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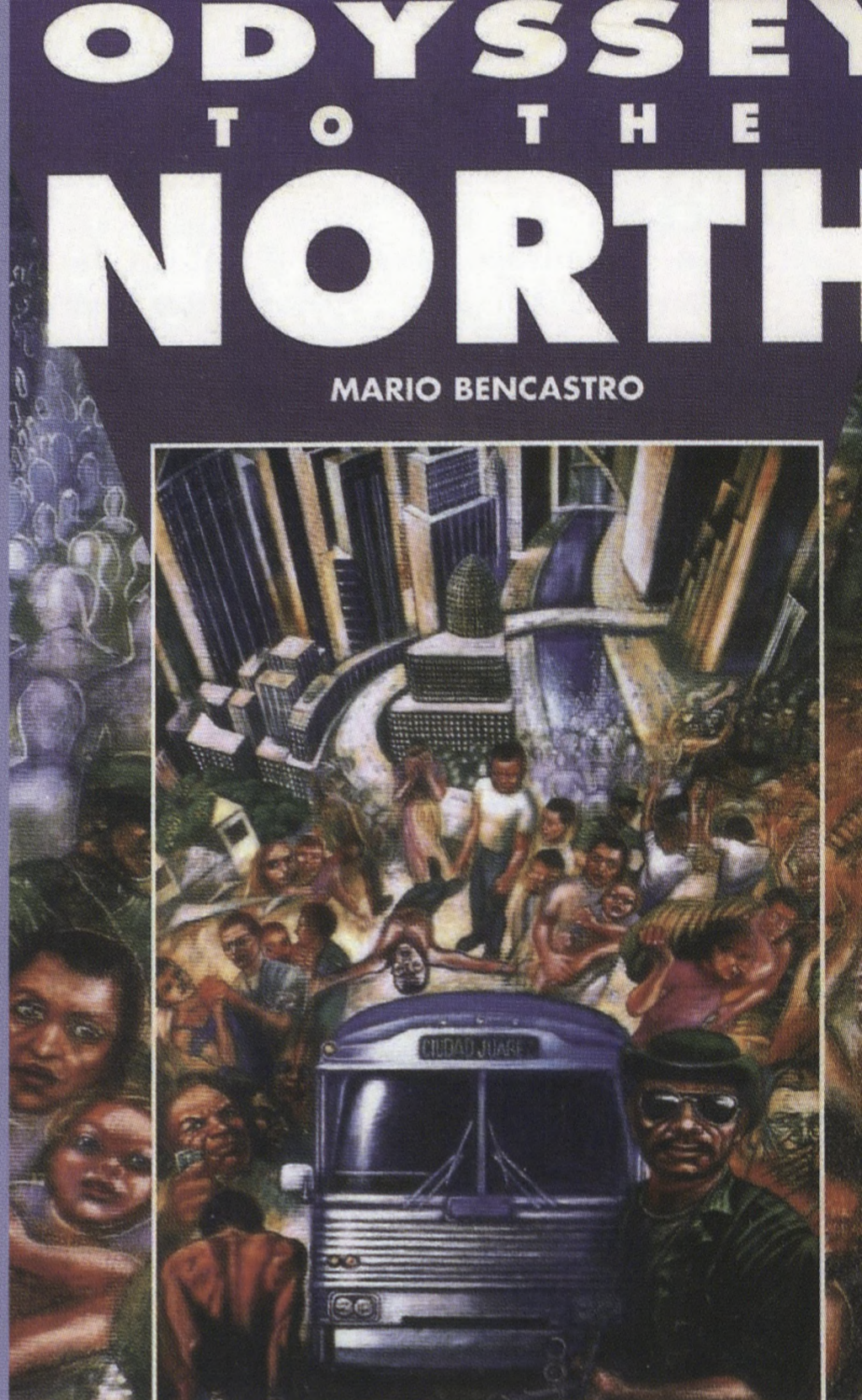
Cover Page Footnote

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ODYSSEY TO THE NORTH:

Salvadoran Identities - American Lives

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Guatemalan author and scholar Arturo Arias recently published an article in which he referred to the Central American diaspora in the United States as "invisibilized, despite their overwhelming presence." He makes this statement in relation to the more prevalent position of the three main hispanic cultural groups in the U.S.: Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans and Puerto Ricans. Arias goes on to describe this phenomenon as a double marginalization that results in a non-recognition, and thus "generates a sense of non-belonging, of non-beingness, a cruel invisibility that was first imposed on them in their countries of origin and has carried over to these latitudes"¹. This displacement results in a cultural void that is sometimes filled through the adaptation of the more generalized term "latino", a more specific form of erasure and replacement with a chicano identity of the Southwest, or simply left a void. Though most discussions of hispanic populations focus on Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans and Puerto Ricans, leaving Central-Americans doubly marginalized, it is important to acknowledge and understand the emergence of continued efforts at self-representation from within these often "invisibilized" communities. Indeed, to speak of a Central-American diaspora is already a vague and contradictory notion of the diversity of cultures and experiences that could potentially be included under such a category, so I will focus my attention here on the

Salvadoran diaspora of the United States. I will first challenge the continued marginalization of Central American identities from mainstream and even marginal cultural discourse, and then examine the literary efforts of Salvadoran-born author Mario Bencastro to combat the self-effacement and sense of non-belonging identified above through cultural expression, imagination and the reinvention of Salvadoran experiences and identities.

The marginalization that Arias speaks of goes beyond a sense of cultural invisibility. It is important first to recognize and question the generalized exclusion of Central American immigration and cultural production from studies of "latino" culture. In reviewing anthologies and cultural readers for my American Studies courses, it is impossible not to notice that despite the rich cultural traditions of Central America, its authors, poets and playwrights are rarely, if ever, represented among their pages. It is difficult to blame the editors of such publications for their decision to follow on the traditions of teaching "latinos" as three main groups, quickly explained, differentiated, and then grouped neatly together again under the banner of a common language. So I am left to question the very tradition itself. Does the long-standing focus on Mexican-Americans, Puerto Ricans, and Cuban-American exiles inevitably result from their former numerical dominance in

representing Spanish speakers in the United States, or are there other possible explanations for this trend? Though the numerical explanation could historically be considered a perfectly valid one, perhaps it is more the very circumstances of immigration that have affected such decisions. A brief, and necessarily limited, examination of the three cultures generally studied may help to explain this point.

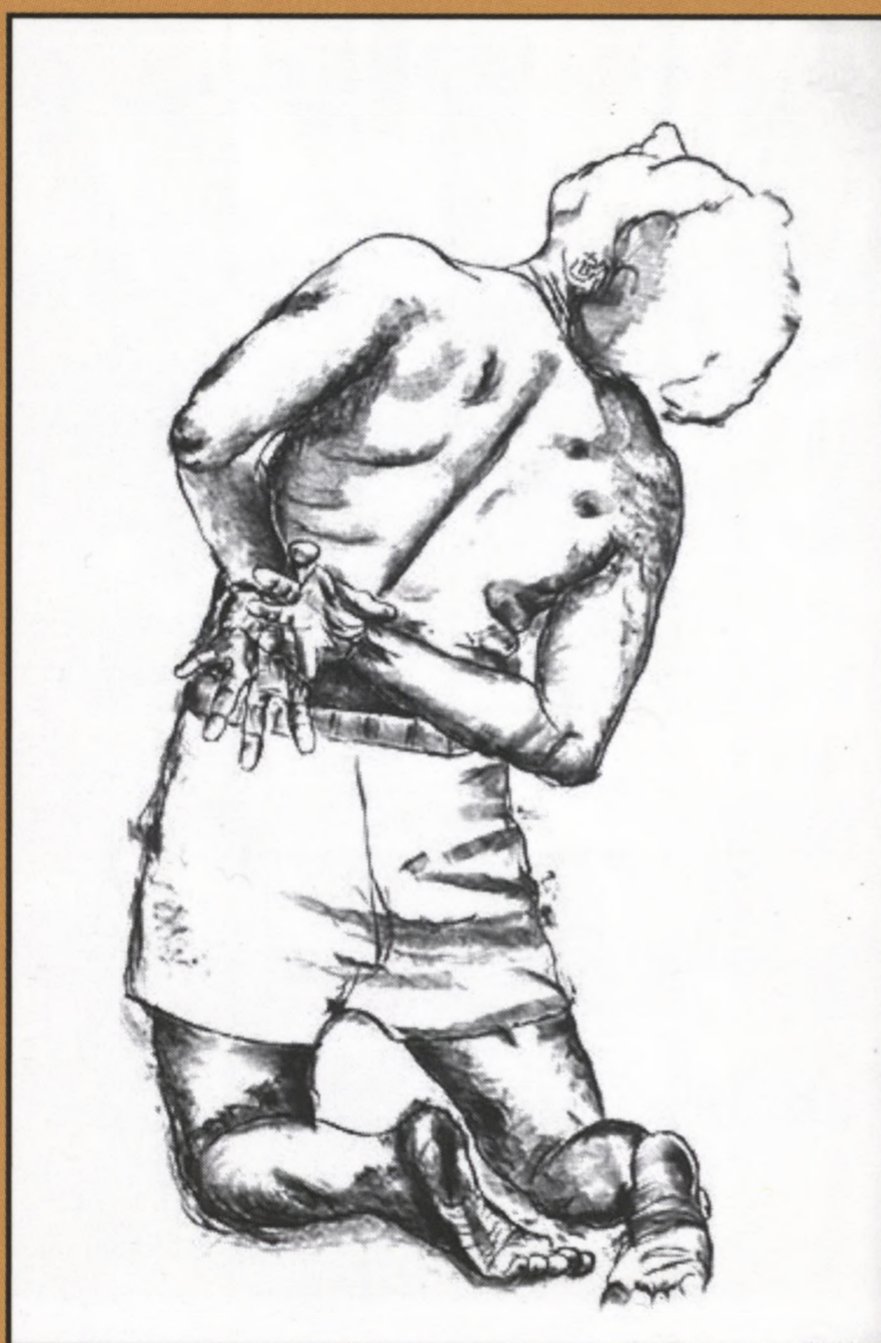
Mexican-Americans are most often understood as border crossers, economic immigrants that come to the United States to improve their employment prospects, educational opportunities, and for many other reasons that have been studied in great detail elsewhere and lie beyond the scope of this particular paper. Puerto-Ricans on the other hand, are citizens of this country whose independence from colonial Spain was a direct result of United States military intervention during their nineteenth century war for independence from imperialist Spain. Finally, Cuban-Americans are refugees of the only remaining Communist regime established in Latin America who came to the United States in search of refuge from the political persecution of Castro's revolution. Though obviously limited and clearly biased, these descriptions are a fair summary of the portrayals often given of the historical immigration of Hispanics to the United States. A brief examination of the push and pull influences

described here will illustrate my point concerning the frequent exclusion of Central Americans from this discussion. The pulling effects of U.S. political freedom, economic prosperity and educational advancement are matched by the push of unjust persecution and financial stagnation in the home countries. These perpetuations of the image of the "American Dream" are undermined by the thought of refugees arriving by the thousands who are fleeing violent regimes that are both openly and covertly supported by the United States. Such is the case with most Guatemalans and Salvadorans as well as many Nicaraguans who sought refuge in the United States throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Thus, in order to begin to understand the particular experiences of these American cultures and their circumstances as immigrants here in the United States, it is first necessary to come to terms with a difficult history of U.S. foreign policies that often did not match the ideals represented by the American Dream. This challenge can be, and often is avoided by simply overlooking the sociocultural differentiation of Central Americans from other latino groups.

Whatever the reasons for the general exclusion of Central-American cultures from most discussions of hispanics in the United States however, the fact of their exclusion remains. The decades of political turmoil in the region left over 200,000 dead in Guatemala, 70,000 in El Salvador, and another 60,000 in Nicaragua.² Meanwhile, the number of immigrants from these countries to the United States increased by ten fold. Census data show that between 1980 and 2000, the number of Salvadorans born in the U.S. went from under 100,000 to over 1.2 million.³ An estimated 20% of the entire Salvadoran population now resides in the United States as a result of the civil wars and social chaos whose intensity and duration were deeply linked to U.S. military and economic intervention in the region. Yet despite these staggering numbers, Salvadorans, and Central Americans in general, have remained on the margins of cultural studies and identity politics of "latinos" that took shape around three main groups during the twentieth century.⁴

The "three main groups" to which I have repeatedly referred here are by no means homogenous groups with a common sense of cultural identity, economic status, nor even political affiliation. What these groups do share is a history of identity politics that has helped to shape a cultural framework within which group members can navigate and make decisions concerning

affiliation, identification, separation, etc. In the words of Mexican-American priest and liberation theologian Virgil Elizondo "The knowledge of fundamental belonging –that is, to be French, American, Mexican English, is... one of the deepest needs of persons. When this need is met, it is not even thought about as a need; but when it is missing, it is so confusing and painful that we find it difficult to even conceptualize it or speak about it."⁵ This is not to suggest that Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans or Puerto Ricans have firmly established such a sense of identity and belonging; on the contrary, it is to point out that despite an established history of identity politics



Let Me Be a Witness I. Art by Robert Huezo.
<http://www.segura.com/Huezo.html>

in this country, they continue to struggle with issues of cultural "belonging". This fact should help to illustrate the difficulties faced by Central Americans who, as Arturo Arias points out, "have not organized themselves around a name, around identity politics, and thus remain invisible in the fractured landscape of multiculturalism."⁶

This invisibility becomes even more pronounced through analysis of Central American cultural production. When discussing the development of programming by Univisión and the shaping of a so-called "hispanic nation", Geoffrey Fox rightly points out that a community must first exist in the imaginations of its members before it can become a political or social force.⁷ Though Fox examines the ways in which national spanish-language television programming worked to produce an

imagined community of hispanics in the United States, I believe his premise to be helpful in explaining the importance of all cultural production to the development of marginalized cultural identities. The need for belonging described above requires an equally important necessity to actively seek out the means by which to articulate cultural identity and represent both individual and collective experiences. In an age of globalization, as ours is currently understood, there is no denying that traditional cultural structures such as race, class, gender and nationality have lost much of their effectiveness in defining identity, leaving it in the words of Stuart Hall, "an unsettled space... an unresolved question... between a number of intersecting discourses."⁸ Arjun Appadurai points out that in this contemporary context, "the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social act, and is the key component of the new global order."⁹ This central role of the imagination allows individuals a much broader range of control over the definition and constant reinvention of their own sense of cultural identity, thus increasing the value of cultural production in articulating and reimagining the elements of identity available to individual subjects. I will devote the remainder of this talk to a discussion of one example of the many ways in which Central American cultural production in the United States is emerging as a means of producing a framework within which such practices of identity construction can be enriched for members of the Central American diaspora.

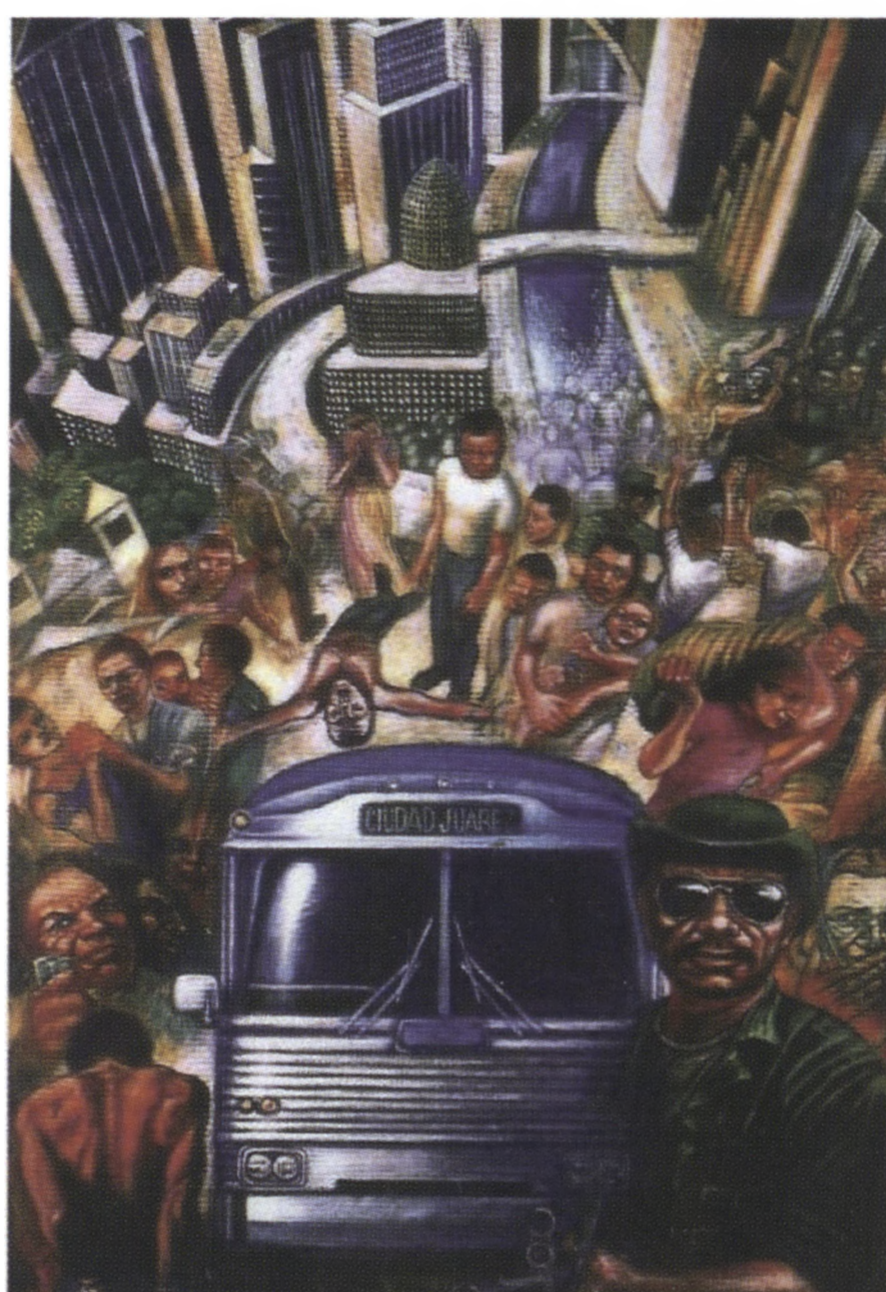
The example of contemporary literature that I will examine here is a 1999 novel by Salvadoran-born Mario Bencastro, **Odyssey to the North**. Bencastro, born in Ahuachapán, El Salvador in 1949 now lives in Virginia near Washington D.C. He is an award-winning author, playwright and artist whose works include a collection of short stories, **The Tree of Life: Stories of Civil War** (1993) as well as two novels, **A Shot in the Cathedral** (1990), and **Odyssey to the North** (1999). Bencastro's earlier work deals with the violence of the bloody Salvadoran Civil War, but his more contemporary work focuses on the experiences of Central Americans, and particularly Salvadorans in the United States. His latest novel, **Journey to the Land of Grandfather**, examines the conflicts that face immigrant children in the U.S. and was developed in collaboration with students from Belmont High School of Los Angeles, California. It will be published simultaneously in English and Spanish in May 2004. Bencastro's second novel, **Odyssey to the North** is a fragmented

portrayal of the Salvadoran-American experience that appears to be a transition from his early focus on El Salvador to his more recent focus on Salvadorans outside of their homeland. Though the adventures of protagonist Calixto form a central narrative throughout the novel, the text itself is a chaotic journey through multiple individual and collective experiences. A combination of both spatial and temporal dislocations results in a text that moves in several directions simultaneously. The reader is constantly transported between Calixto's present experiences as a dishwasher in a Washington D.C. hotel, his past experiences with immigrant smugglers and immigration detention on his arduous journey to the U.S., and the arbitrary political persecution that drove him from his home country. These already disjointed memories and experiences are further disrupted by newspaper articles, court proceedings, love letters between Salvadoran guerrillas, songs and poems, all revealing both the accomplishments and difficulties of the Salvadoran diaspora. This multi-faceted literary style positions the reader in a limbo between the spaces of kitchens and courtrooms, prisons, borders, bus terminals and city tenements, representing the diverse experiences of fragmentation that result from the spatial and cultural dislocation of exile. In this way, *Odyssey to the North* is a literary manifestation of attempts within the Salvadoran-American community to move beyond shared representations of identity as "latinos" and toward more complex processes of invention and imagination of Salvadoran-American identities. The fragmented nature of the text is not as much a result of the multiple sources of information and writing styles included therein as it is an inevitable characteristic of any cultural production seeking to articulate an identity whose cultural "roots" remain uncertain.

Though Bencastro's text is rich in imagery and thematic complexity, I will focus on just two particular aspects of the novel for the sake of this study. The first of these is the defense of Salvadoran identity through the establishment and maintenance of strong connections between the diaspora and their home country. The second is the tendency to focus more on the reasons for which immigrants left their home country rather than on their desires to go to "El Norte". I have decided to focus on these two particular aspects not only for reasons of brevity, but because they present two particular characteristics of Salvadoran immigrants that begin to differentiate them from

the three groups generally listed under the banner of "latinos" described above.

Salvadoran identity is championed by protagonist Calixto throughout the novel. He repeatedly finds ways to allude danger, to land on his feet, and to maintain his strong sense of devotion to the family that he is forced to leave behind in El Salvador. Calixto's character stands out in contrast to other characters throughout the novel such as the drunken and abusive Mexican coyotes, the violent ringleader of Cuban prisoners of immigration aptly named Marielón,¹⁰ and even his fellow Salvadorans in Washington D.C.'s Adams-Morgan neighborhood. One



such Salvadoran companion is Juancho, whose attempts at assimilation to United States culture consist of changing his name to Johnny, buying a new pair of shoes and spending all of his money on a Trans-Am in order to impress an American woman. Such superficial portrayals of assimilation, when compared to the role of Calixto throughout the novel, seem to reveal in Bencastro's work an effort to represent the necessity of maintaining strong ties between Salvadoran immigrants in the United States and their country of origin.

This tendency is also reflected in research that studies the development and strengthening of such ties in the larger Salvadoran communities of California and Washington D.C.¹¹ As I stated previously, most recent census data shows that approximately 20% of El Salvador's population currently resides in the United States. The increased speed and ease of transportation, coupled with advances

in means of communication and financial exchange have led to much stronger social, economic, and cultural relations across geographical distances. Such transnationalism does not necessarily translate to an ability, nor even a desire, to maintain or inhabit two distinct cultures simultaneously as some have suggested, but it does provide a distinct socio-economic basis for the continued construction of identity represented in works such as that of Mario Bencastro. This two-way exchange of monetary remittance and cultural grounding is essential to understanding the ongoing construction of post-Civil War Salvadoran identity in the United States. The importance of this connection is further supported by the Washington Post article, "Calling All Salvadorans," published on November 11, 2002, that reported that the Salvadoran government made a half a million calls to its citizens in the United States to remind them to renew their "temporary protected status" for employment granted in 2001.¹²

Though the development and structure of such remittance networks would appear to indicate primarily economic reasons behind Salvadoran immigration, it is necessary to remember the historical and political conditions under which the massive Salvadoran immigration of the 1970s and 1980s took place. This brings me to the second point raised in relation to my examination of Mario Bencastro's novel *Odyssey to the North*, a tendency to focus more on the reasons for which immigrants left their home country rather than on their desires to go to "El Norte". The diverse range of characters in Bencastro's text does portray the various influences that have traditionally located Salvadoran immigration on the margins of both economic immigrants and political refugees, but the situation of protagonist Calixto is firmly rooted in the latter. The reader learns that Calixto was denounced as a subversive despite his lack of political involvement in any capacity. His situation reveals the suffering of tens of thousands of Salvadorans that were caught up in the violence of the Civil War and he is forced to flee his country or face certain death at the hands of paramilitary death squads. His sudden and traumatic uprooting and exile is echoed in the voices of many that appear over the course of the novel whose collective longing for their homeland is mirrored by images of hopelessness, destruction, and death. At one point in the novel for example, Calixto reflects on the overwhelming violence of El Salvador and states simply, "I picture my country as one enormous cemetery" (152).

One tragic example of the effects of this regime of terror is the figure of Teresa, a young Salvadoran woman in a United States court for immigration hearings concerning the process of her application for asylum to avoid being deported to El Salvador. She fears that her life is in danger due to the oppositional political involvement of her husband and attempts to convince the court that if she returns she will surely be targeted by the forces of government oppression. Fragments of her courtroom experience appear dispersed throughout the novel, in chapters 11, 15, 21, 27, 37, 43, 49 and 55 leading to the judge's eventual decision to deny her application for political asylum and order her deportation. A simple, one paragraph newspaper article from El Salvador near the end of the novel announces that the "remains of a woman were found... identified her as twenty-one-year-old Teresa de Jesús Delgado... recently deported from the United States... [whose] death was due to political retaliation" (188).

Teresa's violent and predictable death closes one part of the novel with the continued impossibility of return, or at least the certain destructive consequences of such a decision. The novel ends with Calixto looking upon the lights of Washington D.C. for the first time while his thoughts wander back to El Salvador. The storylines of Calixto and Teresa never cross; they are, in fact, the only two of the multiple and divergent discourses that do not come into contact with one another. Despite this fact, and perhaps even because of it, their deeply interconnected elements provide a unifying force that both defines and expands the representation of Salvadoran-American experience. In this way, Bencastro structures his novel, in both form and content, much like Stuart Hall defines identity itself: an unresolved space between multiple and intersecting discourses.

Since the end of the political violence at the end of the last century, cultural production has turned toward deeper examinations of the relations between diverse elements of Central American society as well as attempts at repositioning and reimagining their role in the context of cultural, political and economic globalization. As Mario Bencastro's work shows, the emergent literary production of Central Americans in the United States continues to be an important resources for the dynamic reinvention and development of marginalized identities of the Central American diaspora. The particular characteristics and historical circumstances of these cultures hold many lessons not only for Central

Americans, but for all Americans seeking a deeper understanding of the transnational relations that shaped the twentieth century and will continue to shape the twenty-first century.

Michael Millar received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in 2002 and is now an Assistant Professor of Spanish and American Studies at Western Michigan University. Professor Millar also works as an Area Studies consultant for Prudential Intercultural Services. He has published and presented several articles on Central American cultural production and has recently expanded his research to include the literary work of the Central American diaspora in the United States. Contact him at michael.millar@wmich.edu

NOTES

1. Arturo Arias, "Central American-Americans? Re-mapping Latino/Latin American Subjectivities on Both Sides of the Great Divide." *Explicación de textos literarios*. Vol XXVIII – 1&2. (Sacramento, California: California State University, 1999-2000) 48.
2. Geoffrey Fox, *Hispanic Nation: Culture, Politics and the Constructing of Identity*. (Secaucus, New Jersey: Birch Lane Press, 1996) 131.
3. Fox 129.
4. Stuart Hall identifies the term "politics of identity" as "social movements in which the various social movements tried to organize themselves politically within one identity... And in that rather simpler universe, there was one identity to each movement. While you were in it, you had one identity" Stuart Hall, "Ethnicity: Identity and Difference" in *Beyond Borders: A Cultural Reader* eds. Randall Bass and Joe Young (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2002) 228-240.
5. Virgil Elizondo, "Mestizaje as a Locus of Theological Reflection," in *Frontiers of Hispanic Theology in the United States*, eds. Allen Figueroa, Deck and S. J. Maryknoll (New York: Orbis Books, 1992) 109.
6. Arias 53.
7. Fox builds much of his cultural study of Spanish-language television in the United States on the notion of "Imagined Communities" as developed by Benedict Anderson in his book of the same title.
8. Hall 228.
9. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996) 31-2.
10. The name Marielón seems to be a clear

reference to the second wave of Cuban immigration known as the Marielitos who arrived as part of what is known as the "Mariel Boat Lift". This second wave of immigration has been historically stereotyped as the criminals and outcasts of Cuban society that Castro no longer wanted in Cuba.

11. See for example: Norma Hamilton and Nora Stoltz Chinchilla, *Seeking Community in a Global City* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001) or Cecilia Menjivar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000).
12. Mary Beth Sheridan "Calling All Salvadorans" *The Washington Post*, November 11, 2002.

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