

THIRD WORD SUBJECTS:  
THE POLITICS AND PRODUCTION OF  
CENTRAL AMERICAN-AMERICAN CULTURE

by

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Dedicated to my mother Isaura Cardenas

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## INTRODUCTION

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of ordinary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These 'in between' spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

-Homi Bhabha

What is important in a work is what it does not say. This is not the same as the careless notation of 'what it refuses to say,' although that would in itself be interesting: a method might be built on it, with the task of measuring silences, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged. But rather this, what the work cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey into silence.

-Pierre Macherey

Faced with the dialectically interlocking sentences that are constructible as "White men are saving brown women from brown men" and "The woman wanted to die" the postcolonial woman intellectual asks the question of simple semiosis—what does this mean?—and begins to plot history.

-Gayatri Spivak

In this dissertation I examine cultural and literary production from the Central American diaspora to explore the ways this emergent pan-ethnic group cultivates a new form of cultural identity within a U.S American context. Influenced by critics who view identity as not something that is merely reflected in cultural expressions or representations, but constituted within and through that very process, I analyze representations of Central Americanness by U.S. Central

Americans<sup>1</sup>, to highlight how this community constructs what it means to be a Central American-American. Accordingly, I do not view Central Americanness as a form of essentialized identity inherent in all subjects who are labeled as U.S. Central Americans. Instead, in my dissertation I reveal how subjects labeled as “Central American” in the U.S. often produce in their cultural expressions an alternative notion of *Central Americanness*, which I have herein referred to as *Central American-Americanness*. Moreover, this dissertation illuminates how texts produced by U.S. Central Americans re-write the Central American imaginary. Like other community formations that are discursively constructed, the Central American imaginary is fluid and permeable, constantly shifting to include or exclude population groups. The inclusion and exclusion of who or what qualifies as part of the Central American nation, and therefore as Central American, can be traced within the literature and cultural production emanating from transnational networks spanning geo-political locations like “the isthmus,” and the U.S, as well as translocal spaces like Los Angeles. The constituents of these transnational networks continually reflect and alter what it means to be Central American from within these contexts.

One of the primary objectives in this dissertation is to theorize what has been heretofore neglected in Latino scholarship: the construction of Central American-American identity and subjectivity. Specifically, I explore fundamental questions about US Central American culture that have remained unasked, such as: Why would a group of people choose to first identify with a larger geo-cultural

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<sup>1</sup> By US Central American I am referring to individuals from Central American descent that have been born and/or raised in the United States.



imaginary such as the “Isthmus” rather than their own individual national country of origin? Who is included in a term like Central American? Is there a Central American identity on the isthmus? How do US Central Americans define or redefine the Central American imaginary? How do US Central Americans engage with representations constructed by others, and how do they represent themselves? How does the US Central American experience compare to or differ from that of other minority groups, particularly other Latino populations? Finally, is the Central American-American subject a Latino subject?

As some of these questions suggest, this dissertation interrogates the ways Central American-American cultural identity is deployed in relation to, and as an alternative to larger national/cultural categories like “American” and/or “Latino”. In doing so, it is a text grounded in a tradition of Latino scholarship, which theorizes about the Latino experience through the optic of a particular cultural community. Most significant works in the field of Latino studies, focus on the important historical and cultural specificities of a particular national constituency, and in the process provide a new window, or critical framework through which to analyze Latino experience. Thus, by highlighting the distinct and unique features of US Central American culture, I hope to not only carve a niche for my particular community within the Latino discourse, but also in the process find alternative forms to theorize about Latino experience.

Trying to locate texts that can be labeled as emblematic of the field of Latino studies seems like an almost impossible task. The very nature of the texts that I would locate as quintessentially “Latino” could easily be challenged by a

variance of criteria. Still, if we were to think of Latino Studies and the discourse it produces—Latinidad—as being constituted by current literature in the field, one would have to recognize that it is a field dominated by the sub-fields of Chicana/o, Puerto Rican and Cuban American studies. A window from which to examine some prevailing conceptualizations of Latino subjectivity can emerge from texts that are seminal in those respective fields. Within the fields of Cuban American, Puerto Rican, and Chicana/o studies, the texts that emerge as being among the most influential are *Life on the Hyphen* (1993) by Gustavo Perez Firmat, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop* by Juan Flores (2000), and *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa. These works have been central to developing the ways we have come to read, and understand the experiences (albeit at times problematically) of Cubans, Puerto Ricans and Chicana/os. Of particular significance was the manner in which these texts raised provocative questions about cultural identity and, in particular, how they attempted to theorize what they view as a “bicultural” experience of being Latina/o in the United States. Though each text focuses on three very distinct and heterogeneous cultures, what is clear is that the logic and theoretical paradigm that has influenced their articulations of Cuban-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Chicana/os is part of a larger critical discourse (Bhabha 1994; Stuart Hall 1994; Canclini 1995) which utilizes tropes like “liminality, “translation” and “hybridity” as means to explore the construction of postcolonial subjects and identity. Indeed, these three Latino texts which have proven to be central to the discourse of Latino identity and subjectivity, are bound by their similar theoretical impetus (postulated by Bhabha

in his introduction to the *Location of Culture* (1994),) which encourages scholars to be “theoretically innovative” by seeking “those ‘in between’ spaces [which] provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal--that initiate new signs of identity.”<sup>2</sup>

Though Bhabha at times utilizes various objects and spatial metaphors in an attempt to articulate his theory about subjectivity and culture, one of his most cited examples is his use of the image of a “stairwell.” While discussing how the work of artist Renee Green deconstructs and disrupts the binaries of identity/difference, he notes how one particular spatial location, in one of her public art pieces, becomes symbolic for his conceptualization of the radical potential of liminal spaces:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.<sup>3</sup>

Thus what is important for Bhabha is not just that the stairwell is able to deconstruct “fixed identifications” and “imposed hierarchies,” but the fact that this space is a productive site—an organic extension of those two “primordial polarities.” The stairwell, as he describes, is the “connective tissue” the bond which prevents two cultures from becoming distinct, distant and polar opposites.

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<sup>2</sup> Homi Bhabha, *Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 5.

As a result the stairwell becomes another way to describe a particular form of subject formation; one which achieves its identity via its ability to be interstitial—an extension that precludes and blurs the gaps between such asymmetries as lower/higher, black/white.

Similar to Bhabha's preoccupation with examining the emergence of new "strategies of selfhood" through cultural hybridity, one need only read the back cover of the texts by Firmat, Flores and Anzaldua, to see how the logic of cultural theory, and in particular, Bhabha's notion of hybridity has become the standardized model of articulating Latino subjectivity:

This book explores how the 1.5 generation have lived 'life on the hyphen' neither fully Cuban nor fully American, but a fertile hybrid of both.<sup>4</sup>  
*(Life on the Hyphen)*

Neither immigrants nor ethnics, neither foreign nor 'hyphenated Americans' in the usual sense of the term, Puerto Ricans in New York have created a distinct identity both on the island of Puerto Rico and in the cultural landscape of the United States.<sup>5</sup>  
*(From Bomba to Hip Hop)*

The actual physical borderland that I'm dealing with in this book is the Texas-US, Southwest/Mexican border...In fact Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other out, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle, and upper classes touch.<sup>6</sup>  
*(Borderlands/La Frontera)*

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<sup>4</sup> Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994)

<sup>5</sup> Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000).

<sup>6</sup> Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987)

We can see that in the first excerpt from Firmat's text, *Life on the Hyphen*, that like the image of the stairwell for Bhabha, the hyphen also operates as a metaphor for cultural hybridity. Though the passage cited here is nothing more than a quick blurb, it illuminates the way Firmat locates Cuban American culture. For Firmat, Cuban Americans, or what he terms as the "1.5" generation, are a by-product of living "in between" the spaces of Cuban and American cultures. It is the hyphen, Firmat will come to argue, which creates a link between these two worlds. To live in the Cuban-American way is to live in the interstices; in the spaces where competing cultures have not overpowered one for the other, for the "hyphen" "signals equilibrium and not tension."<sup>7</sup> Thus, as noted in this excerpt, Firmat views Cuban-American culture and its metaphor of the hyphen as a "fertile hybrid." And in the process makes Cuban American culture synonymous with cultural hybridity.

One might think that Juan Flores eludes this logic of viewing a Latino subject as synonymous of a hybrid subject. This perception may arise because Flores pronounces that Puerto Ricans are not "hyphenated Americans in the usual sense of the term." This notion seems to be validated when one sees that Flores has a chapter titled, "Off the hyphen," whereby he claims that Puerto Ricans do not invoke the hyphen nor use it as a mode of identification in the way other ethnic American and/or other Latino groups. Because Flores will further comment that "life on the hyphen" needs to be understood as a "bicultural process; a pattern of cultural hybridization," it initially appears that he does not

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<sup>7</sup> Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban American Way* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994) 6.

position Puerto Rican identity or culture within this larger paradigm of cultural hybridity. In addition, because Flores asserts that Puerto Ricans are not immigrants, or ethnics, or hyphenated Americans, it implies that Puerto Ricans are not positioned as hybrid subjects. In other words, it suggests that somehow Puerto Rican subjects are not the manifestation or the by-product of living in cultural interstices; of being “in between” two cultures that have defined other Latino groups like Cuban Americans. However this is not the case. The Puerto Rican subject in Flores’s text emerges from the same types of critical relationality that forms such binaries as island/mainland, Spanish/English, Puerto Rican/American. The title itself *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, for instance is not meant to suggest teleology, a master narrative of “causal relations.” Instead, it is supposed to highlight the position Puerto Ricans in the US, and specifically in New York, occupy; one that places them in-between the influences of two cultural traditions and spheres, noted here through the musical genres of Bomba and Hip-Hop. According to Flores, Puerto Rican culture, and the Puerto Rican experience, is one that is inextricably tied with this type of cultural fusion and hybridity, stating “the experience of being “in between,” [is] so deeply familiar to Puerto Ricans in the United States.”<sup>8</sup> This suggests that perhaps this “in between” experience might be one of the most defining features of US Puerto Rican identity. While the language deployed in his theorization about Puerto Rican culture and identity may not explicitly refer to culturally hybridity, Flores’s articulation of the Puerto Rican subject is clearly situated within this discourse.

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<sup>8</sup> Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000) 55.

Unlike Flores and Firmat who utilize (or disavow) the metaphor of the hyphen to discuss their cultures' hybrid identities, Anzaldúa's work, *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) precedes those discussions by her concept of the "Borderlands."<sup>9</sup> The Borderlands, as the excerpt describes, is both a real or "physical" and imagined "psychological" space. It is, a "third country"—a terrain where a "border culture" will emerge wherever "two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory." Though this latter statement suggests that there might be a possibility that one culture might "edge out" the other, the Borderlands is the antithesis to such a notion because it is a metaphorical and physical space that can contain these types of dialectical cultural contradictions. This is clearly seen in Anzaldúa's conceptualization of the U.S/Mexico border as an "*herida abierta* where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture."<sup>10</sup> In this description, Anzaldúa's use of "blood" invokes a discourse of eugenics that attempts to fix and simplify cultures and peoples into distinct impermeable racial

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<sup>9</sup> It would be foolish to suggest that Gloria Anzaldúa's text *Borderlands /La Frontera* merely reflects the same type of theorizations about postcolonial subjectivity found in the work of Bhabha or Canclini. Before there was the "stairwell", or Mary Louise Pratt's "contact zones", or the notion of "hybrid cultures" Gloria Anzaldúa introduced the metaphor and trope of the "border/borderlands" into the lexicon of cultural theory. *Borderlands/La Frontera*, arguably, is the example *par excellence* of the ways in which the tropes of interstality and/or hybridity can be deployed to theorize space, place, and its relationship to identity and subjectivity. To try to describe the cultural impact this text has had within the fields of literary, Chicana/o, Latina/o, Postcolonial, and Critical Theory within the scope of this introduction would be too extensive, not to mention that this type of analytic engagement has already been discussed by some of the fields most prominent scholars (Alarcon 1993, Sandoval 2000, Saldivar-Hull 2000, Mignolo 2000, and others).

<sup>10</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987) 25.

categories. For Anzaldúa, these types of discourses that rely upon the logic of cultural or racial purity cannot account for Chicana/o culture and identity—a culture and identity that emerges from a perpetual state of tension between two cultures. This tension is never resolved or “fixed” in exclusively one location, because “before a scab forms it hemorrhages again.” Subsequently, like its Cuban American, and Puerto Rican counterparts, the Chicana/o subject is one that is also the product of the amalgamation of “two worlds”—a hybrid constructed precisely in those moments where the “third world grates against the first.”<sup>11</sup>

As constitutive of Latino discourse, *Life on the Hyphen*, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, and *Borderlands/La Frontera* have been pivotal in constructing the notion that Latino subjectivity is the result of hybridic subjects who occupy two contentious, and often opposing cultural locations (e.g. Mexican and American, Cuban and American etc). Though clearly focused on the particulars of each of their respective national communities, all these texts affirm the idea that their communities are “cultures in between,” that produce hybrid subjects who are not firmly entrenched in one national culture over the other, but instead straddle the “borderlands” of their two respective cultures. Not surprisingly when Ilan Stavans attempted to theorize the *Hispanic Condition* (1995), or when William Flores and Rina Benmayor were trying to articulate the defining features of *Latino Cultural Citizenship* (1998), they combined the metaphors of hyphen and borders in their explanations. Indeed, Flores goes on to say that Latino subjectivity is the result of

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<sup>11</sup> It should be noted that Anzaldúa does not suggest that these two cultures (Mexican/U.S) are homogeneous. Rather, her work highlights how Chicana subjectivity is an amalgamation of two already heterogeneous cultural locations.



a form of cultural hybridity that is “more complex “than Bhabha’s notion of hybridity.”<sup>12</sup>

The impact of these texts within Latino discourse cannot be understated. In fact, the spheres of influence from this particular scholarship can be located throughout this dissertation. For instance, Anzaldúa’s *Borderlands* influenced my decision to pay attention to the importance of space—metaphorically and literally—to the construction of identity and subjectivity. As such, one of my first pre-occupations was to explore the “idea” of Central America and how this space has proven pivotal in the construction of a US Central American identity. As a scholar working with a community mostly labeled as “refugees and/or exiles,” Fimat’s text influenced portions of my second chapter where I examine how historical conditions of migration have enabled a type of Central American consciousness which I have termed—*Centralamericanismo*. From Flores’s discussion about the relationship Puerto Ricans have within the Latino imaginary, I became intrigued in exploring how tools of inclusion, like the rubric or pan-ethnic term “Latino” can become spaces of exclusion. This is the central concern in my last chapter where I explore the phenomenon of “internal othering” among Latino groups.

As indebted as I am to this scholarship, it soon became clear that previous theoretical paradigms that center on cultural hybridity could not be applied to my

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<sup>12</sup> Ilan Stavans for instance, has a chapter in this book titled “on the hyphen.” While William Flores comments that while for Bhabha “hybridity as “doubling”... our hybridity is more complex—we are both and we are neither. Not fully accepted or welcome in either world, the hybridity forces us to claim our own space. The hyphen between Mexican and ‘American’ becomes a space, sometimes of denial, and other times of affirmation. It is a border that both separates and links two worlds” (257).

object of study. Although recent scholarship in the field of U.S Central American studies has positioned US Central American subjectivity as part of American “border identities” and has insisted that US Central American scholarship can benefit from being read with the lens of “border theory,” it is my contention that a new type of theoretical praxis and methodology is needed in the study of US Central Americans.<sup>13</sup> In essence, I do not subscribe to the notion that U.S. Central American subjectivity is produced from the same conditions that articulate other Latino subjects, nor I do believe that the current dominant critical framework of cultural hybridity or border theory can fully articulate the complexity of the US Central American experience.

Early on in my investigation I became aware of the ways in which some of these theoretical frameworks could not account for US Central American culture. For instance, while the trope of the border/borderlands has proven useful to describe the condition of other Latino subjects and communities, can a concept like “borderlands” be applied to a community and culture that emerges from multiple competing national/cultural imaginaries: the U.S American, the (Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Costa Rican etc), the Central American? In other words border subjects, as hybrid subjects, are always already the effect of two

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<sup>13</sup> I am alluding here to Karina Alvarado’s dissertation titled, *Transnational lives and texts: Writing and theorizing United States/Central American subjectivities* (PhD diss, University of California Berkeley, 2006) in which she uses the same forms of cultural theory ,namely border theory and cultural hybridity. Though I personally feel that US Central American scholars should seek out new ways to theorize about US Central Americans, and Latino discourse in general, I am proud to have this dialogue with her work. Without a question Alvarado’s dissertation is an important contribution to the field of US Central American studies. It might be the first dissertation whose sole focus was trying to theorize US Central American identity and subjectivity.

cultures<sup>14</sup>--a binary that relies on a Center/Margin (American/Mexican) dichotomy. But what about subjects who emerge from a tension that is not dichotomous? Or cultures and subjects which are not caught between just US/Other? For instance, do US Central Americans live life on the hyphen? Can we even conceive of them as living on a hyphen? If so, where is that hyphen located, between what two social locations/cultures? Is their hyphen between two national locations (i.e Salvadoran/American), is it between the national and the regional (Salvadoran/Central American) is it between two larger geo-cultural imaginaries (America/Central America)? If Latino subjectivity is always a hybrid of two cultural locations however heterogeneous they may be, can one still conceive of US Central American identity as analogous to Latino subjectivity if that space transcends the dialogic framework of being “in-between” two polarities? In other words, where do we place subjects that do not emerge from the same “interstices” or “in between spaces” that have defined Latino subjectivity? As articulated in Latino discourse, the Latino subject always already emerges from the binary of U.S/ Latin American, or U.S/Cuban, American /Puerto Rican, or U.S/Mexican—a binary which has a clear center/margin relationship. But what about subjects who emerge from a space that transcends binaries or a space where the binary has never been center/margin, but margin/margin? Where do we place that subject, and is it still a Latino subject?

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<sup>14</sup> It is important to note that Anzaldúa, Bhabha, Canclini all reiterate the fact that ‘third spaces’ and ‘borderlands’ emerge from two different cultures, these two polar cultures are not to be viewed as “pure” or “uncontaminated” and need to be seen as equally heterogeneous.

Indeed, the more I tried placing US Central American culture and identity within the discourse of Latino subjectivity, the more it slipped away. One primary reason for this elusiveness is that within Latino discourse US Central American identity is viewed as impossibility. Within the discourse of Latinidad, it is generally presumed that those subjects who rely on a particular ethno-cultural form of identification will choose the local/national (Puerto Rican or Chicano) or the larger pan-ethnic category of Latino.<sup>15</sup> This notion is succinctly articulated by Juan Flores throughout his text, stating, “there is an important stake in upholding the specific of ones own nationality, and a strong sense that “if I’m Latino or Hispanic, than I am Dominican, or Puerto Rican, or Mexican American first” and “consciously and intuitively, personally and collectively, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans, Cubans and Dominicans, and each of the other groups most often project their own respective (national backgrounds as a first) and primary axis of identity.”<sup>16</sup> One of the first Latino scholars to promote this idea was Felix Padilla who in his book *Latino Ethnic Consciousness* (1985) also suggests that Latino as a pan-ethnicity is not a primary mode of identification. It only emerges as a strategy for political empowerment. Subsequently, one either chooses their particular national community (i.e. Mexican, Puerto Rican etc), or when in need of political visibility usurps the pan-ethnic identity of Latino. In fact, William Flores and Rina Benmayor argue in their introduction to *Latino Cultural Citizenship* that the concept of “Latino” provides its subjects, who are usually excluded from

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<sup>15</sup> By this mean I do not mean to suggest that these categorical identities are mutually exclusive.

<sup>16</sup> Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, 7, 197.

American discourses of culture and citizenship, with an alternative form of “belonging.”

Cultural citizenship can be thought of as a broad range of activities of everyday life through which Latinos and other groups claim space in society and eventually claim rights. Although it involves difference, it is not as if Latinos seek out such difference. Rather, the motivation is simply to create space where the people feel “safe” and “at home”, where they feel a sense of belonging and membership.<sup>17</sup>

According to Flores and Benmayor’s articulation of Latinidad, the need for another type of Latin American based pan-ethnic identity or category is obsolete since the concept of Latino already provides those subjects with a “home” that makes them feel “safe” and provides them a sense of membership. But if this is the case, if Latino as a category can provide its subject with a form of “cultural citizenship,” with a means to claim space within the American multicultural landscape, then it raises a very important question: how did a US Central American identity emerge? For the rubric of Central American, like Latino, houses a broad variety of ethnic and racial peoples from Latin America. This is significant since this pan-ethnic form of identification (US Central American) has emerged within this historical moment. Had this form of cultural identity emerged prior to the rise of an established Latino discourse, then the articulation of a pan-ethnic identity would not raise the same issues. It would be assumed that deploying this type of larger macro-ethnicity would have been a strategy to obtain a type of socio-political visibility within the larger American landscape. But this is a type of collective identity and culture that has emerged during, if not after, the concept of a Latino identity began to occupy a prominent space within American

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<sup>17</sup> William Flores and Rina Benmayor, “Introduction,” in *Latino Cultural Citizenship: Claiming Identity, Space and Rights* (Boston: Beach Press, 1997) 15.

ethnic politics. Perhaps we might then want to interrogate Latino discourse, and the way it has been constituted, to examine why some subjects are interpellated and feel welcome and safe within this ethnic construct, while others feel the need to make a home elsewhere.

Confronted with this critical distinction, these questions forced me to examine the various ways US Central American subjectivity emerges. I could not simply assume that the same cultural conditions that engendered other Latino subjects would have produced a form of US Central American subjectivity. Nor could I presume that the same critical interventions that might explain or define a particular Latino subjectivity would account for some of these historical and cultural differences. Moreover, I sought to understand how and why some national groups become interpellated, and or 'hailed' by Latinidad, while others emerged from a process of disidentification with that discourse. Consequently, the more I investigated my subject, the more I felt the need to explore political, cultural, historical and discursive conditions that enabled a US Central American identity. If the US Central American subject is not a hybrid subject, then what enables it? To answer these questions, it became clear to me that another path needed to be explored. I could not rely exclusively on canonical Latino scholarship, or on the same types of theoretical paradigms inscribed within that critical framework. What I needed was a theoretical praxis that could account for the emergence of this new form of pan-ethnic identity and subjectivity.

### Searching for Silences: Finding alternative theoretical methodologies

As a means to address this problematic within Latino discourse, I looked for ways in which other scholars studying US Central American culture addressed these questions. Here too, there was a challenge in that most of this scholarship tends to focus on specific national populations from Central America, with Salvadoran Americans receiving the majority of the attention (Mahler 1995; Menjivar 2000; Cordova 2005; Coutin, 2000 & 2007). Yet recently there is an emerging discourse that attempts to address issues of Central American cultural expressions, identity and subject formation. Of the scholars who have engaged in this detailed examination (Milan (forthcoming); Rodriguez 2009; Padilla 2008; Alvarado 2007), the most developed theorization concerning Central American subjectivity has emerged from the work of Arturo Arias. His essays, "Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American subjectivities on both sides of the great divide," (1999) and "Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World," (2003) have both become seminal in the field of Central American and U.S Central American studies because they mark the first attempts at theorizing and naming the conditions that have facilitated and produced the construction of a Central American-American subjectivity.

Arias's first essay in particular has proved most critical, since it was the discursive place that gave birth to the concept of Central American-American.<sup>18</sup>

In it Arias asserts that:

We seldom link the word "latino" with that singular and contradictory trope, "Central American-Americans," an anadiplosis that sounds more like a redundancy, a radically disfigured projection of what "Latin Americanness" is assumed to be. Useful, however, to underline the fact that it is an identity which is not one, since it cannot be designated univocally as "Latino" nor "Latin American," but is outside those signifiers from the start. For this group, life is not just on the hyphen, as Gustavo Pérez Firmat put it, but it is also on the margins, not even of the Anglo, North American or South American center: it is life on the margins of those marginal hyphenated others (Cuban-Americans, Mexican-Americans). A Latino oftentimes is constructed through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American. This is a group doubly marginalized and thereby invisibilized, to coin a neologism.<sup>19</sup>

Arias's articulation here of what is constitutive of Central American-American is important for two reasons. It is, after all, one of the first examples of a representation of Latinidad that emerges from a Central American perspective. That is, in this definition of Central American-American, we get a glimpse of what Arias deems to be the defining qualities that constitute the Latino subject. The second important revelation is that we discover that Arias views the Central American-American subject as an effect of this confining portrait of Latinidad. Specifically, for Arias there are three conditions that enable the production of Central American–American subjectivity. The first is idea that the signifier

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to mention that Arias himself did not coin this term. According to one of his footnotes from his essay "Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American subjectivities on both sides of the great divide." *Explicación de Textos Literarios* (Dec. 1999): 47-64, it is the poet Maya Chinchilla who coins this term. In fact, in the book *Seeking Community in a Global City*, by Nora Hamilton and Norma Chinchilla, there is an excerpt from one of her poems titled Centralamericanamerican.

<sup>19</sup> Arturo Arias, "Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American subjectivities on both sides of the great divide," *Explicación de Textos Literarios* (Dec. 1999): 50



“Latino” has failed to create a signified that includes a U.S Central American experience. The second is the notion that the Central American-American subject emerges from a different location than that of the Latino subject, for if Latinos and their subgroups (i.e. Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans), live “life on the hyphen,” Arias asserts Central American-Americans live life “on the margins of hyphenated others.” Lastly, Arias asserts that “a Latino is constructed through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American.” This conceptualization of Central American-American subjectivity therefore posits it as dialectical and relational to the Latino subject. According to Arias the Latino subject is constituted via the exclusion of the Central American-American, and Central American-American subjectivity is produced in those moments and processes that “doubly marginalize and invisibilize them”.

Arias description of Central American-American subject formation is also important because his rhetoric alludes to an alternative way of thinking about subjectivity—one that does not rely on tropes of hybridity. In fact, one can argue that one of the critical frameworks that influenced Arias postulation of Central American-American subjectivity is Subaltern Studies.<sup>20</sup> Arias use of such tropes

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<sup>20</sup> A similar argument can be made that Arias’s use of rhetoric invokes the field of French Feminism, specifically the work of Luce Irigaray in her seminal book *This Sex which is Not One*. Arias, like Irigaray, often refers to Central American-American subjectivity as an “identity which is not one since it cannot univocally be Latin American and Latino.” Similarly, Irigaray argues that woman is “neither one nor two. Rigorously speaking, she cannot be identified as either one person or two” because “her sexual organ, which is not one, is counted as none” (26). In essence, Irigaray argues that because female sexuality has been defined via its relationship to male sexuality, especially male organs like the Penis (which is singular), it not accounted for. However, this logic of viewing subjectivity differs from Arias or Spivak, for Irigaray is arguing that women has “multiple sites of pleasure” and an inherent “real” sexuality that becomes obscured by phallogocentric discourses. Whereas Arias and Spivak think of a subject is produced from effacement, and not that there is a subject there waiting to be “uncovered” or seen. Still, like Irigaray who argues that a particular discourse

as “invisibility” in both of his essays surrounding US Central Americans, his phrase of “doubly marginalized” as well as the fact that he views Central American-American as an abjection that is located beyond the usual two dialectical spaces, is very reminiscent to Gayatri Spivak’s discussion on subalternity. Unlike early theorizations about subalternity from such interlocutors like Antonio Gramsci (1971) and Ranajit Guha (1982), who first posited the subaltern as people who were not part of dominant groups, for Spivak subalternity does not refer to a specific person or people, but is a process that emerges from discourses of power, or as the effect of power.<sup>21</sup> Spivak’s conception of subalternity is best illustrated in the following passages taken from her foundational essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak” (1994):

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is “evidence.” It is, rather, that, both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.<sup>22</sup>

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has invisibilized, or has failed to recognize female sexuality, Arias makes a similar argument by suggesting that Central American-American subjectivity is an “identity which is not one” since Latino discourse has articulated a confining vision of Latino identity.

<sup>21</sup> Though Gramsci was the first to coin the term subaltern, the name became popularized by the Subaltern Studies group who utilized the term to describe the objectives of their project, which was to bring awareness to those groups who had been previously excluded by Indian Historiography. For instance, in one of his essays titled “Historiography of Colonial India” Ranajit Guha describes subalternity as “the politics of the people,” stating “parallel to the domain of Indian politics in which the principle actors were not the dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups constituting the mass of the laboring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that is, the people” (40).

<sup>22</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Christman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) 82-83.

For Spivak, what constitutes subalternity is not some pre-existing autonomous “people” that simply have not been recognized. Instead it is the manner in which dominant and counterhegemonic discourses, which claim to “speak for the subaltern,” produce a subaltern subject in that very process of trying to account for all types of subjectivity. In this essay, Spivak reveals the limitations and dangers of this type of assumption and enterprise through her discussion of “woman as subaltern.” For Spivak “woman as subaltern” highlights this process because this subject is always assumed to be spoken for through such concepts as “subaltern” when in fact, even within in those types of projects “woman” is still not accounted for. As she states, “in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.” This leads Spivak to proclaim that within these discourses of power, “sexual difference is doubly effaced” and is an effect of a “double displacement.” As such, she reminds her readers about the importance in locating “invisibilities,” “shadows” and “double effacement” via her quotation of Pierre Machery which argues for the necessity of a methodology that focuses on locating in the work “what it does not say”, and reminds us of the importance of the “task of measuring silences”. What both Machery and by extension Spivak seem to suggest is that in discourses which claim to “speak” or create a “home” for certain subjects, a critical intervention is required to highlight the way new subjects are produced via silences or double effacements.

Thus, unlike other Latino scholars who have followed the suggestions of Bhabha to locate “spaces in-between,” one can see that Arias has opted to

search and measure the “silences” located in discourses of Latinidad. The influence of this theoretical paradigm is evident in Arias conceptualization of the Central American-American subject. His choice to refer to Central American-Americans as “doubly invisibilized and marginalized” echoes Spivak in her description that the “woman as subaltern” emerges from a process of “double effacement and “double displacement.” The parallels are also seen in Arias second articulation of Central American-American. Following his first essay about US Central Americans, in his second essay, “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World,” Arias incorporates other features to his concept of Central American-American. One of them is the spatial location US Central Americans occupy within American ethnic and Latino discourses.

'US Latino' is a complex category, whose specificity has come to refer to a variety of groups living in this country - Caribbean, even Mexican - but we seldom link the word with that singular and contradictory trope, 'Central American-Americans,' an anadiplosis an anadiplosis that sounds more like a redundancy, a radically disfigured projection of what 'Latin Americanness' has been assumed to be. .. I would see the very term 'Central American-American' as a dissonance... Besides, the clumsiness of the sound itself, 'Central American-American,' underlines the fact that it is an identity which is not one, since it cannot be designated univocally either as 'Latino' or as 'Latin American,' but is outside those two signifiers from the very start. It is not quite life on the hyphen as Perez Firmat (1994) put it, but more like life off the hyphen, as Juan Flores (2001) asserted in a different sense. Not off the hyphen because these people already inhabit a world that is a montage of cultures, a hybridity so advanced that it has already conformed to a new subjectivity. Rather, they are off the hyphen because they are on the murky margins, not even of the Anglo, North American or South American center: it is life on the margins of those hyphenated others (Cuban-Americans, Mexican-Americans)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Arturo Arias, “ Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World,” *Latino Studies* 1, issue 1(March 2003): 171

According to Arias, unlike Cuban Americans or Puerto Ricans, who despite their sometimes contentious positioning within Latino discourse are very much seen as constitutive of it, Central American-Americans are produced from their inability to be accounted within this paradigm. Unlike the Latino subject, which has been viewed as a hybrid subject or a by product of cultural hybridity, the Central American-American subject is produced from a different set of cultural processes. This is exemplified when he explains that Central American-Americans live life off the hyphen not because they inhabit some form of “hybridity” that allows them to deconstruct the binaries that have enabled the production of a Latino subjectivity. Rather, he suggests that Central American-American subject formation is an effect—from a silence, from a double effacement, from living on the “murky margins” on the “margins of those hyphenated others.” Arias deploys the “Central American-American” like Spivak uses the “female subaltern”: as an example of “an effective subject,” one that exposes the limitations of discourses which attempt to account or “speak for all,” and in the process efface the subjects they claim to speak for. By precisely locating the invisibilities/silences within Latinidad, Arias provides a valuable critique of dominant conceptualizations of Latino subjectivity. Thus, if previous Latino scholarship has been dominated by metaphors of hybridity and liminality perhaps via the study of the US Central American experience, we can begin to deploy alternative metaphors to analyze Latino subjectivities.

Arias’s theorization of Central American-American subjectivity has enabled me to explore the questions posed earlier through a theoretical lens that

does not rely on the paradigm of cultural hybridity that has dominated Latino studies scholarship. In this dissertation I take his concept of Central American-American to its critical limit by tracing how a subjectivity and identity has emerged via discourses and cultural practices within the U.S diaspora, specifically from the city of Los Angeles. My research will showcase how certain ideologies from the isthmus, in conjunction with historical conditions, urban spaces and the social location of US Central Americans in the diaspora, have created a viable pan-ethnic cultural identity. In this aspect, my project differs from Arias who has repeatedly suggested that he does not believe there is a viable Central American-American identity or identity politics in the US stating, “the lack of an identity politics for Central American-Americans is a fact” because their “nonidentity negates the possibility of an identity politics.”<sup>24</sup> Further, although Arias is aware of the prominent role the categorical construct—Central America(n)—plays within the diasporic community, he dismisses it as purely a diasporic invention because “neither of these concepts [Central American] existed back in the homeland.”<sup>25</sup> But if this is the case, if a pan-Central American mode of identification is purely a diasporic construct, then this in itself deserves its own critical investigation.

This dissertation is an early attempt towards this objective in that it theorizes why peoples from the isthmus choose to “imagine” themselves in this (arguably) new fashion. In my analyses of Central American-American texts I reveal how a Central American-American identity and subjectivity is cultivated by

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<sup>24</sup> Arias, *Central American-Americans?*, 188-189

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 190

a concoction of three dominant elements 1)inherited ideologies from isthmus,2) the cultural landscape of Los Angeles, and 3)the social location U.S Central Americans occupy within the Latino imaginary on the West coast. As a result, I shift the conversation of Central American-American subjectivity from the abstract to the concrete by locating specific moments in Latino discourse, specifically in California, that produce Central American-American subjectivities. Moreover, through a critical examination of the politics that produced a US Central American identity and subjectivity I challenge some central tenets in the field of Latino Studies and discourses of Latino subjectivity. Subsequently, while this dissertation contributes to such fields as Central American studies, American ethnic studies and Latin American studies, perhaps the biggest intervention it attempts is within the field of Latino Studies where it delineates the limitations of current articulations regarding Latino subjects.

### Chapter Descriptions

In my first chapter titled, *The Isthmus Imaginary: The Construction of a Central American Nation*, I argue that a critical examination of the multiple significations of a term like “Central America” is needed in order to contextualize the ways in which the US Central American diaspora (re)imagines Central America. This chapter addresses the theoretical and methodological limitations present in Central American studies which routinely uses the term Central America as if it were an ontological given, and which neglects to consider how a concept like Central America has been conceived and configured from within

various discursive and geo-cultural locations. As a means to address some of the issues presented later in this dissertation, this chapter seeks to construct a discursive history of Central America as a national formation. Through a critical examination of Central American 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century political and historical discourses I reveal how the term Central America has, from its earliest usage, conveyed more than just a geographic construct, and has been deployed to invoke a particular cultural nationalism, known as *La Patria Grande*. It is my contention that this nationalism formed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century continues to be maintained both on the isthmus and the Central American diaspora. By focusing on this “idea” of Central America as a national formation, I destabilize dominant articulations of Central America which position it as either a geographic or historical construct. In addition, a critical engagement with this type of nationalist discourse of the isthmus will provide a better understanding for the ways the Central American diaspora in the US has utilized this term to mobilize and construct an ethnic community and collective identity.

As I discuss in my second chapter, the term Central America is often deployed in the diaspora to invoke a particular “imagined community” that distinguishes peoples from the isthmus from those of other Latin American countries. Consequently, in this first chapter my objective is to trace the rise of this “foundational fiction,” in order to outline the ways in which Central American nationalism was fostered long after the death of the Central American nation-state. As such, it should be noted that this chapter does not seek to locate a stable meaning for the signifier of Central America, nor does it seek to produce a



definitive history of Central America, or a formal historical treatment of the etymology of the term Central America. Rather, it seeks to compose a necessarily selective history of the concept of Central America as it has been imagined and deployed as a national formation both on and off the isthmus.

In my second chapter titled, *Centralamericanismo-Central Americans in Los Angeles*, I illuminate the way historical forces, cultural geography and the social location of Central American culture in relation to Chicano/Mexican culture have facilitated the rise of a Central American identity politics. Within the last twenty years the term Central American has emerged as a tactical new American pan-ethnic cultural identity; it is an identity that has developed in certain specific situational and cultural contexts and geographic locations. By utilizing such interdisciplinary approaches as ethnography, cultural geography, and theories of identity formation, I explore the social and cultural forces that have enabled the construction of Central American cultural identity in the diaspora. By offering an analysis of Central American cultural formations in the city of Los Angeles, including immigrant testimonials, the urban space known as “Little Central America”, and the COFECA Central American Independence parade, I wish not only to demonstrate how certain cultural practices have facilitated a Central American pan-ethnic consciousness and identity, but also to highlight how these cultural practices have become institutionalized. Rather than making the claim that a Central American pan-ethnic identity is a cultural phenomenon that has emerged throughout the United States, in this chapter I stress that this alternative form of Latino identity politics needs to be viewed as a tactical translocal identity

that emerged as an amalgamation of several specific historical and socio-cultural forces. As a result, I have decided to focus this chapter exclusively on the cultural expressions of Central American immigrants in Los Angeles.

Finally, in my last chapter titled *Identity and Subjection: Latinidad, Invisibility, and Central American-Americaness* I examine the contentious and constitutive relationship between the Central American-American and Latino subject. According to Arturo Arias, unlike Latino subjectivity that is constituted via the binaries of Anglo/Latino and Majority/Minority, the Central American-American subject is produced via the binary of Latino/Latin American or Minority/Minority. It is produced by a dual negativity that is not present within the Latino subject. Building off of Arias's theories of Central American-American subjectivity I suggest that Central American-Americaness, specifically Central American-American subjectivity, needs to be seen as an effect of power relations whereby the categories of Latino, Latin American and American are maintained through the exclusion of U.S. Central Americans. It is through the abjection of U.S. Central Americans that the Central American-American subject is constituted. In this sense, I contend that Central American-Americaness is more than just a state of marginality, for it is not simply that Central American-American subjects and cultures exist at the periphery of discourses of American and Latino cultural citizenship, but rather that they are produced in and through those spaces of exclusion.

Subsequently, in this chapter I shed light on how categories such as Latino and Latin American (as articulated in geo-cultural spaces like Los

Angeles), are maintained via the exclusion of U.S. Central Americans. Specifically I examine two controversies that at the core of their debate center on the displacement of U.S. Central Americans within the Latino imaginary. The first controversy focuses on the work of Honduran born and U.S. raised comedian Carlos Mencia, who recently has been accused of “pretending” to be Mexican in order to be able to perform “Latino’ comedy. The controversy and the figure of Carlos Mencia un-reveals the condition of Central American-Americaness—a discursive exclusion that simultaneously reveals and produces an inability to locate U.S Central Americans within the Latino and American imaginary. The second controversy I explore is the interdepartmental discord that took place in the East Los Angeles Community College (ELAC) in 1999. The controversy began when the Chicano Studies department attempted to teach a class on Central Americans only to be met with resistance by the Sociology department who claimed that it was “illegal” to teach about Central American culture within a Chicano Studies course and that Central American culture should be taught within a Latin American Studies course. Both the ELAC controversy and the Mencia controversy highlight the ways national identities and signifiers, such as Honduran and Central American, are viewed as incommensurate to such other signifiers like Chicano and Latino. The common denominator between these two controversies can be found in the ways urban spaces like Los Angeles produce representations of Latinidad that construct the Latino experience as synonymous with a Mexican American experience. In so doing, these dominant articulations of Latinidad perpetually render the experiences of U.S. Central Americans as

marginal to both the U.S American and Latino imaginaries. However, what these controversies highlight is the extent to which a Central American-American subject position (a critical effect in and of itself) interrupts and suspends Latinidad. As such, it continues to function as a radical form within Latinidad, one which, through its persistent and pronounced exclusion from dominant imaginaries, threatens the stability of the very concept itself.

**CHAPTER I**  
**THE ISTHMUS IMAGINARY:**  
**THE CONSTRUCTION OF A CENTRAL AMERICAN NATION**

What I propose to do today is to analyze with you an idea which, though seemingly clear, lends itself to the most dangerous misunderstandings.

Ernest Renan

In my classes on Central American literatures, cultures and histories, I often begin by giving students cutout pieces representing Central American countries asking them to (re) construct mappings of the geographic isthmus...More often than not, Central America as a whole lies suspended somewhere between amorphous masses on the north and south and the east and west. As if it were an island, Central America appears without physical, geographic, and historical ties to the rest of the western hemisphere and the world. On reading these student maps, I have pondered why, for many people, Central America figures as an unknown, nebulous zone

Ana Patricia Rodriguez

On September 28, 2006, staff and faculty members from the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) gathered to decide the location for their cultural event titled *Passport UCO*—a multicultural function that showcases a particular foreign culture. According to the *Passport UCO* webpage, one of the primary objectives of this event is to promote “unity and understanding in the global community, while providing entertaining and educational events for our students and surrounding community.”<sup>26</sup> Advertised as a means to provide members of the student body with, a “ticket to experience the culture and excitement of another country right in your *own backyard!*,” during that fall 2006 meeting it was decided

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<sup>26</sup> University of Central Oklahoma, “Passport UCO 2008,” <http://bronze.ucok.edu/passport/.html> (accessed January 5, 2008).

that Central America would be the chosen location for the next *Passport UCO* event.<sup>27</sup> Though one would imagine that choosing a destination would be the focus of that meeting, what the recorded minutes revealed was that selecting a location was a lot simpler than trying to determine what constitutes Central America:

**Central America status:** Most of the meeting time was spent determining what region should be defined as "Central America." After debating the subject, the committee members present decided that we should deal with mainland Central America only. We can include the Caribbean islands in a future Passport semester. The question of whether or not to include Mexico in Passport 2007 was also debated, and it was decided that for cultural reasons we should include Mexico despite the fact that geographically it's located on the North American continent. Otherwise Mexican and Mexican-American students, who tend to identify themselves as *centroamericano* and who view the *norteamericano* border as located south of the United States, are likely to feel excluded and overlooked, possibly insulted. Plus, trying to discuss the history and cultural heritage of Central America without the inclusion of Mexico is a little like ignoring the 500-pound gorilla in the middle of the room.<sup>28</sup>

In this discussion of Central America there is a clear sense of anxiety for what this term represents. Though there is no dispute over the question "where is Central America?" (it is clearly conceived as outside of the US), the more difficult question to answer is, "What is Central America?" There is a representational crisis in this meeting, evidenced in the fact that the staff cannot decide what cultural components are central to their notion of Central America. Perhaps in other cultural settings such confusion would not arise over this term. A

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<sup>27</sup> The phrase "our backyard" during the nineteen eighties was commonly used in political discourse to refer to Central America.

<sup>28</sup> University of Central Oklahoma, "UCO Passport Committee Minutes, September 28, 2006," <http://216.109.125.130/search/cache?ei=UTF-8&p=Passport+UCO+Central+America&fr=yfp-t501&u=www.ucok.edu/facsen/Meetings/UCOlevelgroups/Passport%2520Egypt%2520Minutes%2520September%252028.pdf&w=passport+passports+uco+central+america&d=bjxzPjWxQh6R&icp=1&.intl=us.html> (accessed January 5, 2008).

predominant view of Central America, taught in institutional centers in the US, is to conceive of it as simply an isthmus. It is an idea reinforced by dictionaries, which claim that Central America serves as a “geographical name” for “the narrow south portion of North America connecting with South America and extending from the Isthmus of Tehuantepec to the Isthmus of Panama”.<sup>29</sup> Thus, by not automatically assuming that Central America is simply a landmass, the *Passport UCO* meeting reminds us that there are other alternative articulations of Central America.

In this particular discussion within the UCO staff, Central America is a malleable global south—a space south of the US border populated by peoples assumed to share a common cultural bond based on geographic reasons. For the members of this meeting, Central America is imagined as an undefined space comprised of “Caribbean islands,” a “mainland,” and parts of the North American continent. Unknowingly, in this brief discussion, the UCO staff fused two larger meta-narratives about Central America. One is rooted in anthropological discourses of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which viewed Central America as Middle America. Like traditional notions of Central America (i.e. an isthmus), which are generated from geographic discourses, Middle America is a term designated to describe a physical topography consisting of “continental North America south of the U.S., comprising Mexico, Central America, and usually the West Indies”.<sup>30</sup> According to the text, *The Pageant of*

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<sup>29</sup> Merriam Webster Dictionary, 11<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “Central America.”

<sup>30</sup> Online Dictionary, s.v. “Middle America.” <http://www.dictionary.com.html>, (accessed February 12, 2008)

*Middle American History* (1947) by Anne Peck, one feature that binds the countries in Middle America is that they all share the same “tropic zone” climate.<sup>31</sup> In addition, Peck explains that “Archeologists have given the title Middle America to these lands of many Indian peoples...including islands in the Caribbean Sea” (2).<sup>32</sup> In this concept of Middle America heterogeneous populations and cultures become homogenized; everyone is perceived as “Indian peoples,” or descendants of Indian peoples who inhabit the same “tropic zone”—a zone that notably falls outside the “temperate zone.”<sup>33</sup> In doing so, this geo-cultural construct of Middle America presupposes a common racial and cultural heritage among various Latin American countries.

The second narrative about Central America presented is one rooted in U.S political discourse and policy which has continuously conceived of Central America as a disorderly mismanaged space there to be easily manipulated in order to further the US in its quest to accumulate capital. This notion of Central America was epitomized by the derogatory term, “Banana Republic.” The term, which emerged from the novel, *Cabbages and Kings* (1904) by William James Jordan, has gone on to be utilized by U.S politicians and economists as a catch phrase to describe countries within Central America. It is often deployed to refer

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<sup>31</sup> Tropics also called tropical zone or Torrid Zone, refers to “all the land and water of the earth situated between the Tropic of Cancer at lat. 23 1/2 °N and the Tropic of Capricorn at lat. 23 1/2 °S.” Definition obtained from Columbia Encyclopedia, s.v. “Tropics.”

<sup>32</sup> Anne Peck, *The Pageant of Middle American History* (New York: David McKay Press, 1947), 2.

<sup>33</sup> The fact that all of these countries are located in the “tropics” is significant, since climatological discourse for many years has categorized the “temperate zone” as the only physical geographic space that could enable “the full development of the human race.” John Disturnell, *Influence of Climate in North and South America* (New York: D. Van Norstrand Press, 1867), Page xvi.



to a one-crop economy, politically volatile, third-world country that is largely dependent on foreign capital.<sup>34</sup> Most recently, this “idea” of Central America—as a nebulous space that can assist the US in its new ventures of globalization—can be seen in the political discourse surrounding CAFTA (Central American Federal Trade Agreement), which includes not just parts of the “mainland” (El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua) but parts of the Caribbean (The Dominican Republic) as well.

In many ways the *Passport UCO* event itself, and the discourse it creates, reflects the problematic nature of these Central America meta-narratives. For instance, UCO’s cultural event unintentionally shows the unequal distribution of power relations between cartographic imaginaries of geo-entities like North/South America. In this college function, US students have unlimited access to cultures down “South.” This power dynamic mirrors US political policies towards its southern neighbors, especially within Central America.<sup>35</sup> In this event we also witness the dangers of employing an idea of Central America as “Middle America,” which based on an idea of shared geography and racial attributes,

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<sup>34</sup> Lest we think that political correctness has eliminated this term from circulation, one need only to read US based scholarship and fiction on Central America, to see that the term is still in use. See Peter Chapman, *Bananas: How the United Fruit Company shaped the world* (New York: Canongate, 2007); Steve Striffler and Mark Moberg, eds., *Banana Wars: Power and Production in the History of the Americas* (Raleigh: Duke Press, 2003); Kirk Anderson, *Banana Republic: Adventures in Amnesia, the small backward Third World nation with hearts of silver and mines of gold* (Saint Paul: Molotov Comix, 2008).

<sup>35</sup> The US involvement into Central American affairs has actually shaped the formation of the region. In the 19<sup>th</sup> & 20<sup>th</sup> century, it was the support of the US government which enabled Panama to secede from Columbia and become an independent nation-state by 1903. This in turn paved the way for the US to hold rights over a territory within Panama to build the Panama Canal. For the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, US Marines were a constant presence in both Nicaragua and Panama. The coup d’etat against Guatemalan President Jacobo Arbenz by the CIA, and the covert war the US had with Nicaraguan Sandinistas during the 1980s are other few examples.

homogenizes divisions carefully manufactured by Latin American countries. Unfortunately, though the rationale behind *Passport UCO* is to create multicultural awareness by showcasing the specificity of certain regions and cultures, the end result is that it becomes another example of how U.S discursive practices homogenize countries that fall outside of that other geo-social construct: America. The fact that the staff cannot decide what should be included and excluded under the term Central America reveals ignorance about internal differences located south of “America.”

In the end, the UCO staff opts to forgo including the Caribbean in their celebration of Central America, but decide to keep the country of Mexico as part of this cultural event. In fact, it soon becomes clear that the staff perceives Mexico as the most important cultural component of Central America. They argue that “trying to discuss the history and cultural heritage of Central America without the inclusion of Mexico is a little like ignoring the 500-pound gorilla in the middle of the room.” Their notion that Mexico is central to Central America is also evidenced in their fear that if they don’t include Mexico, Mexicans who “see themselves as centroamericanos” would feel “insulted” and “excluded.” But Mexican Americans do not consider or call themselves “centroamericanos,” nor do Central Americans view Mexican culture as vital to its own discursively constructed idea of Central America. On the contrary, in other institutional settings like California State Northridge in Los Angeles, both faculty members and students have created the Central American Studies Program (CAS), and organizations like Central American United Student Association (CAUSA),

precisely because they felt Central American culture could not be encompassed in Chicano/Mexican American studies.<sup>36</sup> Launched in 2000, the CAS program was a result of CAUSA's desire to "educate people who are unfamiliar with their culture and help them understand that Central America is a region separate from Mexico that holds its own identity."<sup>37</sup> Thus ironically, while the UCO staff tries to avoid offending some of its Latino student body, the insult emerges nonetheless by their failure to acknowledge the cultural and historical differences between such geo-cultural locations like the Caribbean, Mexico, and Central America.<sup>38</sup>

I begin with this lengthy anecdote about the *Passport UCO* event, because the issues raised in their discussion are thematic concerns I address in this chapter. This intellectual community challenges (albeit inadvertently) the ontology of geographical constructs by exploring the question "What is Central America?" Similarly, in this chapter, I argue for the need to ponder this question more deeply, as well as reveal how current deployments of the term by Central Americanists need to be reconsidered. In addition, like the *Passport UCO* discussion which exposed the various narratives associated with the term Central America, in this chapter I also explore one of the most dominant narratives surrounding Central America—the notion that Central America is a *patria grande*.

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<sup>36</sup> The student group Central American United Student Association (CAUSA) was formed in 1993 as an alternative to other Latino based student groups, mostly of Mexican- American decent. In addition, the Central American Studies Program (CAS) was launched in May 2000 as a way to begin addressing the needs of its Central American student population by offering classes directly relating to Central American culture.

<sup>37</sup> Alicia McCray, "Central American studies program becoming reality," Daily Sundial Online, <http://sundial.csun.edu/sun/98s/98s/020398ne.03htm> (accessed March 7, 2002).

<sup>38</sup> Though they are concerned over how Mexican/Mexican American students will read their conceptualization of Central America they never suggest a concern over how Central American/US Central American students will read their cultural event.

A critical examination of Central American political discourse from the isthmus reveals how the term Central America has from its earliest usage, conveyed more than just a geographic construct. The term is a residual product from a particular Central American cultural nationalism that was formed in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century as a means to create an “imagined community” between five very distinct provinces and peoples. I explore the emergence of the “idea” of Central America as a national formation because previous scholarship has not been able to account for the ways the Central American diaspora have utilized the term to mobilize and construct an ethnic community and collective identity. As I will discuss in my second chapter, the deployment of the term Central America in the diaspora is invoked to connote a particular nationalism that distinguishes peoples from the isthmus from other Latin American countries. Consequently, in this chapter I locate the rise of this “foundational fiction,” and trace the ways in which Central American national imaginary was fostered long after the death of the Central American nation-state. It is this connotation of Central America that has been an influential factor in current manifestations of Central American cultural productions in the diaspora. It therefore should be noted that this chapter does not seek to locate a stable meaning for the signifier of Central America, nor produce a definitive history of Central America. Rather, it seeks to compose a necessarily selective history of the concept of Central America as it has been imagined as a national formation on the isthmus.

As Eric Hobsbawm reminds us, concepts “are not part of free-floating philosophical discourse, but socially, historically and locally rooted, and must be

explained in terms of these realities.”<sup>39</sup> Subsequently I study this concept of Central America as *patria grande* by first revealing how a colonial framework created the idea of *patria* within a Latin American context. I then focus on how this idea of Central America as patria was popularized via “invented traditions” and practices during the Central American Federation. Finally, I examine how this idea survived the death of the Central American nation-state through cultural texts like state constitutions, civic celebrations and most notably, Central American historiographies. Like Walter Mignolo’s important contribution about the “idea” of Latin America (2005), and Ana Patricia Rodriguez’s intervention regarding the “Isthmus” (2009), the argument in this chapter “will not be about an entity called “[Central] America.”<sup>40</sup> Instead, it will trace the predominance of one specific “idea” of Central America that emerged during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to expose “the imperial/ colonial foundation of the that idea.”<sup>41</sup>

### False Dichotomies: What is Central America?

An excess of confidence has spread all over the world regarding the ontology of continental divides.

-Walter Mignolo

Whatever our definition is, we need to think about categories such as “Central American” a multiple and discontinuous, not as categories with “ontological integrity.”

-Arturo Arias

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<sup>39</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780 : Programme, Myth, Reality*. 2nd ed, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 9.

<sup>40</sup> See Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005) as well as Ana Patricia Rodriguez, *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009).

<sup>41</sup> Walter Mignolo, *The Idea of Latin America*, xi.

Within Central American historical discourse there are two competing approaches to the study of Central America. The first relies on what some view as a “geographic perspective.” It employs a “traditional” definition of Central America, which views it as an isthmus situated between the two larger continents of North and South America. Under this approach, Central America becomes synonymous with isthmus, which in turn is conceived as an ontological reality; a “real” geographic physical space whose parameters are usually between Guatemala in the north, and Panama in the south. Some examples of Central American historiographies that utilize this configuration are Rodolfo Cardenal’s *Manual de Historia de Centroamérica* (1996), Anthony Coate’s *Central America a Natural and Cultural History* (1997) Lynn Foster’s *Brief History of Central America* (2000) and Thomas Percy’s *History of Central America* (2006). Advocates of this perspective tend to be critical of Central American historiographies that utilize “comparative country histories” as criteria to study Central America instead of employing methods that contain an “integrated studies of the isthmus.”<sup>42</sup>

A second approach argues to limit the study of Central America to the five countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica. In this view, while Central America (defined here as the five aforementioned countries) is located within the isthmus, the isthmus itself (i.e. the geographic frame which usually houses seven rather than five countries) does not define it.

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<sup>42</sup> Rachel Sieder, “Review of *Historia General de Centroamérica*,” *Latin American Studies* 26, no. 3 (1994): 761-763.

In fact, proponents of this method, view the geographic perspective as a limited and invalid form of historical analysis. Their idea of Central America is that it is a historical construct—an entity comprised by countries and cultures that share a collective history. The points of divergence between these two historical discursive formations (i.e. geography versus history as the primary mode of identification for Central America) are best illustrated through the following passages that are emblematic of these different modalities.

Centroamérica comprende el extenso istmo que va desde los límites orientales de Tehuantepec, Tabasco y Yucatán hasta la frontera costarricense con Panamá. El istmo se encuentra en los trópicos, corriendo del noroeste al sudeste aproximadamente. *Centroamérica es un istmo* relativamente estrecho que conecta las áreas mayores del Norte y Sudamérica. *Sin embargo, pese a las apariencias, el área no tiene unidad geográfica. Tampoco tiene unidad histórica, como iremos viendo.*<sup>43</sup>

A history of Central America. The topic itself is fraught with problems. On one hand, a shared history forces us to limit consideration to five countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. *On the other hand, from a geographical viewpoint we might be expected to deal with a larger unit...* One could expand the geographical perspective even further to include not only the isthmus but the Caribbean islands as well. And if we were to expand it still further, our horizon could widen to embrace what in the United States is referred to as Middle America: Mexico, the Central American Isthmus, and the Caribbean islands, according to some; and additionally Venezuela, Colombia and the Guianas as well according to others. Any of the views mentioned above can be supported by various criteria ranging from physical geography through human and political dimensions and demographics. For us to undertake a valid historical analysis of the region, however, something more than an operational definition of the region's extent and scope is

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<sup>43</sup> Central American comprises the extensive isthmus that goes from the eastern limits of Tehuantepec, Tabasco and the Yucatán to the Costa Rican border with Panamá. The isthmus is situated in the tropics, running approximately northeast to southeast. Central America is a relatively narrow isthmus that connects the major areas of North and South America. However, despite appearances, this area has no geographic unity. And as we shall see, neither does it have historical unity. Roberto Cardenal, *Manual de Historia de Centroamérica* (San Salvador: Talleres Gráficos UCA, 1996), 15.

required. *It is essential that what we define have common social origins. The geographical frame is not in itself important except inasmuch as it conditions and reveals the lives of societies and groups.*<sup>44</sup>

In the first passage, taken from Cardenal's *Manual de Historia de Centroamérica*, Central America is perceived as nothing more than an isthmus, "centroamérica es un istmo/ Central America is an isthmus."<sup>45</sup> In fact, the author seems to be aware and critical of other conceptualizations of Central America when he states, "generally Central American unity is seen as a given or as something obvious," and therefore makes it a point to insist that "el area no tiene unidad geografica. Tampoco tiene unidad historica/ the area does not have geographic unity. Nor does it have any historical unity."<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, Cardenal contends that "Central American history can be considered as a process of trying to overcome the obstacles that have hindered its ability to be unified geographically, economically, politically, socially and culturally."<sup>47</sup> In essence, for Cardenal history becomes a way of creating a Central American unity that in actuality has failed to emerge.

However, Cardenal is also cognizant that his perspective on Central America is not the predominant way Central America has been studied, claiming his history of Central America "challenges official histories."<sup>48</sup> There is some validity to Cardenal's statement since the majority of texts, both within and

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<sup>44</sup> Hector Perez Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America*, trans. Ricardo B. Sawrey and Susana Stettri de Sawrey (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), XIV.

<sup>45</sup> Cardenal, *Manual de Historia*, 19

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 12



outside of the field of history, like *Central America a Nation Divided* (1976), *Understanding Central America* (1989), *Power in the Isthmus* (1989), *Centroamérica su Historia* (1998), *Historia de Centroamérica* (1988), to name a few, utilize a definition of Central America that sees it as a historical construct. This perspective is manifested in the second quoted passage, taken from Hector Brignoli's seminal text, *A Brief History of Central America* (1985). Unlike the first passage, which insists that there is no historical unity, the second excerpt begins with an assumption and affirmation that there is indeed a "shared history" between certain countries in the isthmus. Though in the second citation Brignoli elaborates upon the complexities of a term like Central America, and seems aware of the various approaches towards a history of Central America, he is nevertheless adamant that a more "valid" approach is one that privileges history over geography. Arguing that under a "geographic perspective" the study of Central America would have to include most of Latin America itself (i.e. Mexico, Caribbean islands, Venezuela, Columbia etc), and therefore render meaningless the significance of the very term, Brignoli asserts that focusing on the common socio-political histories of five Central American countries is the only "valid historical analysis".

What becomes clear via the juxtaposition of Central American historiographic discourse is that the discussion over the best methodological approach to study Central America is really a discussion over what narrative about Central America should be dominant. For those scholars who study Central America as an isthmus, it is clear they conceive of it as a geographical

region and less as a cultural entity. On the other hand, those who limit their study to five countries of Central America, privilege a notion that sees Central America as a historical entity—one created on the belief that five nations share the same geography, culture, and history.<sup>49</sup> Ironically, despite the fact that all these texts are histories about Central America, most fail to consider the relationship history has had in perpetuating these ideas about Central America as “truths.” Moreover, not only do both approaches produce the same type of theoretical errors, they also create the same type of cultural/national exclusions.

But the idea that Central America is just an isthmus—a real physical space—fails to consider how a concept like “isthmus” is a discursive construction. As previous scholarship has reminded us (Nouzeilles 2002; Mignolo 2005; Rodriguez 2009), “Geography has epistemologically shaped thinking about the world and produced various notions of space, place, and location.”<sup>50</sup> In this particular context, we must recall that the space now conceived of as an isthmus was not always perceived in that way, it is a uniquely colonial invention.<sup>51</sup> When the initial cartographies of America were being produced, the territory now known as Central America was not initially configured as an isthmus. Christopher

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<sup>49</sup> This dissertation could not have been written without the groundbreaking work done by some of the historians aforementioned. In fairness to the scholars of this field, due to the scope of the literature involved in Central American historiographies, I have created a necessarily limited and arguably a reductive reading of the ways in which historians conceive and study Central America. While there is more fluidity between these two approaches than is suggested, for the most part, these have been the conventional approaches when studying Central America.

<sup>50</sup> Ana Patricia Rodriguez, *Dividing the Isthmus*, 4

<sup>51</sup> According to Ana Patricia Rodriguez, the Maya for instance, conceived of their territory as an “axis mundi”. Though this is a bridge of sorts, it is still distinct than a landmass.

Columbus, for instance, who encountered this physical terrain in 1502, did not describe this territory as a land bridge between continents; to him it was simply “tierra firme.” In fact the idea of a transatlantic bridge only begins to surface after 1513 when Vasco Nuñez de Balboa journeys from the coastal region of the Atlantic Ocean and “discovers the Pacific Ocean. According to some scholars “a partir de ese momento, las tierras se concieberon como un istmo, es decir como una lengua de tierra que unia dos continentes/from that moment the lands were conceived as an isthmus, as a tongue that united two continents.”<sup>52</sup>

This notion of Central America as a “bridge” between two continents would be cemented by later colonial distributions of power in the Americas. Within its colonies, the Spanish empire had created two cultural, political, and economic centers: the Viceroyalty of New Spain and the Viceroyalty of Peru. The Viceroyalty of Spain was an administration and political unit that governed most of North and Central America by the viceroy in the capital city of Mexico City. Likewise, the Viceroyalty of Peru governed most of the territory of South America by a viceroy housed in the capital city of Lima. As such, the territory in between those two spaces was not seen as important to the Spanish empire. Its perceived significance was related to its strategic location—as the physical space that could connect these two larger Spanish colonial territories.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Margarita Silva Hernandez, “El nombre de centroamérica y la Invencion de la Identidad Regional” paper for *Coloquio Internacional Creando La Nacion*, (Mexico, June 28-30, 2006) 4.

<sup>53</sup> According to John Peter Cole, *Geography of the World's Major Regions* (New York :Routledge, 1996) 262, Central America was less developed and overlooked by the Spanish empire because of “its virtual absence of precious metals.” It’s significance emerged once the isthmus in Panama was discovered and goods could be transferred from the Pacific and Atlantic coasts.

Colonial independence from Spain did little to sever the cartographic image of an isthmus from this physical territory. As both Ana Patricia Rodriguez and Ileana Rodriguez note, the US would continue this legacy of defining a space based on its utilitarian function, “the isthmus as a whole and the countries located in it would be measured according to their use value as ocean and land-crossing instruments for the United States and other world powers.”<sup>54</sup> This idea of measuring space by its use-value might explain why the “traditional” definition of Central America as a bridge/landmass has persisted. However, when Central America is presented as simply an isthmus, it invisibilizes the fact that the idea of “isthmus” is also a discursive/historical construct. Therefore, any approach that utilizes this narrative of Central America to establish the validity of their methodology must be read with some skepticism.

Likewise, scholars who continue to argue for the primacy of their historical approach over a geographic conceptualization of Central America, equally ignore the problematic nature of their endeavor. Their scholarship does not account for why they choose to emphasize common links established by a Spanish colonial past over other links created by such indigenous groups like the Mayans, Miskito, and Garifuna. Historians who claim to utilize common social history as the only valid form of analysis seem unaware of the role their own textual production plays in reinforcing these particular notions of Central America. By choosing to privilege language and colonial history as criteria for their study, their works are not objectively studying Central America, but instead contributing to a discursive process that creates the belief that there is a “real” and/or “true” socio-historical

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<sup>54</sup> Ana Patricia Rodriguez, *Dividing the Isthmus*, 8

unity between five countries in Central America. In other words, their approach to Central America does more than reinforce the idea that Central America is a historical construct; as I demonstrate later in this chapter, such scholarship becomes the vehicle through which that articulation of Central America is constituted. Ultimately, as I will show, the notion that Central America is a historical construct is grounded on an ideology inherited from discourses produced during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. So influential is this idea of Central America—as a limited space with a “real” shared history between five countries—that even historiographies that claim to study the region, end up only focusing on these same five countries.

For instance, in Foster’s *Brief History of Central America*, she claims that her history will focus on the “seven modern nations that share the isthmus.” By naming the seven countries, Foster inadvertently suggests that she believes Central America to be an idea rooted in geography—isthmus—since historical approaches only focus on the five countries that were once a part of the Kingdom of Guatemala. And yet, despite her declarations, she clearly privileges the histories of only five countries, when she states that Panama and Belize “will be discussed insofar as they influenced events in Central America or shared in its history.”<sup>55</sup> By marginalizing Panama and Belize with respect to the “real” Central America, Foster reinforces the idea that only five countries define Central America while the isthmus contains seven. Similarly, Cardenal who is adamant about the fact that there is no cultural or geographic unity within Central

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<sup>55</sup> Lynn Foster, *Brief History of Central America* (New York: Facts on File Press, 200), xvii-xviii.

American nations also constructs a history of Central America that exclusively focuses on the same five countries. Thus, if, as some scholars contend, the geographical frame is what should dictate the study of Central America, if it is only an isthmus, then why do the same five countries continue to receive the most attention, while other countries like Panama and Belize, which under this perspective are constitutive of the isthmus, remain marginal?

Subsequently, what is made apparent from this brief analysis of Central American historiographic discourse is that our study of Central American history is contingent upon our understanding of what is constitutive of Central America. But where do these ideologies of Central America emerge? What socio-cultural, political and economic factors dictate the predominance of certain articulations of Central America over others? And what narrative about Central America has become the most dominant in both Central American scholarship and within cultural practices of the Central American diaspora?

### La Patria Grande: The Central American Nation

Si nuestro objetivo fuese una historia rigurosa de Centroamerica tendríamos que ahondar en las distancias y cercanias de esos procesos paralelos y particulares. Pero no es nuestro fin. Esta no es una historia exhaustiva de la region. No es siquiera una historia. Es otra cosa: una reflexion acerca del imaginario nacional centroamericano.<sup>56</sup>

Alejandro Jimenez and Victor Hugo Acuna

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<sup>56</sup> If our objective were a rigorous history of Central America we would have to delve deeply into the differences and similarities of those parallel and particular processes. But that is not our goal. This is not an exhaustive history of the region. It isn't even a history. It is something else: a reflection on the Central American national imaginary.

In the fall of 2007 when the presidents of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras arrived in Nicaragua to participate in a meeting on economic and political affairs in Central America, the president of Nicaragua, Daniel Ortega, is reported to have said to his peers to feel at home in Nicaragua since his nation “es una parcela de la gran patria centroamericana/ is a parcel of that larger Central American fatherland.”<sup>57</sup> Evidently, Ortega’s notion that Nicaragua is as much the home to the other presidents as it is to him, is one grounded in the belief that Nicaragua, like Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica (though not present at this meeting) are all “parcels” belonging to an even larger “imagined community”—*La Gran Patria Centroamericana*. As such, Ortega’s statement is a recent manifestation of a dominant Central American discursive legacy, hereto referred as *la patria grande*. This discourse espouses the belief that certain nations in the isthmus are inheritors of a larger common history and culture, and that despite their allegiances to a particular nation-state, sometimes referred to as “la patria chica,” they all belong to a larger fraternity known as Central America.<sup>58</sup>

According to scholars Alejandro Jimenez and Victor Acuña (2003) the roots of this ideological belief were established during the colonial period, when the physical space of the isthmus was first titled as La Audiencia de los Confines,

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<sup>57</sup> “Berger, el primeo en llegar a Nicaragua,” *Prensa Libre.com*, October 5, 2007, <http://prensalibre.com/pl/2007/octubre/05/184289.html> (accessed September 28, 2008).

<sup>58</sup> Marta Arzu and Teresa Giraldez, *Las Redes Intelectuales Centroamericanas: Un Siglo de Imaginarios Nacionales* (Guatemala: F&G Editors, 2005)17. Arzu and Giraldez argue that Jose Cecilio del Valle conceived of Central America as *Patria Grande*, and considered the provinces of El Salvador, Guatemala, Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua provinces as *Patria Chica*. In their own discussion they too also employ this distinction of Central America as *Patria Grande* and the nation-states of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica as *Patria Chica*.

(1563). As configured by the Spanish monarch, the Audiencia's physical parameters began in Tabasco and the Yucatan in the south of Mexico and extended all the way to the southernmost point of what is now Panama. However, the territory and the name of this isthmic space would be reconfigured in 1570 when it would become known as La Audiencia de Guatemala, which limited the area to include the provinces of Chiapas (now in Mexico), Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Although In 1786 the Spanish crown decided to change the name to *El Reino de Guatemala*, it still comprised the provinces of Chiapas, Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica up until 1821 when the provinces declared their independence. It was during the 300 years of colonial rule by the Spanish monarchy that the future Central American countries would inherit the idea that smaller political bodies are constituents to a larger family known as "la patria." Acuña and Jimenez have suggested that in the Spanish colonies, especially within the Kingdom of Guatemala, "la patria designaba al conjunto de la monarchia espanoloa."<sup>59</sup> This sentiment, they argue, is exemplified in a speech delivered on April 13, 1811 by then President and Governor of the Kingdom of Guatemala—El Capitan General Jose Bustamante y Guerra:

Confunde el vulgo las palabras patria y pais, patriotismo y paisanaje. Cariño merece el pais en que se nace, en que se forma la razon, en que toma el espiritu las imprecisiones mas duraderas. Pero cuan distinto es el lato y verdadero amor a la Patria, que se comprende todos los pueblos unidos por los mismos vinculos sociales, todos lo que tenemos, una

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<sup>59</sup> Alexander Jimenez and Victor Acuña, "La improbable nacion de Centroamerica," *Biblioteca Valenciana*, <http://bv.gva.es/documenos/Jimenez.doc> (accessed July 12, 2008) 8.



Religion, un Rey, una ley unas costumbres, una voluntad, y un character que nos distingue del resto de los pueblos.<sup>60</sup>

One of the more revelatory features of Guerra's speech is the hierarchy he creates between one's country and what he labels as one's "patria/fatherland." Though he is clear that one should be loyal to both one's country of birth, and one's patria, he also suggests that while one's country deserves "cariño/affection," it is the "patria/fatherland" which deserves to have "verdadero amor/true love." Interestingly, Guerra's notion of patria is one that is deterritorialized; in essence he argues that what constitutes patria are not factors like geographic boundaries, but common social ties like having the same religion, king, laws, and traditions. These ties in turn create "una voluntad/one will" as a people, and this "voluntad" sets them apart from other groups. It is noteworthy that Guerra conceptualizes patria in these de-territorialized terms since his speech was delivered in 1811, ten years prior to Central American independence. In a historical period where Latin American and North American countries were producing ideological claims asserting a difference between the "old and new worlds," it becomes clear that this conceptualization of patria becomes an ideological apparatus for the Spanish monarchy. This idea of patria becomes the vehicle that unites Spanish and colonial subjects by insisting that both are ruled by the same king, and that despite one's country of birth, the

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<sup>60</sup> The masses confuse the words patria and country, patriotism y civil society. Affection deserves the country in which it is born, in which reason is formed, in which the spirit takes its most enduring impressions. But how distinct is this latent and true love for Patria, which all united peoples understand through the same social ties, all of which we have, one religion, one King, one Law, some customs, one will, and one personality that distinguishes us from the rest. Passage quoted in Jimenez and Acuna, "Improbable Nacion Centroamericana," 8.

greatest loyalty should be reserved to that larger cause which binds a people, a *paisanaje*, and together — defined here as “patria.”

The political events of the new world would necessitate an alteration to the concept of patria when in 1821 Mexico, along with the Kingdom of Guatemala, declared their independence of Spain. After being annexed to the Mexican empire governed by Agustín de Iturbide, on June 30 1823, delegates of the provinces of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica met at what is now referred to as “La Asamblea Nacional Constituyente,” to announce their complete independence from both Spain and Mexico and asked to be recognized as a sovereign political entity titled, “Las Provincias Unidas de Centroamérica/The United Provinces of Central America. It is believed by some scholars that it was during this national assembly that the term Central America was first invented, and therefore becomes one of the first instances in which the idea of Central America as a multi-national entity was articulated in political discourse.<sup>61</sup> Less than a year later, when delegates of the United Provinces of Central America drafted their own constitution, they officially became a sovereign nation called La Republica Federal de Centroamérica.

As part of the nation-building process, one of the first acts required by this new federation was to sever notions of loyalty attached to the crown and transfer them to their newfound republic. One way the new federation attempted to distance itself from the old world was through altering the concept of patria. The invocations of patria invoked within the emergent Central American political

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<sup>61</sup> Margarita Silva Hernandez, *El Nombre de Centroamérica y la Invención de la Identidad Regional*, 7.

discourse differed because patria became disassociated from the signifier of crown or Spanish monarchy, and became sutured with the new Central American Federation. As Arzu and Giraldez observed, this notion of transferring one's loyalty from Spain (i.e. patria) to one's new nation-state (Central America) was one that was burgeoning throughout Latin America, "paso a manifestar su lealtad a la nacion Americana, siempre con esa idea integredora de una sola patria."<sup>62</sup> Citing the political philosophies of Simon Bolivar who espoused ideologies of "panhispanicism," and Antonio Batres who advocated a form of "panamericanism" among the liberated nations in the Americas, Arzu and Giraldez assert that the creation of a Central America nation was a manifestation of the political ideologies of its historical moment, which "daba la prioridad a la pertenencia global, a la gran patria sobre la chica sin negar ninugana de ambas/prioritized the global the fatherland over the smaller individual nation without denying or neglecting either one."<sup>63</sup> That is, there was a sentiment during this period towards creating a constellation of confederations such as Gran Colombia, Rio De La Plata and Central America, whom individually and in conjunction with each other, embodied the spirit of a new "patria grande Latinoamericana". Under this new restructuring of patria one was not forced to choose to love ones "patria grande" any more than their own "patria chica," but instead, one was able to show "lealtad a la patria centroamericana, a una entidad

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<sup>62</sup> Marta Arzu and Teresa Giraldez, *Las Redes Intelectuales Centroamericanas: Un Siglo de Imaginarios Nacionales*, 52. Translation: it came to pass that the same idea of having loyalty towards the fatherland was implemented in the nations of the Americas.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

grande, que cohabitaba e interactuaba con otra, la patria chica, entidida como lugar de origen.”<sup>64</sup> Thus, unlike previous colonial articulations of patria which were heavily de-territorialized, within this new Latin American, and specifically Central American context, the term patria was re-territorialized and became synonymous with the concept of nation.

Though political figures like Bolivar and Bartres in Latin America would promote these larger ideas of solidarity and fraternity between the Americas, within Central America, these ideals would be promoted by ideologue Jose Cecilio Del Valle. Del Valle was not only the author of the La Acta De Independencia/Central American Declaration of Independence, but also a prominent political figure within the new federation of Central America. Like Bolivar and Bartes, Del Valle was equally inspired by this new re-conceptualization of “patria,” and often used the terms “patria” and “nación” interchangeably when referring to the new Central American nation. As Benedict Anderson has noted, among one of the most powerful mediums for the creation of an “imagined community” during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was print capitalism. This proved to be no different in Central America where Del Valle utilized his newspaper aptly titled, *El Amigo de La Patria*, as a means to construct a Central American imagined community. In it, he continuously promoted a synechdocal idea of Central America, one which argued that despite the individual nuances of each province, they were all part of the same whole, “Se han unido todas (las provincias) para forma una sola nacion. Cada una es un estado indepediente de los otros, pero todos son al mismo tiempo partes de un solo todo, fracciones de

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

una sola unidad.”<sup>65</sup> Del Valle frequently used the metaphor of the family as a means to highlight the relationship the provinces of Central America had within the larger political entity of the federation, which he also referred to as “La patria grande Centroamericana”:

No dependen unos de los otros hermanos, ni hay entre ellos subordinación o superioridad de derecho; pero todos deben consideracion y respeto as su padre[...] No depende Costa Rica de Nicaragua , ni Comoayagua de San Salvador; Comayagua, Nicaragua, y Costa Rica tienen un gobierno supremo que debe extender a todos los pueblos su vigilancia y protección. Este gobierno es el vinculo que los une para formar una sola nación.<sup>66</sup>

Nacimos en un mismo continente; somos hijos de una misma madre; somos hermanos; hablamos un mismo idioma; defendemos una misma causa; somos llamadas a iguales destinos.<sup>67</sup>

Del Valle relies on the metaphor of the family to describe the internal dynamics of this nation-state, indeed it undergirds his idea of Central America. Employing the trope of the family in nationalist discourse becomes a vehicle to establish the idea that an organic relationship exists between spaces and peoples that are discontinuous and heterogeneous. Like families who may have differences, these differences are minimalized under the belief that a genealogy and a common

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<sup>65</sup> All provinces have united to form one single nation. Each one is a state independent from the others, but at the same time, all are parts of one sole totality, fractions of one sole unity. Arzu and Giraldez, *Las Redes Intelectuales*, 53

<sup>66</sup> One brother does not depend upon others, nor is there subordination nor superiority between them; but all owe deference and respect to their father[...] Costa Rica does not depend on Nicaragua, nor Comayagua to San Salvador; Comayagua, Nicaragua and Costa Rica all have a supreme government that ought to extend to all its peoples its vigilance and protection. This government is the link that unites toward the formation on singular nation. Arzu and Giraldez, *Las Redes Intelectuales*, 61

<sup>67</sup> We were all born on the same continent; we are all sons of the same mother; we are all brothers; we all speak the same language; we all fight for the same cause; we are all called to the same destiny. Quoted in Rafael Leiva Vivias, “La Union Centroamericana,” (Tegulcigalpa: Empresa Nacional Artes Graficas, 2004) 12.

bond exists and that this source of unity supersedes any other form of cultural and ethno-racial differences. Moreover, the metaphor of the family, or “la gran familia,” as Paul Allaston notes, was a popular trope within Latin American nationalisms.<sup>68</sup> According to Allston the appeal of using the trope of family when discussing the nation is “predicated on faith in the patriarchal structures and heteronormative reproductive logics, that undergrid the ideals of both family and nation.”<sup>69</sup> One can see how Del Valle relies on patriarchal metaphors when trying to articulate the relationship the provinces have with the larger Central American nation. Del Valle asserts that the provinces of Central America must “respect” their “padre/father,” in so doing, he establishes a hierarchical relationship between the provinces and the Central American state—a hierarchy that is viewed as natural and logical similar to that of the relationship children have with their fathers. Thus, the deployment of the metaphor of family also proves useful to Del Valle for he is able to argue that there is a fraternity among the states that comprise the federation. It is a fraternity that resembles the relationship between “hermanos/brothers” who do not depend on one another, or who feel superior to one another, but instead understand their role within a patriarchal structure. Thus, while the provinces, like siblings, might have tensions amongst one another, they still nonetheless must show the highest respect for their “patria/father”—the one entity that can provide “vigilancia y protection/ vigilance and protection” to all of them.

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<sup>68</sup> Paul Allaston, *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural and Literary Studies* (Oxford: Blackwell press, 2007) 116.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

Evidently for Del Valle then, one important element that binds these autonomous states is government. We witness this in his statement that “este gobierno es el vinculo que los une para formar una nacion/this government is the tie that unites us to form a nation.” The importance Del Valle places on the role government plays in this type of political project is indicative of how 19<sup>th</sup> century discourses began associating the idea of government with an “aggregate of inhabitants.” Eric Hobsbawm has suggested that prior to 1884 the definition of nation, *nacion*, rarely included the role of the government. However, he contends that by 1884 the Spanish dictionary defined the nation as “un conjunto de los habitantes de un pais regido por un mismo gobierno.”<sup>70</sup>

But it is clear that for Del Valle, these provinces share something more than just the distinction of being a protectorate under a larger political body, for in the second passage he establishes the notion that what binds the provinces of Central America are also such factors like culture and geography. Their familial relationship, he argues, emerges from the fact that the provinces all “nacimos del mismo continente; somos hijos de la misma madre/we are born of the same continent; we are sons of the same mother,” implying that because these provinces share the same physical space of Central America, here embodied in the image of a mother, they share a fraternal relationship. In addition, the passage also solidifies the notion that culture is what binds these provinces together, asserting that not only do they “hablamos una misma lengua/ speak the

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<sup>70</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Cambridge Press, 1992) 14.

same language,” but they are also united for the “misma causa” and beholden to the same destiny.

The task of trying to cultivate a Central American nationalism on the basis of an idea that citizens and subjects of this nation belonged to a “patria grande,” irrespective of country of birth, required more than just the use of print capitalism. As effective as they are for fostering “imagined communities,” written texts are not accessible to all areas of the populations. For a government to convince its populations from different particular histories, cultures, and geographic locations that they have common roots, often requires the invention of cultural productions that construct the idea that these disparate peoples do indeed have shared origins (Hobsbawm 1992; Smith 1993 & 2000; Gellner 1997 & 2006). Within Central America, this idea of common roots was fostered in the invention of civic ceremonies like the annual celebration of Central American independence, as well as through the advent of national symbols. These texts exemplify Hobsbawm’s idea of how “invented traditions” rely on “accepted rules and ritual of symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with a suitable historic past.”<sup>71</sup>

The newly created “fiestas patronales” which celebrated Central American independence through parades, speeches and other festivities, relied on previous “rituals” established during the colonial period. Rebecca Earle (2002) has commented that the popularity of civic practices, especially those that celebrate “independence” from Spain were not new traditions invented but an

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 3.



extension of Spanish colonial cultural practices. The parades, speeches, fireworks and display of flags that became central to Latin American independence celebrations echoed “events such as the arrival of a new viceroy or the birth of a Spanish prince [which] were commemorated in the colonies with lavish parades, speeches and other festivities.”<sup>72</sup> By mirroring these cultural practices, the new Central American nation-state relied on past rituals in order to create the same spirit of community that was fostered by these previous celebrations. Thus there was an irony and ambivalence in these national cultural practices that sought to simultaneously create an identity separate and distinct from its former patria—Spanish crown—by using the same ideological devices enacted by that political unit.

Moreover, the Central American nation-state, would utilize repetition, and invoke ‘tropes’ to inculcate certain values. Most notable, was their use of geography within state and national symbols to further the belief that the Central American people shared a special location and innate destiny. When choosing the iconography that would best represent the nation of Central America, the political elites carefully chose to construct symbols that both transcended localized provincialism and firmly entrenched the idea that all the provinces inhabited a common past and a common future. To this extent, the Central American elites opted to choose the strategic geo-political location of the provinces—the isthmus—to highlight their uniqueness from other nations at that

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<sup>72</sup> Rebecca Earle, “Padres de la Patria and the Ancestral Past: Commemorations of Independence in Nineteenth –Century Spanish America,” in *Journal of Latin American Studies* 36, (November 2002):781.

time, and to emphasize that this was the common denominator shared by fall five provinces. Indeed, it is said that when deciding to pick a name for the federation, the name of Central America was chosen to highlight “su privilegiado lugar entre los mares y los continents.”<sup>73</sup> Over time, the image of the isthmus became the predominant national symbol of the Central American nation and figured prominently in all the newly created national symbols like the Central American flag (see fig. 1),<sup>74</sup> Central American coat of arms (see fig. 2),<sup>75</sup> as well as songs composed for Central America.



Fig 1. Central American National Flag.



Fig 2. Central American Coat of Arms

With its distinct blue and white colors, the Central American national flag is a symbolic representation of the isthmus. At the center of the flag is the Central American coat of arms which is surrounded by two blue stripes meant to be seen as representing the Pacific and Atlantic oceans that surround Central America and give it its distinct geographic character of an isthmus. Similarly, within the coat of arms, the importance of Central America’s strategic location was highlighted by the image of the five volcanoes surrounded by two bodies of water. Again, here we see the element of geography being employed to form a

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<sup>73</sup> Quoted in Jimenez and Acuna, *La Improbable Nacion Centroamericana*, 4

<sup>74</sup> Jaime Olle, “Central American Federation Flag,” in CRWFlags.com, <http://www.crwflags.com/FOTW/FLAGS/cam-us.html> (accessed June 19, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

sense of community among the provinces both by the image of the isthmus, as well as by the image of the five volcanoes which not only is representative of the five different Central American countries, but also re-inscribes the belief that these five countries share similar features like their distinct volcanic terrain.

Perhaps the best example of a nationalistic gesture that encompassed the symbolism and ideologies about Central America during this period can be found in Rafael Arevalo Martinez's "Himno a Centro America/ Hymn for Central America." The following is a brief excerpt:

Y que juntas las manos amigas  
y una ¡Oh patria! tus cinco naciones  
sea insignia de sus nuevas legiones  
el olivo fecundo no mas.

**Coro**

Suene el dulce vocablo de hermano,  
bata el aire una enseña de Unión,  
cinco dedos formando una mano,  
alto agiten un cetro de honor.

**Coro**

Corazón de la tierra fecundo,  
eres numen de unión y de paz.  
Dios te puso en el centro del mundo  
Y mañana su emporio serás.<sup>76</sup>

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And how closely held friendly hands  
and ours Oh Patrial! Your five nations  
be an insignia of its new legions  
the fertile tree no more

Ring out the sweet word of brother  
the air beats with a show of Union  
five fingers forming a hand  
Highly waving a scepter of honor

Chorus  
Heart of fertile soil

The establishment and repetition of hymns and national anthems are a vital component in producing foundational fictions that construct an imagined community. For instance, the act of singing hymns and anthems allows for citizens to imagine themselves as part of a larger collective, for “at precisely such moments, people wholly unknown to each other utter the same versus to the same melody [for] nothing connects us all but imagined sound.”<sup>77</sup> In addition, hymns create an imagined community through the ideologies they disseminate by way of their lyrics.

This is clearly evidenced in the lyrics of the Central American hymn, which not only invokes but sutures different signifiers to the idea of Central America. The first is the idea of Central America as a *patria grande*, one that unites las “manos amigas/friendly hands” of its cinco naciones/ five nations. The fact that the hymn refers to the provinces as “tus cinco naciones/your five nations, via a possessive pronoun, solidifies the notion that these five countries belong to Central America. By employing the images of hands and fingers, the Central American hymn creates the perception that the provinces and the Central American nation have an organic relationship. One is the extension of the other, and together they form a larger body politic. This conception is equally reinforced in one of the choruses, which states that “cinco dedos formando una mano/five fingers forming a hand,” here again, the five fingers stand for the five countries of

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muse of unity and peace  
God placed you in the center of the world  
And tomorrow its hub you shall be

<sup>77</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 45

the federation that together become one—Central America. This in turn serves to create borders and parameters of the Central American nation. In essence, it serves as a reminder that “patria” here does not signify the same as it once did for the Spanish monarchy, nor does it refer to la “patria Latinoamericana” which is another geo-political construct circulating during this historical period. Instead, the hymn makes it explicit that ‘patria’ here is limited only to a specific set of five countries and to a particular geo-cultural location of the isthmus. In fact, the hymn invokes an image of the isthmus as central to the idea of Central America by viewing it as a “corazon de la tierra fecundo/heart of the fertile land,” and by also claiming that “dios te puso en el centro del mundo/ god placed you in the center of the world.” Moreover, by implying that “god placed you in the center of the world” the lyrics allude to a type of Central American manifest destiny—an idea that the isthmus was created specifically for this Central American republic, that its existence is “natural” and fated.

These cultural forms like the parade, the newly created flag, and hymns were vital in constructing an imagined community of “centroamericanos.” And unlike *El Amigo Patria*, and other written forms of blatant national propaganda, these civic and cultural practices enabled the newly formed nation-state to disseminate its ideology of Central America to the masses.

## Central American Cultural Nationalism: The Nation-State is Dead, Long Live the Nation!

Despite the cultural and political efforts from the newly formed federation of Central America to maintain itself as a political entity, by 1840 the Central American union and the political body of the federation had dissolved. Over the years and throughout many of the different countries of the isthmus, there would be several attempts to resuscitate the defunct political body of the Central American nation. From 1842 -1844 there was the Confederation of Central America, in 1852 there was the Federation of Central America, in 1896 there was the Greater Republic of Central America or Republica Mayor de Centroamérica, finally the last attempt occurred in 1921 under the title, yet again, of Federation of Central America. Though the eventual formation of individual nation-states from the countries that used to comprise the Central American nation signaled a reality that a Central American nation-state would never be revived, it did not signify the end to the idea of Central America as “la patria grande.” That is, the failure to maintain a Central American nation-state did not entail the failure of nation-state to ‘hail’ its subjects into seeing themselves as “Centroamericanos” or of creating a viable form of cultural nationalism.

Arguably, the nationalism created while Central America was a nation-state is one that would continue to play a great role in the politics and cultural practices on the isthmus. In 1899, for instance, members of several different Central American countries organized a political party called Partido Unionista Centroamericano (PUC), with the explicit political objective of recreating the Central American nation. The PUC was one example of many different

subsequent political organizations that would continue to create socio-cultural networks in order to maintain Central American solidarity and allegiance between the five countries. Moreover, the political elites of the newly formed nation-states of the isthmus were equally invested in continuing interpellating its new citizenry not just into Salvadorans or Nicaraguans but also into Central Americans. One need only read the constitutions of the then newly formed states of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua to witness how political discourses within these republics promoted and valued the idea of the creation of a ‘larger patria Centroamericana.’ So much so, that even until 1965 when James Busey was performing his research on the Central American Common Market he was clearly astounded to see how pervasive this idea of Central America as patria—or union was to the individual nation states:

The ideal of restoration of union is persistent in Central American political thought. History texts of the region reiterate the aim of common nationhood. Each population regards itself as a part of a greater Central America and business correspondence is addressed accordingly; San Salvador, El Salvador, C.A; Managua, Nicaragua, C.A and so on. Each of the five flags is derived from the banner of the United Provinces of Central America (1823-38). Four of the Central American constitutions include rather dramatic references to the aspiration of union... Article 4 of the Guatemalan constitution refers to the restoration of the Central American Union as a “supreme patriotic aspiration”...The Salvadoran constitution, Article 9, provides that “El Salvador, being part of the Central American nation, is obligated to assist in the total or partial reconstruction of the Republic of Central America....Article 10 of the constitution of Honduras, and the Nicaraguan document, Article 6, contains similar statements.<sup>78</sup>

In Busey’s summation of these constitutions we see that for these individual nation-states the idea of a Central American nation is perceived as a “supreme

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<sup>78</sup> James Busey, “Central American Union: The Latest Attempt,” *Western Political Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (March 1961): 49.

patriotic aspiration,” suturing once again the idea of a Central American union/nation with “patria.” Within the political discourse of four of the former five provinces of the pre-existing Central American nation, there are explicit references that the individual country and/or nation-state is still viewed as a parcel or fragment of the larger “patria grande centroamericana.” This logic is witnessed by the fact that many of the former provinces adopted the symbols and civic ceremonies they inherited during the brief period that Central America was a nation. For instance, to date the five countries continue to celebrate the same independence date chosen by the Central American federation, despite the fact that the nation no longer exists, or that each of the respective countries in Central America became autonomous political entities at different dates. In addition, as Busey notes, the national flags of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica all utilized the original Central American national flag as their inspiration, and like it, they all invoke that national iconic image of the isthmus in their flags, and have the same large blue horizontal stripes that surround a white center.<sup>79</sup> The provision in the various Central American constitutions that allows for the re-emergence of Central American nation over individual nation-states, the choice to inject the same colors and symbols from the previous Central American nation, in essence, the act of preserving Central American national symbols instead of eradicating them, suggests that the political leaders of the newly formed nation-states not only saw themselves as Central Americans, but

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<sup>79</sup> The only exception is Costa Rica, which has a red stripe at the center of their flag. However like the other four countries, it still celebrates Central American independence.



were also equally invested in creating a political discourse that could continue to hail its subjects into Central Americans.<sup>80</sup>

One of the discursive spaces that exercised the most influence in perpetuating the idea of “la patria grande centroamericana,” were school and history books produced in the isthmus about Central America. The role institutional centers play in disseminating state-sponsored ideologies cannot be underscored. Both public and private institutions, Althusser argued, should be seen as “Ideological State Apparatuses,” which create subjects aligned with interests of the state.<sup>81</sup> This certainly proved to be the case on the isthmus where most of the countries would create or teach from books that reinforced the idea of Central America as a supra-nation. For instance, the textbook titled, *El Lector Centroamericano* (1949), was created with the assistance of “Profesorado y la Intelectualidad Centroamericanos,” to be utilized in middle schools and “bachilleres” across Central America. In its prologue the authors of the text are very explicit about the purpose of this text:

Hoy queremos cerrar con broche de oro esa collection, pasando de la Patria chica a la Patria Grande, Centro America...El Lector Centro Americano lleva a la ninez y a la juventud del istmo, junto con el conocimiento de todo lo bello y rico que tiene Centro America, el anhelo

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<sup>80</sup> What still remains unclear is whether these new political elites perpetuated this ideology of patria grande because they had become fully interpellated as centroamericanos, or because they were invested in perpetuating an ideology that at its core forces the individual to make concessions for something larger like the state. One can see how the latter option, which trains individuals to have unquestioned loyalty to government entities—might be beneficial to the Central American oligarchies of that time period.

<sup>81</sup> Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (:Notes towards an Investigation)”, *Mapping Ideology*, ed., Slavoj Zizek (New York: Verso Press, 1994) 112-114

de union de nuestros pueblos para formar la Gran Patria Centroamericana.<sup>82</sup>

Akin to the works by Del Valle and other federation ideologues, authors of this textbook introduce its readers the distinction between a “patria grande/large fatherland” and a “patria chica/small fatherland.” They also argue that “la gran patria centroamericana” is the “anhelo de union,” the idea that “nuestros pueblos” share affinities and that there is in fact a common socio-cultural bond. What is affirmed in this passage is the belief that the patria chica and grande are interconnected; that there can be, and should be, a dual form of patriotism. It argues that to feel a sense of loyalty and patriotism to la *patria grande* does not hinder or interfere with one’s loyalty to one’s individual nation-state (i.e. patria chica). On the contrary, this educational textbook inculcates the belief that at the core of every “lector Centroamericano” is the “anhelo de union de nuestros pueblos para formar la Gran Patria Centroamericana/the desire to unify our towns in order to form the Central American fatherland.”

The fact that an individual nation-state would unconsciously subvert its own power via the exaltation of a former nation-state is what distinguishes this ideology of *patria grande* from other national ideologies. Usually national formations designed and enforced by the state operate by creating an artificial unity through the abjection of other competing nationalisms. One only need to look at the policies enacted by the Guatemalan state towards the Mayas, or the

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<sup>82</sup> Now we wish to close with golden brooch this collection, moving from Patria chica to Patria grande, Central America...Our Central American reader takes with him, from infancy to adolescence, the isthmus, along with the wisdom of all that is beautiful and rich in Central America, a yearning for the unity of all our peoples to form la Gran Patria Centroamericana. Victor Recalde and Carment Recalde, *El Lector Centroamericano*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Managua: Editorial, 1949) prologue.

Nicaraguan Government (including the Sandinistas) toward the Miskitos, and the Honduran state towards the Garifuna, to witness how cultures that threatened a national hegemonic identity were treated with contempt and violence.<sup>83</sup> But Central American nationalism—as conceived by the idea of Central America as *patria grande*—has, from beginning, allowed for the idea that two nationalisms can co-exist simultaneously. It is for this reason that when the former provinces became nation-states, almost all of them developed their own nationalisms to be coterminous with this former Central American imaginary. There was an idea already in place that suggested that one could not honor their own “patria chica” without honoring their larger “patria grande centroamericana.”

The idea that these five countries are fragments that belong to a larger culture and history becomes a theme present throughout the entire textbook. The front cover, for instance, is an image of an isthmus with the five national flags of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica, reminding its “lector centroamericanos” that irrespective of their national flag they all belong to the isthmus—they are all centroamericanos. It is a belief mutually reinforced in the back cover that contains the Central American nation coat of

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<sup>83</sup> For a more focused study on how the individual nations dealt with cultures and populations that went against the grain of a mestizo based nationalist ideology see, Robert M. Carmack, *Harvest of Violence: The Maya Indians and the Guatemalan Crisis*, (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988); Victor Montejo, *Voices from Exile Violence and Survival in Modern Maya History*, (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); Edmund T. Gordon, *Disparate Diaspora: Identity and Politics in an African Nicaraguan Community*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998); Sarah England, *Afro-Central Americans in New York City: Garifuna Tales of Transnational Movement in Racialized Space* (Florida: University of Florida press, 2006).

arms.<sup>84</sup> By representing the coat of arms, it reminds its readers of a selective past, and of their shared geographic present. Because the content of the textbook includes individual histories of the different national countries, as well as stories of the various important Central American political figures, it also suggests to its reader that to be “centroamericanos” one needs to know the history of one’s country as well as that of one’s fellow neighboring countrymen. Furthermore, the textbook contains the musical arrangement and lyrics for not just the Central American hymn, but for all the national anthems of the five countries of Central America. Thus, for the reader of *El Lector Centroamericano* it is crucial to know not just your individual national anthem, but the anthem of your “países hermanos.” For as the authors of the textbook assert, “en el corazón de todo buen centroamericano retocen, alborozadas, las ansias de unidad/ in the heart of every good Central American retains the hope and desire for union.<sup>85</sup> In doing so, the textbook can be perceived as an ideological apparatus through which students foster and maintain a form of Central American nationalism.

Another historical textbook that would prove to be vital in espousing this particular conceptualization of Central America as *patria grande* can be found in Jose Mata Gavidia’s *Anotaciones de Historia Patria Centroamericana* (1969). Like, *El Lector Centroamericano*, Gavidia’s text is very explicit about its

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<sup>84</sup> As mentioned prior, the Central American Federation Coat of Arms contains the image of five volcanoes and an isthmus.

<sup>85</sup> Victor Recalde and Carment Recalde, *El Lector Centroamericano*, 6

ideological objective of creating a textbook that will introduce and sustain a specific vision of Central America. As noted in his prologue,

No saber Historia Patria es como ser uno extranjero en su propia tierra. La Historia Patria es como la conciencia viva de cada nacion. Si nadie ama lo que no conoce o conoce mal, como puede amarse a la patria que se desconoce? Cuanto mejor sepamos como Centroamérica ha nacido, crecido, vivido, y llegado a ser lo que hoy es, estaremos en posibilidad de ser mejores centroamericanos. Para llegar a amar a Centroamérica hay que conocerla primero. Estas paginas eso quieren esenar: conocer la Patria Grande, que se esforzaron por crear nuestros antepasados...Nuestra historia es el alimento del amor patrio. Sin historia no hay patria.<sup>86</sup>

What is highlighted from Gavidia's prologue is the interconnectedness between Central American history and the role it plays in promoting the idea of Central America as a national community. He argues that "one cannot love Central America without knowing her" and emphatically concludes by stating, "without history there is no patria." Gavidia in this passage is very clear about the role history plays in the construction and perpetuation of Central American nationalism. For Gavidia, to learn the history of one's respective country is incomplete and insufficient because what is of truly great importance is the history of Central America—which he views as the history of one's patria or nation. According to Gavidia to not know the story of one's "patria" is to "be a stranger in one's own land." In addition, Gavidia also astutely points out the key role historical discourse and memory plays in the maintenance of all

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<sup>86</sup> To not know Historia Patria is to be a foreigner in his own land. La Historia Patria is each nation's living conscience. If no one loves what they do not know, or knows poorly, how can one love that patria that is unknown? The better we know how Central America was born, raised, lived, and come to be what it is, then shall we have reached the possibility to be better Central Americans. To come to love Central America is to first know her. These pages seek to do just that: to understand Patria Grande, which have striven to create our forefathers...Our history is nourishment for amor patrio. Without history, there is no patria. Gavidia, *Anotaciones de Historia Patria Centroamericana* (Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1969) 16-17.

nationalisms, stating that “history [is] where the conscious and soul of the nation lies, and that “our history is what sustains patriotism.”

Gavidia’s use of metaphors and terminology to describe patria, or nation, echoes the extrapolations posited by Ernest Renan. In his seminal essay, “What is a Nation?,” Renan argues that the nation and nationalism operates like the body stating, “nationality has a sentimental side to it; it is both soul and body at once.”<sup>87</sup> For Renan, the nation, like the body cannot survive without a “soul” and that “soul” cannot be based, on things like “race, language, material interest, religious affinities, geography and military necessity.”<sup>88</sup> Instead Renan suggests that history is what keeps the body of the nation alive.

Two things constitute the “soul” one lies in the past, one in the present. one is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of heritage that one has received in an *undivided form*. (emphasis mine).<sup>89</sup>

What is evident is that while Renan may disavow race, language, religion and geography as important factors in the formation of nation and nationalism, he seems to endorse the idea of “history” as the constitutive force behind the national body. The national soul, as defined in this passage, is based on temporality, on the past, present and future. The national soul here, can only survive through “legacy”, “heritage” and “memories”. Thus, after much deliberation over the nature of a nation, Renan ultimately concludes that common

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<sup>87</sup> Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge Press, 1990)18.

<sup>88</sup> Renan, *What is a Nation?*, 19

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

history is what defines a nation. In this aspect, Renan's conclusion seems to echo the ideas presented by Gavidia who claims that without "history there is no nation," and that it is "history which is the conscience of the nation."

Also noteworthy about Gavidia's *Anotaciones* is that it is among the first historical texts that began to address the problem of viewing Central America as simply a name for an isthmus and not as his title suggests "la patria centroamericana". He therefore makes it a point to refer to the isthmus as America Central in order to differentiate it from the idea of Central America. America Central he asserts "es como un puente gigantesco que surge en el istmo de tehuantepec y declina en Panama. Enlaza a dos continentes y sirve de playa a dos oceanos: el Atlantico y el Pacifico."<sup>90</sup> Gavidia further asserts that It is in America Central where "se desenvuelve la historia de Centro America...Nuestra Patria Centroamericana."<sup>91</sup> For Gavidia then, there is such a thing as America Central, which he clearly denotes as being a geographic construct, and on the other hand there is Central America, which he clearly sees as a cultural historical construct. Gavidia's distinction is important because it is one of the earliest examples of a Central American historical text making a distinction about its object of study. In other words, Gavidia wanted to ensure that his readers understood that Central America was not a geographic construct, and that it did not simply refer to the physical entity of an isthmus, instead he wanted to establish a notion that Central America is a historical term, one used to

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<sup>90</sup> Gavidia, *Anotaciones*, 15

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

denote *patria*—a patria, contained within clear national, cultural and physical borders.

Though one might be inclined to dismiss Gavidia's text as not an "objective" and/or "historical" text for its explicit promotion of a Central American nationalist ideology, it should be noted that historiographies and historical texts currently produced within the isthmus still contain this form of ideological positioning. For instance, Elizabeth Fonseca's *Centroamérica: Su Historia* (1998), a text like *El Lector Centroamericano* and *Anotaciones de Historia Patria Centroamericana*, contains within in it the trace of Gavidia's configuration of Central America:

El espacio al que nos referiremos en este libro es el correspondiente a los cinco países que formaron parte del Reino de Guatemala durante el periodo colonial y que poco tiempo después de su independencia intentaron organizarse como una federación, es decir, las Provincias Unidas del Centro de América: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, y Costa Rica. Así, el concepto Centroamérica es más bien de carácter histórico. En cambio América Central es concepto geográfico, utilizado para designar al territorio que une la América del Norte con La América del Sur.<sup>92</sup>

Like Gavidia, Fonseca asserts that Central America and the isthmus are not one and the same. For her, América Central is a "geographic construct utilized to designate the territory that unites North America and South America." On the other hand, she conceives of Central America as an idea that transcends

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<sup>92</sup> The space to which we refer in this book is that which corresponds to the five countries that formed part of the Kingdom of Guatemala in the colonial era, and which soon after their independence intended to organize themselves into a federation, that is, the United Provinces of Central America: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. As such, the idea of Central America shall then be of historical nature. This is in opposition to Central America in its geographic form, utilized to designate the territory that connects North with South America. Elizabeth Fonseca, *Centroamérica: Su Historia* (San Jose: Flasco Education, 1998) 11-12.



geography, limiting it to include only ‘cinco paises/five countries’ and claims that rather than being a geographic construct it is a concept defined by its “character historico/ historic characteristic. However, Central America’s “historic character” as conceived in this passage by Fonseca, is one she bases on the belief that these five countries have a shared history that began in the Kingdom of Guatemala, continued during the federation, and continues to this date. Thus, while Fonseca omits the explicit nationalist rhetoric employed by such historians like Gavidia, she still nonetheless employs an idea of Central America as a *patria grande* by viewing Central America as a formation defined by five countries that despite their individual national histories, share a common history and culture.

This distinction between seeing Central America as a “historical construct”, and America Central as a “geographic” construct created within history texts produced in the isthmus, is one that has transcended its historical and political moment within the isthmus and has come to impact the larger field of Central American historiography. As previously mentioned, most Central American historians have utilized these ideas of Central America to defend their approach to studying Central America without realizing that this binary was invented by this nationalist discourse. As demonstrated in Brignoli’s passage, most historians who limit their study of Central America to include only the five countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica, have done so with the pretext that their approach is one determined not by such arbitrary features like “geography”, but is one that is grounded by a “real” history these five countries share. Ironically, while most of these scholars of Central

American history and culture are well versed in the political and cultural history of Central America, they failed to see how Central American nationalism has naturalized the idea that there is in fact a shared history or cultural affinities between certain countries in the isthmus. Therefore their own texts and definitions of Central America, which see it as a historical construct, become part of a larger nationalist discourse that promotes the idea of Central America as geo-cultural entity comprised of five similar nation-states. In short, when scholars conceive of Central America as a historical construct, they inadvertently obscure how this idea is intertwined with colonial and post-colonial ideologies of *patria*.

### Conclusion

In this chapter I have excavated a portion of a discursive history which conceives of Central America not simply as an isthmus, but also a larger supra geo-cultural entity I have termed as *patria grande*. This configuration of Central America should be viewed as an ideological effect of a Central American nationalism that emerged after independence when the provinces of the Kingdom of Guatemala united and created the short lived Central American federation. Though the idea of “patria” had been in place prior to this nationalist period of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, it was during this time period when then the idea of Central America as a type of *patria grande*—an “imagined community” comprised by five nations who share a common history, culture and geographic location—came into prominence.

The significance of understanding this meta-narrative of *patria grande*, is that it has become naturalized in most Central American scholarship. As was aforementioned, most Central Americanists conceive of Central America as either an isthmus or a historical construct, and both view these two qualities as unchallenged realities. This type of articulation of Central America, I contend, needs to be re-examined, especially by scholars studying the Central American diaspora. For scholars in the diaspora need to be careful of the way they conceive and deploy the term. After all, if we employ this articulation of Central America, as a historical construct, not only will we continue to naturalize a nationalist ideology, but we will also continue the marginalization of the cultures and peoples of Belize and Panama. We must remember that nationalisms operate through exclusions, and in the case of *patria grande*, it limits that historical construct to certain countries, a certain colonial past, and arguably even a certain racial population. Thus, under this “idea” of Central America, we risk the danger of not viewing Belize, Panama, Mayans, Garifuna, or Miskitos as integral to the study of what is constitutive of Central American culture. In doing so, we will come to define the U.S. Central American diaspora as immigrants that originated from only certain parts of the isthmus.

But perhaps more importantly, if we as scholars of the Central American diaspora continue to adopt the geographic perspective or the historical perspective, then Central America will always remain territorialized and married to the isthmus. Both of these ideas of Central America, after all, view it as containing very finite borders and located in a very specific territory. Using this

notion of Central America will therefore inevitably negate and render invisible the histories of its diaspora who find themselves *a part* of Central America while remaining *apart* from Central America. Without dislocating Central America from its geographic location, and without finding new ways to conceive of Central America, the history of the U.S. diaspora will remain missing in most histories of Central America because it will be seen as both outside of the *patria grande*, and external to the isthmus.

**CHAPTER II**  
**CENTRALAMÉRICANSIMO:**  
**CENTRAL AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN LOS ANGELES**

Often it is only after immigration that a common sense of nationality emerges.

Candace Nelson & Maria Tienda

In 2001 the *Los Angeles Times* profiled the story of Siris Barrios—a young Salvadoran-born college student who “wouldn’t admit she was born in El Salvador” because of her parents’ unwillingness to discuss “the civil war or their trek to the United States,” and for fear that her “Mexican American peers looked down on her.”<sup>93</sup> Barrios is not alone in encountering these societal pressures that discourage subjects from identifying as Central American in urban locations like Los Angeles. As author Marlon Morales documented in his short memoir piece *Always Say You’re Mexican* (2000), growing up in Los Angeles he too rejected identifying as Salvadoran in an attempt to avoid being stigmatized by his Mexican American peers. As a result, some Central American immigrants and their descendants have rejected a national or regional identity associated with Central America. This in turn has caused some in the nascent field of U.S Central American studies to question whether there is and/or can be a viable politics of identity within the US Central American community. Arturo Arias, for instance, has repeatedly lamented in his work (1999, 2003) the “lack of identity politics”

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<sup>93</sup> Moore, Solomon. “Central American Students Hope to Explore their Roots.” *Los Angeles Times* 15 May 2000, print ed. : B-3

amongst the US Central American diaspora. Nora Hamilton and Norma Stolz Chinchilla, in their seminal work, *Seeking Community in a Global City* (2001), seem to implicitly reinforce Arias's notion of a failed U.S Central American socio-political identity. Though their work documents the social networks that created a visible diasporic community of Central American immigrants in Los Angeles, especially Guatemalans and Salvadorans, they seem to suggest that amongst American born Central Americans there is a tendency to identify more as "Latino" rather than Salvadoran, Guatemalan or Central American.<sup>94</sup> Hamilton and Chinchilla view this trend as a by-product of immigrant parents whom "had a reluctance to discuss their previous lives in Central America" with their children.<sup>95</sup>

However, not all subjects of Central American descent are self describe themselves as Latino. Often overlooked is the way some of these subjects have appropriated the term Central American as a privileged mode of identification. Indeed, the overall objective of the *Los Angeles Times* article on Siris Barrios, was to showcase how the "new" Central American Studies program (CAS) at the campus of California State University Northridge (CSUN) served to inspire a sense of pride and identification among its Central American students. The article highlights how many students who did not identify as Central American before, or were to ashamed of being associated with Central American culture, like Siris Barrios, have now begun to see themselves as Central American. The article

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<sup>94</sup> Nora Hamilton and Norma Stolz Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 56.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

concludes with a statement by Barrios who states that the program has helped her “build an identity as a Salvadoran American.”

The creation of the Central American Studies program is a recent institutionalized manifestation of cultural practices emanating from the space of Los Angeles that challenge the general perceived notion of a “lack of [Central American] identity politics,” or that subjects tend to identify with national loyalties (i.e. Guatemalan) or pre-established pan-ethnic categories like ‘Latino/Hispanic’. The CAS program was created in 2000 by the Central American United Student Association (CAUSA), with the objective to produce social and institutional spaces that catered to Central American students at the CSUN campus. The establishment of CAS is the culmination of social activism by CAUSA, and their faculty supporters, who held rallies, and were featured in several Cal State Northridge articles over the last decade demanding the need for Central American students, and their cultural heritage, to be recognized on campus.

What is noteworthy about the construction of CAS is the way it undermines the notion that the concept of Latinidad encapsulates the social experiences of U.S Central Americans. CAS was formed despite the fact that Cal State Northridge already had a Chicano/Latino studies program. According to Ramon Rivera, the former chair of CAUSA, despite the well intentions of the Chicano/Latino studies program, it could not provide the socio-cultural or academic space needed for Central American students, stating,

Chicano history is mostly about Cortez and the Aztecs conquering Indians. We have different food, art and culture, and even though we speak that same tongue, there’s a big difference. There are seven countries in Central America and each has its own identity...For many years we were

never covered [in history books]. We want to know what's below Mexico-about places like Guatemala and El Salvador....Central American students are the second majority on campus in comparison with the Mexican and Latina/o community...we are only looking for representation.<sup>96</sup>

Rivera's statements about the reasons for lobbying for the creation of a Central American Studies program are both problematic and revealing. As emblematic of a larger cultural phenomenon, Rivera's statements highlight the process by which some Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran subjects begin to identify themselves with the pan-ethnic label of Central American. As some have argued (Portes and Rumbaut 2001, Padilla 2008) part of the process of ethnic identification is to apply a "label to oneself in a process of self-categorization." Vital to this process is "not only a claim to membership in one category but also a contrast of ones group with other groups and categories."<sup>97</sup> Unfortunately, in the process of differentiation, of creating a contrast between 'Mexican,' 'Latino' and Central American cultures, Rivera inadvertently summarizes Chicano history through a very reductive lens that views this complicated social-political identity and history as just a narrative of victimization between Spaniards and "Indians." In addition, in order to create a distinction between other forms of identity labels like "Mexican" or "Latino," Rivera also homogenizes Central American cultures. Though he acknowledges that each Central American country has an individual "identity," he minimizes this difference by asserting that they all have the same

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<sup>96</sup> Daily Sundial Online."Central American Studies Program"  
<http://.sundial.csun.edu/sun98s/98s/020398ne03.htm> (accessed July 7, 2005).

<sup>97</sup> Alejandro Portes and Rubén G. Rumbaut, *Legacies: The Story of the Immigrant Second Generation*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 151, quoted in Yajaira Padilla, "Sleuthing Central American Identity and History in the New Latino South: Mark Villatoro's Home Killings," *Latino Studies* (2008): 386



“food,” “art” and “culture.” He therefore subsumes that “individuality” by claiming that they share the same culture.

Rivera’s articulation of the cultural differences between Central Americans and Mexicans/Latinos is an important reminder of the way identities are formed via moments of “arbitrary closures.”<sup>98</sup> One can argue that many Latin American countries share the same type of food, art, and culture, and that these distinctions are arbitrary since the criteria that constitutes difference is situational and always subject to change. Yet, it is clear by this passage that this Central American student conceives of and articulates a difference between such identity categories like “Mexican,” “Latino,” and “Central American.” For instance, Rivera claims that the only commonalities Central Americans have with Mexicans and other Latinos is that they share the “same tongue,” yet he never explains why language is less important than other cultural ties like food or art. The fact that Rivera, asserts that there is dissimilarity between Mexicans/Latinos and Central Americans, but cannot concretely articulate what that difference is, underpins the claim that there is a “real” distinction between these two identity categories. In fact, we might begin to think of Rivera’s inability to name a difference as indicative of the way US Central American identity formation is relational and emerges through an articulation of “that which it is not and through the historical moment of enunciation.”<sup>99</sup> In other words, what is so endemic of being Central American, is not an assumed shared sense of culture between peoples of the

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<sup>98</sup> Michael Keith and Steve Pile, *Place and the Politics of Identity*, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

isthmus, but the fact that within a US context their experiences cannot be accounted for by such signifiers as Latino or Mexican-American.

I draw on the example of CAS and CAUSA as a way to begin addressing some of the core objectives of this chapter which will trace how a US Central American identity is being forged in urban spaces like Los Angeles. Arguably, the production of CAS, CAUSA, and CASA<sup>100</sup> are symptomatic of an identity politics that has emerged among US Central Americans in Los Angeles. Such cultural forms are integral in creating and fostering a notion of a common Central American identity. The fact that a group of disparate students from various national backgrounds came together and created not only their own student group under the rubric of the term “Central American,” but in addition, lobbied together to create an academic program that represented their *perceived* common “food, art and culture,” reveals that in this current historical moment we are bearing witness to the usage of new type of ethnic identity that has entered the American lexicon of identity politics: Central American. The choice to label themselves Central American is noteworthy considering that they could have opted to imagine themselves as part of a larger community formation by unifying under the term Latino, or could have also chosen to position themselves within a more specific national subgroup like Guatemalan, or Honduran. For instance, we observe in Rivera’s statement that there is an awareness of individual national identities located within Central America when he states “There are seven countries in Central America and each has its own identity.” However, for Rivera

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<sup>100</sup> CASA is an acronym for the Central American Student Association, a student organization on the campus of Occidental College in Los Angeles, California.

as for the students at the CSUN campus, the term “Central American” seems to offer them with a tactical speaking position, or identity, as a means to claim political and cultural visibility that other signifiers like ‘Latino’ or ‘Salvadoran’ cannot on their own provide. This is not to suggest that some US Central American subjects do not feel interpellated or identify with a larger Latino community or with their own respective national communities.<sup>101</sup> However, what I wish to highlight is that in the span of the last twenty years, within certain locations, the term Central American has emerged as a tactical new American pan-ethnic social identity. It is an identity that has developed in specific situational contexts and geographic locations, like the city of Los Angeles in the late twentieth century. As such, while the deployment of the term “Central American” can be hastily read as just a convenient umbrella term utilized to engage in a form of coalitional politics within a University setting, upon reflection, the use of Central America as cultural identifier might also indicate a growing practice among certain residents in Los Angeles who have appropriated the term as a way to construct a transnational pan-ethnic “imagined community.”

This act of consciously employing the term “Central American” as a unification strategy for Central American immigrants in the United States is an example of what some have called a “pan-ethnic movement” (Sommers 1991).

Pan-ethnic movements have much in common with nationalism, not in their attempt to create a nation-state, but in their attempt to invent and create an “imagined community” that is “defined in large part through

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<sup>101</sup> As previously mentioned, Hamilton and Chinchilla in their work have noted the trend that individuals of Central American descent have opted to identify simply as Latino.

perceived ethnic ties that create a sense of boundary, continuity, and homogeneity for the group.<sup>102</sup>

For Sommers then, a pan-ethnic group is a “conglomerate of entities which in and of themselves each constitute a distinct “nation” defined by ethnic characteristics but which are bound together by an even more general level of subjectively shared supra-ethnic traits.”<sup>103</sup> She further observes that usually the creation of a pan-ethnic movement or supra-ethnic identity, like Latino, or in this case Central American, is strategically deployed to mobilize people.

But, if Central Americans in the United States are to be viewed as a pan-ethnic group, and if their choice to use the name ‘Central American’ reflects this self-consciously adopted pan-ethnic identity, then how exactly did this phenomenon, of using a regional identity or supra-ethnic identity as a mode of identification occur? By this question I do not mean to imply that there is some “origins” narrative of Central American identity. Nor do I mean to suggest that cultural identities exist outside discourse, for as Stuart Hall (1994) has argued cultural identities emerge precisely in moments of discursive enunciation not outside of them. Still, because identities are cultural constructs then we must also acknowledge that they are not ahistorical productions, and emerge from particular social conditions and geo-cultural spaces. The focus of this chapter therefore, is to highlight how this Central American pan-ethnicity in Los Angeles was enabled by larger global processes like trans-regional immigration, previous

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<sup>102</sup> Kay Sommers, “Inventing Latinismo the Creation of “Hispanic” Pan-ethnicity in the United States,” *Journal of American Folklore* , vol 104 (Winter 1991):34

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

cultural narratives of Central American identity, as well as the social and physical location Central Americans occupy in relation to other Latino groups within the US multicultural landscape.

Before moving forward, there are a few points that require some clarification. First, some may ponder why new scholarship would focus or even affirm an emergent form of identity politics when the articulation of such identities has typically relied on an idea of a self-authored subject, or a subject with a centered, internal essence. Though I am aware of the problematic nature of such endeavors, I also understand that there are discourses and politics that have limited the way subjects can make claims for power and representation. Though appeals to 'authentic identities' are troubling, as Liz Bondi reminds us, we still need to understand that "we cannot do without identity altogether" for "fictions of identity are essential, and essentialism (humanism) is deployed strategically rather than ontologically."<sup>104</sup> By insinuating that modes of identification are tactical strategies, I do not wish to disavow the way structures determine and produce subjects. On the contrary, I am cognizant of how external categorizations limit the types of social locations and speaking positions subjects can adopt. Joane Nagel articulates this notion best when she states "ethnic identity is both optional and mandatory, as individual choices are circumscribed by the ethnic categories available at a particular time and place. That is, while an individual can choose from among a set of ethnic identities, that set is generally limited to socially and politically defined ethnic categories with varying degrees of

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<sup>104</sup> Liz Bondi, "Locating Identity Politics," in *Place and Politics of Identity*, eds. Michael Keith and Steve Pile, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 94.

stigma or advantage attached to them.”<sup>105</sup> We therefore must read the deployment of a Central American identity as a tactical speaking position marginalized subjects are forced to occupy in order to participate within the terrain of American cultural politics.

Secondly, I want to stress that it is imperative not to read a US Central American identity as simply an extension of a pre-existing isthmian identity, nor as a uniquely diasporic invention without any cultural or ideological influences stemming from the isthmus. As I highlighted in the previous chapter, the use of the term Central America connotes more than just an isthmus, it frequently invokes a type of national formation or “imagined community” often termed *partria grande centroamericana*. Therefore, the term Central American is already infused with a form “cultural baggage” one that immediately references a particular ethnically and nationally demarcated community. Unlike the term Latino which is purely seen as an umbrella term, a name adopted by a larger US based Latin American alliance, the term Central American evokes a particular historical community formation, one formed prior to the construction of the US diaspora. However, akin to the concept of Latino, we must understand that the term Central American always already emerges from a series of erasures; by subsuming different national cultures and identities (e.g Salvadoran, Guatemalan), which already requires the homogenization of diverse cultures into one singular national culture.

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<sup>105</sup> Joane Nagel, "Constructing Ethnicity: Creating and Recreating Ethnic Identity and Culture." *Social Problems* 41, no. 1 (February 1994): 156.

Still, while the cultural nationalism fostered within the countries of Central America has been a powerful force for unifying Central American immigrants in the diaspora, and has given them a mode from which to create a politics of identity, a Central American pan-ethnic identity should not be viewed as merely a manifestation of this ideology. To do so would fail to consider how the processes of immigration and displacement of almost two million Central Americans affects the idea of Central America as a *patria grande*. An integral component to the discourse of Central American nationalism was the belief that the isthmus provided the geographic boundaries that encapsulated the Central American nation, therefore what becomes of the idea of a Central American 'nation' if its peoples are no longer within the confines of its "imagined borders"? It would thus be naïve to read Central American identity in the diaspora as just the result of a pre-existing identity being transplanted from Central America into a North American context, since such a reading neglects to consider how identities are transformed and forged by such social forces as immigration (the historical factors that caused that immigration) acculturation, and transculturation within new geographic and cultural contexts.

As sociologists Yancey William, Eugene Ericksen and Richard Juiliani (1976) have noted, the development of ethnicity is largely dependent upon structural conditions in American cities and the "position of groups in American social structure" rather than "transplanted cultural heritage."<sup>106</sup> This sentiment is echoed by the work of Candace Nelson and Maria Tienda (1997) who argue that

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Yancey William, Eugene Ericksen and Richard Juiliani, "Emergent Ethnicity: A Review and Reformulation". *American Sociological Review* 1976, Vol 41 (June): 391.

such factors as socio-economic conditions, and reasons of immigration, are “more relevant to the understanding of Hispanic ethnicity than are the vestiges of Latin American culture.”<sup>107</sup> Indeed, most scholarship on ethnicity and the emergence of an ethnic collective consciousness emphasizes that it is a social construct whose production cannot simply be viewed as being derived from “primordial ties,” since ethnic group boundaries are defined socially and can be changed.<sup>108</sup>

Thus, using this critical lens by ethnologists and sociologists as well as cultural geographers, I highlight some of the social and cultural forces that have enabled the construction of Central American cultural identity in the diaspora. By analyzing Central American texts from the city of Los Angeles, such as immigrant testimonials, the urban space known as “Little Central America”, and the Comité de Festejos Centroamericanos (COFECA) Central American Independence parade, I hope to demonstrate how the institutionalization of certain diasporic cultural practices has facilitated a Central American pan-ethnic consciousness and identity. Rather than making the claim that a Central American pan-ethnic identity has emerged throughout the United States, in this chapter I stress that it is a tactical and translocal cultural identity that shifts in form and content depending on the rural and urban locations in which diasporic subjects find themselves. For this reason, I have decided to focus this chapter exclusively on the cultural politics of Central American immigrants in Los Angeles. This is in

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<sup>107</sup> Candace Nelson and Marta Tienda, “The Structuring of Hispanic Ethnicity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives,” in M. Romero et. al., *Challenging Fronteras* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 9.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.



large part due to the fact that the city of Los Angeles, specifically the area known as “Westlake district,” has played a vital role to the development of a Central American diasporic identity. Although the Central American diaspora may have scattered to various locations in the United States, this social phenomenon of appropriating the term “Central American” as a form of ethnic identification, is not one that has emerged in other urban contexts as visibly as it has in Los Angeles.<sup>109</sup> In fact, what this chapter will draw attention to is the important role that space and the ‘identity of places’ occupies in the production of identities. Subsequently, the city of Los Angeles in this chapter is not conceived as a passive setting transformed by social actors, but rather a constitutive feature in the development of diasporic identities. It is through cultural practices emanating from Los Angeles, along with the geographic space of Los Angeles itself that has enabled a distinctive regional—or what Klor de Alva has labeled a “macro-ethnicity,” rather than simply a national or “micro-ethnicity”—Central American identity to emerge.<sup>110</sup> The fact that this ethnic form flourished in Los Angeles is

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<sup>109</sup> More research in this area is needed. However the work of such scholars as Carlos Cordova and Ana Patricia Rodriguez, suggest that a type of Central American identity politics might also be in place in areas like the Mission district in San Francisco, California. Still one hypothesis for the emergence of this Central American identity within such a space as Los Angeles is that it is a physical space which has predominantly been associated with one particular Latino group-Chicanos/Mexican Americans. Perhaps, in the need to claim a form of visibility, this type of pan-ethnic identity needs to be read as a form of strategic alliance that only occurs when Central American subjects become too easily (mis)read as purely Mexican/Mexican-American subjects.

<sup>110</sup> Jorge Klor de Alva, “The Invention of Ethnic Origins and the Negotiation of Latino Identity, 1969-1981” ed. Mary Romero et al, *Challenging Fronteras* (New York: Routledge, 1997) :55. According to Klor de Alva a “regional identity” also referred to as a “nationalist ethnicity” and/or ‘macroethnicity’ are “self-consciously constructed identities framed within a socio-cultural matrix whose axes were made up (what we commonly think of as) voluntary (internal) and imposed (external) reformulations, constraints, and negotiations” (55). They differ from national or “micro-ethnicity” because they transcend the temporal and spatial borders of the nation.

not a coincidence, since as William, Eriksen and Juliani have argued, “conditions of immigration” and “urban ecology” are two constitutive factors in the production of ethnicity in the United States. As such, I suggest that the reasons for Central American immigration to the United States, in conjunction with the manner in which Central Americans organized themselves, geographically, politically and socially in the “urban ecology” of Los Angeles during the early 1980’s—the historical period which witnessed the largest Central American exodus to the United States—enabled a type of Central American supra-ethnic identity to emerge.<sup>111</sup>

#### Desde “el Istmo” a “el Norte”: The Creation of the US Central American Diaspora

As Ana Patricia Rodriguez has noted, ‘transnational migration’ from Central America to the United States has been occurring since the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>112</sup> Settling in such diverse metropolitan centers like, New York, New Orleans, San Francisco, and Los Angeles, the reasons for migration from the isthmus were as varied as its Central American immigrants. In that early period of

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<sup>111</sup> As the work of Nora Hamilton and Norma Chinchilla point out, there were a few “push” and “pull” factors that enabled a large Central American community to emerge. Among some of the reasons noted was the fact that the city of Los Angeles had prior to the 1980’s established social networks amongst Central American residents. In addition the economic restructuring that was occurring in the city of Los Angeles during the 1970’s and 1980’s facilitated what some have called the “Latinization” of Los Angeles. The decline of high-paying jobs in the manufacturing sector, which created cheaper housing some urban spaces for newly arrived immigrants. The rise in low-paying, low-skill jobs especially in the domestic sector created a supply for immigrant labor.

<sup>112</sup> Ana Patricia Rodriguez, “Departamento 15’: Cultural Narratives of Salvadoran Transnational Migration.” *Latino Studies* 3.1(April 2005): 21

migration, most Central American immigrants were either “labor migrants associated with multinational fruit companies, political dissidents, and/or members of the elite class.”<sup>113</sup> The migration circuits and ethnic enclaves that were established during this early period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century would prove to be influential to the subsequent mass migrations of the 1970s and 1980s.

There were several economic and political factors during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that encouraged Central Americans to immigrate to countries like the United States. The creation of the Central American Common Market (1960), for instance, ushered in a new wave of industrialization that promoted the growth of U.S manufacturing investment in Central America.<sup>114</sup> This economic development in turn, had a subtle effect in cultivating Central American migration to the United States because it increased the possibilities for workers to learn about opportunities in the United States.<sup>115</sup>

The appeal of leaving their Central American homes in hopes of economic advancement abroad became magnified for some Central Americans during the decades of 1960s and 1970s. Both El Salvador and Guatemala during this time period were caught in one of the worst recessions. In 1969 the infamous “Soccer

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> The Central American Common Market, known in Spanish as “Mercado Comun Centroamericano” emerged in 1960 when the countries Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras signed the “General Treaty on Central American Economic Integration.” The treaty was an attempt to assist in developing the economic growth of the region through free trade among the countries. To facilitate this type of interaction and integration amongst the countries of the isthmus, certain infrastructures, like public transportation were strengthened. This in turn created internal population shifts as more rural populations began migrating to city centers. See Hector Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989) 141-143.

<sup>115</sup> Hamilton and Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 29.

War” between El Salvador and Honduras was seen as an “ecologically driven conflict,”<sup>116</sup> spurred by overpopulation and job scarcity. In 1972 Nicaragua would experience one of the highest recorded earthquakes,<sup>117</sup> and four years later Guatemala, a country already in economic troubles, found itself in even dire straights after the earthquake of 1976. Though these economic factors (exacerbated by natural disasters) undoubtedly encouraged many Central Americans to seek refuge in places like the United States, an even larger factor was the political turmoil spurred by the civil wars in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala.

Scholars for the last three decades have pondered and debated the root causes for the civil wars and revolutions that emerged during the late 1970s. For instance, some believe the wars were caused as an effect of “coffee dynasties” and the unequal class distributions they created by having governments that supported their interests.<sup>118</sup> Others believe that these revolutions were by-

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<sup>116</sup> According to scholars William Durham, *Scarcity Survival in Central America: Ecological Origins of the Soccer War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1979) and Thomas Homer Dixon, *Environment, Scarcity, Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999) the war between El Salvador and Honduras had less to do with Soccer and everything to do with land and employment scarcity. Dixon notes that Durham attributes the following reasons for the war: 1) the failure of the Central American Common market to be applied propionate to the two countries 2) tensions over a long term border dispute 3) overpopulation in El Salvador led to an increase of Salvadoran immigration to Honduras. This exacerbated the border tension.

<sup>117</sup> The earthquake occurred on December 23, 1972; at the time it was recorded as being a 6.2 earthquake. Though the number may not be as high as other earthquakes in other regions, it proved be very devastating for the country of Nicaragua. According to David Alexander 50% of the population lost their employment because of it, and 75% of the entire population of Managua were effected by this disaster. See David Alexander, *Natural Disasters* (New York: Routlege, 1993) 74.

<sup>118</sup> Jeffrey Paige, *Coffee and Power: Revolution and the Rise of Democracy in Central America* (Cambridge: Harvard Press, 1988)

products caused by years of US financial and physical presence in the region, which led it to support the “military oligarchy complex.”<sup>119</sup> But the most commonly proposed theory for the political unrest of the region is that it was a combination of two factors: “grievances aroused by regional economic problems and from the political repression of mobilized demands for reform.”<sup>120</sup> According to Hamilton and Chinchilla, it was the inability of the governments of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua to allow for dissent and peaceful protest that enabled the formation of militant political groups, whom often resorted to violence as a means to advocate for political and social change in their respective countries:

The futility of trying to bring about change by peaceful means and the increased repression by governmental and extra governmental forces led to increasing support for these movements among different sectors of the population. In the early 1980’s the guerilla organizations in the respective Countries united in the URNG (Guatemala National Revolutionary Unity) in Guatemala and the FMLN (Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation) in El Salvador. The Sandinista victory in Nicaragua at the end of 1970’s was an added impetus to the revolutionary movements in Guatemala and El Salvador.<sup>121</sup>

The political situation in Central America was made even more precarious in 1979 by two other important political events; the overthrow of the Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua by the FSLN (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional) in 1979, and the subsequent election of Ronald Reagan in the United States. These situations directly impacted the flow of Central American immigration to the

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<sup>119</sup> Walter LeFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*. 2nd ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1993).

<sup>120</sup> John A Booth et al, *Understanding Central America*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999) 1.

<sup>121</sup> Hamilton and Chinchilla, *Seeking Community*, 29-30.

United States. After the initial seize of power by the Sandinistas in Nicaragua there was small-scale immigration by some members of the upper and middle class who were not ideologically in sync with the new Sandinista government. However, with the application of the Reagan doctrine<sup>122</sup> in Nicaragua via the financial and military support of the Contras—a group whom was repeatedly accused by such human rights groups as Americas Watch for engaging in acts of terror on sometimes “civilian targets”—what was once a steady controlled migration to the United States became increasingly larger, as several Nicaraguans sought to benefit from the new Refugee Act (1980).<sup>123</sup>

Like Nicaragua, the countries of El Salvador and Guatemala were equally affected by an escalation of violence that arguably was encouraged by U.S intervention and Reagan’s anti-communist philosophy. Fearing a “domino-effect” whereby more Latin American countries would fall prey to Communist governments like the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, Reagan increased military and financial support to both El Salvador and Guatemala. This is especially seen in the “aid” given to El Salvador. Whereas in 1981 El Salvador only received \$103 million in military aid from the United States, by 1984 the military aid to El

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<sup>122</sup> According to the US Department of state, the Reagan Doctrine, “was used to characterize the Reagan administration’s (1981-1988) policy of supporting anti-Communist insurgents wherever they might be...Breaking with the doctrine of “Containment,” established during the Truman administration—President Ronald Reagan’s foreign policy was based on John Foster Dulles’ “Roll-Back” strategy from the 1950s in which the United States would actively push back the influence of the Soviet Union. Reagan’s policy differed, however, in the sense that he relied primarily on the overt support of those fighting Soviet dominance.” <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/rd/17741.htm> (accessed February 12, 2008).

<sup>123</sup> The act, which was enforced in 1980, stated that it would grant legal entry into the United States as a means of providing political asylum to those immigrants who faced a “well founded fear of persecution.”

Salvador would be as high as \$412.6 million.<sup>124</sup> The constant financial support by Reagan to El Salvador's government further fueled political violence since it was well known by the citizens of El Salvador and humanitarian groups that the military government of El Salvador was responsible for many human rights violations including, "the disappearances and murders of union leaders, community leaders, suspected guerilla sympathizers, including priests and nuns."<sup>125</sup> Similarly, in Guatemala the CIA had a direct hand in training the state military whose counter insurgency tactics often included "brutally torturing and killing civilians, most of whom were indigenous."<sup>126</sup> Thus, as Hamilton and Chinchilla suggest, it was "the escalation of general violence and targeted repression [which] led to increased internal, intraregional, and international movement of refugees beginning in the late 1970's and throughout the 1980's."<sup>127</sup>

This era of intraregional violence created a new diaspora that would emerge from the isthmus. Fleeing the terrors of war, many Central Americans opted to immigrate to such countries like Canada and Mexico where they often received some benefits that were not provided in the United States.<sup>128</sup> The

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<sup>124</sup> Figures were taken from the 1985 report "US Aid to El Salvador an Evaluation of the Past; A Proposal for the Future" by Jim Leach, George Miller and Mark O. Hatfield. Cited in Hamilton & Chinchilla page 32.

<sup>125</sup> Susan Gzesh, " Central Americans and Asylum Policy in the Regan Era," Migration Information Network, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?ID=384> (accessed December, 14, 2008)

<sup>126</sup> Hamilton & Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 32

<sup>127</sup> Hamilton & Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City*, 32

<sup>128</sup> Maria Christina Garcia, " Canada: A Northern Refuge for Central Americans," Migration Information Network, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/Feature/display.cfm?id=390> (accessed December 12, 2008), author Maria Christina Garcia claims that a large rise of

majority of Central Americans, however, sought to relocate to the United States, where many believed that under the newly passed Refugee Act, they would be granted legal entry via political asylum.<sup>129</sup> Several immigrants relocated to urban cities in the United States that had established, albeit minor, Central American communities formed from earlier immigration waves, such as New York, Washington D.C, San Francisco and Los Angeles. Still, of these larger metropolitan centers, it was California and especially the cities of San Francisco and Los Angeles that attracted the most Central American immigrants. And while initially San Francisco was the city most Central American immigrants flocked to in California, by the mid 1980s 63% of Central Americans had opted to make Los Angeles their primary destination.<sup>130</sup>

### Centralamericanismo: Constructing a Collective Consciousness

When the mass migrations from Central America took place in the early 1970s and 1980s over a million of Central Americans, who previously lived independently of one another, almost overnight found themselves living side by side to one another. Living in this new context enabled these disparate people of Central America to find new ways to (re) imagine and negotiate their identities. In other words, the process of migration to such places like the United States

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residency applications emerged from a less stringent immigration policy by Canada who accepted asylum petitions more readily than the United States.

<sup>129</sup> As Susan Gzesh noted, while Nicaraguan refugees were able to receive legal entry via the Refugee Act, all other Central Americans, especially Salvadorans and Guatemalans, were not viewed as political refugees and viewed as economic refugees. As a consequence the approval rates for asylum for Salvadorans and Guatemalans in 1984 were under three percent.

<sup>130</sup> Hamilton and Chinchilla, *Seeking Community*, 45



provided the vehicle to enable cultural awareness and exchanges to occur between Central American immigrants, which in turn nurtured a Central American ethnic consciousness or *Centralamericanismo*.

Centralamericanismo is a neologism I constructed that refers to the socio-discursive processes that occur in the diaspora which allow individuals from the isthmus to develop a consciousness that enables them to identify as Central American. It is a derivation of what Felix Padilla in his important work, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness* (1985) has coined as *Latinismo*. *Latinismo* is Padilla's term to describe a form of "ethnic" consciousness that facilitates a type of pan-ethnic identity—Latino—that allows individuals from different countries to see themselves momentarily as belonging to a larger 'imagined community.' This type of Latino "ethnic consciousness," according to Padilla, "represents a multi-group generated behavior that transcends the boundaries of the individual national and cultural identities of the different Spanish speaking populations and emerges as a distinct group identification and affiliation."<sup>131</sup> In his research between Mexicans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago, Padilla notes that this type of pan-ethnic identification or "Latino consciousness" was cultivated by two social conditions: 1) ideological beliefs and 2) "situational alliances." According to Padilla the Spanish language was one of numerous different cultural elements used to build a type of coalitional politics between Mexican and Puerto Rican communities. For Padilla, what allows Mexicans and Puerto Ricans to come

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<sup>131</sup> Felix Padilla, "On Hispanic Identity" in *Handbook of Hispanic Cultures in the United States*, eds. Nicolas Kanellos, Thomas Weaver, and Claudio Esteva-Fabregat, (Austin: Arte Publico Press, 1994) 294.

together is a “sentimental and ideological identification with the language group, as in “nostros somos hispanos porque hablamos el mismo idioma.”<sup>132</sup> This form of “nostalgia” or “sentimentality,” Padilla adds, enables coalitional politics between two Spanish-speaking communities who come together to form a “situational alliance” over particular socio-cultural or political issues that are deemed important to both groups. Thus, as articulated by Padilla, in order for this type of shared Latino ethnic identity to emerge (*Latinismo*), it necessitates not only a belief in a common cultural trait (“nosotros somos hispanos porque hablamos el mismo idioma”), but also in a belief that both groups share the same social location. This, as Paul Allaston (2007) notes, becomes one of the most important factors in cultivating a sense of *Latinismo* because arguably a Latino identity is based on an “ethnic principle of organization.”<sup>133</sup>

Similarly, Kay Sommers in her essay “Inventing *Latinismo*” (1991) suggests that *Latinismo*, or a Latino ethnic consciousness, emerges from a two prong social process. According to Sommers a “successful pan-ethnic strategy requires both a *common interest* (some kind of need of unity, often political) and a *common identity*, solidified and expressed by an overarching symbol or cultural umbrella.”<sup>134</sup> Thus, both Sommers and Padilla view *Latinismo* and the subsequent supra-ethnic identity it produces (Latino), as the result of a pan-ethnic consciousness that emerges from the belief that: 1) there is a common

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Paul Allaston. *Key Terms in Latino/a Studies: Cultural and Literary Studies* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Press, 2007).

<sup>134</sup> Sommers, “Inventing *Latinismo*”, 35

identity and 2) they share a common interest or problem. However, Padilla also stresses the ephemeral nature of a Latino consciousness by emphasizing that Hispanic identification is “operative within specific situational contexts rather than at all times.”<sup>135</sup> Indeed, throughout his work Padilla is clear that he views a Latino identity as a form of “strategic identity” rather than a long-term indentificatory term that replaces any national allegiances.

Centralamericanismo or a Central American pan-ethnic identity operates and develops in a similar fashion. Similar to *Latinismo*, which emerges through a belief in a “shared sense of inherited culture” and via “situational alliances,” a pan-ethnic Central American consciousness emerges from the belief by Central Americans that they share a common culture, and a need to create a strategic alliance in order to contest their marginal social location. As was discussed in my previous chapter, the idea that Central Americans share a common culture is one that does not emerge in the diaspora since it is a notion that has been fostered by historical and political discourses that promotes the idea that the five fragmented countries of isthmus share a common history and culture and together form the larger geo-cultural entity named Central America. While many Central Americans in the isthmus are initially introduced to this nationalist ideology of Central America as *patria grande* in grade school, it is a type of cultural nationalism that filters through many cultural practices and political discourses throughout the isthmus. For instance, within Central American political discourse it is very common to refer to other Central American countries

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<sup>135</sup> Padilla, “On Hispanic Identity,” 293

as “republicas hermanas/sister republics.” This metaphor of the family and use of the word “hermana/sister” has a long standing tradition within Central American historical discourse; not only can it be seen in the lyrics of the Central American hymn, but also in current political speeches.<sup>136</sup> Labeling a foreign country as an “hermana” serves to cement the idea that whatever differences remain between two separate and distinct nation-states, they are minimal in comparison to the relationship they share as being part of the larger family—the *patria grande centroamericana*. Although this type of Central American nationalism is promoted throughout many Central American countries and has facilitated the creation of a Central American “imagined community,” for many immigrants it was only after they left the isthmus that they began to develop a type of consciousness about their ‘Central Americanness.’ That is, though most Central Americans are taught to see themselves as belonging to two distinct but complimentary “imagined communities” the *patria chica* (nation) and *patria grande* (region), it was not until they underwent the processes of migration and displacement, and relocated to places where they shared the same physical space with other Latinos and other Central Americans that a consciousness emerged about what is constitutive of Central American culture. In other words, it was their distance from the isthmus and their consequent co-habitation with other

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<sup>136</sup> A case in point can be found in a political speech that was given on April 18, 2006 by the Salvadoran President Elias Antonio Saca. The speech was addressing some border disputes between El Salvador and Honduras—two countries who have had a long history of border disputes—so much so that in 1969 war broke out between the two nations. However, as a rhetorical device, the Salvadoran President made it a point to remind both Salvadorans and Hondurans that they were “dos hermanas republicas,” “dos paises hermanos”, “dos naciones hermanas.”

Latino communities that allowed Central American immigrants to articulate differences between various group categories and identities.

A prime example of how certain diasporic locations enabled a Central American consciousness can be found in the area known as the Westlake district in Los Angeles. As early as 1980 commodities from El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua and Honduras were available to consumers in an area whose radius is smaller or the equivalent of any city in Central America. The multiplicity of goods offered allowed Central American immigrants to become acculturated to the foods and cultural practices of their isthmian neighbors. Though certainly many immigrants had experienced intra-regional migration within the isthmus and had been exposed to other cultural items from other Central American countries, these moments of exposure were limited. But in the diaspora immigrants were confronted with new structural conditions that restricted access to the consumption of their homegrown products. This in turn forced more social engagement and opportunities for cultural exchanges between Central American immigrants. For instance, if a Salvadoran immigrant wanted to buy Salvadoran sweet bread known as *quesadilla*, but could only obtain it in a Honduran bakery, then this 'practice of everyday life' would constantly expose this subject to other Central American delicacies in such a manner that would not be the norm in their home country. Perhaps back home they never need to go to an Honduran bakery to find a Salvadoran pastry, but as immigrants with limited access to goods from their country of origin, the options for the consumption of such commodities forced them to engage with their fellow isthmian counterparts. While in their

native countries most individuals were not exposed to their isthmian neighbors' culture on a day-to day basis, in the diaspora these immigrants would be forced to see themselves in relation to each other. For many Central American immigrants who previously never experienced foods and customs from other Central American countries, urban centers like Los Angeles often served to produce or rekindle the belief that the countries of the isthmus shared common affinities. In short, for many Central American immigrants being exposed to the different consumer products from other Central American countries, and sharing the same space with other isthmian peoples had the effect of confirming in their minds the belief that Central Americans share an 'inherited culture.'

This sentiment was one almost unanimously shared by some Central American immigrants I interviewed.<sup>137</sup> Salvadoran immigrants Maria Orellaña and Antonieta Alvarenga, for instance, explained to me that prior to their arrival to Los

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<sup>137</sup> In 2006 as an independent project I began documenting life histories of family, and friends of the family who had arrived to Los Angeles prior to the mass migrations of late 1970s and 1980s. My objective was to get an oral history of Central American immigrants who lived in Los Angeles prior to a period when Pico-Union was known as "Little Central America." I wanted to get a perspective for the climate of the period and how having access or the lack of access to Central American cultural items (food, services, etc) affected their cultural identity. Though that project never developed I am using some of their testimonies and recollections for this chapter as I feel that while they cannot and do not speak for any community, some of their observations might parallel the experience of others. Members of my focus group include. Maria Orellaña (58), Dina Dubon (62), Antonieta Alvarenga (72) and Martha Portillo (54). They share a similar profile in that they are all considered "economic immigrants" since they left El Salvador due to financial duress, they all arrived to Los Angeles as undocumented immigrants in the early 1970s, all four obtained work as domestic servants within a few months time, and all of them initially relocated to the Westlake/ Pico-Union area. Though they are clearly not representative of a Salvadoran, and much less a Central American experience, their profile does support the prototypical image presented by scholars, which claim that Central Americans who came prior to the 1980s were generally economic immigrants and women (Zentgraf 1996, Menjivar 2000, Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001).<sup>137</sup> Moreover, I have found their observations about that time period, their experiences living in Pico-Union as well as their discussions about Central Americaness to be both useful and revealing.

Angeles they had never eaten Guatemalan food, and that it was only once they settled in Los Angeles, and were exposed to different foods from other Central American countries that they noted that other isthmian delicacies resembled their native Salvadoran food more so than any other Latino culture. In fact, both stressed that after a while the differences between a Salvadoran tamale and a Guatemalan tamale seemed inconsequential and almost unnoticeable. However, when I asked whether they felt that way about Mexican tamales, Maria was very clear that for her Mexican food was very different from “comida centroamericana/Central American food,” claiming that while “they (Mexicans) wrap it in corn, we (Salvadorans, Guatemalans) use banana leaves.”<sup>138</sup> The fact that both subjects fixate on one small detail—a banana leaf—as a marker of a cultural difference— is again a reminder of the way identities operate by creating ‘arbitrary moments of closure.’ Clearly there are some ingredients in Mexican cuisine that overlap with Salvadoran cuisine more so than Guatemalan, and yet those moments of convergence are minimized and forgotten in favor of locating moments of difference. We might consider then, that for many Central American immigrants, they are conditioned to look for the similarities within isthmian cultures and in the process reify cultural differences from other Latin American groups. In this one particular example, for Maria the opportunity to consume food from her Central American neighbors only confirmed the ideology she was raised to believe in her native El Salvador—that there are inherent similarities within those countries that comprise Central America. But even if some Central

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<sup>138</sup> Interview, June 24, 2006.

American immigrants in their native countries were not interpellated by this notion, social interactions in the diaspora like the purchases of consumer goods, fostered a type of *Centroamericanismo* because it enabled these immigrants to adopt and view the food of their neighbors as part of their new neighborhood culture.<sup>139</sup>

Every-day exchanges between other Central American immigrants eventually shaped the way these immigrants would come to position themselves and create narratives of Central American identity. Such an articulation of Central Americanness can be located in the testimonies and (re)memories produced in the diaspora. Of the different Salvadoran women I interviewed for this project, Maria caught my attention the most because quite often when asked about her ethnicity and/or nationality she would respond by saying that she was “Central American.” When probed about why she utilized the term Central American as a form of identification and whether or not this was a type of identity she always employed, she responded by explaining to me that while Central American is an identification that all Central Americans take with them wherever they go, it was only until she left Central America, and moved to a place where she co-habited with other Central American residents that she realized how they indeed did have a common history and culture.

Maria’s immigrant narrative is one that undoubtedly parallels that of many other Central American immigrants. Maria left her native El Salvador and immigrated to Los Angeles California in 1972 in search of a better life. When I

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<sup>139</sup> Perhaps it is no surprise that when the president of CAUSA, Ramon Rivera, was trying to articulate how Central Americans share a common culture—one different from Mexican and other Latino groups—among the first items he noted as marking that difference was “food.”



asked Maria about how she identified herself in her native El Salvador, and whether or not she labeled herself as Central American or Salvadoran, she explained to me that while she lived in El Salvador she never thought about what it meant to be Salvadoran. She further stated that in El Salvador people more readily identified themselves with regions or “departamentos” and that one only felt their “Salvadoraness” occasionally; during big international events like Soccer tournaments, Miss Universe Pageants, or the Olympic Games. Therefore in El Salvador Maria was more apt to identify with more localized translocal forms of cultural identities, in her particular case as “Chaletenango,” rather than national or supra-ethnic terms like Central American (though these various forms of ethnic identification should not be read as mutually exclusive). It was not until she arrived in Los Angeles that she started to identify herself as Salvadoran, and over time Central American. Maria’s ability to identify at moments with all three identities(Chaletenango, Salvadoran, Central American) signals the complex social positions gendered immigrant subjects occupy, and demonstrates how ‘Central American’ is one of many forms of identification.

Maria also explained to me that although in her native country she had learned the history of Central America in school, and grew up with the idea that Central American countries share common affinities, she felt that the terms “Salvadoran” and “Central American “ obtained greater meaning once she left El Salvador,

When I first came here [Los Angeles], it was very different. Back then[1972] there were only one or two Central American restaurants and most of them were downtown. I remember riding the bus to work talking to my roommate when a man interrupted us and asked what part of Central

America we were from. We told him we were from El Salvador. He said he knew we were Central American because of our accents, our use of the “vos” we didn’t talk Spanish like Mexicans do. He was from Guatemala, and we spent the rest of the bus ride talking about our countries missing our Central American culture, our traditions, our food, complaining about the food here how Mexican food was too spicy, and how American food was too bland. Then when the war broke out, whenever you would run into a fellow Central American, you would realize that you were going through the same experiences, worrying about your family back home, or trying to find money to bring your family here. I just felt a sense of camaraderie with them, that somehow they understood what I was going through because they were going through it too, even though they weren’t Salvadoran.<sup>140</sup>

Maria’s comments are significant because they reveal how in spaces like Los Angeles some Central American immigrants began to fashion and cultivate a sense of community and collective identity. The emergence of this type of pan-national/ethnic identity among Central American immigrants is one that does not rely on the rejection of their native countries, for in fact the location of their native countries (isthmus) is viewed as an essential factor towards developing the belief that they belonged to a shared culture. Her observations about her experience of being Salvadoran in Los Angeles illuminates how individuals begin the process Steven Grosby (2005) has labeled as “collective self-consciousness.” Rather than viewing ‘collective consciousness’ as the “existence of a group mind or a combination of biological instincts,” Grosby asserts that collective consciousness develops from “a social relation” from “individuals participating in the same evoking tradition.”<sup>141</sup> He further adds that “when those individuals not only participate in the same tradition, but also understand themselves as being

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<sup>140</sup> Interview March 16, 2006.

<sup>141</sup> Steven Grosby, *Nationalism: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) 9.

different from those who do not, then there exists a self-designating shared belief” which produces a ‘distinct culture.’<sup>142</sup> This is seen in Maria’s own anecdote where she feels a sense of affinity with a Guatemalan stranger not only because he speaks Spanish, but because of the way he speaks Spanish; it is a form of Spanish that she views as distinctly Central American—the *voseo*.<sup>143</sup> The use of the “vos,” and an accent which Maria recognizes and labels as being different from what she terms “Mexican,” enables her to make a type of connection with this other individual, and allows her to view both of them as participating in the same “evoking tradition.”

Maria’s narrative also elucidates another crucial component in the fostering of a Central American collective consciousness—the notion that Central American immigrants share a culture and have a distinct identity from other Latino groups. For Maria, not only did she and that Guatemalan stranger share the same language, and culture, but she also felt that Central American immigrants encountered the same social conditions and problems while living in the US (i.e. the lack of Central American food, the problems with immigration, and the preoccupations with the political violence of their home countries). The belief that irrespective of national origin peoples from the isthmus were undergoing the same socio-cultural experience in the US is what allowed immigrants like Maria to be interpellated into a pan-ethnic Central American

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<sup>142</sup> Steven Grosby, *Nationalism*, 10

<sup>143</sup> Yajaira Padilla has used the term *Voseo* to describe a “common form of Spanish prevalent in many parts of Central America”(380). *Voseo* is the name given to a type of Spanish which uses the second person pronoun “vos” instead of “tu.” Interestingly, while Maria viewed them as being something distinctly Central American, this type of Spanish speaking can also be found in other parts of Latin America.

identity. This is best evidenced in the manner in which her statements reveal a shift in pronoun from “I” to “We” and from the singular national (Salvadoran) to a more plural communal (Central American). This transition from singular to plural pronoun reveals that there is a shift in her perception of seeing herself strictly as Salvadoran to also seeing herself, and her fellow bus rider of Guatemalan descent, as both being a part of Central American culture. In addition, her choice of the words “our culture,” “our food,” and “our traditions” to describe cultures and foods from both El Salvador and Guatemala, indicates the rise of her Central American collective consciousness. One could easily argue that Salvadorans and Guatemalans have very different foods and cultural traditions, however within this new cultural context of living in the US, rather than seeing these cultural traits as distinct, Maria perceives them as being more similar than different because of their relationship to U.S and Mexican culture.

For immigrants like Maria, the close interaction with other Central American immigrants further cemented and reinforced the ideology she learned as a child that Central American culture is similar within countries of the isthmus, but different from other Latin American countries. However, as Maria’s example illustrates, nationalist ideology from her native El Salvador alone did not facilitate the emergence of a pan-national/ethnic Central American identity. The idea that all Central Americans belonged to a larger *patria grande* only became significant and relevant to Maria once she left the isthmus. Although in school she was taught that Central Americans share the same colonial history and other cultural components such as language and food, it was only until she lived in the U.S.

that those commonalities became highlighted to her. As a result, though many Central American immigrants are exposed within their native countries into a type of Central American nationalism by asserting the belief that Central Americans share a common history and culture, this ideology flourished in the diaspora where immigrants like Maria profoundly believed that regardless of country of origin, Central Americans were undergoing the same experiences of displacement, violence, immigration and nostalgia. Thus, what is notable about Maria's experience, is that while it may be doubtful that she could have 'imagined' herself as Central American without the cultural narratives fostered in her native El Salvador, her observations about living in the diaspora suggests that new tropes and forms of collective memory are entering into the lexicon of Central American nationalism.

#### Spaces of Identity: Little Central America

The production of "Little Central America"—a name utilized to demarcate the Westlake district—embodies the way Centralamericanismo has begun to change the physical and cultural landscape of the city of Los Angeles. At times, "Westlake," "Pico Union" and *Pequeña Centroamérica* are terms used interchangeably to describe the same Central American ethnic enclave. What is remarkable about this neighborhood is that whereas other regional urban spaces in Los Angeles have been civically or colloquially demarcated under a national rubric (e.g. Koreatown, Chinatown, etc), this particular area—Little Central America—showcases the manner in which a space was transformed to reflect a

regional collective culture rather than a singular national one. In contrast to other neighborhoods that might view the sharing of a physical space with another national culture as a threat or exterior to their own culture, Pico-Union differs in that the diversity of cultures from the isthmus served to reinforce and establish a type of Central American community. This form of isthmian solidarity is exemplified in the mural painted on the intersection between Rampart Boulevard and Sixth street, which not only is colored blue and white (the original national colors of the Central American nation-state and of all the Central American flags) but also has as its focal point five volcanoes—a geographic icon that has become a trope within Central American nationalist discourse to refer to the five countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. Thus, in this section I bring to light how Little Central America has been both an effect and a catalyst in the construction of a diasporic Central American identity.

The Westlake area is a space bounded by “Temple Street to the north, Figueroa Street to the east, Washington Avenue to the south, and Vermont Avenue to the west.”<sup>144</sup> Within the southeast corridor of the Westlake district is the area known as “Pico Union.” Pico-Union is the name given to the neighborhood that surrounds the intersection of Pico Boulevard and Union Avenue. Developed around the 1880s, the Westlake district first began as suburb to downtown Los Angeles. The creation of new railroads and its proximity to streetcars quickly attracted more residents, which in turn transformed the space into an urban neighborhood. Though primarily settled by mostly European

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<sup>144</sup> These geographic boundaries of demarcation were taken from Hamilton & Chinchilla p. 59

immigrants, throughout the years the Westlake district has played host to Mexican-American residents, African-Americans and within the last decades, Central American, Cuban and Korea immigrants.<sup>145</sup>

Although most scholarship on Central American immigrant settlement patterns tends to focus on the importance of social networks, the production of Little Central America also illustrates how urban planning and larger economic structures dictate and contain certain populations within specific spaces. This point was made clear to me during interviews with Central American immigrants who resettled in the Westlake area and/or who currently reside there.<sup>146</sup> When I asked them why they chose the Westlake area as their location of resettlement, I was immediately corrected by my own choice of words. All of them balked at the idea that they had a choice or other residential options. Most said they relocated to Pico-Union because they either had relatives living there, or had friends in El Salvador who knew someone living in the area that made the arrangements for them. Their answers reinforce the theory proposed by some immigration scholars that established social networks are a determining factor for immigrant resettlement patterns (Menjivar 2000, Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001). While two of the women only lived in the Westlake district for less than five years, the other two women have resided in Pico-Union for the last thirty years. When asked why they had not left or moved out of the area, both women cited affordable housing, availability of transportation, and the accessibility of Central American consumer products as factors for why they continue to live in the Westlake district.

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<sup>145</sup> Los Angeles Conservancy, *Pico Union: Layers of History* (Los Angeles, 2009) 1-2

<sup>146</sup> See footnote 137 for more details.

Los Angeles, like other large metropolitan areas, has a reputation for being one of the most expensive US cities to live in. Securing affordable housing is a priority for most if not all of its inhabitants. For interviewees Antonieta and Dina, the lower than average rent they paid for their apartment is one of the main reasons they have not left the area of Pico-Union. In 1978, the city of Los Angeles Housing department enacted the “Los Angeles Rent Stabilization Ordinance.” Under this ordinance, renters who live within the incorporated areas of the city of Los Angeles cannot have their rents raised more than 4% a year. Though both Antonieta and Dina were unaware of this ordinance, they both mentioned that when they had considered leaving their apartments (which they had been living in since the mid-1970s) they noticed that rental rates outside of the Westlake district were much more than they could afford. In addition, both added that even if they could afford to pay a higher rental rate, they doubted they would be accepted as tenants at other nicer apartment communities. As undocumented immigrants their employers always paid them in cash for their work. Therefore both women were unable to meet the requirements established by many landlord and management properties; they could neither show proof of employment or proof of a good credit history since they never established credit. As a result, both felt that even if they desired to leave the area, their current employment situation hindered that possibility. Even so, both did stress that they did not feel that their living situation was intolerable, because despite the perceived negatives in the area (like higher crime rates, and overpopulated



apartment complexes), they felt their neighborhood provided them with everything they needed.

The fact that Pico-Union continues to play host to a large Central American immigrant and non-immigrant community suggests that there are many individuals like Antonieta and Dina who view the space as providing them with goods and services that enable them to operate in the larger metropolitan area of Los Angeles. Scholars David Lopez, Erik Popkin, and Edward Telles (1997) were among the first to highlight the economic and cultural advantages offered by residing in the Westlake/Pico-Union area:

Though very overcrowded, the areas do offer affordable housing, as well as markets and other institutions that will seem familiar to Central Americans. And they are well situated for access to jobs located throughout the center and western half of the city. Westlake is adjacent to the major east-west bus lines running on Wilshire, Venice and Pico Boulevards; Hollywood is served by the bus lines on Santa Monica Boulevard. In contrast, East Los Angeles, the core of Chicano Los Angeles, is essentially isolated from Los Angeles west of downtown. It can take an hour to go by bus from East L.A to downtown; to get to the Westside requires an inconvenient transfer and at least another hour.<sup>147</sup>

The observation made here by Lopez *et al* about how the larger Los Angeles infrastructure and spatial configuration makes some geographic locations more amenable to immigrants is important. For Lopez, the urban planning of the cityscape is what has contained some Central Americans to one particular area. The fact that city planners opted to locate bus lines that run “east-west” had important consequences for the ways it would attract immigrant populations. The fact that immigrants who live within this district have access to public

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<sup>147</sup> David Lopez, Erik Popkin and Edward Telles, “Central Americans at the Bottom Struggling to Get Ahead,” eds. Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russel Sage Foundation, 1997), 291.

transportation that can take them essentially to all of the major metropolitan areas of Los Angeles (i.e., Hollywood, Santa Monica, etc.), is important since many do not have the financial or technical skills to own and drive a car. Access to mass transit certainly played an important role for both Antonieta and Dina, neither of whom owned, much less knew how to drive a car, yet worked outside of Pico-Union. According to Lopez, the fact that other Latino urban spaces like East Los Angeles, does not provide the same spatial advantage as Pico-Union, can account for why East Los Angeles is still predominantly a Mexican/Mexican-American neighborhood while Pico-Union has become more “Latinized” by Central American immigrants. Lopez’s assessment of the area, in conjunction with the responses of Antonieta and Dina, inadvertently make the argument that Central American immigrants alone are not entirely responsible for the production of Little Central America; for it was the spatial configuration of the city of Los Angeles which confined these immigrant subjects into certain social and physical spaces. Therefore this ethnic neighborhood also needs to be understood as an effect of urban public policies and the spatial design of Los Angeles rather than just a self-orchestrated manifestation by a Central American community. This might provide an explanation for why the area became a popular settlement for Central American immigrants prior to the 1970s and 1980s. The larger Los Angeles city infrastructure had already pre-determined spaces that would be more apt for immigrant subjects. Of course by this I am not suggesting that Los Angeles urban design alone created a Central American community. Clearly the need for affordable housing and services like accessible mass transit only

becomes an issue for certain classed immigrant subjects. Still, by highlighting the experiences of Antonieta and Dina I hope to complicate the way we study “ethnic neighborhoods,” as well as caution against celebratory gestures about identity politics “claiming” physical and by extension metaphorical space. The notion that marginalized subjects like US Central Americans “claim a space,” needs to be tempered with an awareness that larger macro-forces, like urban design, city policies and reasons for migration, limit which spaces they can claim. As such, rather than simply viewing Pico-Union as a space that was transformed by Central Americans, I wish to emphasize the role the urban landscape played in cultivating a Central American diasporic identity. Space, as Michel Foucault reminds us, is not some “kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things”, rather we live “inside a set of relations that delineates sites” and arguably community formations as well.<sup>148</sup>

In this particular example, the result of a working class immigrant population, in conjunction with the way the city of Los Angeles was spatially mapped, facilitated the development of a transnational Central American diasporic community. Confronted with a new environment that rarely attended to their cultural needs, Central American immigrants and business entrepreneurs began offering services that directly targeted them as consumers. In fact, by the early 1980s the Westlake district had been transformed into a vibrant Central American ethnoscape.

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<sup>148</sup> Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” trans. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* Vol 16 No.1 (Spring, 1986):23.

By the early 1980's, Westlake, a residential/commercial area directly west of downtown Los Angeles, was being transformed by Salvadoran and Nicaraguan restaurants, Guatemalan markets, Honduran bakeries and pupusa stands, which provided home-cooked meals and familiar foods to the growing Central American population. Express courier services advertised prompt and dependable delivery of mail and packages to designated sites in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. Travel agencies offered flights to Guatemala City, San Jose, and San Salvador. ADOC, a popular Central American shoe manufacturer, had opened a brand on Sixth Street...Although Central Americans lived in different parts of the city, by the early 1980's the Pico Union section of Westlake had become identified as the center of Central American settlement.<sup>149</sup>

Witnessed in Hamilton and Chinchilla's observations is a thriving sophisticated economic and cultural network booming in the Westlake area. As early as 1980 the Westlake district was offering its residents access to services of goods that would re-connect them with their former countries. Some of the businesses and services that established themselves in this area served to propel Central American immigrants to become a transnational community. According to Michel Laguerre, a transnational relationship between immigrants and their homeland is made possible through the establishment of "transnational financial circuits," which are comprised by,

the availability of cheap and fast air travel, information technology (telephone, fax, e-mail, radio and video cassettes) and transnational financial circuits, including money wiring and fast-courier operations; all these sustain the diaspora homeland web or relationships.<sup>150</sup>

As Laguerre observes, vital to the maintenance of any culture that finds themselves disconnected from their perceived homeland(s) is the ability to

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<sup>149</sup> Hamilton and Chinchilla, *Seeking Community*, 59

<sup>150</sup> Michel Laguerre, "Diasporic Citizenship: Haitian Americans in Transnational America (New York: St. Martins Press, 1998), 177, quoted in Ana Patricia Rodriguez, "Departamento 15': Cultural Narratives of Salvadoran Transnational Migration." *Latino Studies* 3.1 (April 2005): 23

maintain some type of allegiance both symbolic (cultural) and material (voting rights, economic support etc). Therefore the rise of these types of businesses (money transfers, airline agencies, etc) in the Westlake area was imperative because it allowed immigrants in the US to feel fiscally and culturally connected to their families back home. These types of cultural and economic ties fostered by these businesses in the Pico Union area served to satisfy the needs of its consumers, many of whom for both political and economic reasons during this period of the early 1980s, believed that they would never get the opportunity to return back to their native countries. The fact that these immigrants could send money from their new home to their former homes, in the form of remittances, that they could secure travel arrangements from national airline companies featured in Central America, and that they could buy the same goods, from a manufacturer based in Central America, served as an important vehicle not only to maintain the bonds this diasporic community had with their respective national cultures, but also to facilitate the development of a cultural center within their new host country.

The impact of the Westlake area in fostering a type of Central American collective identity cannot be underestimated. The fact that it had within its geographic confines cultural establishments (albeit very few) that catered to Central Americans prior to the mass migration of the 1980s, transformed the space from merely a cultural focal point to a new ethnic political enclave for many refugees. Eventually, the space itself became a strategic point of development for many social and political organizations that clearly decided that their social

services and business ventures should be located in the physical space where most Central American immigrants lived. What is interesting about the rise of community organizations in the Westlake area is that the growth of these resource centers mirrored the development of a pan-ethnic collective consciousness that was emerging among its residents.

A case in point can be witnessed in the hometown associations and community centers that emanated from the Westlake area during the period of the 1980s. Initially, during the early 1980s when social-cultural and political organizations began to emerge in Los Angeles most were being formed under national rubrics. Some examples of this trend include, CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador), which was formed in 1980 as well as such cultural centers as the GIC (Guatemala Information Center). These early organizations were often created under certain ideological auspices; as political formations established in the US to critique certain US state policies within their respective countries of origin. As a result, these organizations only appealed to a certain demographic who shared their political objectives and therefore were not organizations that catered to most of its own national subjects, much less to a larger Central American community.

However, by the mid 1980s new community-based organizations began to emerge as a way to serve Central American immigrants. Perhaps in an attempt to appeal and reach out to a larger immigrant population, these newly created community centers began to organize under a regional rubric (Central American) versus a national one (e.g. Salvadoran). The community organizations titled El

Rescate/The Rescue, CARECEN (Central American Refugee Center), and COFECA (Comite de Festejos Centro Americanos), for instance, are all examples of this trend that signaled a shift from viewing oneself, and by extension one's community, within a strictly national lens. Their ascendancy reinforces Padilla's notion of the important role 'strategic alliances' play in the development of ethnic consciousness. Often, these organizations were comprised of members from different nations of the isthmus who became united in their belief that Central Americans in Los Angeles were not being provided with the services they needed. That is, these organizations, which sought to provide Central American immigrants with medical, legal, social services, believed that Central American immigrants had specific and particular needs that distinguished them from other minority groups; needs that could not be met and serviced by other more established U.S. and Latino organizations. Therefore, the birth of these organizations is important because they materialized a need for "situational alliances"—and emerged in a moment in which Central American immigrants believed they needed to come together to confront their marginalization in American culture and society.

Over time the organizations that emerged in the Westlake area during the early 1980s have become cultural institutions that have engendered some of the most prominent narratives of Central American identity. As the "largest Central American organizations in the country" one of the most important institutions for Central American culture in Los Angeles is CARECEN.<sup>151</sup> Created by a group of

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<sup>151</sup> CARECEN, "About Us Page," <http://www.carecen-la.org/programs.php> (accessed February 8, 2008).

Salvadoran refugees to help assist other Salvadoran immigrants and refugees, CARECEN first opened its doors in 1983 in what was back then simply viewed as the Macarthur-Westlake area. Interestingly, though it was created by Salvadorans and for Salvadorans, the choice to name this community center “Central American Refugee Center,” signified that these Salvadoran immigrants viewed the experience of being a political refugee as not exclusively a national one, but also an experience endemic to other Central Americans. Further, it indicates that initially CARECEN conceived of this pan-ethnic identity as an immigrant identity. One of CARECEN’s early main objectives was to provide Central American refugees with legal resources in their quest to find political asylum and legal residency.<sup>152</sup> Accordingly, most of their services reflected the way CARECEN positioned and viewed Central Americans as immigrants: as working class immigrants that needed assistance in navigating a foreign terrain.

But soon CARECEN exceeded its initial intention as just simply being a legal service for Central American immigrants. For the last twenty years CARECEN has continued to provide legal services and advocacy for immigrant rights, but it has also increasingly promoted cultural awareness and educational programs for second-generation Central Americans. In fact, once the Peace Accords were signed in Central America in the mid 1990s, CARECEN began to focus more on the cultural and social needs of those Central American immigrants who became permanent residents and citizens. As is evidenced by

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<sup>152</sup> According to the CARECEN website the mission of CARECEN was to “mission was to secure legal status for the thousands of Central Americans fleeing the torture and brutality of civil war.”



their website, not only does CARECEN aim to defend immigrant rights and promote citizenship, but they also seek to “create innovative educational programs that motivate, expand knowledge, promote excellence, enhance awareness of opportunities and *foster community identity*.”<sup>153</sup> To achieve this latter objective, CARECEN sponsors several cultural programs like an ongoing visual historical archive, and writing workshops that encourage Central American immigrants and second generation Central Americans to explore issues like cultural identity.

One of those most cited anthologies used by scholars of the US Central American diaspora, *Izote Voz*, was compiled via the writings of second generation Salvadorans who produced these texts within CARECEN workshops. The release of *Izote Voz*, marked an important historical shift for both CARECEN and the Los Angeles Central American community. It is the moment where the Central American community, especially in California, began to position themselves as an American ethnic group and not as simply immigrants. The anthology clearly has on its cover that the writings are by “Salvadoran Americans,” as such, it was one of the first texts to express the notion that Central Americans are no longer simply foreign immigrants, but rather a new community formation that needs to be featured in the mosaic of American ethnic identities.

In fact, the release of *Izote Voz* in 2000 was followed by the creation of the first Central American Studies (CAS) program in Los Angeles. Both are

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<sup>153</sup> CARECEN, “Program Web Page,” < <http://www.carecen-la.org/programs.php> > (accessed February 8, 2008).

emblematic of the way these institutions forged in Westlake during the 1980s are altering the construction of Central American identity. Whereas initially CARECEN viewed and articulated Central American subjects as always already “foreign” immigrants, their involvement in *Izote Voz*, CAS, and the formation of the first ever Central American council,<sup>154</sup> signals they are beginning to construct Central American identity not as an ‘immigrant identity’ but that of a US. ethnic minority.

In 2006, CARECEN along with other Westlake-based community organizations created a larger ‘strategic alliance’ by establishing the first ever Central American council. As one of its first objectives, the council officially petitioned the city of Los Angeles to re-name the area of Westlake/Pico-Union as “Central American Historical District.”<sup>155</sup> If passed, the measure would be the latest visible manifestation of the way the space is being utilized as way to publicly perform a pan-ethnic identity as it attempts to inscribe the space as reflective of a regional identity (Central American) rather than a national one (i.e. Salvadoran). But even if the measure is not approved by the city of Los Angeles, the formation of the council itself speaks to the ways in which Centralamericanismo is constantly being reproduced in the urban space of Los Angeles. The fact that these organizations, already formed by a belief that they share a common culture and identity, created a strategic alliance in order to

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<sup>154</sup> The Central American Council was created in 2006 by the following organizations: Clinica Monseñor Romero, Salvadoran American Leadership Fund (SALDEF), the Central American Research Policy Institute (CAPRI), and the Central American Studies Program (CAS).

<sup>155</sup> “Central American Council Proposes Renaming of Westlake/Pico-Union,” *CARECEN NOTES* vol 23 no 4. (Los Angeles , 2006), 1.

create a civic space for their community crystallizes the notion of a Central American pan-ethnic consciousness. Moreover, the fact that CARECEN is at the forefront of this civic movement is also no coincidence, like the anthology *Izote Voz*, it becomes another discursive space from which to proclaim the notion that Central American culture and identity needs to be read and understood as also an American identity. One cannot overlook the important symbolic gesture of this civic movement, for it demands both the US and Latino imaginary to stop reading Central Americans as ‘refugees,’ or ‘immigrants’ and acknowledge them as permanent residents who wish to be heard within the larger national and local politics of their environment. In addition it also contests dominant readings of Los Angeles identities, and the identity of spaces which have read Latino neighborhoods as exclusively Chicano/Mexican-American “barrios” (Romo, 1983; Sanchez, 1995; Villa, 2000; Bodella, 2005; Diaz, 2005).

### Performing Centralamericanismo: The COFECA Independence Parade



Figure 3. COFECA float at 2006 Central American Independence parade.

In addition to having the distinction of creating CARECEN—the largest Central American organization in the United States—the area of Pico Union is also responsible for enabling the production of the largest visual cultural performance of Central American identity via the COFECA Central American Independence Parade. While a visual text such as a parade contains a myriad of significations, for the purposes of this chapter I emphasize how the parade is 1) a materialization of Centralamericanismo which in turn cultivates this pan-ethnic consciousness by importing a cultural practice from the isthmus 2) the site where a Central American identity is visually performed and in the process challenges and affirms both the Central American and US imaginaries, 3) as a “heterotopic” space—a site produced in a moment of alienation and mis-recognition from the discourses of Latinidad circulated in Los Angeles.

Unlike CARECEN, which was first formed as a community organization and later began to produce cultural texts, COFECA was formed as an organization as a means to preserve cultural practices that were already taking place in the diaspora. The first COFECA event took place on September 15<sup>th</sup> 1983 when a group of Central Americans staged a protest against US intervention in the countries of El Salvador and Nicaragua. This initial act of social protest was significant because, like CARECEN, it showed the manner in which Central American immigrants began to form social and political relationships in the diaspora. It sheds light on how ‘situational alliances,’ coupled with the belief in a larger inherited culture, enabled a Central American cultural institution to emerge. The choice of selecting the 15<sup>th</sup> of September (Central

American Independence Day) to stage their first protest proved significant; it was chosen because Central American Independence Day is a “national” holiday celebrated in most Central American countries. In so doing, this public performance of Central American solidarity became a way to suture historical memory of the past (Central American Independence) with current historical events (the wars in Central America). This process in turn solidified the notion of a common history (present and past) between Central American subjects. In fact, a year after this initial first political manifestation, the organization COFECA was created in order to ‘mantener y promover los valores, historia, y tradiciones culturales de esa region/promote and maintain the values, history and cultural traditions of the [Central America] region.’<sup>156</sup> Soon after its inception, COFECA began to sponsor cultural productions that celebrated Central American cultural nationalism. At present COFECA is responsible for the biggest Central American civic events in Los Angeles, like the Central American Independence Parade, the Central American Independence festival, and the crowning of Miss COFECA. As cultural institutions attended by many Central American residents, these visual performances have proved to be instrumental in creating and perpetuating Centralamericanismo.

Undoubtedly the most important cultural text COFECA produces in Los Angeles is the Central American Independence parade. Though it may seem odd that a group of nations would privilege a historical moment of independence prior to the formation of individual nation-states on the isthmus, one must understand that the production of this parade stems from cultural traditions in Central

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<sup>156</sup> Martha Caravall, “Desfilan inmigrantes de Pico-Union,” *La Opinion*. September 9:2005.

America, namely *Las Fiestas Patrias*. These festivities occur every mid week in September and are celebrated throughout Central America. As a cultural practice it is a vestige from what Eric Hobsbawm has viewed as “invented traditions”-- cultural practices that promote the idea of “continuity with a suitable historic past” among different groups. These celebrations of Central American Independence emerge in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as formal attempts by the then Central American nation-state to interpellate its subjects into ‘centroamericanos’. It is no surprise that *Las Fiestas Patrias* emerged during a period of Central American nation building, since it is a clear attempt to create an “invented tradition” that privileges the historical period of post-independence where the Kingdom of Guatemala became transformed into a “united” Central America. Thus, on the isthmus, the parade becomes a cultural performance that seeks to establish a collective memory by privileging a historical moment when the individual nation states of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica, were merely provinces that belonged to a larger nation-state: the Central American Federation. In doing so, these festivities, especially the parade, enable inhabitants of the isthmus to “imagine” themselves as a larger community, since regardless of nation-state they inhabit, subjects within these five countries know that every year their fellow “hermanos centroamericanos” celebrate the same holiday in their own respective countries. Moreover, the political discourse utilized at these events, often employs such terms as “patria grande” in order to perpetuate the belief of a Central American common culture.<sup>157</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> For instance, in 2008 the president of “El Bloque Popular” of Honduras, invoked this nationalist rhetoric when discussing the importance of the *Las Fiestas Patrias*: El Bloque

Similarly, the COFECA parade, and its festivities, annually takes place every weekend closest to the date of Central American Independence, September 15<sup>th</sup>. The structure of the parade over the years has remained relatively consistent. The parade always takes place in “Little Central America” (though sometimes the route might change), has a theme generally political in nature, (see figure 1), has a “grand marshal”, and always contains floats from the various Central American countries. Usually, a banner designating a national culture will precede the floats which are often sponsored by hometown associations (see fig.4), local and transnational community organizations (see fig. 5) and local businesses that cater to those populations (see fig. 6).



Figure 4. Banner of local Salvadoran organization



Figure 5. Banner of transnational Salvadoran organization

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Popular todos los años hacemos esta movilización para saludar a la patria grande de Centroamérica y a la patria grande de Latinoamérica contra los intereses de los Estados Unidos y Europa y las oligarquías de aquella época que nos dividieron en cinco repúblicas.



Figure 6. Float sponsored by a local Salvadoran restaurant.

The fact that this type of cultural practice has found its way into the diaspora is important because the production of this performance provides the opportunity for US Central Americans to see themselves as a larger “transnational” or what Ana Patricia Rodriguez has labeled “transisthmian” imaginary. Although the COFECA celebrations of *Las Fiestas Patrias* takes place in the Westlake area, the cultural impact exceeds the confines of this space. According to COFECA’s own website, the Central American Independence parade “se ha transformado en la expresión socio-cultural más grande de Centro América en el mundo/ has transformed itself into the largest socio-cultural expression of Central America in the world.”<sup>158</sup> While, initially one might view COFECA’s claim as an overstatement, there might be some validity to this proclamation. The parade has become a cultural institution in the city of Los Angeles and especially for its Central American community. As the third largest parade in Los Angeles,<sup>159</sup> this

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<sup>158</sup> Statement expressed on the COFECA website and replicated in an article in *La Opinion* dated September 18<sup>th</sup> 2007.

<sup>159</sup> The other two parades are the Rose Parade, and Mexican Independence Parade.



annual celebration has attracted crowds as large as 300,000 spectators, and it is estimated that more than a million Central Americans see it worldwide. This is due in large part to the emergence of new technological media, and transnational television networks like *Telemundo*, *Univision*, and *CentroAmerica TV*, which broadcast news and cultural events to different regions of the Latin American world. The internet website *Youtube*, has also become a valuable tool in disseminating Central American culture, especially texts created from Los Angeles. Most of the COFECA events including web video of the parade itself, as well as the crowning ceremony of Miss COFECA can be found on the website *Youtube*, which can be accessed any time of day and from any location. This in turn, enables Central Americans both on and off the isthmus to share in the same experience and in the process, expand the parameters of the Central American imaginary. Thus, arguably just as early 19<sup>th</sup> century technological media such as print capitalism helped to create “imagined communities,” these new technological devices have enabled the formation of decentered transnational ‘imagined worlds.’

By allowing Central Americans around the world to partake in these festivities, COFECA’s celebration of cultural nationalism is transformed into a larger Central American communal event. By invoking a particular historical memory—a time of unity among Central American countries—t these cultural practices create a space that facilitates disparate peoples from different countries, racial groups, genders and social strata to imagine themselves as Central Americans. Moreover, because new technology allows Central

Americans from around the world to be physical and virtual participants, one of the most important functions of the COFECA civic celebrations is the manner in which has served to create a transnational Centralamericanismo.

Upon first glance, the (re)production of Central American Independence parade in the diaspora mirrors those enacted on the isthmus. Both present a utopic vision of Central America, one where members of different national entities and racialized populations all march together happily; minimizing the contentious relations that permeate within these populations. Certainly within the COFECA parade, two of the most popular floats are those of indigenous communities like the Garifuna and the Maya. Ironically, both of these communities have been marginalized, physically and culturally, by both individual national imaginaries and the larger Central American imaginary, which via its very choice to privilege a particular historical moment of a national formation, undermines the current political claims of sovereignty enacted by these two communities. Yet, every year, for only one day, marginalized populations are viewed as integral to Central America culture, even if their lives and political aspirations are not.

Still, while the COFECA parade is an inherited cultural practice, it would be misguided to view it as a pure adaptation or recreation of Independence parades and festivities within the isthmus. As Joseph Roach has noted in his work of cultural (re) productions of festivals and parades in the “circum-Atlantic” diaspora, more often than not, the attempt to (re)produce actually engenders new forms of cultural texts.<sup>160</sup> This certainly can be applied to the Central American

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<sup>160</sup> Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

diaspora which uses the COFECA parade as a space from which to (re)inscribe Central American identity and culture. For example, unlike the *fiestas patrias* in the isthmus, which are celebrated on the same day by five countries but independently of each other, within the diaspora the parade is performed in a physical space that enables Central American immigrants to celebrate together. Further, whereas in the isthmus most Independence parades and festivities emphasize their respective national culture (Salvadoran, etc), by only including floats or groups limited to their own nation, in the diaspora the parade is a cultural form comprised of various nations (i.e. Salvadoran , Honduran, etc). Moreover, the inclusions of “themes” and of a “grand marshal” are both elements that are uniquely diasporic contributions. The themes in the COFECA parade, such as the one illustrated in figure 3., “hoy desfilamos manana votaremos/ today we march tomorrow we vote” are usually connected to a socio-political issue within the U.S. One suspects that since COFECA was born out of a ‘strategic alliance’ between Central American subjects who were politically active, this type of progressive politics is being infused in this visual performance. In addition, the COFECA parade annually chooses to have different “grand marshals,” this element is one not found in isthmian Central American parades of independence. However, “grand marshals” are commonly found in parades sponsored in Los Angeles like the local Hollywood Christmas Parade, and the more prestigious Tournament of Roses. Therefore, its inclusion in the COFECA parade indicates the beginnings of a cultural fusion between cultural practices of the isthmus with those of US culture.

Another important distinction is the insertion of countries that have been discursively marked as falling outside of the Central American imaginary. On the isthmus only five countries celebrate Central American Independence—Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica—since these are the countries that were formed as a result of Spanish independence. However, in the COFECA parade, and in the organization COFECA itself, Belize (see fig. 7) and Panama are inscribed into the Central American imaginary. As discussed in my previous chapters, Central America as a national formation has self-ascribed borders that only include peoples and cultures that were originally part of the five provinces in the Kingdom of Guatemala. Indeed, most scholarship on Central American history and culture rarely if ever include discussion of Panama or Belize. It is then notable that in the diaspora Central American immigrants have begun to adopt these two nations as part of the Central American family; it signals a moment where they are re(articulating) what they feel is part and parcel of the Central American nation. Visual performances like COFECA are important to this process, for they use visual symbols like banners to re-configure the borders of the Central American nation.<sup>161</sup> Thus, in the diaspora, the cultural performance of the Central American Independence parade needs to be read as more than just a mere reproduction of isthmian traditions, or as simply a vehicle

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<sup>161</sup> By this I am not making the argument that Belizean or Panamanian culture are viewed as equally important as the experiences or cultures of the other isthmian countries. In fact, if you look at the pictures closely, you can see that while Belize has a similar banner to that of Nicaragua, they are still marked as different via the use of color (dark blue) and through symbology, or in this case the failure to have the Central American coat of arms on their banner.

of Central American nationalism. Instead, it needs to be understood as text that simultaneously contests and affirms the Central American imaginary



Figure 7. Belize banner 2006 COFECA Parade.



Figure 8. Nicaragua banner 2006 COFECA parade.

In addition, as a means to publicly perform a Central American identity, the COFECA parade acquires another function that is only salient in the diaspora: it offers an opportunity for Central Americans to locate and perform their cultural difference from other Latino groups. The term Central American, like Latino, is not a racial category but an ethnic category. Central Americans in the diaspora therefore, have no “visible” markers to differentiate themselves from other racialized groups, and specifically from other Latino groups. The COFECA parade therefore is another opportunity to narrate and perform an identity. It allows Central Americans to remind their own communities, the larger Latino community, and US culture of the heterogeneity within Latino groups. One way the parade achieves this is through the inclusion of other Latino communities into their parade. Again, while it may appear odd that national communities that do not celebrate their independence on September 15<sup>th</sup> may want to partake in the parade, COFECA utilizes their inclusion as a way to distance themselves from these other non-isthmian communities. In other words, like the process of identity

formation which is relational, and requires a subject to construct itself on the premise of “difference” from another subject, the parade includes other national communities as a way to assert their difference from them. This is achieved by the structure of the parade where members of the “Central American Nation” are clearly delineated by banners that contain their name and the Central American Coat of Arms, while communities seen as external to this collectivity are marked by banners that located them as outside of “Central America” (see fig. 9 and 10). Thus, the parade’s structure and use of colors becomes a way to visibly delineate the parameters of what it views as being constitutive of Central America. In this case, those countries and cultures that are not part of Central America are clearly defined by having banners that claim to “salute” Central America, while those that are viewed as Central American are not required to make that distinction.



Figure 9. Ecuadorian banner 2006 COFECA parade.



Figure 10. Guatemalan banner 2006 COFECA parade.

The fact that Central Americans are using a public space to self-consciously prescribe what they view, or whom they view as Central American is significant since US culture tends to read “brown” bodies in the city of Los

Angeles as always already Mexican.<sup>162</sup> As such, the COFECA parade serves to undermine racist and homogenizing tropes that fail to recognize how heterogeneous Latino populations are. The creation and production of the COFECA parade, therefore, should be read as a self-conscious attempt by this Central American community to claim a space within Latino cultural politics.

As an act of identity politics, the COFECA parade also provides US Central Americans with a space to contest dominant US narratives of cultural assimilation, especially for spectators of the performance. Routinely, spectators of the event will wear the colors of blue and white, or bring with them national flags from Central America (see fig. 9), as a way to both visually identify themselves as Central American, but also, perhaps implicitly, as a way to challenge the idea that immigrants need to or should “melt” into a larger US(Euro)culture. A case in point can be seen in figure 9, which has a photo of a spectator at the 2006 COFECA parade.



Figure 11. Spectator at the 2006 COFECA Parade.

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<sup>162</sup> For a more thorough discussion of this problematic, please see Chapter 3 in this dissertation.

The fact that this spectator in the above photo is wearing a shirt that proclaims that he is 100% Guatemalan, exposes an anxiety regarding Central American identity in the diaspora—it is one that constantly needs to be performed and visibly located in order to prevent being collapsed with other Latino groups. It also highlights how these moments of identity politics often rely on problematic notions of identity. To pronounce that there is a 100% Guatemalan identity or subject, is a troubling gesture, especially in light of the fact that the nation-state of Guatemala has engaged in its own military and violent campaign to preserve and maintain an identity that has been often defined by the abjection-culturally and physically—of its indigenous peoples. His action, speaks to the ways in which this civic ceremony allows Central American immigrants a moment to visibly protest the idea of inevitable assimilation, even as it serves as a powerful reminder of the manner in which nationalism, both at the macro (regional) and micro(national) level are sustained by a fiction of homogenization; for to privilege a certain implied citizen-subject, like that of Guatemalan, is to rely upon a national identity that was formed via the exclusion of other diverse populations within the nation-state.

Still, this spectator's choice of wearing this t-shirt needs to be read within its specific context of a minority subject visibility asserting a type of resistance towards the dominant narrative of assimilation and accommodation. This is particularly significant the year I attended the COFECA parade, where just four months earlier on May 1 2006, Los Angeles hosted one of the largest protests



regarding immigrant rights.<sup>163</sup> The political climate in the nation, and especially in such spaces like Los Angeles in the last three decades, beginning with such policies as Proposition 187, has been hostile towards immigrants, especially Latino immigrants. Thus for this spectator to wear a shirt that states that he is “100% Guatemalan,” with a barcode on it, as if to suggest that his body and labor is merely a commodity within American culture, needs to be recognized as a moment of agency. For it speaks to the contradictory position American culture has towards its immigrants; on the one hand it resents immigrants like this spectator for their resistance towards assimilation, and on the other hand it needs this population as a cheap source of labor to sustain the economy.<sup>164</sup>

In this sense the COFECA event becomes a radical space of critique—a manipulation of space in order to cast light on those “other [discursive] spaces” which continually position Central Americans and racialized “others” as outsiders. We must then read the COFECA parade as an example of what Michel Foucault (1986) has labeled as “heterotopias.” For Foucault, ‘heterotopias’ are spaces that operate as “counter-sites” whereby “all other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.”<sup>165</sup> This, according to Foucault, is achieved because t

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<sup>163</sup> According to a report from CNN.com dated on May 1, 2006, 200,000 protestors marched the streets of City Hall, and 400,000 thousands protested along the Wilshire Corridor during the national protest titled “A Day without an Immigrant.”

<sup>164</sup> Both Hamilton and Stolz have eluded in their book to the types of job patterns Central American immigrants occupy within Los Angeles. While Terry Repak traces how the immigration of Central Americans to spaces like Washington D.C was often facilitated by the need of cheap labor in the service sector.

<sup>165</sup> Foucault, “Of other Spaces”, 24

“counter-sites” or “heterotopias” mirror those spaces that produce their own conditions of possibility. As Foucault explains:

The mirror, is after all, a utopia, since it is a placeless place. In the mirror, I see myself where I am not,...I am over there where I am not, a sort of shadow that gives my own visibility to myself, that enables me to see myself there where I am absent...but it is also a heterotopia in so far as the mirror does exist in reality, where it exerts a sort of counteraction on the position I occupy. From the mirror I discover my absence from the place where I am since I see myself over there. <sup>166</sup>

Foucault’s language here is very reminiscent of Lacan’s theory of identity formation via the “mirror stage,” as well as Laclau’s theories that identities are formed from moments of negativity or as an effect of a ‘constitutive outside.’ What they all share in common is a notion that a subjectivity and identity formation emerges from a moment of misrecognition. The production of a subject for these theorists emerges as an artifact or remnant from a moment of failure or disidentification. For Foucault the production of certain spaces and places can operate in the same fashion. They can emerge as the *constitutive outside* of other spaces. In this aspect, we may need to start thinking about the production of COFECA texts, Little Central America, and a diasporic Central American identity itself as heterotopic texts; as remnants discarded during the constructions of other identities like “American,” or “Latino.” Conceived under this lens, the construction of these texts and subjects become powerful forms of critique; they become “mirrors” from which their mere presence or existence challenges totalizing discourses from the isthmus and the United States that claim to be inclusive of all peoples and cultures.

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

Within the context of this particular conversation, I view the annual performance of the COFECA parade and Little Central America as effects produced from being discursively marginalized in California Latino cultural politics. As a brief example I am reminded of Kay Sommer's study of Latino festivities in the San Francisco area in her article titled "Inventing Latinismo." Though the overall emphasis in the article was to showcase how certain approaches to ethnic celebrations cultivated *Latinismo* while other approaches failed to interpellate subjects into Latinos, the fact that Central Americans have opted to construct their own celebrations, divorced from other Latino celebrations in California, signals that certain projects and the larger discourse of Latinidad has not been able to "invent Latinismo" for all of its supposed members. Thus, every year that Central Americans march down the streets of Little Central America, they become metaphoric mirrors to a discourse of Latinidad which simultaneously speaks for but renders their traditions and social experiences invisible. As a consequence, more than just examples of "identity politics," the birth of the space Little Central America as well as the COFECA parade, as catalysts and embodiments of Centralamericanismo, also need to be viewed as heterotopic spaces produced by US and Latino discourses.

### Conclusion

In the last decade a politics of identity from diasporic Central American communities is beginning to emerge in such spaces like Los Angeles. Magnified in this discourse of Central American identity politics is a belief or

“consciousness” that individuals from the nations on the isthmus comprise a distinct but common culture—one that cannot be fully represented by the pan-ethnic identity “Latino,” but which can still invoke a type of geographic and cultural specificity that is usually associated with national identities. This type of ‘collective consciousness’ that enables a pan-ethnic Central American identity is what I have labeled as Centralamericanismo. Because this form of ethnic consciousnesses develops from both ideological and socio-political factors, in this chapter I have traced the various ways in which Central American cultural nationalism, in conjunction with current social conditions in the diaspora, have produced Centralamericanismo. This is especially evident in the cultural productions emanating from Los Angeles, where Central American immigrants during the early 1980s began creating “situational alliances” in order to advocate for socio, political and juridical rights for their community. Over the years these “situational alliances” became cultural institutions that produced important narratives of Central American identity. Often this Central American identity is one that is articulated by representations in the diaspora that homogenize cultural differences amongst Central American cultures in order to create a larger distinction and separation from both Anglo and Latino culture. In this aspect, while Centralamericanismo may require the same social conditions as that of *Latinismo*, because many Central American immigrants brought with them a form of Central American cultural nationalism, the pan-ethnic identity of Central American may prove to be less ephemeral for Central Americans.

**CHAPTER III**  
**IDENTITY AND SUBJECTION:**  
**LATINIDAD, INVISIBILITY, AND CENTRAL AMERICAN-AMERICANESS**

Sergio Arau's political satire, *A Day without a Mexican* (2004), openly ponders the question of what would happen to California's socio-economic structure if, overnight, the entire Latino population disappeared. Given the clearly didactic tone of the film there is no mistaking that the writers had as their central objective to highlight the socio-cultural and economic contributions of Latinos in California, and the entire country. Nowhere is this objective clearer than in the film's website which poses the question "How do you make the invisible visible? You take it away?" Arguably, this becomes the film's modus operandi as it literally removes the Latino population from California. With its statement about the economic importance of the Latino labor force, and the Latino immigrant community, Arau's film is an important document within Latino discourse and has been vital in reinvigorating the Latino immigrant and labor movements.<sup>167</sup> But an often overlooked and equally significant contribution of the film is the manner in which it provides a critical commentary on dominant

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<sup>167</sup> Diego Cevallos, "International Labor Day: Mexico Backs U.S.' Day without Immigrants," Global Information Network (May 2006): 1. According to this article, the strategy of highlighting the importance of Latinos by "invisibilizing" them was a tactic Latino immigrants rights and Labor rights activities would employ on May 1, 2006 on International Labor Day when they asked Latinos to stay home and boycott work.

constructions of “Latinidad.”<sup>168</sup> Throughout the film, Arau inserts textual statements containing facts about Latinos, which he assumes are generally unknown. Among some of the more interesting statements presented in the film are the following: “There are 40 countries south of the border,” “Guatemalans and Hondurans are not Mexicans,” and “Every Hispanic on the West Coast is presumed to be Mexican (it’s vox populi not fact).” Clearly these statements are meant to elucidate to audiences the heterogeneity of the Latino community which is comprised of peoples from over 40 countries and who include national groups outside of Mexico. In fact, in interviews about the film, Arau has suggested that the title itself is supposed to be ironic, reflective of the ways American society has homogenized Latinos, stating, “In the United States, everything that is south of the border is Mexican. People ask in what part of Mexico they can find Venezuela.”<sup>169</sup>

Through these statements the film implicitly asserts that in some geocultural spaces like the “West Coast,” Latinidad has become synonymous with a particular national group: Mexicans and Mexican Americans. Ironically, while the film’s title is meant to highlight the problematic nature of collapsing the categories of Mexican with Latino, the film inadvertently cements this suturing. This is evidenced by critic and audience reviews, which see it as a film about Mexicans

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<sup>168</sup> Another important fictional piece emerging from Los Angeles that challenge current articulations of Latinidad is Larry Clark’s independent film *Wassup Rockers* (2005) which chronicles the lives of Guatemalan and Salvadoran-American teenage boys in South Central who are constantly being mistaken for “Mexicans.”

<sup>169</sup> Diego Cevallos, “MIGRATION-U.S.: It’s Latinos or Chaos, A New Movie Argues,” Global Information Network, (June 2004): 1

rather than Latinos.<sup>170</sup> In this respect, the film becomes symptomatic of Latino discourse which often employs the term “Latino,” and/or Hispanic, in an attempt to address the heterogeneous Latino populations, but which nevertheless ends up privileging a particular national-origin constituency.

Though the film is not original in its claim that certain national groups have obtained and maintain a type of “geographic hegemony”<sup>171</sup> in certain parts of the United States, within Latino discourse there has been a reluctance to examine the effects that this type of internal marginalization has on those “other” Latino communities who find their experiences erased from dominant constructions of “Latinoness”. In an attempt to open this critical dialogue within the field of Latino studies, this chapter seeks to explore how this type of internal othering within Latino discursive practices has mediated the ways in which U.S. Central Americans have come to position themselves, or be positioned, within the Latino imaginary.<sup>172</sup> For instance, in showing us the privileged location Mexican-

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<sup>170</sup> Examples can be found in the reviews by Marta Barber, “Incomplete Parody has its Moments”, Miami Herald, September 17, 2004. As well as Marjorie Baumgarten, “A Day without a Mexican,” The Austin Chronicle, September 9, 2004.

<sup>171</sup> Lorena Garcia and Merida Rua, “Processing Latinidad: Mapping Latino Urban Landscapes through Chicago Ethnic Festivals,” *Latino Studies*, no. 5 (2007):318 have labeled the prominence of certain national cultures in certain locations as “geographic hegemony,” they cite the work of Frances Aparacio who in her article “Reading the ‘Latino in Latino Studies: Towards Reimagining Our Academic Location.” *Discourse* 21, no. 3 (1999): 3-18 also asserts this notion. Juan Flores, in his essay, “Pan-Latino/Trans-Latino” in *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), also suggests that certain cultures monopolize certain urban spaces.

<sup>172</sup> I am evoking Juan Flores’s use of the term which argues that the Latino community needs to read as an ethnoscape, as an imagined community –a “projection beyond the “real” as the immediately present and rationally discernable. It is a “community” represented “for itself,” a unity fashioned creatively on the basis of shared memory and desire, congruent histories of misery and struggle, and intertwining utopias.” Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop*, 198.

American experiences occupy within “West Coast” representations of Latinidad, the film *A Day without a Mexican* offers a glimpse into the ways U.S. Central Americans are (dis)placed within the Latino imaginary. The fact that the film has to remind its audience that “Mexican” is not synonymous with “Latino” and that, Guatemalans and Hondurans are also Latinos, reveals how dominant representations of Latinidad on the West Coast have positioned the experiences and cultural expressions of U.S. Central Americans as falling outside the category of “Latino.”

But first one must ask what has enabled this form of geo-national hegemony within Latinidad? What discursive and socio-cultural practices have reinforced this naturalization between Mexican and Latino on the West Coast? How did this fusion come to be, as Arau puts it, “the vox pupuli”? And perhaps more importantly, who exactly constitutes this “vox pupuli”? Is this the voice of Anglo American audiences? Is this suturing between Latinidad and Mexican-Americanidad an external imposition; a tropicalized<sup>173</sup> manifestation of the larger American imaginary which homogenizes all Latinos by viewing and labeling them simply as Mexicans? Or is this “vox pupuli” one that also emerges internally from within Latino discourse which reinforces the notion that Latinidad is defined by certain national cultures and not others? Moreover what are the implications for *Other* groups, like U.S. Central Americans, who clearly find themselves in the

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<sup>173</sup> Frances Aparicio and Susan Chavez Silverman have utilized the term “tropicalization” as way to describe “a mythic idea of Latinidad based on Anglo (or dominant) projections of fear.” Frances Aparicio and Susana Chavez-Silverman, eds, *Tropicalizations: Transcultural Representations of Latinidad* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997), 8.



ambivalent location of technically being labeled as “Latino” via their Latin American ancestry, while simultaneously removed from the Latino imaginary? That is, what becomes of those groups that are invisible within the already invisible location that Latinos occupy within the larger American imaginary? Those that are rendered invisible the minute the implied West Coast Latino subject—the Mexican—rises to the center of visibilizing projects like *A Day without a Mexican*?

In this chapter I argue that the failure to recognize U.S. Central Americans within the Latino imaginary has had a twofold affect: 1) it has prevented U.S. Central Americans from becoming fully interpellated as Latino subjects 2) paradoxically it has enabled the emergence of a Central American-American subject. As I argued in Chapter 2, the construction of a “pan-ethnic” multinational regional identity such as “Central American” can be viewed as an example of the ways in which this Central American diasporic community has not become interpellated exclusively as Latino subjects.<sup>174</sup> As such, the first part of this chapter begins with an analysis of Arturo Arias’ articulation of the term Central American-American. While “Central American-American” over the last years has gained currency as a term to describe and name the Central American population in the U.S., a critical reading of Arias’ conceptualization of Central

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<sup>174</sup> Unlike other Latino communities who forged a sense of cultural identity prior to the 1970’s, the mass waves of Central American immigration to the United States occurred during the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Coincidentally, it was during this same historical moment where the categories of Hispanic/Latino became umbrella terms to cultivate a Latin American “pan-ethnic” regional identity. As I argue in my previous chapter, the fact that U.S. Central Americans have opted to privilege the term “Central American,” in the creation of a pan-ethnic identity rather than the terms Hispanic and/or Latino, reveals the limitations of these aforementioned terms to interpellate U.S. Central Americans.

American-American reveals that this term's signification exceeds its initial understanding as just a name for U.S. Central Americans. Indeed, as I will explore in greater detail later, the construction of a Central American-American subject, as articulated by Arias, can be viewed as an effect, a discursive manifestation of the inability of U.S. Central Americans to be 'hailed' as Latino subjects.

Guided by Arias' notion that Central American-American subjectivity emerges from the inability to suture U.S. Central Americans to other Latino communities through the term "Latino," (rendering them socially and discursively marginal within the already marginal space of Latino), I examine two key examples of the complex positioning of Central Americans within the Latino imaginary. In the first example I look at the recent controversy over Honduran born comedian Carlos Mencia, in particular the common accusation that he is a "Mexican imposter." In the second example I examine the controversy that took place on the campus of East Los Angeles Community college (ELAC) when the Chicano Studies department offered a class on Central Americans titled "Central Americans: The New Chicanos." Though these two examples are located in the varied terrains of popular culture and academia, they are linked by a common representational crisis that occurs when West Coast constructions of Latinidad are forced to engage with the presence of U.S Central Americans. The Mencia and ELAC controversies are important not only because they are examples of what Garcia and Rua have labeled as "complex moments of convergence"<sup>175</sup>—

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<sup>175</sup> Lorena Garcia and Merida Rua, , "Processing Latinidad: Mapping Latino Urban Landscapes Through Chicago Ethnic Festivals," *Latino Studies*, no. 5 (2007):318

critical sites of inquiry that allow us to investigate the processes of identity formation”— but also because they elucidate how categories like Latino, as articulated in cultural practices like performance and in such geo-cultural spaces like Los Angeles, are maintained via the exclusion of U.S. Central Americans. Though certainly this investigation could focus on cultural practices in other urban and geo-cultural locations, because California houses one of largest Mexican-American populations as well as the largest population of Central Americans outside of Central America,<sup>176</sup> I feel it is imperative to ground this inter-Latino study within this geographic context.

### The Making of the Central American-American subject

While there have been different attempts to study the relationship between U.S. Central Americans and Latinidad,<sup>177</sup> arguably the most influential statements on the subject of U.S. Central American inter-Latino relations can be found in the work of Arturo Arias. His essays, “Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American subjectivities on both sides of the great divide,” (1999) and “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World,” (2003) are seminal in the field of Central American and U.S. Central American studies because they mark the first

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<sup>176</sup> This information was cited in Roberto Rodriguez’s article, “Academic Turf War at East Los Angeles,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 14, no.4 (Jan 1998): 12.

<sup>177</sup> Among some of the more compelling studies on this subject can be found in Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla’s book, *Seeking Community In Global City: Guatemalans & Salvadorans In Los Angeles* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001); Ana Patricia Rodriguez, “Refugees of the south: Central Americans in the U.S. Latino imaginary,” *American Literature* 73, no. 2 (2001): 386-412; Claudia Milian, “Fashioning U.S. Salvadoranness: Unveiling the Faces of Christy Turlington and Rosa Lopez,” *The Latin American Fashion Reader* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2005) 263-279.

attempts to theorize and name the conditions that have facilitated and produced the construction of a Central American-American subjectivity. Arias's first essay in particular has proved most critical, since it gave birth to the nomenclature and the concept of Central American-American. In it, Arias asserts that "we seldom link the word "Latino" with that singular and contradictory trope, "Central American-Americans," because "for this group, life is not just on the hyphen, as Gustavo Pérez Firmat put it, but it is also on the margins, not even of the Anglo, North American or South American center: it is life on the margins of those marginal hyphenated others (Cuban-Americans, Mexican-Americans).<sup>178</sup> This leads Arias to conclude "a Latino oftentimes is constructed through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American. This is a group doubly marginalized and thereby invisibilized, to coin a neologism.<sup>179</sup>

For Arias there are three conditions that enable the production of Central American –American subjectivity. The first is the idea that the categorical construct "Latino" does not include a U.S. Central American experience. The second is the notion that the Central American-American subject emerges from a different location than that of the Latino subject, for if Latinos and their subgroups (i.e. Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans), live "life on the hyphen," Arias asserts Central American-Americans live life "on the margins of hyphenated others." Lastly, Arias asserts that "a Latino is constructed through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American." This conceptualization of

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Arturo Arias, "Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American subjectivities on both sides of the great divide," *Explicación de Textos Literarios\_XXVIII* (1999) : 2.

Central American-American subjectivity therefore posits it as dialectical and relational to the Latino subject. According to Arias, the Latino subject is constituted via the exclusion of the Central American-American, and Central American-American subjectivity is produced in those moments and processes that “doubly marginalize and invisibilize them.”

The fact that Arias proclaims that “we seldom link the word “Latino” with Central American-Americans, is significant for it highlights what he believes to be the social location U.S. Central Americans occupy within Latino discourse, even as it presents us with an alternative perspective on Latinidad. According to Frances Aparacio the terms “Latino” or “Latinidad” in their most “ideal” form , should be seen as “terms that carry within them a diverse array of competing authenticities , or paradigms of identity that, together, and in conflict with each other constitute the heterogeneous experiences of various Latino groups.”<sup>180</sup> But it is clear that for Arias the terms “Latino”, and by proxy “Latinidad,” does not “constitute the heterogeneous experiences” of all Latino groups, especially those of U.S. Central Americans. Indeed a simple perusal of the current state of Latino studies programs, and of the works published on the subject of Latinidad would undoubtedly validate Arias claim. In books, with such ambitious titles, like *Latinos: A Biography of a People*, *The Hispanic Condition*, the *Latino Condition*, and *Latino Cultural Citizenship*, to name a few, the study of Latino culture is all too often filtered through one of three “competing authenticities”: Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban Americans. That is, the Hispanic/Latino

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<sup>180</sup> Aparacio, “Reading the Latino”, 10.

“condition” tends to be defined through a Mexican American, Puerto Rican, or Cuban American lens. Rarely, if ever, are U.S. Central Americans or other groups outside of this tripartite model of Latinidad, seen as central to the Latino experience.

A case in point can be seen in Ilan Stavans seminal text *The Hispanic Condition* (1995), which was one of the first attempts to theorize about a larger collective Latino experience as opposed to a particular national experience. Despite Stavans’s attempt to explore what creates the conditions of possibility for the construction of a Latino identity, he cannot conceive of Latinidad outside of certain national markers. For instance, when commenting about his book title, Stavans states that he titled his book *The Hispanic Condition* because he was “eager to show the multiple links between Latinos and their siblings south of the Rio Grande, a journey from Spanish to English, the northward odyssey of the omnipresent bracero worker, jibaro immigrant, and Cuban refugee.”<sup>181</sup> Here the Latino experience is defined through very specific national, cultural, racial, gendered, and historical terms: it is the Mexican bracero, the Puerto Rican indigenous jibaro, and the Cuban exile refugee.

In fairness to Stavans, there are important socio-cultural and political factors that have enabled certain national groups to obtain this type of “hegemony” within Latino discourse. The *1848 Treaty of Guadalupe of Hidalgo* changed the landscape of the southwest from Mexican to American. The Spanish-American war in 1898 would lead to the colonial connections between

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<sup>181</sup> Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 20.

Puerto Rico and the United States, as well as the Cuban Revolution in 1959. These political and historical factors have contributed to the predominance of certain national groups within certain geo-cultural spaces, namely—Mexican Americans in the Southwest, Puerto Ricans in New York and Cubans in Miami. However as demonstrated in cultural productions like *A Day without a Mexican*, the presence of a national group within these urban spaces has shaped perceptions of Latinidad that have transcended the particularity of that region. Moreover, as scholars like Frances Aparicio and Paul Allaston remind us,<sup>182</sup> before there was a paradigm of Latino studies, or talk of Latino discourse, most scholarship was rooted in cultural nationalism, in the fields of Chicano Studies and Puerto Rican Studies, whose central focus was national and particular rather than comparative. Hence, it comes as little surprise that the paradigm of Latino studies remains focused on these selected national groups, or that Latino studies scholars such as Stavans, conceive of the Latino subject through this specific tripartite model of Latinidad.

But in addition to positing the experiences of certain national groups as representative of all “Hispanics,” Stavans also proceeds to theorize and cite the “condition” that produces Latino subjects which he views as emerging from “living life on the hyphen.” This notion of “living life on the hyphen,” which has become

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<sup>182</sup> Both Frances Aparicio in “Reading Lo Latino” and Paul Allaston in his book *Key Terms in Latino/a Studies: Cultural Studies and Literary Studies* (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Press, 2007), claim that despite the fact that a term like “Latino Studies” implies a diverse array of heterogeneous national experiences, “This broad ambit[Latino/a Studies] needs, nonetheless, to be qualified by the fact that Latino/a studies are anchored historically in scholarship about, or emanating from, two communities: Chicano/as or Mexican Americans; and US-resident Puerto Ricans” (Allaston 1), and thus continues to remain an “academic imaginary”, a “desire rather than a fact”(Aparicio, 4).

the metaphor par excellence for Latino biculturalism was originally conceived by Gustavo Perez Firmat in his book titled *Life on the Hyphen* (1993). In it Firmat argues that the “1.5” Cuban generation lives life “on the hyphen”—an “interstitial placement” where “spiritually and psychologically you are neither *aqui* nor *alla*, you are neither Cuban nor Anglo.”<sup>183</sup> Though originally intended to be a descriptor for a particular Cuban immigrant community, over the years the trope of “living life on the hyphen” has come to be viewed as the defining feature of all Hispanics/Latinos. This notion of living “life on the hyphen” as a “Hispanic condition,” and not simply a Cuban-American condition, begins with Stavans who uses this phrase as the title to the first chapter in his book *The Hispanic Condition*, and is reinforced three years later, when the book *The Latino/a Condition* (1998) includes an essay by Stavans that invokes this trope again. For Stavans, “hyphenation” is not a process unique to Cubans, and instead he conceives it as constitutive of all Latino subjectivity.

How can one understand the hyphen, the encounter between Anglos and Hispanics, the mix between George Washington and Simon Bolivar? Has the cultural impact of south of the border immigrants in a country that prides itself on its Eurocentric lineage and constantly tries to minimize, even hide, its Spanish and Portuguese backgrounds, been properly analyzed? Where can one begin exploring the Latino hybrid and its multiple links to Hispanic America?<sup>184</sup>

Like Firmat, Stavans conceives of “the hyphen” as a “condition” that emerges from having to mediate two cultures, a type of mixture that is produced in

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<sup>183</sup> Gustavo Perez Firmat, *Life on the Hyphen: The Cuban-American Way*, (Austin: UT Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>184</sup> Ilan Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition: Reflections on Culture and Identity in America* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 19.



“imaginary” and “real” spaces of encounter between Anglo America and Latin America. However, unlike Firmat who sees the hyphen as a space that mitigates the tensions of living between two particular national and cultural locations (Cuban/American), Stavans turns the hyphen into a larger hemispheric and cultural phenomenon. The hyphen, according to Stavans, emerges in the imaginary spaces where the icons of the U.S imaginary (George Washington) meet with Latin American icons (Simon Bolivar), as well as in “real” moments of cultural encounters, such as when “south of the border immigrants” have to encounter a “country that prides itself on its Eurocentric lineage.” In this respect, Stavans understanding of the “hyphen” invokes that other seminal text within Latino discourse—*Borderlands/La Frontera*—in which Gloria Anzaldúa posits that Chicana subjectivity, emerges from moments of encounter that produce “Borderlands.” For Anzaldúa there are “physical” and “psychological” “borderlands” that are produced “wherever two or more cultures edge each other” in spaces like the U.S-Mexican border where “the third world grates against the first and bleeds.”<sup>185</sup> Though Stavans does not directly cite Anzaldúa in his passage, it is clear that her work is influential to his current understanding of the “Hispanic condition.” Anzaldúa, he insists, is an example of “new interpreters” of a “different frame of discussion “which is centered on a “mestizo world view.”<sup>186</sup> It is this exploration of the “mestizo world view”—one that focuses on the effects of cultural and racial “mixtures” between America and Latin America—which

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<sup>185</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1987), 3.

<sup>186</sup> Stavans, *The Hispanic Condition*, 13.

Stavans views as foundational to studying the “Hispanic condition” since the Latino subject, he argues, is a “Latino hybrid.”

Unfortunately, in Stavans’s attempt to articulate the conditions that are constitutive of Latino subjectivity, he erases and minimizes the distinct histories and complexity of his respective national groups. For instance, not only does he appropriate the trope of the hyphen, a metaphor meant for a particular Cuban American community, but in addition, he homogenizes Latino culture via his choice of seeing the study of Hispanic culture as one that relies on a “mestizo world view”—a view that privileges a certain type of racialized Latino subject at the expense of Latin American indigenous and African communities. In addition, he also neutralizes the subversive qualities in the concept of hybridity, which has been pivotal for many Latino subgroups in their postulations of cultural identity and subjectivity.<sup>187</sup> Although scholars like Nestor Garcia Canclini (1995) and Homi Bhabha (1996), have noted the political and intellectual significance of a concept like hybridity,<sup>188</sup> particularly in producing what Bhabha has labeled “strategies of hybridization,” which are meant to “reveal an estranging movement in the ‘authoritative’ inscription of the cultural sign,”<sup>189</sup> as deployed by Stavans,

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<sup>187</sup> For instance, in Anzaldúa’s theorization of the Borderlands, she views hybridity and its effects—the border subject and mestiza consciousness—as examples that challenge and questioned the purity of such terms like American, Mexican, and Chicano, and which deconstructed such binaries as Anglo/Mexican. In so doing, she employs a notion of hybridity that is championed by critics like Bhabha.

<sup>188</sup> See Nestor Garcia Canclini, *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*, trans. Christopher Chiappari and Silvia Lopez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995); Homi Bhabha, “Cultures In-Between,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage Publications, 1996) 53-60.

<sup>189</sup> Bhabha, “Cultures In-Between”, 58

hybridity is divorced from this radical potential and becomes a term to connote the mixture of two things. This is evident in his articulation of hyphenation which positions it as a “mix” between two relatively homogenous worlds (Anglos and Hispanics), embodied in the gendered white images of George Washington and Simon Bolivar. Used in this manner, Stavans’s conceptualization of hybridity is the antithesis of what hybridity means for Bhabha, “I do not mean duality or binarism.”<sup>190</sup> It is clear that for Stavans the concept of “hybrid” and “hybridity” is configured as another form of mestizaje—that is, he can only conceive of it as a product of a “mixing” that occurs between two cultures. Thus, when Stavans speaks of the “Latino hybrid,” he is not only implying that the Latino is a particular form of racialized subject (the mestizo), he is also enacting a type of homogenization that others have forewarned against: the tendency of implying that “all Latin American cultures (and in this case their descendents) are just hybrid.”<sup>191</sup>

Indeed such lack of contextualization of the unique differences between the national groups housed under the rubric of “Hispanic” is what has led scholars like Juan Flores, to be critical of Stavans’s articulations of Latinidad, specifically his contention that “life on the hyphen” is a constitutive element for all Hispanics. In an essay titled “Life off the hyphen” from his book *From Bomba to*

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> In the “Introduction” for the Latin American Cultural Studies Reader, Ana Del Sarto says that there is a “dangerous risk involved in the studies of these intercultural relations and juxtapositions is simply to consider that all Latin American cultures are just hybrid” (180). Antonio Cornejo Polar, in his essay “Mestizaje and Hybridity: The Risks of Metaphors—Notes” located in the same reader, also warns how these two terms have been appropriated as metaphors without careful consideration.

*Hip-Hop* (2000), Flores is critical of Stavans's choice to de-contextualize the cultural specificity from which the concept of hyphenation emerged, claiming "while Perez Firmat's *Life on the hyphen* retains a Cuban-American focus...llan Stavans in the *Hispanic Condition* will do with no such narrow boundaries," (172), and calls for the need "for more specificity and more rigorous differentiation among the varied groups perspectives."<sup>192</sup> At the core of Flores's critique of Stavans is his use of Firmat's notion of the hyphen, which is rooted in the premise that the power relations between both sides of the hyphen is based on "equilibrium," and that the hyphen should be "embraced as an equal sign."<sup>193</sup> For Flores, this postulation that Latino subjects emerge from an equitable power dynamic between American and Latin American culture is erroneous since it cannot account for a Puerto Rican experience that is dominated by asymmetrical power relations of U.S colonialism. "If life on the Latino hyphen as a sign of equilibrium stands for this interplay of cultural politics at an international level," then according to Flores, "Puerto Ricans in the United States live life off the hyphen."<sup>194</sup> Ironically, while Flores sees the hyphen as an inappropriate trope for the social location Puerto Ricans occupy within the U.S., he nonetheless reinforces the notion that it is central to Latinidad by calling it "the Latino hyphen." Consequently, while Flores may resist the idea that all Latinos "live life on the hyphen," because his work attests to the ways in which Puerto Rican identity and

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<sup>192</sup> Juan Flores, *From Bomba to Hip-Hop: Puerto Rican Culture and Latino Identity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 172-173.

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.*, 170

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.*, 180

subjectivity is produced in cultural practices that negotiate the contentious relationship between U.S. and Puerto Rican culture, Puerto Rican subjects, as hybrid subjects, are produced from the same dichotomous frame that is constitutive of the Chicana, Cuban-American and Latino subject: the American and the Latin American Other.

But Flores's work is also important because it again reinforces the notion of how a term like Latino has come to symbolize the experiences of certain national groups. The concept of "pan-latino," for instance, was conceived by Juan Flores as a way of thinking about Latinos as a "pan-ethnicity"—as a cultural construct, as a form of an "ethnicity of ethnicities."<sup>195</sup> According to Flores, the need to (re)think Latinidad as a pan-ethnicity reflects the current historical moment, and the recent "diversification" or "latinization" of New York by "newer," "exotic" immigrants.<sup>196</sup> The creation of this term "pan-Latino" is therefore connected to historical factors that are producing new Latino immigrant subgroups. Of noteworthy attention is that Flores's new term implies that the construct of Latino has come to signify a Latino subject that does not include the "newer" and "exotic" immigrants. In other words, Flores seems to suggest that the term Latino is inherently not very "pan-ethnic", for why else would he choose to add the prefix of "pan" to the term "Latino"?

However, while Flores's concept of pan-Latino is an important inclusionary move in Latino discourse, just like in the case of Stavans, we see that Flores

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<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 150

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 141

cannot resist establishing the primacy of certain national groups, in certain geo-cultural spaces.

Viewed in its full trajectory, the Latinization of New York *centers* on the congruences and contrasts between Puerto Ricans and the *other* Latino groups, individually and as a composite. For Puerto Ricans are not only “still the largest and oldest” of the New York Latino populations, a frequent and fitting rejoinder to the usual relativistic fanfare about the city’s pan-Latino “melting pot.” With a century of experience here, New York Puerto Ricans actually straddle the “old” and the “new,” while their emigration en masse in the 1950s and 1960s was clearly the *first* wave of the “new”, non-European flow. Rather than just one more among the Latino groups, receding in relative prominence as the others expand and dig in, the *Puerto Rican community remains at the crux of any consideration of Latinos in New York*, the historical touchstone against which much else that follows must be tested.<sup>197</sup> (emphasis mine)

Upon first glance, one cannot but agree with Flores on the prominent role Puerto Rican culture has had on New York articulations of Latinidad. Puerto Ricans in New York and to a larger extent the “east coast,” have not only been central to the way the Anglo American imaginary has conceived of Latinidad, but also instrumental in advocating and garnering socio-cultural and civil rights for other Latino immigrants.<sup>198</sup> Still, in his positioning of Puerto Ricans as central to New York articulations of Latinidad, Flores creates a binary between Puerto Ricans and other groups. Puerto Ricans become the normative experience of Latinidad, the “touchstone” by which all groups need to compare themselves. For Flores,

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<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

<sup>198</sup> As Flores states in that chapter, one of the first images of New York City Latinos came in the form of the film *West Side Story* (1961), which criminalized and racialized both Puerto Ricans and Latinos alike. The works of Puerto Rican writers, such as Tato Laviera’s famous poem *Americán* (1985) have been seen as pivotal in articulating the experiences of a Latin American subject negotiating American culture from within the urban landscape of New York City. Moreover the fight for social justice and civil rights was one lobbied often by the “Young Lords”—a Puerto Rican based organization. Undoubtedly, the contributions Puerto Ricans and Puerto Rican culture has had on New York City cannot be understated.

Puerto Ricans should be viewed as central to any discussion of New York cultural history; as a community that is at the “crux” of this history and should therefore not “recede” into oblivion as “other Latinos” enter the scene. According to Flores, what merits this privileged position is the fact that Puerto Ricans are the oldest and largest Latin American immigrant population in New York City.<sup>199</sup> It is disconcerting that Flores employs this type of pseudo-nativism in his lobbying for the primacy of Puerto Ricans within New York Latino cultural history. If these are the guidelines (longevity and demographics), for establishing the location of national groups within Latinidad, then inevitably there will always be communities marginalized within Latino discourse, for their will always be “old” and “new” Latino immigrants. Moreover, we must ask ourselves what becomes of those “other” Latino groups that are viewed as not being influential to Latino cultural history, of not being “central” or at the “crux” of discussions of Latinidad. Thus, while Flores on the surface may be attempting to find strategies of inclusion, like in his construction of the term “pan-Latino,” if the construct of pan-Latino still

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<sup>199</sup> Flores’s claim that Puerto Ricans are the oldest “non-European” immigrant population in New York City might be challenged by other scholarship which views Cuban Americans as among one of the first Latin immigrant populations in New York City. See Felix Masud Piloto, *From Welcomed Exiles to Illegal Immigrants* (Lanham: Rowman&Littlefield Publishers, 1996) 8. Piloto notes that Cuban immigration to the United States can be dated as early as 1860. Many Cuban immigrants at this time chose to relocate to New York. Also see Robert Kent, *Latin America: Region and its People* (New York: Gilford Press, 2006) 379-380. Kent also states that there was a thriving Cuban immigrant community in New York by 1870. For example, the Spanish-American war (1898), which some Puerto Rican scholars attribute as producing the first Puerto Rican immigration wave to the United States, also resulted in Cuban immigration to the U.S.<sup>199</sup> Because during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century the U.S. Census made no distinctions between Puerto Ricans and Cubans, it is hard to establish that one Latin American immigrant group precedes the other, especially if the same war produced the same type of Latin American immigrant community—political exiles. Moreover, it is striking that Flores ignores the prominence of the Cuban political exile community in New York City during the 19<sup>th</sup> century since it is said that Pachin Marin, one of the biggest Puerto Rican nationalists, held close ties with New York Cuban immigrants, especially prominent author Jose Marti and the Cuban Revolutionary Party in New York.

requires that we privilege certain national experiences over others, how is this different from the construct of “Latino”(without the all-inclusive “pan”) which produces the same articulation of Latinoness?

Is this then, the fate for all Latino groups that reside in urban spaces that are dominated by one particular national group? Will “other” Latino cultures and experiences always remain peripheral to that of Chicanos in geo-cultural spaces like the Southwest and West Coast? Will “other” Latinos remain marginal to Cubans in Miami, or Puerto Ricans in New York? Can we ever conceive of Latinidad outside of those three national constituencies? If we look at institutionalized definitions of Latino, it seems that in this particular historical moment the answer to that question would be “no”. In the most recent 2000 U.S. Census survey, individuals who identified themselves as either ‘Spanish’, ‘Hispanic’, or ‘Latino’ were asked to mark if they belonged to one of the following categorical terms: Mexican, Mexican American, Chicano, Puerto Rican, Cuban, or Other.<sup>200</sup> It appears that for the U.S nation-state, like that of intellectual discourse, Latinidad has certain national cultural parameters. Those groups that fall outside of those recognized national categories are forced to literally inscribe themselves as “others”. Not surprisingly, when scholar Jose Antonio Mazzotti needed a title for his forthcoming anthology that focuses on South American and Central Americans in the United States, he aptly titled it, “The Other Latinos.”<sup>201</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Census, “2000 Long Form Questionnaire,” <http://www.census.gov/dmd/www/2000quest.html> (accessed November 18, 2006).

<sup>201</sup> Silvio Torres-Saillant, “Pitfalls of Latino Chronologies: South and Central Americans.” *Latino Studies* 5, no.4 (2007): 489-503 .In this article Silvio Tores-Saillant mentions that this forthcoming anthology titled *The Other Latinos*, by author Jose Antonio Mazzotti, will focus



It is precisely because the term Latino, and the newly formed term “pan-Latino” often implies certain national groups at the expense of “other” Latino groups, that leads Arias to contend that Central American-American subjectivity emerges from a different dichotomy, and “condition.” In Arias’s second postulation he asserts that Central American-Americans live life on a different hyphen. Of critical importance is Arias’s choice to invoke the trope of the hyphen, for as we have seen it has become emblematic of the “condition” that constitutes both Latino subjectivity and the erasure of Central Americans. According to Arias, unlike Cuban-Americans and Mexican-Americans, whose subjectivity is produced from “living life on the hyphen,” Central American-American subjectivity is produced from living life “on the margins of those hyphenated others.” Thus while other groups like Puerto Ricans, Cuban-Americans or Mexican Americans may decide to position themselves discursively either “on” or “off the hyphen” this choice is one that eludes Central American-Americans. For Arias Central American-Americans are “a population that has not yet earned the hyphen to mark its recognition, its level of assimilation and integration, within the multi-cultural landscape of the United States.”<sup>202</sup> They are therefore not subjects allowed to “just live life on the hyphen,” but instead are forced to live life “on the margins of hyphenated others.” The fact that Central American-Americans experience internal othering—being marginalized from

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on US Central Americans, US Brazilians and Andean-descended populations in the U.S. The exact date of the book release however, is not revealed.

<sup>202</sup> Arturo Arias, “Central American- Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World,” *Latino Studies* 1, no.1 (2003): 4.

within an already marginal location— creates a distinction between the Latino subject and the Central American-American subject. If the Latino subject is seen as the effect of a deconstruction of the binary of such categories of American/Latin American, for Arias this traditional dichotomous frame is not constitutive of the Central American-American subject since U.S. Central Americans find themselves as the abject of the Latino construct. The Central American-American subject, therefore is not produced from a center/margin dichotomy that has been the norm for most other Latino subjects like Cuban Americans, Puerto Ricans or even Chicanos, but emerges from two minoritarian locations—the Latino and the Latin American. Their “condition” is highlighted by the fact that they experience marginalization and alienation precisely in the space that is suppose to provide them a sense of inclusion—the Latino. Succinctly, if the Latino subject is produced by being “*ni de aqui*” (American), “*ni de alla*” (Latin American),” the Central American-American subject is produced from being “doubly marginalized and invisibilized”; for not being “*ni de aqui*”(American), “*ni de alla*”(Latin American), “*ni de ese otro alla*”(Latino).

The (dis)placement of U.S. Central American experiences within the construct of Latino is what also leads Arias to assert that “a Latino is oftentimes constructed through the abjection and erasure of the Central American-American.” It is noteworthy that Arias positions this as his last statement within his definition of the term Central American-American, for it is a postulation very similar to his first statement that “we seldom link the word Latino with that singular trope Central American-Americans.” Accordingly, one can read Arias’s

explication of Central American-American subjectivity as one that is produced from discursive structures engaged in a vicious cycle that leads to the exclusions of Central American-Americans. Central American-Americans are not linked with the construct of “Latino,” which in turn causes them to “live life on margins of hyphens,” which subsequently allows for the formation of a Latino subject via the exclusion of the Central American-American subject, which in turn reinforces the disconnection between the word “Latino” with Central American-Americans. Certainly we sense that for Arias, Central American-American subjectivity emerges as an effect of Latino discourse, as its surplus, or the excess, the “abject” that cannot be located within the word or construct of “Latino.” Central American-American subjectivity therefore should be seen as an effect of power—a consequence created by dominant cultural and socio-political discourses that render invisible the experiences of U.S. Central Americans. Here I invoke a Foucauldian notion of power which views power as not centered but de-centered and exercised locally in everyday practices that regulate and govern bodies, institutionalize certain discourse, and in the process produces subjects.<sup>203</sup>

Arias’s conceptualization of Central American-American subjectivity provides an apt theoretical framework for understanding discursive practices that constitute what I am calling Central American-Americaness. My understanding of Central American-Americaness is largely influenced by Arias’s assertion that

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<sup>203</sup> In particular I am influenced by Foucault’s postulations on power as presented in his two influential books *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed, (New York: Random House, 1995); *History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

Central American-American subjectivity is a form of excess— the constitutive outside of such national cultural identities as “Latino”, “Latin American,” and “American.” Central American-Americaness is the condition that emerges from the Central American-American subject being abjected from Latino discourse. It is the name to note the conditions of possibility that hinder U.S. Central Americans from being fully interpellated into “Latinos,” which in turn engenders a Central American-American subject. In this sense Central American-Americaness, like Central American-American subjectivity, is an effect of power relations formed in those spaces where the categories of Latino, Latin American, and American are maintained through the exclusion of U.S. Central Americans. Thus, Central American-Americaness needs to be seen as more than just a state of marginality, for it is not simply a condition where Central American-American culture and subjectivity finds itself peripheral within discourses of American and Latino cultural citizenship; it is that Central American-Americaness is produced in those spaces of exclusion.

Subsequently, what follows is an attempt to analyze the way discursive practices create moments of exclusion that are constitutive of Central American-Americaness. Because power is regulated and exercised in everyday practices my first example examines the recent controversy surrounding the comedian Carlos Mencia. Of interest, is not the veracity of the claims that engendered the controversy itself, but the discourse that emerged from this controversy, which at its core is based on the inability to locate U.S. Central Americans as Latino. In doing so, the “Mencia Controversy” exemplifies one of the precepts viewed as

foundational to the construction of Central American-Americaness: the inability to link the signifier of Latino with Central American-American.

### The Mencia Controversy

I was Chicano all along precisely, because I was Mexican and Salvadoran and American all along as I grew up between Spanish and English, on the political and cultural border that divides—and yet does not separate—the U.S from the southern lands that reach to Tierra del Fuego. Mario...taught me that Chicano-ness has less to do with nationality than it does with the deconstruction of the very idea of a fixed identity. Chicanos and Chicanas are always trespassing across territorial divides, linguistic and political, and even historical markers. It's an exhilarating space to inhabit, and also a very troubling one, because it seems that many, if not most, people in the world still cling on to the notion that their lives have singular meanings, in the cultural or national sense. There is nothing singular or unitary about being Chicano.

-Ruben Martinez

BTW [By the way], what does a Honduran named Ned, know about being a Chicano? Just curious?

-Carlos Mencia forum user named "Rich"

It was among the most uncomfortable and strangest videos I had ever seen. There he was, a Honduran born immigrant being confronted by an Anglo-American man over his identity. One of the accusations made towards this Honduran man was that he had created a fake identity in order to perform and maintain his job. In an attempt to prove and authenticate himself to his Anglo-American accuser, the Honduran man pulled out his "green card" and showed his accuser that he was in fact who he claimed to be. For many of us in the field of Latino studies, the scenario of an immigrant being accused of a form of "illegal" behavior is not unusual. What is unusual about this scenario is that in this example the Honduran immigrant uses the "green card" as a means to verify his authentic racial/ethnic status. Generally, those subjects which have the

phenotype of dark features or what Clara Rodriguez calls, “Latin looks”<sup>204</sup> do not have their racial and ethnic status questioned, if anything, their phenotype automatically locates them as racialized ethnic subjects. Watching this video on “youtube”<sup>205</sup> I wondered what factors enabled this odd inversion to occur? What lead this Honduran immigrant to use his “green card” as a testament to his racial and ethnic authenticity? Why is the “brown” body of this Honduran immigrant being read as something outside of the signifier of Latino and/or ethnic? Especially since the Honduran immigrant in this scenario is none other than comedian Carlos Mencia, one of the most visible faces in American popular culture.<sup>206</sup> How is it possible that the brown body of Mencia, that a figure, whose stand-up work and show is centered on “Latino” comedy, still finds itself located outside of the category of Latino?

The confrontation captured on video was the result of a controversy that emerged in 2004 when comedian Joe Rogan and others accused Carlos Mencia

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<sup>204</sup> In her book, *Latin Looks: Images of Latinas and Latinos in the US Media*, (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997) Clara Rodriguez argues has been a dominant phenotypic face (marked by brown skin and dark features) of “Latinidad” portrayed in the media, and this racialized, classed “visual” image, which she has labeled as “Latin Looks”, has come to be the way most Americans come to understand and label who falls within and outside a term like “Latino”.

<sup>205</sup> Created in 2005 “Youtube” is a video sharing website where users can upload, view and share video clips(definition courtesy of [www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com)).

<sup>206</sup> When the Comedy Central show “Mind of Mencia” aired in 2005, it debuted “with the third-largest audience in the channel's history.” In fact, this hybridic comedy show consisting of part stand-up, part live comedy sketches, and film sketches, over the course of the season would average 1.4 million viewers per episode over its initial, 13-episode season. Indeed, Mencia’s popularity was showcased and cemented in a coveted Super Bowl half time commercial for the beer company Bud Light. These half time commercials for which vendors and business corporations pay over a million dollars for their commercials to air (in 2007 Super Bowl ads cost 2.6 million per 30 second segment), are considered an important spectacle unto themselves.

of being both a joke thief and a Mexican imposter. This quirky moment in popular culture which has consumed audiences in cyberspace, presents a unique opportunity to examine the ways in which Central American-Americaness is constituted. I argue that the controversy and the construction of the caricature or persona of Carlos Mencia, as performed by Mencia himself mirrors the production of the Central American-American subject: both are produced as effects of power, of discourses that locate the U.S. Central American experience as outside of the already peripheral location of “Latino.”

Though the figure and character of “Carlos Mencia” was originated sometime between the late 1980’s, the individual Ned Arnel Mencia-Holness, according to Mencia’s own website, was born on October 22, 1967 in San Pedro Sula in the country of Honduras. He immigrated to the United States at a young age when his father of Honduran descent, Robert Holness, and his mother of Mexican decent, Magdalena Mencia, opted to send Carlos to East Los Angeles to be raised with his mother’s Mexican family.<sup>207</sup> According to Mencia, his experiences growing up as a Honduran immigrant in America and especially in the city of East Los Angeles, was one that often involved being marginalized, since his name and nationality were seen as atypical within dominant articulations of what it means to be Latino.

My birth name is Ned Arnel Mencia, but I grew up in East LA where like everybody’s Mexican... I was known as the “white wetback” because of my name Ned. And then they would call me the “wetter wetback” because I was born in Honduras, my mom is Mexican my dad’s from Honduras, but everybody’s Mexican and my friends would say “Ned you’re the wetter

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<sup>207</sup> Carlos Mencia website, “bio” section, <http://www.carlosmencia.com/content/html>. (accessed January 25, 2006).

wetback"! How could I be wetter? "Because you're from farther"! They didn't even know where Honduras was, my friends would come up to me and say "Ned tell them where you were born", I was born in Honduras "see I told you he's Cambodian"!.. Then when I started to do comedy the owner of the Comedy store would tell me "you can't be an angry Mexican named Ned", first of all I'm not Mexican, "everybody thinks your Mexican, you're in LA"! So that's kind of weird because everybody thinks I'm Mexican when I'm in LA and then I come here [New York] and everyone's like "Puerto Rican" , no Honduran, and then when I go to Miami they're like "Cuban".<sup>208</sup>

Mencia's autobiographical oral text highlights the ways in which ideologies of race and of national/cultural identities like Mexican/Mexican-American and Latino become defined and regulated in everyday practices, often to the exclusion of U.S. Central American identities. Mencia's experience also reveals how Latino communities self impose essentialized notions of Mexicaness and Latinidad, and re-enact racial and cultural hierarchal oppression. For example, one might not expect to witness a Latino community, of predominantly Mexican descent, utilize the term "wetback"<sup>209</sup> to describe a member of the Latino community. One might assume that a group that has been victimized by this offensive term, which has been used to alienate them from an American cultural identity, would not use the very same word as a means to alienate a non-Mexican. Moreover, the choice to use a term like "white wetback" is also strange because the term "wetback" has always had racial connotations. Generally, "wetbacks" has been a label used to describe undocumented immigrants from "south of the border," which always,

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<sup>208</sup> Carlos Mencia, interview by Conan O' Brien, *The Conan O'Brien Show*, NBC, July 13 2006.

<sup>209</sup> The term "wetback", according to the Houghton Mifflin dictionary is "offensive slang" that is "Used as a disparaging term for a Mexican, especially a laborer who crosses the U.S. border illegally". Houghton Mifflin Dictionary, s.v. "Wetback."



though not exclusively, tends to signify as non-white. To be a “white wetback,” then, seems like an oxymoron. This peculiarity aside, it is also noteworthy that Mencia’s Latino classmates view him as “white,” possibly because of his name “Ned,” and/or because of his birthplace Honduras, or possibly because of his accent. One wonders if Mencia spoke exclusively Spanish to his classmates if they would still perceive him as “white.” As a consequence, this positioning of Mencia as “white” suggests that for his classmates some nationalities and/or names are essentially more Latino, or more “brown” than others.

In addition to seeing Mencia, who carries the stereotypical features of “Latin looks,” as “white,” in this first person narrative created by Mencia, he is alienated by his Latino peers by insisting that he is the “wetter wetback.” Again, this is an odd statement to make about Mencia and his cultural ethnicity, for how can some Latino immigrants be more “illegal” than others when the state views all “illegals,” and arguably all Latino immigrants, as alien and foreign? Still, for his presumably Mexican-American peers, some Latinos are “wetter” than others. Certainly in the deployment of this neologism “wetter wetback” towards a Honduran-American we can see how U.S. Central Americans occupy a marginal location within the already marginalized location of Latino. This point is re-emphasized by his schoolmates’ reaction to his birthplace of Honduras, for when Mencia informs his peers that he is from Honduras, they fail to recognize that country as being part of the Latino family, saying “see I told you he’s Cambodian!” For his peers, the term Honduran is an empty signifier, it means nothing, it simply is meant to be read as “foreign” and not “Mexican.” Honduran

here is translated into a “Third World” otherness, whereby a country like Honduras can be substituted for a non Latin American Spanish speaking country like Cambodia.

More importantly, Mencia’s testimony of his consistent marginalization in different social spaces, also illuminates how in locations like Los Angeles, New York and Miami, Latinidad and the Latino subject has become synonymous with localized national Latino identities like Mexican-American, Puerto Rican, and Cuban-American. This is evident in Mencia’s revelation that whenever he performs in these Latino urban centers, people always assume that he is either Mexican, Puerto Rican, or Cuban, despite his insistence that he is Honduran. Thus for these audiences, Mencia’s body and performance is always already assumed as being from one the aforementioned Latin American nationalities. This homologizing reading of Mencia’s identity is further exemplified in the comments made to him by the “Comedy Store” owner, Mitzi Gaynor who tells him that “he can’t be an angry Mexican named Ned” and later proceeds to create the name “Carlos” for him.<sup>210</sup> When Mencia insists that he is not Mexican, she tells him, “everyone thinks you’re Mexican, you’re in LA.” Gaynor’s response calls attention to the ways American society enforces a type of homogenization and prescription on “brown” bodies. For Gaynor it makes no difference that Mencia is not Mexican; for if he is a brown racialized body in Los Angeles, then he must be Mexican. In this aspect, Gaynor seems to mirror the “condition” Arau’s film is

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<sup>210</sup> In an interview, Pauly Shore, the son of Mitzi Gaynor, revealed that it was his mother who gave Carlos Mencia the name of “Carlos”. Pauly Shore, “Pauly Shore on Joe Rogan Vs Carlos Mencia Live 105,” YouTubeVideo, February 19, 2007 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JruD1mkW5Ds>. Html (accessed on November 27, 2007).

critical of—the notion that “every Hispanic on the West Coast is presumed to be Mexican.”

Furthermore, just like his Mexican-American classmates, Gaynor also reads the signifier of Honduran as occupying no signification, except that it, along with his name Ned, are viewed as falling outside of current articulations of what it means to be a Latino. Thus, we should read the construction of the figure of Carlos Mencia as an effect of dominant Latino discourses within Los Angeles that define Latino subjectivity as predominantly Mexican-American. His existence is produced from the idea that one cannot have an “angry [Honduran] named Ned” perform Latino comedy, but instead, an angry [Mexican] named “Carlos” is needed to legitimize his position as Latino commentator. Subsequently, Mencia’s testimony highlights the factors, and the locations where Central American-Americanness is produced; it surfaces in the spaces where power is exercised at the local level by positioning U.S. Central American culture as outside of the American/Latino and Latin American imaginaries.

And yet, rather than seeing the construction of the figure of Carlos Mencia, and the imposition of the name “Carlos” onto the individual Ned Mencia as an effect of power—whereby Mencia’s body lacks the autonomy to be read as anything other than Mexican—this name change would facilitate a controversy surrounding Mencia’s talent and identity. The controversy began in 2004 when comedians Joe Rogan and George Lopez publicly accused Mencia of being a joke thief and a Mexican imposter, stating:

the latest, and most disgusting joke thief off all is a guy named "Carlos Mencia." The REALLY crazy thing is that's not even his real name. He sells himself as being Mexican, but the reality is his real name is Ned Holness, and he's actually half German and half Honduran. The Mexican hook is something he did to ingratiate himself with the local Mexican population of LA where he started.<sup>211</sup>

The guy was pretty liberal with some of my material.....I'd check his lineage the guy is like Honduran-German.... Why would you pretend to be Mexican? . . . I think he had that intention from the beginning that he was going to play Mexican.<sup>212</sup>

Inherent in both of these statements are essentialized notions of what it means to be Latino and what it means to be Mexican and/or Mexican American. For why is the name "Carlos" seen to be more authentically Mexican than Ned? And how, for instance, does a name change from Ned to Carlos come to be read as an exclusively Mexican performance? What enables Lopez and Rogan to read Mencia's stand-up performance, and the figure of Mencia himself, as an enactment of "false" Mexicaness? Does engaging in Latino humor automatically suggest that the enunciator and/or speaker has to be Mexican, and therefore if he/she is discovered not to be, will they be accused of "playing" Mexican? Moreover, how exactly does Mencia "play Mexican"? Both Rogan and Lopez never detail what about Mencia's performance is exclusively Mexican, or intended to be read as Mexican. The notion that some individuals are "performing" or "playing Mexican" implies that there are certain static characteristics (race, language, etc) that constitute Mexicaness. Therefore, in

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<sup>211</sup> Joe Rogan, "Carlos Mencia is a weak minded joke thief," The Rogan Blog, entry posted on September 27 2005, <http://joerogan.net/?s=ned+holness.html> (accessed November 27, 2007).

<sup>212</sup> This George Lopez quote was obtained in the newspaper article written by Cathalena Burch, "Accent: Carlos Mencia," *Arizona Daily Star*, October 28, 2005.

addition to creating an essentialized representation of Mexicaness, these statements automatically assume that certain cultural codes are always already Mexican, thereby denying the possibility that other Latino groups might employ the same types of cultural codes. Their comments, and the controversy they engendered, only reinforce the ways in which the Mexican-American experience has become normative in spaces like Los Angeles where to be read as a Latino body is to be read as Mexican.

In addition, these statements are also revelatory because we can observe that there is more of a cultural awareness for the cultural politics of Latinidad within Los Angeles from members of “external” communities rather than within the Latino community. For instance, though Joe Rogan’s statement that the only Latino community Mencia can ingratiate himself to is the Los Angeles Mexican/Mexican-American community is a problematic one because he completely minimizes the large Central American presence in Los Angeles, at least there is an awareness for the ways in which the Mexican-American experience has become the predominant face of “West Coast” Latino representations. Conversely, George Lopez, a Mexican-American, seems completely unaware of the hegemonic location Mexican-Americans occupy within the Los Angeles Latino imaginary, when he poses the question, “why would anyone pretend to be Mexican?” It is odd that Lopez, who is a native of Los Angeles, is so uninformed about the experiences of his Central American neighbors, who are the second largest Latino population in Los Angeles. For as

other scholars have noted,<sup>213</sup> and as the cultural expressions of U.S. Central Americans can attest to, the notion of “passing” or “performing Mexicaness” is often less of a choice and more of an economic or social necessity. The film *El Norte* (1983) and the novel *Odyssey to the North* (1999) for instance, both depict scenes that detail the need for Central American immigrants to “pass” as Mexican immigrants. *Odyssey to the North* in particular, includes several scenes that reinforce the idea that “passing” as a Mexican is essential to one’s ability to make it to “el Norte.” Repeatedly throughout the novel Salvadoran immigrants are told by their “coyotes” that their ability to make it to “el Norte,” to avoid being deported or arrested, is contingent upon their ability to speak “como un mejicano.”<sup>214</sup> Passing in this context is therefore not only defined linguistically—the ability to speak like a Mexican—but also imbued as a necessary evil in the process of migration.

However, the need to “pass” as Mexican is a performance that does not end when one crosses the border into the United States. In his short essay titled, “Always say you’re Mexican” (2000), Salvadoran-American Marlon Morales relates how his mother advises him to “always say you’re Mexican, they’ll think your from here, Mexicans have always been here, when you speak inglish en la

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<sup>213</sup> Arturo Arias, in both of his essays “Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American subjectivities on both sides of the great divide”, and “Central American- Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World”, explores the various reasons why certain Central American subjects say they are “Mexican”.

<sup>214</sup> Mario Bencastro, *Odisea Del Norte*, (Houston: Arte Publico Press, 1999) 50, 51, 71.

calle, they'll leave you alone.”<sup>215</sup> In Morales' essay we see that for his mother, “saying you're Mexican” becomes an informal way to obtain a type of cultural citizenship, a means to stave off being viewed as illegal or foreign, a form of protection that the statement “I'm Salvadoran or Salvadoran-American” cannot provide. But Morales in this essay also wonders if this performance of Mexicaness he enacts is one that he chooses to do, or one that is imposed on him.

I don't think my mom knew exactly how hard it was for me to become an American. To become an American in Los Angeles, I first had to learn how to be a Mexican. I think Salvadorans are all Mexicans before anything else. People always call us Mexicans and I'm still sure people see me and see another Mexican. It's impossible to be anything else.<sup>216</sup>

Here Morales seems to suggest that “passing” is more of a fate than a choice in such locations like Los Angeles. It is an imposition that occurs from West coast representations of Latinidad that codify brown bodies into Mexicans, for as Morales reveals, “When people see me [they] see another Mexican. It's impossible to be anything else.” He also reasserts the hegemonic location of Mexican/Mexican-American culture within California by his claim that “to become American in Los Angeles” one first has to learn “how to be a Mexican.” Though Morales never details how exactly one learns how to be a Mexican, the implication is that one learns to accept that the cultural identities of Mexican/

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<sup>215</sup> Marlon Morales, “Always Say You're Mexican,” *Izote voz: A Collection of Salvadoran American Writing and Visual Art*, ed, Katherine Cowy Kim and Alfonso Serrano (San Francisco: Pacific News Service, 2000), 66.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

Mexican-American are viewed as more native to America than the identities of Salvadoran/Salvadoran American.

Understanding the socio-cultural factors that encourage some Central Americans to enact a type of “ethnic passing,” is important in our reading of the Mencia controversy. If indeed Mencia is fabricating his Mexican ancestry, rather than simply viewing it as a comedic marketing strategy, we must situate his “passing” within a larger Central American cultural practice. This cultural practice, in turn, reveals the dominant location the Mexican-American experience has within the Latino imaginary, for how can we explain the need of a Honduran—a presumed member of the Latino family—to adopt a Mexican/Mexican-American identity in order to be seen as a legitimate commentator on Latino culture. Mencia’s recollection that in Los Angeles everyone thinks he is Mexican also raises the question, of whether or not subjects like him intentionally choose to “pass” as Mexican-American, or, simply “read” as Mexican since in spaces like Los Angeles, an assumed Mexicaness is imposed on all “brown bodies.”

The public accusations by Rogan and Lopez generated a discursive explosion concerning Mencia, particularly his “ambiguous” ethnicity. American audiences became more obsessed with trying to decipher Mencia’s “real” identity than with the accusations of him being “unoriginal.” Soon after, in websites all over the internet, Mencia was being defamed and insulted not so much for his “joke thievery” but for having an ambiguous identity. Clearly this became the central focus for most Mencia critics who expressed a visible need to situate him



concretely into one Latino national subgroup. Ironically, while most of the discussion surrounding Mencia focused on trying to decipher and stabilize his national identity, inadvertently the discussion ended up creating more ambiguity about Mencia's nationality. The following excerpts from web blog discussions surrounding Carlos Mencia and his identity controversy demonstrate this tendency:

Last I heard he's all Honduran, but being from LA he has alot of the mexicanisms. Saying he's part mexican throughout his acts would of course give him more credibility.<sup>217</sup>

Carlos Mencia, a bad human being, a joke thief, and, even, a fake Mexican.  
He's half Guatemalan and half German, and all unoriginal comic. His name is only "Carlos Mencia", because his real name, Ned Holz, didn't sound Mexican enough.<sup>218</sup>

OMFG! Are you all idiots.....Mencia is El Salvadorean he's said so himself look up his bio yes that's his birth name too MENCIA check that too.<sup>219</sup>

Do you think the powers of PC would allow a white guy to get away with having a show like Mind of Mencia? Nein mein herr! Why am I speaking German? Because Carlos aka Ned Holness is actually half German and half Central American, not Mexican.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Rolystar[pseudo.], comment on "Carlos Mencia is a Thief," Carlos Mencia forum, comment posted on December 2, 2004, <http://www.carlosmencia.com/forums/index.php?s=4d29521fa7614b45677e4022f8760ba7&act=Print&client=printer&f=2&t=95.html> (accessed July 25, 2006).

<sup>218</sup> Brian Dowell, comment on "Carlos Mencia Sucks," comment posted on October 5, 2005, <http://www.chucklemonkey.com/forums/printthread.php?t=26.html> (accessed on July 25, 2006).

<sup>219</sup> User 378[pseudo.], comment on "Carlos Mencia," online post, comment posted on November 27, 2005, [http://www.hedonistica.com/2005/09/\\_carlos\\_mencia.php.html](http://www.hedonistica.com/2005/09/_carlos_mencia.php.html)(accessed on July 25, 2006).

<sup>220</sup> Anonymous , comment on "Ned Holness Sucks," online post on Amazon.com , comment posted on November 14, 2005 [http://www.amazon.com/review/product/B00004SYS8/ref=cm\\_cr\\_pr\\_link\\_2?%5Fencoding=UTF8&pageNumber=2&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending](http://www.amazon.com/review/product/B00004SYS8/ref=cm_cr_pr_link_2?%5Fencoding=UTF8&pageNumber=2&sortBy=bySubmissionDateDescending), (accessed on November 27, 2007).

The discussion surrounding Mencia's ethnicity is an interesting phenomenon considering that Mencia himself has clearly indicated on his website bio, in countless interviews, and in his stand up performances that his name is Ned Mencia and that his mother was Mexican and father was Honduran, and that he was born in Honduras. And yet, it is clear by reading these statements, that fans and critics like Rogan and Lopez alike remain unconvinced about his national/ethnic identity. But perhaps what is most important about this controversy over Mencia's national/cultural identity, and the subsequent debate it fostered, is it elucidates how American audiences conceive of such cultural terms like "Latino" and "Honduran" as mutually exclusive.

What is made apparent by these statements is the manner in which the term "Honduran" yet again seems to occupy a space of empty signification; it is so forgettable, so amorphous that it can easily be substituted for any other Central American country like "Guatemala" or "El Salvador" and of course for Central America itself. Even more troubling is the implication that being Honduran American is somehow less of a "Latino" experience than being Mexican-American. This lack of association between Honduran, and Central American experiences in the geo-cultural landscape of U.S Latinidad is best exemplified in the last comments cited, where the internet observer refers to Mencia as a "white guy," presumably because of his supposed half German heritage. By seeing Mencia as only "white", this type of reading of Mencia's identity and body erases any and all traces of his *Other* racial cultural heritage—

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Honduran— and re-enacts the same form of exclusionary politics that Mencia faced as a child from his Mexican-American school mates which viewed his Honduran heritage as somehow “white” and less “Latino.”

This notion that to be Honduran is incommensurate with being Mexican-American is also reinforced by the fact that despite questions over the veracity of Mencia’s Mexican ancestry, his Honduran national and cultural heritage has never been questioned and has remained consistent. Nevertheless, the public response surrounding this controversy clearly views a Honduran American experience as not being “credible” enough to be able to make and engage in Latino observational humor. What is firmly established by the discourse that emerged from this controversy, is that being Honduran, or as some of the other bloggers have noted Guatemalan, Salvadoran, or Central American, cannot provide Mencia the same “credibility” that Mexican-American ancestry does, for why would anyone be concerned that he may not be partially Mexican? Why is there such an objection to the idea that a non-Mexican, that a possible Honduran-American, also engages in Latino humor? The accusation that Mencia needed to “pretend” to be Mexican to obtain “credibility” implies that to be Honduran, or Central American, is to not have the same type of cultural insight into Latino culture that a Mexican-American experience can provide. In other words, the controversy here does not emerge exclusively because of Mencia’s “Honduraness” but is produced from the fact that Mencia might be a non Mexican-American performing Latino comedy.

Thus, the Mencia controversy highlights the ways in which national identities and signifiers, such as Honduran and Central American, are viewed as incommensurate with other signifiers like Mexican/Mexican-American and Latino. It also provides another example and affirmation of the ways in which Central American experiences are seen as falling outside of the experiences of Latino culture and identity. This in turn, exposes and critiques any notions that terms like Latino, are able to encapsulate and represent all Latino subgroups, for clearly there is an internal hierarchy present that allows for audiences to read some national subgroups as being more representative of the Latino experience than others.

### The ELAC Controversy

A second example of how Central American-Americaness is revealed as an effect of being “invisibilized” by Latino and Latin American discourses can be located in the controversy that took place on the campus of East Los Angeles Community College (ELAC). As documented in an article by journalist Roberto Rodriguez (1998),<sup>221</sup> the controversy emerged in 1998 when the chair of the Chicano Studies Department, Sybil Venegas, drafted a proposal to teach a new class titled “Central Americans: New Chicanos.” This proposal, however, was immediately challenged by the chair of the Social Sciences department, Consuelo Rey. According to Rodriguez, Rey challenged the proposed Chicano Studies/Central American course based on two central premises, 1) it is illegal to

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<sup>221</sup> Roberto Rodriguez, “Academic Turf War at East Los Angeles,” *Black Issues in Higher Education* 14, no. 24 (Jan 1998): 12-14

use California state funds allocated for Mexican-Americans towards another Latino group, and 2) Central Americans are different than Chicanos, and require their history to be taught in a Latin American Studies course.<sup>222</sup> Rey further argued that Central Americans “need to be studied separately because they maintain their own sense of identity,” and teaching their history within the Chicano studies department is a “duplication of what we offer” since “for the past twenty years the history of Central Americans has been taught at ELAC as part of a class called ‘The History of the Americas,’ in the Social Science department.”<sup>223</sup>

Conversely, Venegas was motivated to propose this class to accommodate the needs of their growing U.S. Central American student body who seek courses that “examine their experience.” According to Rodriguez, Venegas sees many parallels between Central Americans in the U.S. and Chicanos, stating “they [Central Americans] may or may not identify with their home countries. They’re the children of immigrants, similar to Mexican-Americans.”<sup>224</sup> As a way to circumvent one of Rey’s accusations that teaching a course on Central Americans would be a duplication of the history course titled “History of the Americas,” the proposed class was altered so that while “initially [the course] contained some history...the revised course focuses more on the

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 12

<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

study of Central Americans living in the U.S.”<sup>225</sup> In addition to altering the course, Venegas also proposed “expanding the paradigm of Chicano studies” by asking that the department name be changed from just Chicano Studies to Chicano/Latino studies.”<sup>226</sup> Venegas claimed that changing the name would not alter the field of Chicano Studies since, “There are no borders to Chicano Studies” and that “to limit it is to not understand that the discipline is multidisciplinary.”<sup>227</sup> She further argued that external efforts that “limit the scope of Chicano studies” are a “violation of academic freedom.” Rey, however, countered this notion by stating that while a space should be allocated for studying Latinos, at the moment “the state of California has not recognized Latino studies as a discipline,” and added that she was unsure that there was a “sentiment” for the need of a Latino Studies discipline in the state of California.<sup>228</sup> In the end, the class proposal was defeated, and as of the moment of this writing, the Chicano Studies department at ELAC has not changed its name to Chicano/Latino studies, there continues to be no Latin American studies program, and there are no courses being taught on U.S. Central Americans in either the Chicano studies or Social Sciences department.

What this ELAC controversy demonstrates are the ways in which everyday practices, such as the simple proposal to teach a class, become moments where power is exercised and where the parameters of what

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid., 13

constitutes such identities of Chicano, Latino, and Latin American, are defined and reinforced. In this example we see that maintaining the borders of Latinoness, Chicanoness or Latin Americaness, requires the erasure of U.S. Central Americans. Ironically, the article which documents this form of institutional marginalization towards U.S. Central Americans further subsumes this moment of U.S. Central American invisibility by making the focus of the article on the cultural politics between established departments and “ethnic” studies departments. Not surprisingly, the title of the essay, “Academic Turf War at East Los Angeles”, only mentions Central Americans in a small caption that reads, “move to include course on Central Americans in Chicano Studies meets resistance,” revealing that the focal point of the article is on the interdepartmental discord rather than the consequences or institutional marginalization of U.S. Central American culture. As such, little information is presented to the reader about U.S. Central American culture, instead the article presents interviews from both sides of the debate and concludes by presenting commentary from ethnic studies scholars at other universities. These scholars in turn, utilize the controversy as a means to highlight the marginal location of ethnic studies departments within academia.

For instance, Rodriguez includes the ruminations of Felipe Lopez (the current ELAC chair of Chicano Studies) who argued that “at the root of the ELAC dispute” was the fact that “ethnic studies is still viewed as a second rate discipline.”<sup>229</sup> Also included is the commentary of Migdalia de Jesus Torres,

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<sup>229</sup> Ibid.,

chair of Puerto Rican/Latino studies at CUNY's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, who said that the ELAC debate was one that she experienced in her own institution where the foreign literature department challenged their right to teach Cuban and other Caribbean literature.<sup>230</sup> And concludes the article with the thoughts of Carlos Cordova, a Salvadoran professor of Raza Studies for San Francisco State University, who felt that "the battle ELAC is having is reminiscent of the nationwide battles fifteen years ago, when La Raza and Chicano studies were told that that they could teach about Latinos in the United States, but not about Latin America."<sup>231</sup> Without a doubt the concerns and observations raised by this group of scholars about the current state of ethnic studies departments are well-founded since they continue to be more vulnerable than more "established" "traditional" departments. Still, the fact remains that the article views U.S. Central American invisibility as an afterthought, as somehow not quite as important as the current tension between ethnic studies and outside departments. In so doing, it epitomizes the Central American-American condition, for how can there be a discursive and physical space for U.S. Central Americans when the spaces of "hegemonic subaltern" categories like Chicano/ Latino/Latin American face constant marginalization, and, as in the case of ELAC, lack an autonomous institutional space. The Central American-American subject therefore is produced in these spaces of non-existence; it struggles to become visible within categorical terms that continuously face the danger of themselves becoming invisibilized.

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 14

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 13



What is odd is that while both the article and its interlocutors view the ELAC controversy as a “turf war” between “ethnic studies” and “traditional established” departments, they neglect to see it as symptomatic of the current tensions between the paradigms of cultural nationalism and Latinidad. As noted by Frances Aparicio in her essay, “Reading the ‘Latino’ in Latino Studies” (1999), for many scholars in such fields as Chicano Studies and Puerto Rican Studies, the shift in paradigm towards studying “lo Latino” has been met with resistance and/or viewed as politically suspicious. According to Aparicio the resistance emerges from the belief that “Latino studies have been strategically used by academic bureaucrats to erase and diminish the spaces that Chicano and Puerto Rican studies had carved since the late 1960’s.”<sup>232</sup> Often this occurs by consolidating these autonomous departments into a larger rubric such as “ethnic studies” or “Latino studies” where their “instructional budgets are reduced, decision-making and autonomy are compromised” and become condensed to “subprograms within already small academic programs that have to compete with the long stabled traditional departments.”<sup>233</sup> But Aparicio also notes, that for many scholars the shift to a more “pan-ethnic” approach is not met with such skepticism and is seen not only as a place from where to create “an alternative academic site where knowledge is produced by collective and collaborative work, but also one that recognizes the increasing “demographic diversification of

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<sup>232</sup> Aparicio, *Reading the Latino*, 5.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid.

particular Latino regions within the United States.”<sup>234</sup> Accordingly, scholars view this shift towards Latino studies as a means to serve community interests, as a way to create an area study that is reflective of the manner in which the Latino demographic has changed and continues to change in the United States.

There are some clear undertones of this internal Latino studies discussion within the statements and proposals of both Rey and Venegas. Venegas’s proposal to include another Latino group, U.S. Central Americans, as well as her recommendation that Chicano studies should be changed to “Chicano/Latino” studies seems to suggest that her position is one that embraces the shift towards Latino studies. On the contrary, Rey, who served as former chair in Chicano studies, seems to embody the other side of this discussion by vehemently opposing the idea of including another Latino group within the field of Chicano studies, and by making the statement that she felt that there was no need or “sentiment” for a Latino studies program. However, for many of us who are U.S. Central Americans, or who are U.S. Central American scholars, this dialectical tension between cultural nationalism and *Latinidad* seems like a false binary. Indeed, even the more inclusive construct of “Latino” has typically privileged certain national groups over others, and in certain locations has come to privilege one dominant group as the root of “lo Latino”. It therefore seems strange that some Chicano studies scholars view the shift to Latino studies as a place where they lose their own distinct cultural national location, for as we have seen on the West Coast, the Latino has consistently signified Mexican-American in the “*vox populi*.” Thus, a shift towards Latino studies would diminish neither the autonomy

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<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 16, 4.

nor the dominant location of Mexican-American culture; it only makes it harder to see.

But, let us return to the controversy itself. What if the class proposal had been approved? Or what if ELAC had created a Latin American studies program that included a class on Central American culture, would these spaces of inclusion be enough to preclude the conditions (i.e. invisibility from within both the Anglo American and Latino imaginary) that have been constitutive of Central American-American subjectivity? The fact of the matter is that even if the proposal had not been met with resistance, and a class on U.S. Central Americans was taught within ELAC's Chicano studies department, this seemingly inclusive move would still enact the subjection of Central American-Americans. For how can the racial/cultural/ and historical complexities of Central American culture be taught within a class that already subsumes the experiences of the Central American diaspora into a larger Mexican-American immigrant experience by labeling them as "the New Chicanos" ? Though the efforts of ELAC's Chicano Studies department should be lauded, they also need to be interrogated, for is it really possible to teach the U.S. Central American experience within a field of study defined solely by the Mexican-American experience?

According to Carlos Cordova, a Central American studies professor in Raza Studies, Chicano studies is a suitable location from which to teach about other non-Mexican national cultural groups since, as he contends, "Chicano is a state of mind" and not a "racial and ethnic designation."<sup>235</sup> But, as the EPEA

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<sup>235</sup> Rodriguez, *Academic Turf War*, 14

(1969) as well as *El Plan de Santa Barbara* (1969), and in the texts *Chicano Manifesto* (1971), *Occupied America* (1972), and *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), illustrate, among one of the many precepts foundational to the paradigm of Chicano and identity and Chicano Studies is that it is a politicized identity grounded in the complex history of interrelations between the United States and Mexico. For Cordova to suggest that Chicano Studies does “not [have] a racial or ethnic designation” is at best a naive statement, and at worst politically dangerous. For Chicano Studies, like the study of any other American ethnic groups, should be taught and grounded in its historical contextualization. And this historical lens does not normally include the complicated history of the isthmus.

When scholars like Cordova or Venegas suggest that “expanding the paradigm” of Chicano studies will allow for the inclusion of more groups by stating that “there are no borders to Chicano studies,” they only highlight a lack of awareness for the ways in which Chicano studies has become the preferred modality to discuss the Latino experience on the West Coast. In other words, to claim that there are no borders in Chicano Studies—the field that has made the term “border” synonymous with the U.S. Mexico border,<sup>236</sup> and has invisibilized the borders that *Others* encounter, like the Guatemalan/Mexican border—only reinforces the notion that perhaps one of the most impenetrable borders to cross or dismantle is the one which positions the Mexican-American experience as

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<sup>236</sup> Some examples of texts that have naturalized the ‘border’ with U.S./Mexico border include, Gloria Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* ( San Francisco: Aunt Lute Book Company, 1987); Jose Saldivar, *Border Matters: Remapping American Cultural Studies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997).

normative of the Latino experience. Indeed, the fluidity of borders is often contingent upon what side of the border you are on.

While Venegas and Cordova should be commended for their efforts in trying to diversify the field of Chicano studies, the notion that the U.S. Central American experience can be captured in a class titled “Central Americans: New Chicanos,” and within the paradigm of Chicano studies, is nonetheless problematic because it privileges the Chicano experience and constructs it as the normative experience for Central American subjects. In this aspect it echoes Flores’s contention about the way Puerto Ricans need to be seen as archetypical model for Latino constructions on the East Coast, and New York City in particular. In addition, subsuming U.S. Central American history under the rubric of “New Chicanos” prevents U.S. Central Americans and their cultural expressions from being read and contextualized within their own historical specificities, as well as impedes the field of U.S. Central American studies from the possibility of having a space of its own.<sup>237</sup> A deeply territorialized reflection of power is revealed here where U.S. Central Americans are conceived as the illegal border crossers, or at best, are granted temporary visas, which figuratively allows them to be included within the paradigm of Chicano discourse and studies, but always with the knowledge that they lack a home—a discursive, socio-political space to claim of their own. Furthermore, the choice to remove the

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<sup>237</sup> Though I am not privy to the internal departmental politics, the creation of the Central American Studies program at Cal State University Northridge in 2000 seems to be one location where Central American scholars and students experience a limited form of autonomy. Though they have their own program and in 2007 have lobbied to create their own B.A, the fact of the matter is that they are still housed within the Chicano Studies department.

“historical component” from the proposed Central American course so that it only focused on their experiences in the U.S., only elucidates the manner in which the U.S. Central American experience is viewed as incommensurate to other Latino ethnic groups. One wonders if a class on Chicanos, or Puerto Ricans, would receive such a de-historicized, de-territorialized treatment within an ethnic studies department. To begin the history of U.S. Central Americans somewhere in the 1970’s and 1980’s when large numbers of Central Americans immigrated to the United States is to minimize one hundred and fifty years of a complicated history between the United States and Central America.<sup>238</sup> That history has been critical in the creation of the U.S. Central American diaspora. Therefore, the proposed class is less concerned with articulating the distinct experiences of U.S. Central Americans, and would only serve to reinforce why Chicano studies, and why the Chicano subject, has become the privileged voice within Latino discourse. Labeling U.S Central Americans as “The New Chicanos,” suggests that the Chicano experience can account for the experiences of all “new” Latino immigrants. However, had this class proposal passed, it would not had been the first or only example of the ways in which social practices institutionalize and position the Mexican-American experience as the standard for all other Latino immigrants. For this positioning of the Mexican-American experience as normative is one that has been employed by state agencies like the “The Immigration and Naturalization Service” (INS) and continues to be employed by

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<sup>238</sup> For a more detailed examination of this complex relationship see Walter LaFeber’s, *Inevitable Revolutions the United States in Central America* (New York: WW Norton & Company, 1983).

Border patrol officials who routinely label Latino immigrants as falling under one of two categories: “Mexican” and “Other than Mexican”(OTM).

Similarly, even if the history of U.S. Central Americans was taught in a class within a Latin American studies component, this too would continue the processes of invisibilization that produces Central American-Americaness. To position U.S. Central Americans as simply Latin American, and not American nor Latino, is to also de-historicize and deny the U.S. Central American diaspora its place within the American and Latino imaginaries. It perpetuates the notion that the Latino experience is defined by the experiences of a few particular national groups who have a longer history of cultural visibility within the United States. Moreover, because U.S. Central Americans like Puerto Ricans, and many other national groups, are diasporic and transnational, their lives and cultural expressions cannot and should not be located solely within one paradigm of study. And yet, as the case study of the ELAC controversy demonstrates, the irony that produces the Central American-American condition is that while the Central American-American experience should be located and analyzed in more than one paradigm (Latino and Latin American studies), it cannot be found in either of these peripheral social discursive locations.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of the ELAC controversy is what it reveals about the relationship between discourse and power or what Foucault has labeled as “power/knowledge.”<sup>239</sup> For example, when Rey argues that to

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<sup>239</sup> A more complete discussion of the ways in which Foucault theorizes the relationship of discursive formations with power, in the text *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews 1972-1977* ed, Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

teach about U.S. Central Americans within an ethnic studies/Chicano studies course is considered “illegal” by the state of California, she seems unaware of her role, and the roles of intellectuals, in the production and implementation of knowledge. The fact is, what we publish, teach, and label as Latino, Latin American, or American is utilized to regulate such categories as Latino, Latin American and American. In other words, what the nation-state labels and views as Latino, Latin American, and American is in a mutually constitutive relationship with discursive formations produced and institutionalized in various locations like ELAC. As a result, when scholars like Rey argue that U.S. Central Americans are Latin American, or that their culture should be viewed as pertaining to that of Latin America, it informs the way the nation-state and its subjects will come to position Central Americans within the American imaginary. Similarly, when Venegas claims that Chicano studies can encompass the experiences of other Latin American national groups in the U.S., it engenders such political and economic effects seen in the state of California, which according to Rey, only allocates funds for the study of the Mexican-American experience. The fact that during 1998, the timeframe of this controversy, the state of California had not “recognized Latino studies as a discipline”, suggests that the only type of Latino biculturalism that could be endorsed and “recognized” by the state is one involving the Chicano/Mexican-American experience. Thus, while this controversy may be localized in the campus of ELAC, the controversy itself should be read as symptomatic of the ways in which Latino discourse has



institutionalized and naturalized some national experiences at the exclusion of others.

### Conclusion

The 1998 ELAC controversy, and the Mencia controversy both serve to highlight how power is enforced in every day cultural and social practices that maintain and create the parameters of what is included and excluded within Latino, Latin American and American imaginaries. The Mencia controversy highlights our inability to link the word “Latino” with the Honduran and U.S, while the ELAC controversy reveals how U.S. Central American experiences are both marginalized from and subsumed under academic rubrics for understanding the Latino experience. As such, they elucidate how Latino discourse has precluded the ability of U.S. Central Americans to become interpellated by a term like Latino, and instead has enabled the production of the disidentificatory subject<sup>240</sup>—the Central American-American. While the articulation of a Central American-American subject opens up many theoretical possibilities for the field of Central American and U.S. Central American studies, the material effects that produce that subjectivity weigh heavily on the lives of U.S. Central Americans, who because of these dominant constructions of Latinidad find themselves excluded from cultural and economic resources. What is of deep concern is that if U.S. Central Americans , like Carlos Mencia, and the students of ELAC, can

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<sup>240</sup> Jose Munoz describes a “disidentificatory subject” as a subject who “who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form.” Jose Esteban Munoz, *Disidentifications; Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 12.

experience this type of invisibility within such a geo-cultural space like East Los Angeles, where Latinos constitute 96.8 % of the population<sup>241</sup>—the highest concentration of Latinos per mile outside of Puerto Rico—and in the city of Los Angeles which has been deemed the “undisputed Central American capital,”<sup>242</sup> then one only wonders over the fate of this population and of the paradigm of U.S. Central American studies within other U.S. cities that lack this type of Latino and Central American presence.

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<sup>241</sup> This information can be found in the website <http://www.epodunk.com/cgi-bin/genInfo.php?loclIndex=10104>, which is a website that contains a profile of East Los Angeles., as well as in the US Census Bureau website <http://www.census.gov/>.

<sup>242</sup> Daniel Patrick Moynihan, “A Nation of Nations,” in *The Central Americans* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1990) 9.

## CONCLUSION

I would therefore like to create in this paper a theoretical space for those dispersed faces of 'otherness' that do not fit within the validated limits of either Latin Americanidad or the recognized marginality of the United States.<sup>243</sup>

-Arturo Arias

This dissertation was inspired by Arturo Arias's "call to action" to create and claim a "theoretical space" for Central American-Americans. Noting a lack in research and scholarship in the field of Central American-American literary and cultural productions he effectively argues that in locating these diasporic practices and contextualizing them within a broader socio-cultural matrix, one can begin to "create a theoretical space" for those others "who do not fit within the validated limits of either Latin Americanidad" or Latinidad.<sup>244</sup> This notion of challenging existing paradigms of thought regarding what constitutes such categories as Central American-American and Latino is what I have attempted to do in this dissertation.

My first chapter questions the manner the categorical construct of Central America is elaborated and deployed. Unlike Arias, who has previously implied

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<sup>243</sup> Arturo Arias, "Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World," *Latino Studies* 1, issue 1(March 2003):167

<sup>244</sup> It is important to note that while Arias in this quote creates a binary between Latin Americanidad and US, his essay focuses on the contentious relationship (or lack thereof) between Central American-Americans and Latino discourse.

that using Central America(n) as a mode of identification is “arbitrary” because that signifier “cannot point back to an internally coherent and total history of a people of a region,”<sup>245</sup> my work in this dissertation calls into question the “arbitrariness” of this term and its current deployment within the diaspora. While I agree with Arias that Central America is a discursive construction, it is my contention that the current circulation of this idea of Central America within US Central American cultural politics is directly connected to a notion of Central America cultivated by 19th Century Central American ideologies, and rooted in concrete political efforts to reunify the isthmus between roughly 1830 and 1921. As I have demonstrated in both my first and second chapters, when the term Central America is disseminated in texts like political speeches on the isthmus, or cultural practices in the diaspora such as the “ Central American Independence Parade,” what is being invoked is a very specific (albeit altered, or “transcultured”) idea of Central America.

Certainly one cannot deny that Central America is a signifier with multiple referents. However, when disseminated in the cultural expressions from the diaspora, particularly within the city of Los Angeles, what is being partially summoned is a notion of Central America which I have referred to as *patria grande*. In fact the very origins of the moniker Central America emerged as a form of nationalism established in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when political leaders and the intelligentsia from the various Central American nation-states used the term to suture the notion of the isthmus as a type national-cultural entity. Thus, while I

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<sup>245</sup> Arturo Arias, *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America*(Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 190.

agree that most identity politics use 'arbitrary' criteria to organize and mobilize people, I do not view the decision to deploy the term Central America(n) in discourses of identity formation as simply random. Indeed, as I demonstrated in my second chapter, the legacy and ideologies from this dominant ideology of *patria grande* has played a role in the cultivation of a US Central American consciousness. Arguably, then, one of the very foundational elements within U.S Central American cultural politics is very much entrenched in this national formation.

Though this dissertation also shows that this form of nationalism is only but one ingredient that has facilitated the development of a Central American-American diasporic consciousness, or Centralamericanismo, it is equally important to note how this understanding of Central America—as imagined community—is one increasingly being resisted by US Central American cultural workers. A case in point can be located in the Salvadoran-American poet Marlon Morales, whose poem *Central America Is* challenges hegemonic articulations of Central America. Unlike other postulations of Central America, Morales conceptualizes Central America as,

Fiction  
Fabricated in the mind of money hungry promoters  
Of consumer propaganda  
And the self-hating national pretense they invented

Pieced together like a quilt in thought  
Cut up in deed  
Its an autopsy  
Rotting Flesh sewn back together  
With sutures that will never heal

**Like barbed wire that keeps us apart.<sup>246</sup>**

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Morales' poem is the manner in which he dislocates Central America from its dominant cartographic image of an isthmus. The isthmus, one of the governing tropes that has dominated most configurations of Central America, an image so formative in the idea of Central America nationalist discourse that it can be located in national symbols of all Central American countries, and which was used as the central image in the flag of the old nation of Central America, is nowhere to be found in this poem. In fact there are no geographic references within this entire poem. Central America here cannot be reduced or defined through its geography. The traditional image of isthmus associated with the signifier of Central America is replaced here by the corporeal image of "rotting flesh" held together unnaturally by "sutures that will never heal". By presenting Central America as a type of 'Frankenstein,' a fragmented dead body held together inorganically, Morales creates an oppositional image to those of geography and nature invoked by the concept of the isthmus.

By substituting the image of the isthmus with an image of a body, Morales is making an explicit attempt to critique the ideology of Central America as a *patria grande*. The body has become an apt metaphor to talk about the nation. It is one so pervasive that on a day-to-day basis we routinely here national communities like the United States be referred to as the "American body". Scholars have also utilized the image of a body to discuss the nation,

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<sup>246</sup> Marlon Morales, *Central America Is, Greetings From Epicentroamerica* (Long Beach, 2001), 35.

Ernest Renan, for instance, articulated the nation as an animate being stating, “nationality has a sentimental side to it; it is both soul and body at once.”<sup>247</sup> More importantly, within discourses from the isthmus, Central America is often articulated as an animate object such as a father, or in the case of the Central American Hymn as the body that contains the fragments of the provinces.<sup>248</sup> Noteworthy, then, is the fact that Morales’s depiction of Central America is a soulless fragmented body. Not only is Central America a lifeless body, it is also one that is composed through labor and violence. Lacking any autonomy or totality, Central America is not imagined in an undivided form; it is a disjointed body that can only attain wholeness through the constitutive process of suturing its parts back together. In addition he views Central American nationalism as not an act of volition but an act of imposition. The “sutures that never heal,” are scars and reminders of the ways in which totalitarian projects like nationalism and histories engender “real” and epistemic violence by imposing a sense of unity on heterogeneous cultures and peoples. For Morales, conceptualizing Central America as a totality is both fictional and ephemeral; the very stitches that hold the body of Central America together are precisely what prevent it from “healing”, and “keeps it apart”.

Morales’s poem seems to be issuing a rhetorical response to discourses that engendered the idea of Central America as a region with characteristics of a nation-state. His corporeal representation of Central American in the poem

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<sup>247</sup> Ernest Renan, “What is a Nation?,” *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London: Routledge Press, 1990)18.

<sup>248</sup> For a more detailed account of how Rafael Arevalo Martinez’s “Himno a Centro America/ Hymn for Central America, uses the body as a trope, see Chapter 1 page 30.

suggests that for Morales Central America cannot be defined exclusively as a type of nation or nationalism. This is not to suggest that Morales is unaware that within the isthmus and the diaspora the idea of Central America has been governed by a longstanding nationalist trajectory. On the contrary, his reference to Central America as a “national pretense” seems to indicate otherwise. In fact, as much as Morales is critical of projects of cultural nationalism, he cannot avoid being interpellated as Central American. Morales belongs to a Los Angeles based “organic literary collective”<sup>249</sup> called “EpiCentroamerica.” Among their main objectives is to create a space “to exchange words and ideas, to develop theories and realities of what it means to be Central American.”<sup>250</sup> As I discussed in my second chapter, there is a growing Central American identity politics where peoples from the isthmus are beginning to employ a pan-ethnic mode of identification. Though Morales chooses to employ an even more translocal identity such as “epicentro,” by actively identifying as Central American, Morales inadvertently affirms the type of national formation he seeks to deconstruct.

Still, despite the ambivalence Morales has with his own identifications as Central American, we should take heed of what he proposes in his poem—that we cannot simply reproduce this view of Central America as a nation, or as just another example of an “imagined community.” His poem calls to attention the need to think beyond concepts of nation and nationalism, even as it highlights the inadequacy of conceptual approaches that privilege history as a means to define

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<sup>249</sup> Maya Chinchilla, “Introduction,” *Greetings From Epicentroamerica*, (Long Beach, 2000).

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, 3



and explore the concept of Central America. Further, Morales's poem serves as a powerful reminder to all scholars of the Central American diaspora. Central America in this text is conceived as a process rather than an *a priori*. It is defined not as an ontological "real" physical space, nor as a concept based on a real shared history, but is viewed as a discursive construction, a point emphasized through Morales' choice of labeling Central America as a narrative device: "fiction". For Morales then, Central America is a process carefully crafted and sewn together in the minds of an unnamed few who are invested in the construction of nationalism as a type of commodity. As such, Central America, according to this poem, is not just an 'invention' or idea, but a specific ideological construct, a form of nationalist "propaganda" that is able to create a totality via "barbed wires that keep us apart." The image here of "barbed wire," a substance associated with fences and borders, is a deliberate figurative device to allude to the idea that a concept like Central America (n) is bound by what it excises. As a consequence, Morales launches a powerful critique of the Central American diaspora, its people and its scholars who privilege and romanticize one fictional version of Central America at the expense of others, even if he is one of them.

One cannot think of Morales' critique without conjuring the work of other cultural theorists (Anzaldúa 1987; Laclau 1990; Butler 1993; Bhabha, 1994B), and especially that of Stuart Hall who reminds us that "the 'unities' which identities proclaim are in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable primordial totality, but of the

naturalized, overdetermined process of closure.”<sup>251</sup> It is tracing this “play of power of inclusion and exclusion” within Latino cultural politics that has enabled me to become conscious of the manner in which meta-narratives, and categorical terms of inclusion within identity politics become the same vehicles that exclude certain groups and communities.

The Central American-American subject, as I explained in my third chapter, has emerged precisely from the inability of Latino discourse and its imaginary to fully interpellate Central American subjects. Because Latinidad has constructed its own invisible borders and fences by perpetually defining Latino culture via three national constituencies--Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban—it has created a surplus or ‘constitutive outside’ where subjects like the Central American-American emerge. Ironically, this same problematic gesture of privileging certain national constituencies and deeming them as emblematic of Latino discourse can also be found within Central American discourse. For instance, most scholarship on the Central American diaspora has been predominantly focused on particular national groups, specifically Salvadorans, Nicaraguans, and Guatemalans. This can be seen in the field of literary studies, where the novels *The Ordinary Seaman* (Goldman: 1999), *Tattooed Soldier* (Tobar: 2001), *Odyssey to the North* (Bencastro: 1999), and the compilation of poems, narratives and testimonies *Izote Voz* (2000), have received critical attention from Central American scholars (Arias 1999 &2003; Padilla 2003; Rodriguez 1999) yet only focuses on Salvadoran and Guatemalan experiences.

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<sup>251</sup> Stuart Hall, “Who needs Identity?,” *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (London: Sage publications), 5.

Likewise, in the social sciences seminal texts on Central American diasporic culture (Menjivar 2000; Mahler 1995,1996; Boubler-Coutin 2000,2007; Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001; Garcia 2006) have and continue to be focused on these same three constituencies. Therefore, we must become vigilant about the ways in which a term and an identity labeled as Central American presents us with the same problems that “inclusionary” terms like Latino raise. We must become aware of how problematic our proclamation that we are studying ‘Central America culture’ is, when in fact we are studying a very limited facet of Central American culture.

I have not been able to elude this type of problematic gesture. Though I do include the work of a Honduran (Mexican?) American in one chapter, most of my dissertation has given continuity to this prevalent notion within Central American discourse that privilege three national communities in discussions about Central American diasporic culture. The literary examples (Morales 2000; Chinchilla, 2000; Bencastro, 1999) I used were all Salvadoran or Guatemalan. Likewise, my focus on the region of the Southwest, and historical periods of 1970s and 1980s, perpetuated the notion created by other scholars (Menjivar 2000, Hamilton & Chinchilla 2001) that somehow the diasporic cultural center and history of US Central American culture was located in a particular regional location. The fact of the matter is this project would look very different had I pursued other routes of the Central American diaspora.

For instance, most scholarship tends to focus on the West Coast, and ignores other important Central American diasporic urban landscapes like New

York City, which has also played host to many Central American immigrants, especially Afro-Central Americans.<sup>252</sup> Indeed, when Honduran writer Roberto Quesada articulated his experience in the United States in his novel *The Big Banana* (1999) he opted for a New York City setting. The title itself is a pun of the phrase used to refer to New York City: The Big Apple. However, in Quesada's world the apple has been substituted for a different fruit—the banana. Invoking this particular “tropical” fruit serves to remind readers of the ways this fruit commodity/export became the economic backbone for countries like Honduras. By using the fruit as his chosen metaphor and making his setting New York City, Quesada is appropriating the urban space of New York City and making it part of a larger transnational network of the Honduran and Central American diaspora. In the process he highlights the role this urban landscape has played within the Honduran American experience, forcing American immigrant discourses to contend with the fact that Hondurans are contributing to the New York multicultural landscape. But perhaps more importantly, Quesada's work places the spotlight on other migratory circuits within the Central American diaspora.

Thus, whenever scholars proclaim they are studying the Central American diaspora, or deploy the use of the term Central American, it must be read with a sense of suspicion. We must remind ourselves of Morales's postulation that

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<sup>252</sup> In her important contribution to Central American diaspora studies, *Afro-Central Americans in New York City: Garifuna Tales of Transnational Movements in Racialized Space* (Florida: University of Florida press, 2006), Sara England highlights how Afro-Central Americans experience a type of marginal status both within Central America as well as in the diaspora. With her case study on the Garifunas, she describes how ideologies of mestizaje within Central America have perpetuated this form of marginalization stating, that within most Central American nation-states “blackness in contrast to indigenismo has only been recently been recognized as part of mestizo national identity” (4).

Central America is a powerful fiction in order to make us aware of the way we (scholars of the Central American diaspora) are active participants in the promulgation of that geographic/nationalist discourse. Becoming conscious of my role in perpetuating those constructs created about the diasporic Central American experience in this dissertation has been difficult. It is a project in which I have had to contend with the notion that an articulation of Central American-American production simultaneously constructs that subjectivity. For identities, as Stuart Hall argues, are not merely reflected in representations, but are produced in the representations themselves, Thus, by examining certain representations, I am part of the machination that creates a singular type of Central American diasporic conceptual fiction. Through choices examined within this critical conversation, I have already created a new series of exclusions. As such, this dissertation was written with the understanding that it is a preliminary, limited, “map” of Central American-American culture. I therefore have articulated my own limitations and theoretical deficiencies in this conclusion in an attempt to encourage more scholars to explore these gaps and fissures within the routes of the Central American diaspora. Theoretical mappings like the one represented here, are in constant need of being redrawn and re-articulated. I therefore look forward to a time when scholarship on this subject includes new facets of this emergent, heterogeneous population.

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