvadoran civil war, mothers and guerrilla fighters attended births out of necessity. While fleeing airstrikes, in caves and beneath mango trees, with no electricity or running water, these women became *parteras*—community midwives—and began to care for pregnant people in rural areas and refugee camps who could not access medical care. In 1994, in the wake of the armed struggle, the Association of Midwives Rosa Andrade (APRA) was born.

Compiled from oral histories gathered in 2019 by Salvadoran American birth worker Noemí Delgado, this bilingual anthology weaves together testimonies from twenty members of APRA to tell a collective story of midwifery and community care in revolutionary El Salvador. In *Guardianas*, the beauty of the testimonies, and the care with which they were collected, come together to safeguard a vision of a world rooted in fierce bravery, dignity, and ancestral wisdom.

DURANTE los doce años de guerra civil en El Salvador, madres y guerrilleras asistieron a parturientas. Mientras se refugiaban de ataques aéreos, dentro de cuevas y bajo árboles de mango, sin electricidad o agua corriente, estas mujeres vueltas parteras comenzaron a cuidar a personas embarazadas en áreas rurales y campos de refugiados que no podían acceder a cuidado médicos. En 1994, tras la lucha armada, nació la Asociación de Parteras Rosa Andrade (APRA).

Compilado de historias orales recolectadas en 2019 por la trabajadora de partos salvadoreña-estadounidense Noemí Delgado, esta antología bilingüe entreteje testimonios de veinte miembros de la APRA para relatar un cuento colectivo de partería y cuidado comunal en El Salvador revolucionario. En *Guardianas*, la belleza de los testimonios, y el cuidado con el que fueron recolectados, juntos resguardan una visión del mundo enraizado en coraje feroz, dignidad y conocimiento ancestral.

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Clipped Wings, Noemí Delgado, 2021



The people at the Ministry of Health know that we meet. A doctor sent a delegate who came to our assembly to fill out a ton of forms, to ask us a ton of questions about what we knew, about what we didn't know. And at the end of the last meeting here a lawyer came to this room to tell us that if a baby died in a midwife's hands, they'd give us

this many years in prison. He didn't threaten us with a gun, but that's not the only kind of threat, he threatened us with words, he terrorized us. Some midwives have not followed their rules, but it's not like before, and some have stopped entirely since they told us that.

They called us to a meeting with the director of the health clinic and she said to us, "If it were up to me, there wouldn't be a single midwife on the planet." We wept that day. They think that they're the only ones who know how to do things, and that what one does as a midwife isn't clean. I'll never understand why, when there were no doctors during the war, nobody was with them, no one but us.

We've almost drowned crossing rivers in the communities, feet worn through from so much walking, it's been bitter for us, I won't tell you we're here because we're so nice or because the government wants us here, but because we've put so much into the work.

—MARÍA HIGINIA "PATRICIA" HERNÁNDEZ
Zacamil 2, Suchitoto



The doctors from the health clinics are already telling the pregnant women that they won't let them use a midwife because because we're ignorant, we don't know anything and if any little thing happens to a pregnant woman the jail is just waiting for us, six years in prison; this is what the doctors tell them. That we are ignorant and don't know anything and they are the ones who really know. If we make a mistake, we end up in prison. And so the women tell us, "I trust you, see, because with you treat me with kindness and care." I ask how the baby is, I tell them what to do if the baby's malnourished, to eat well,

to have some *sopita de mora*, and all of that. And the doctors just have them take some iron pills that the women can't even stomach. "The [prenatal pills] that you give are much better," the women tell us. And one very gently asks them, "With your permission, let's see how we're doing here," and then you touch them like so, carefully. And so the women much prefer the midwife, they say, because there is more trust. The doctors might have all their knowledge, and I imagine they've studied a lot, right? But it all boils down to the same thing, because although they've studied for years, they come to do the same thing one of us does. But what one would never do is cut the woman and be touching her every second.

The doctors have stamped us down, they have us pinned under their heels, because they don't give us the freedom to attend births. Midwifery is necessary; it's necessary because of the trust the women have in one, they tell us everything, and sometimes the doctor doesn't palpate their stomach. They've told me, "Listen, the doctor doesn't even look at my face, they just stand there taking notes." Can you imagine? Babies die, but because they're doctors they wash their hands and then poof everything is fixed. Midwifery has been a calling since long ago. When one is having labor pains you want someone there holding you with tenderness, telling you kind words, but in the hospital they're going to stick you in a room, toss you any which way, and if you give birth then and there, they get mad, "Why didn't you say anything?" And so it's really rough. As for me, I feel happy working, and so women still come find me, and I think that helps, it shows that the women don't undervalue us.

You know what really gets to me? That I can't write. If I could write we'd be singing another tune, but no, I couldn't, I never learned to write. But with all one thinks and sees, that's something natural. Sometimes there are people who can write a lot, but they still make mistakes too.

—VICENTA MARTÍNEZ
Los Laureles, San Pedro

We are made invisible. I feel that it's a violation, it's a violation just telling us that we can't attend home births. Why? Because they are violating my right as a midwife and the woman's right to give birth in her community. Yes, it's a violence against women, as much against me as a midwife as against the people of the community. They are violating the rights of women who give birth in the community.

—NATIVIDAD ESCOBAR DE HENRIQUEZ
Istagua, San Pedro Perulapán



What I like best is helping women, one woman to another. It's logical to help each other, between women, because we all feel the suffering. I have attended more than three hundred births, above all when we returned after the war. Sometimes a birth would go past two in the morning. There has never been any recognition, never any pay for what we have given, not on the part of the government, nothing. They only reprimand us. One is already getting old, you can't do it alone anymore, you can't work anymore, after having spent one's life helping women. They should give us recognition.

When you used to bring someone to the hospital with complications they'd feel upset: "Oh no here comes Ángela. Oh my heart hurts when I see you coming, because it's always a woman with complications;" and it was true because they didn't even used to deliver babies for pregnant women there, but would send them to the Maternity Hospital [in San Salvador]. Nowadays, now that they've prohibited midwives, they scold me. When I brought a girl [to the hospital]: "Why are you coming with that woman, that midwife? Don't you know that's

not allowed?" "I'm only bringing her," I said. "I haven't attended the birth." Just for bringing her, they reprimanded us. The girl's mom had come too, and she said to them, "Why are you scolding her? She has so much experience, she helped me give birth. She delivered this very daughter of mine!" I had delivered the girl who was now giving birth. "But it's prohibited!" "It might be prohibited, but you lot aren't there with us in the community," the girl's mother said. And when I went to leave the girl there, she started to cry. "Don't worry, don't worry," I told her. "You have to push when the baby calls you."

We have been mistreated at the hospital, mistreated because they say we can't do our work. But before there were people who admired you, because women who I've attended, when the doctors see, when they do pap smears, and there haven't been any vaginal tears . . . one had given birth three times and they asked her if she'd never had kids, "What do you mean, Doctor? I've had three." "And who helped you deliver?" "The midwife." "The midwife didn't let a single birth give you a tear." In the hospital, women always get tears; but not with us, because one takes care to prevent them.

—ÁNGELA LUZ BARAHONA DE ÁVALOS
Copapayo, Suchitoto



The little of it that I understand is that the ministry doesn't want us to attend births, but they don't realize that for that same reason many women are dying, because they aren't able to get to the hospital. A lot of babies also die in the womb and don't manage to arrive.

They don't trouble themselves with the poverty of the people. We

hope that the Ministry of Health takes us into account, because we are doing a service in exchange for nothing. At least they should give us a little recognition, even a basic food basket, monthly if possible. We live off of what God gives us, and that is the fight, and well, may the Ministry recognize us one day. Because how long has this work been going on? But they aren't on the ground in the communities. By night, there's only the midwife, by day there's the health promoter, but the health promoter is gone at night. They don't come every day, sometimes every other day or only when they have something in particular to do. They didn't hire us to work as health promoters because even though some in the association have training, I at least can't read, not to mention write. Thanks to God what I've learned has stayed in my head. The people who got those positions all had education.

—TOMASA JOVITA TORRES
Mazatepeque, Suchitoto



I give thanks to God that we were able to do the work when women most needed it . . . and we did it with pleasure and we felt satisfied, but sometimes it hurts when one looks back at all the time we've been at this work, and the fact that we did the work when the communities most needed it but we have never been given recognition by the Ministry of Health. A director in the hospital, a woman, once said to us that if it were up to her midwives wouldn't exist, we would all disappear. Imagine how one felt. I dream that I'm attending a birth; and even though we want to keep working, due to the Min-

istry's rules, all births have to take place in the hospital. One can't work anymore . . . you can do it in an emergency because we aren't going to let a woman die, and if the woman feels good with us, then we'll help her deliver.

I had a case, the last birth I attended, and after the birth at the check-up the doctor asked the woman who had given birth, "How many babies do you have?" "Two." "And where did you have the first one?" "At home." "And who delivered the baby?" "The same woman." "And what's her name?" The doctor said to her.

"And don't you know only bitches give birth at home?"

That's what the doctor told the woman who gave birth, and the women will then tell us. What is one supposed to feel? That was the last birth I delivered in my community. And look, on a Wednesday the health promoters from the Ministry were there because she didn't want to go to the hospital, and by Thursday the doctors were there, telling her that if she didn't go to the hospital, the police would come to take her there. And the baby girl was born on Tuesday, and that's what the doctor told her afterwards. So it happens that many women tell us stories of how the doctors treat them, and how they tell them they shouldn't let a midwife come see them, ay, it's so hard . . . after everything one has done.

At home, if the woman can't bear to sit, "Lie down, rest." If she stands up, we stand behind her, accompanying her, preparing some milk for her, brewing her a drink. Because I have a lot of faith in some of the teas that we give to the women, when they are having labor pains for example, then lime tree root is really good for speeding up the contractions. And so we give her teas, all that, we're talking to her, we take the same steps that she takes. The women feel good. And you know that in the hospital it's not just one patient that they are treating, because they haven't yet finished one birth when another starts. And I get that, but they should make an effort to understand our work as well. And if something happens to us in a community, if a baby dies or a patient does, we

get sent straight to prison, and for them women die and they go home, no consequences.

—MARÍA DOLORES HERNÁNDEZ DE RIVERA
Zacamil 1, Suchitoto

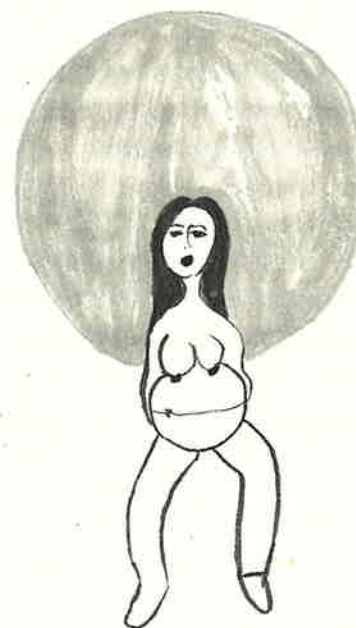


I'd like the government to give us a basic food basket, you know, one needs to earn something. I've never charged women, maybe they'll give me five dollars, but I don't like taking money from them because they do all the work. But the economic side is difficult, I've even had to pay [laughs] for transport for a sick woman—me, pay. There in the community everyone agrees, everyone knows me. The most necessary thing is a distribution for those that need it, for the poor, those without a living. And the doctors don't take us into account, they never take us into account. And how they profit having the women there, when they have a girl there seven, eight days, then they collect the insurance and all that. And so if women don't go there to have a baby, then they lose money. They want to profit, I guess.

I go wash women's clothes, cook for them, for fifteen days after the birth. It makes people feel good. They just call me *mamita* and *abuelita* and one feels happy. Midwives are important because one takes charge of the pregnant woman and the women have a lot of trust in you. They tell us their stories, about what they have lived. They want to give birth at home, but as they can't . . . what's more, it's a long way to get to the hospital. At the first signs they call you, and with the first labor pains there already isn't much time to waste. I always go [to the hospital] with them, with all the women in my com-

munity. And when they're admitted, you have to visit them every day, every day. The people put their love in you, their trust. I carry them. It's harder for them alone—you have to go and give them information, you always have to be there for them. Because there are births that go quick! The last birth I attended was three months ago. When one attends a birth then you have to go to the mayor's office with the woman and the witnesses. And they scold them: "You are foolish! Why stay home with that woman in the community?"

—FRANCISCA CATALINA BLANCO HERNÁNDEZ
El Milagro, Suchitoto



The Full Moon, Noemí Delgado, 2021