

CENTROAMERICANIDADES: New Configurations of



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THE QUESTION POSED in this article, and at the Lozano Long conference in February 2012 that inspired it, would appear at a primary level to be a simple one: “Where are Central American–Americans headed in the second decade

of the twenty-first century?” After all, Central America is no longer limited to a small collection of nation-states “over there,” south of Mexico, but is increasingly also “over here,” in the United States. Central America is both a real site and a sight, a representation of a place that has gained visibility and significance in the U.S. through discourses, images, and other cultural productions since the 1980s, and Central American–Americans have followed a similar process in the first decade of the twenty-first century.¹

More recently, Central Americans have regained prominence in the U.S. as “Central Americans” only in the aftermath of infamous operations targeting undocumented migrants like the so-called Postville Raid in Iowa. This heavily militarized roundup by the U.S. Customs and Immigration Enforcement agency (ICE) became this nation’s largest single immigration operation on May 12, 2008. Hundreds of ICE agents stepped into Agriprocessors’ kosher meat processing plant and detained 389 undocumented workers. Most of them were of Guatemalan Maya origin.²

We know that Central American migration also has had an impact on their countries and region of origin since the original mass departure to the U.S. as a consequence of the civil wars of the 1980s. As already documented by countless books and articles, the massive flow of Central American immigrants to the U.S. was a direct result of the brutality of these civil wars and of the toll they exacted on peasant communities. As armies advanced destroying village after village and massacring the occupants, thousands of refugees, primarily from El Salvador and Guatemala, seeking safety for themselves and their children, fled to Mexico. Some remained there in UN-sponsored refugee camps, but many more continued on to the United States

and Canada. Anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans also fled their country, heading primarily to Miami and the Florida area.

The earliest U.S. Central American migrations can be traced to the mid-1850s California gold rush, as was the case for other Latin American migrants like Chileans and Peruvians. By the early 1910s and 1920s, increasing numbers of Central Americans were migrating to and establishing communities in places like San Francisco and New Orleans, headquarters of the infamous United Fruit Company that treated the entire region as an enclave economy. But the great migration of Central Americans, of course, occurred during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The 1980s civil conflict created what Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla have conceived as a model in which Central Americans “differ from many other immigrant groups . . . in that they are neither strictly economic migrants nor accepted as refugees, but have the characteristics of both” (p. 2).

Ostensibly, after the civil wars of the 1980s, Nicaragua changed course when the Sandinistas lost the presidential election in 1990. Peace was signed in El Salvador in 1992, the same year that the Los Angeles riots took place, and in Guatemala in 1996. This implied, in principle, a process of social reconciliation, reconstruction, and development. Nevertheless, the peace dividend was never fully realized. The arrival of peace did end military combat and state violence in the region, as guerrillas turned in their weapons and formed legal political parties. But the much-promised international aid never materialized in sufficient quantity. What was expected to be a massive Marshall-like plan to fully modernize these nations and uproot social inequalities became only a trickle that dwindled to almost nothing after the economic downturn in 2000. The most delinquent country in terms of economic aid was the United States. Despite President Clinton’s apologies to the populations of Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua in 1997 when he visited the region, the U.S. Congress approved only negligible aid to them in the postwar period. As a result, the reality of the postwar period was a time of

Central Americanness

by ARTURO ARIAS

little economic growth, massive unemployment (officially recorded at 50% in both Guatemala and El Salvador, but most likely higher in both countries), and the gradual emergence of an unregulated parallel power to the state produced by criminal gangs and drug cartels. The gangs gained muscle, wealth, and prestige, as unemployed youngsters and immigrants deported from the United States, most of them members of either Mara Salvatrucha or 18th Street Gang (Mara 18)—gangs originally formed in the streets of Los Angeles by young, alienated youth of Central American origin—joined their ranks.³ These last two factors were direct consequences of the U.S. reneging on most promises made prior to the signing of the peace treaties after the election of George W. Bush in 2000.

After 9/11, security conditions at the border gradually became tighter. Despite this, immigrants continued to enter the U.S. in massive numbers. Nonetheless, safety conditions for the passage through Mexico became harrowing. A corridor running from Colombia to the United States that crosses the entire Central American isthmus to transport cocaine into the U.S. had been complicating matters since the late 1980s. This passageway became the object of dispute by competing drug cartels in the first decade of the present century, exposing burdensome transnational anxieties on violence, public safety, government surveillance, and the implications of repressive anti-gang policies. In the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras), drug cartels gained a foothold in the first decade of the new century as well. They became entrenched in government, recruited important segments

of the army and police to their ranks, and created a parallel power stronger than the forces deployed to combat them.

The lack of economic opportunity, combined with the high number of unemployed soldiers, including known torturers and other criminals, as postwar armies were reduced in size and military budgets much reduced, led to a rapid rise in banditry, drug violence, and street crime. Thus, instead of enjoying greater safety as a blissful consequence of the end of the war, most Salvadoran and Guatemalan citizens were

exposed to the greatest crime wave in their history. As most social sectors lost faith in their state's capacity to control these criminal elements, they began to arm themselves, paying for private security or endorsing draconian measures to eliminate them, even when these trampled hard-won civil liberties. Shootings became an everyday occurrence, even in elite restaurants and malls. Imprisoned criminals often enjoyed a high standard of living in jail and continued to direct their criminal activities from the inside with the

aid of cellphones, Internet, and other technological equipment.

Express kidnappings—where small sums are paid in a matter of hours upon news of an individual's abduction—became common, even among the poor. Robberies on city buses and all modes of public transportation, used mainly by the poorer sectors of society, became equally common. These conditions were not uniquely Central American. Colombia had undergone a similar experience in the wake of the cocaine trade boom in the 1990s, and Mexico has been undergoing a similar process since 2005. Still, for those with nothing

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to lose, the worsening conditions that followed the signing of the Central American peace treaties became a stimulus for migration. As a result, Central Americans flowed into the U.S. in large numbers at least until 2008, when the Great Recession turned the immigrant tide around and the raid in Postville, Iowa, took place.

The scars of this nightmarish history remain engraved in the Central American–American population, even if the 1980s civil war is no longer an open wound. It is still, nevertheless, a fearsome memory, especially in view of the turn the U.S. has taken toward immigration. Indeed, war trauma now has been replaced by newer traumas, such as the 3,000-mile-long journey from the isthmus to the U.S. border, military service in the Middle East for those with legal resident status, or the daily risk of living without legal papers in the U.S. in an increasingly hostile environment.

Salvadorans are today the sixth largest immigrant group and the fourth largest Latino/a group in the U.S. Indigenous Guatemalan Mayas are present in new areas such as Iowa and the South, where indigenous Mayas sparked a strike and a unionizing campaign at Case Farms, a poultry plant.⁴ Thus, it can no longer be denied that Central Americans are making their presence felt within the U.S. and Latino/a landscape at the end of this first decade of the twenty-first century. Far from presenting Central American–Americans as a complete and coherent terrain, I hope to provide a blueprint for the present, as well as explore how Central American–Americans are gradually becoming another integral component of Latinoness.

Entering the country primarily through California, Arizona, and Texas, this population fanned out throughout the vast North American territory, including Mexico and Canada, where major pockets of Central Americans reside. The bulk of U.S. Central American migrants remain in California and Texas, with Los Angeles and Houston serving as dominant hubs. Despite this, significant Central American pockets are present, and indeed, visible in all U.S. cities. By now it is well-known that the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, D.C., has become a “little El Salvador,” and the Pico-Union district of Los Angeles has been officially designated as “Little Central America.”

Central American migrants either worked the urban service economies or followed agricultural jobs and manufacturing throughout the U.S. *Los Angeles Times* reporter Hector Tobar’s book *Translation Nation* documents Central American–American immigrant communities emerging in unexpected places such as Alabama, Georgia, and Nebraska. All of them were formed by immigrants arriving where

jobs could be had. Often, they were bused six or seven hours to these sites to provide cheap, illegal labor. Tobar went undercover and worked in some of them himself, making friends and interviewing coworkers or those sharing a dormitory trailer with him. This was the case in Anniston, Alabama, where he traveled by bus from Eagle Pass, Texas, to do swing-shift work dismembering chickens at a food processing plant. Other scholars have documented Central American–Americans along the Eastern seaboard and in the Sun Belt and Florida. This population helped rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and resided in most U.S. rural areas until the economic collapse of 2008.

The circumstances described to this point, particularly in the current political context, both nationally and more specifically for Latinos/as in this country, indicated that the focus on Central American populations merited a conference that could better locate this population’s experience at this point in time. This was particularly important given the obvious growth and consequent visibility and significance of Central Americans in both the U.S. as a whole and among Latinos/as. We wanted to discuss the implications for Latinos/as and the nation of the fact that Salvadorans are today the sixth largest immigrant group and the fourth largest Latino/a group in the U.S., and the experiences of indigenous Guatemalan Mayas in new destination areas such as Iowa (cf. Camayd Freixas 2008), the South (cf. Odem 2006, 2007), etc. We also wanted to emphasize and detail the ways that Central Americans are now *marcando presencia* within the U.S. and Latino/a landscape, complicating the concept of Latinidad, by

exploring “identities-in-the-making” that challenged what a Latino or Latina could be. Claudia Milian of Duke University, one of our invited speakers, had already argued on behalf of new subjectivities previously uncharted in any form of identity politics, those “Latinities” identifying elements that belonged to blackness, brownness, or dark brownness.

Traditional academic divisions among departments, fields, and disciplines most often prevented an integral study of *Centroamericanidades* that included what was happening both in the isthmus and among Central American–Americans in the U.S. Thus, Central Americans in the isthmus were studied by Latin Americanists, whereas Central Americans in the U.S. were studied by Latina/o scholars, an artificial division. Migrating Central Americans do not become “Latinas/os” by magic the minute they succeed in crossing the border. This traditional division obscured the extent to which Central Americanness remained

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fluid geographically. From economic remittances to deported immigrants to expelled gang members to Maya ritual practices to Garifuna cultural festivities, there is a cultural and economic corridor continually flowing between the isthmus and Canada, crossing through Mexico and settling in the U.S.

This conference sought to investigate the many ways in which Central America, in all its expressions, figures in its original site, in the U.S., and elsewhere by exploring its unfolding identities, practices, and representations. The colonial legacy of racism (although it should be stated that most Anglo residents of Postville were extremely supportive of the immigrants, as *AbUSed* makes abundantly clear) was one of its central themes.⁵

Ultimately, despite the passage of time, when we speak of Central American–Americans we are still speaking of a traumatized immigrant population “infecting” Latinoness with their lived experience. We therefore have to ask ourselves not only what this challenge means for Central American–Americans, but also what it means for Latinoness as a whole. After all, to trace Central American–Americans’ presence in the U.S. is also to trace this story of trauma as a different, an alternative, itinerary in the migrant experience, within the broader perspective of globalized coloniality reshaping U.S. cultural citizenship. This coloniality of diaspora is also where discontinuities continue to mark the way subjects are identified and labeled, and explains how they are left grappling with variable structures of power, many exercised by other minorities themselves in relation to them. ✨

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Notes

1. “Central American–American” was originally defined by me as “an anadiplosis that sounds more like a redundancy, a radically disfigured projection of what ‘Latin Americanness’ has been assumed to be.... [T]he 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 as ‘Latino’ or as ‘Latin American,’ but is outside those two signifiers from the

very start.” See “Central American–Americans: Invisibility, Power, and Representation in the U.S. Latino World.”

- Guatemalan filmmakers Luis Argueta and Vivian Rivas have produced a documentary film on the raid, titled *AbUSed: The Postville Raid*. See also Camayd-Freixas’s article “Interpreting after the Largest ICE Raid in US History: A Personal Account.”
- According to Luis J. Rodríguez, as many as 40,000 people accused of belonging to either the Mara Salvatrucha or the 18th Street gang were deported every year to both Mexico and Central America.
- See *The Maya of Morganton*.
- The film interviews legal defendants, elementary and high school teachers, nuns, etc., all of whom rushed to support those arrested, their children, and their families. All of them are Anglo.

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