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U.S. Central American Identities in Roberto Quesada's *Big Banana* and *Nunca entres por Miami*

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Abstract / Resumen

Following several calls in recent scholarship for increased attention to the study of the Central American diaspora in the United States, this article offers readings of Honduran-born author Roberto Quesada's novels *Big Banana* (1999) and *Nunca entres por Miami* (2003). Written in New York City where he has resided since 1989, *Big Banana* highlights issues of Central American identity, migration, and immigrant experiences. Published four years later, *Nunca entres por Miami* continues to engage with these important topics. My readings of Quesada's novels focus on the ways in which his works construct cultural memory and identity by providing critical historical context that is absent from most mass media coverage of Central American migration to the United States. By engaging with theoretical constructions of *Latinidad*, this article also analyzes the ways in which Quesada's characters represent the multi-layered and intersectional nature of U.S. Central American identities. Ultimately, I posit that these novels make a move towards establishing the identity politics that critics such as Arturo Arias assert will be necessary for U.S. Central Americans to emerge as a unique, recognizable, and influential entity in the multicultural landscape of the United States in the twenty-first century.

Recent scholarship has emphasized the need for increased attention to the study of the Central American diaspora in the United States. Arturo Arias, for example, points to the invisibility of Central American culture "to the great majority of U.S. citizens despite its overwhelming presence in the United States" (185). With regard to literature, Leticia Hernández-Linares maintains in the preface to her co-edited anthology *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States* that, "Writers of the Central American diaspora have occupied shaky literary and historical ground" (10). As part of the solution to the issue of invisibility, Karina O. Alvarado, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, and Ester E. Hernández call for the institutionalization of Central American studies and an expansion of "the critical voices and methodologies used in the study of Central America and its diasporas in the United States" (224). Most recently, in her 2018 monograph *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*, Maritza E. Cárdenas calls attention to "Central America(n) as an important discursive category of analysis," noting that, "the borders between these geopolitical spaces (the United States and Central America) are being eroded by its U.S diaspora" (5). In particular, cultural production from Honduras and its diasporic communities in the U.S., which has been even further marginalized within Central American studies, deserves much more careful consideration than it has received to date, especially when one considers the economic, military, and migratory connections between Honduras and the United States.

Honduran-born author Roberto Quesada's novels *Big Banana* (1999) and *Nunca entres por Miami* (2003) present narratives that allow a better understanding and a heightened visibility of Central American diasporic communities in the U.S. Quesada's 1999 novel *Big Banana* presents an important shift in the trajectory of his fiction by changing the primary setting from Honduras to the United States. Written in New York City where he has resided since 1989, *Big Banana* marks the beginning of Quesada's diasporic writings, and, accordingly, issues of Central American identity, migration, and immigrant experiences in New York City come to the fore (Hood 503). Published four years later, *Nunca entres por Miami* continues to engage with these important topics. The following readings of Quesada's novels thus focus on the ways in which his works construct cultural memory by historically contextualizing late twentieth-century Central American migration to the United States as well as the ways in which his characters represent the multi-layered and intersectional nature of U.S. Central American identities.[1] Ultimately, I posit that these novels increase the visibility of the Central American diaspora in the U.S. and, in particular, the Honduran diaspora in New York through a series of didactic components that insist on "the articulation of cultural differences" within the project of *Latinidad* (Bhabha 1).

Big Banana is the story of aspiring actor Eduardo Lin's struggle for survival in New York City. Upon arrival from his native Honduras and after a few days in Manhattan, he finds himself living in a small room in the Bronx with Mairena, described as a childhood friend and black man from the Atlantic Coast of Honduras. Eduardo finds work restoring old buildings and painting apartment interiors, and after a brief stint on his own in Queens, he eventually settles in the Bronx again with fellow subletters from Ecuador and Chile. His Chilean roommate Casagrande introduces him to an eclectic group of friends from various parts of Latin America, who occasionally throw raucous parties and often engage Eduardo in discussions of Latin American politics. The story also traces his long-distance relationship with his girlfriend, Mirian, who lives in Honduras, as well as his affairs with women in New York. In moments of depression or adversity Eduardo journeys into the future or drifts into the past, occasionally attempting to escape reality through alcohol or illegal drugs. In the final chapters, after auditioning for and having received an offer from Steven Spielberg for a role in an upcoming film, Eduardo politely declines, deciding instead to return to Honduras to reunite with his girlfriend Mirian.

Interactions between Eduardo and other characters throughout the novel reveal many of the underlying problems with the concept of *Latinidad* that scholars have highlighted over the course of the last three decades. In *Key Terms in Latino/a Cultural Studies*, Paul Allatson defines *Latinidad* and the less common *Latinismo* as "designations for panethnic Latino/a identifications, imaginaries, or community affiliations that encompass, but do not supersede, diminish, or destroy, national origin or historical minority identifications" (138). Allatson observes that Chon Noriega has linked the concept to "the ideal of pan-American political unity propounded by Simón Bolívar and José Martí, which inspire attempts to conceptualize Latino/a populations in both national and continental terms," but acknowledges the exclusionary premises of the concept that scholars such as Ramón and Sandoval have signaled, particularly with regard to race, gender, and sexuality (138). In *Ethnic Labels, Latino Lives*, Suzanne Oboler questions the coherence of the term Hispanic, arguing that, "it is important to ask to what extent the appeal to the legacy of the Spanish colonial rule can justify the homogenization under the label Hispanic of the subsequent experiences of at least 23 million citizens, residents, and immigrants of Latin American descent" (xiii). She further questions, "is it rooted in an accurate perception of the diversity of Latin American populations in their *own* countries of origin?" (Oboler xiii) Despite a broad shift from usage of the label Hispanic, which was originally imposed by the U.S. government in the 1980 census, to Latina/o, and then Latinx over the course of the last thirty years as a result of an effort to create a term "from below," Oboler's interrogation is as relevant to the concept of *Latinidad* as it is to the concept of being Hispanic (Oboler 177). Marta Caminero-Santangelo similarly argues in *On Latinidad*, "it is difficult indeed to pinpoint what exactly might link people of Chicano/a, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Dominican, and Central/South American descent into a single, and singular collective ethnicity labeled 'Latino' or 'Hispanic.'" (6). Given the heterogeneous nature of lived Latinx experiences, Frances R Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman have argued in favor of the plural *Latinidades* "as a means of indicating the multiple tropes of "Latino-ness" produced by dominant cultural forces and Latino/as alike" (Allatson 138).

Central American studies scholars and authors have similarly insisted on the importance of recognizing and understanding the varied experiences of U.S. Central Americans within the broader construct of *Latinidad*. Indeed, Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández's anthology *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* emphasizes "the ways in which U.S. Central American diasporas construct community and historical memory and assert their subjectivity in a country that often criminalizes their ethnicities or attempts to erase them" (30). Alicia Ivonne Estrada has argued, for example, that, "The U.S. census's representation of Guatemalans as a homogenous national group erases the existence, contributions, and experiences of Mayas in the United States" (166). She contends that despite experiencing "double forms of marginalization from within dominant U.S. society as well as nonindigenous U.S. Central Americans and Latina/os that reside in the area," Mayas of Guatemalan origin affirm their cultural memory and create a sense of community and place through the construction of a weekend market in the Westlake/MacArthur Park neighborhood of Los Angeles (167-168). Similarly, Maritza E. Cárdenas has examined of the performance of Central American identity in the Central American Independence Parade in Los Angeles, and Ester E. Hernández's has articulated the ways in which Central American diasporic communities transmit cultural memory through film, murals, performances, and creation of public spaces. These, as well as Steven Osuna's and Karina O. Alvarado's analyses of the importance of oral tradition in Salvadoran-American culture, are few examples of the type of recent scholarship that has sought a deeper understanding of the complexity of U.S. Central American identities, experiences, and cultural production.

One of the instructive elements of Central American diaspora writing is that it frequently provides insight into the sense of marginalization that many immigrants experience. The protagonist of *Big Banana*, Eduardo Lin, is an aspiring actor who leaves Honduras for "la tierra de las oportunidades" with dreams of making it big, but quickly comes to understand the multiple barriers that stand in his way (72). Quesada's portrayal of Eduardo reveals the sense of marginalization and disillusionment experienced by a recently arrived Central American immigrant with few economic resources and undocumented status. Although he is fortunate to have a childhood friend from Honduras who offers him a place to stay in the South Bronx, Eduardo is immediately marginalized geographically within the city, symbolically gesturing the peripheral space that many Central American immigrants occupy in U.S. culture. His friend Javier, horrified at the prospect of Eduardo moving to such a crime-ridden neighborhood, recommends against it, warning, "El Bronx es malo, pero el Sur del Bronx es el infierno" (3). This marginalization is emphasized in his memory of being dazzled by the opulence and rich culture of Fifth Avenue and Broadway, and the feeling that "había nacido para habitar un lugar como Manhattan. Lamentablemente, todo fue fugaz, horas después tuvo que enfrentar la realidad de verse viviendo en el Sur del Bronx" (2). The contrast between Eduardo's desire to participate in Manhattan society and the reality of his lack of access to that world inevitably creates a feeling of disillusionment. His disappointment is compounded by the monotony of his "espantosa rutina: trabajo-casa, casa-trabajo" and his self-loathing "por estar en un trabajo que está seguro de que no es para él" (19, 67). Despite his employment as a construction worker, he experiences "la tristeza de ver que los objetivos buscados no se vislumbraban ni a largo plazo" (11). Indeed, his eventual friend and roommate Casagrande advises him that his dreams are not only difficult, but nearly impossible. Once again underscoring his marginal status as a Central American immigrant, Casagrande teases, "¿Imaginas a un bananero en Hollywood?" (41).

Implicit in Casagrande's comment are the stereotypes and discrimination that many U.S. Central Americans must grapple with. Indeed, the novel's title is a reference to Casagrande's playful nickname for Eduardo, whom he has dubbed "The Big Banana." Casagrande's nickname evokes the process described by Aparicio and Chávez-Silverman as "hegemonic tropicalization," which they use to describe "the sets of images and attributes superimposed onto both Latin American and U.S. Latino subjects from the dominant sector" (15). In addition to the allusion to his presence in the Big Apple, the nickname immediately evokes the colonial gaze to which Central America, its citizens, and its migrants to the U.S. are often subject. As Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández explain, as a result of the ubiquitous presence of American agricultural corporations such as United Fruit Company (Chiquita Banana), Standard Fruit Company (Dole) and Cuyamel Fruit Company, "Honduras came to epitomize the 'banana republic,' as coined by writer O. Henry in 1904. The corporations that came to own much of Honduras's only farmable lands built the nation's transportation infrastructure. However, this was accomplished to promote U.S. companies' profits, which were disinvested from the Honduran economy" (12-13). Despite his awareness of U.S. economic imperialism in Honduras, Eduardo resists being labeled as a representative of a one-dimensional, subservient culture, as implied in his nickname. In gatherings with other Latin American immigrants, for example, Eduardo takes advantage of "las circunstancias propicias que brindaban las reuniones para hablar de lo poco que se conoce du su país, más allá de las bases militares y los ejercicios militares. No contradecía lo que a la vista del mundo estaba, pero mostraba también otros aspectos de un país que sueña, canta, ríe, llora. Contaba acerca de los pintores, de los músicos, del teatro, de la vasta producción literaria y artística" (182-183). In doing so, Eduardo attempts to actively subvert what Homi K. Bhabha identifies as "the processes of subjectification made possible through stereotypical discourse," (quoted in Chávez-Silverman 101) which, as Susana Chávez-Silverman argues, have rendered Latinos/as "if not literally 'invisible' to ourselves and the dominant culture, [. . .] visible *only* as stereotypes" (101). By the end of the story, Eduardo has successfully disrupted the stereotype that Casagrande previously held of Hondurans. Casagrande quips: "Pero son inteligentes ustedes los bananeros y lo más bello es que muy humanos (335).

Big Banana further engages questions of pan-Central American, national, and ethnic identities through dialogue between characters. In particular, Eduardo's childhood friend, Mairena, described as "el negro de la Costa Norte, de mediana estatura y de facciones afro bien marcados" problematizes the notion of a homogenous Honduran national identity by emphasizing the marginalization of blacks in Honduras and the segregation between black and mestizo Hondurans in the U.S. (266).[2] In a conversation with Eduardo, he recalls the racial slurs hurled at him in grade school in Honduras and argues, "ustedes los indios no nos quieren a nosotros los negros, ustedes se creen superiores a nosotros. En Honduras somos más discriminados que aquí en Nueva York" (254). Through his use of you/us, Mairena reveals the sense of division that he has experienced as a black Honduran and surfaces the dominance of the ideology of *mestizaje* within the Honduran and Central American national imaginaries. As Lowell Gudmundson and Justin Wolfe explain, "Each of these [Central American] nations has witnessed the postcolonial development of *mestizo* or mixed-race ideologies of national identity that have systematically downplayed African roots and participation in the process in favor of Spanish and Indian antecedents and contributions" (2). With specific regard to Honduras, Erin Amason Montero maintains that, as a result of government efforts to construct a national identity by mythologizing the pre-Colombian Mayan and Lencan civilizations, "Afro-descendant populations were regarded as a foreign element, and their traditions were deemed as exotic and outside of national identity" (10-11). Eduardo does not disagree with Mairena's assertions, and the conversation concludes with a symbolic image of unity, as the two men hug and continue drinking and laughing together in a display of what Verónica Ríos Quesada describes as "una solidaridad por empatía" (198). The passage thus suggests the need to recognize the cultural heterogeneity and racial discrimination in Honduras and the potential for increased solidarity and understanding through honest dialogue.

Quesada creates the dialogue between Eduardo and Mairena as a didactic moment in which the narrator provides a brief description of Garífuna culture.

> En Honduras la población negra la constituye una pequeña etnia que a lo sumo llegará al punto cinco por ciento de la población. Esta etnia habita en la Costa Norte de Honduras, en Belice y Guatemala, y muchas veces son objeto de discriminación por parte de los mestizos. A esta etnia se les conoce como garífunas. Ellos se refugiaron en los ritos de los ancestros de origen africano, hablan con los Muertos, tienen danzas ligadas a su pasado con el afán de disminuir las ansiedades producidas por la discriminación. En sus ritos, se reúnen familias garífunas que vienen desde muy lejos, se preparan hasta tres meses para culminar con el enlace de todos los miembros, con los espíritus de los antepasados. (255)

By including this informational passage on Garífuna culture, *Big Banana* alludes to Central America's ethnic heterogeneity and breaks from "the mestizo ideology that continues to erase blacks and blackness in Central America" (Alvarado et. al. 222). Moreover, by describing current Garífuna cultural practices, this passage rejects the erroneous consignment of Garífunas, and Central American blackness in general, to "an unknowable, faceless past or prelude to the main event of national, mestizo-driven history" (Gudmundson and Wolfe 4).

Mairena's presence in the novel thus invokes what Gudmundson and Wolfe refer to as a history of "widespread practices of social, political, and regional exclusion of blacks" in Central America (1). Indeed, as Cárdenas has painstakingly documented in her analysis of nineteenth-century Central American legal and political discourse, the very construction of Central America as a national imaginary was "intertwined with a fear and disavowal of blackness" (38). As she explains, the 1821 Acta de La Independencia preserves the colonial logic and racial hierarchy inherent in the caste system that had developed under Spanish colonial rule by presenting independence "as a way of 'prevent[ing]' or forestalling mestiza/o, indigenous, and black populations from rebelling and declaring independence on their own terms" (37).

The Garífuna are further highlighted in the novel in a tragic incident, based on a true event that occurred on March 25, 1990, in which eighty-seven immigrants, most of whom were Garífunas, died in an underground social club fire in the Bronx (Siu 100). As Mairena points out, the space in which the incident occurs is yet another manifestation of the marginalization that his ethnic group's experiences both in Honduras and in the U.S. He exclaims, "pero ves a qué clase de lugar, qué clase de antros son los únicos a los que nosotros tenemos acceso" (167). Eduardo's girlfriend's reaction to the fire underscores the tendency toward social segregation within the Honduran diaspora. When Eduardo becomes irritated that she hasn't called to verify that he is safe after the fire, she responds, "Vi las noticias y la mayoría de ellos son garífunas, y yo sé que vos no visitas los lugares que visitan los negros" (264). Mirian's comment thus alludes to a form of diversity and racial tension in Honduras that disrupts the homogeneity frequently assumed in dominant conceptualizations of Latinx, pan-Central American, or Honduran national identities. Moreover, as Oriel María Siu contends, this episode highlights "the marginal, subalternized position of these bodies within North American society," and "inscribes within the text the failure of these subjects to be recognized as such within hegemonic nations" (101).

With regard to the concept of *Latinidad, Big Banana* interrogates the common tendency to lump U.S. Latinxs into one ethnic group by creating characters with intersecting and sometimes complex identities. Casagrande, for example, is a Chilean-American who moved to San Francisco during the height of the countercultural movements of the 1960s. He shares with Eduardo an interest in Latin American cultural production and a critical stance on U.S. interventionism in Latin America. His sexual identity as a gay man, however, undermines the heteronormative stereotype of male U.S. Latinos as "Latin lovers" in perpetual pursuit of women to seduce (Ramírez Berg 115). Mairena, for his part, laments the fact that he is excluded from being considered a Latino because of his racial identity, whereas Eduardo, a mestizo, falls naturally into this category. Mairena exclaims, "¿Cuántas mujeres te acostaste cuando viviste en mi apartamento? Muchas, entre ellas dos blancas, ¿y por qué? Porque no sos negro. Sos lo que se conoce aquí como latín lover" (268). Despite the *machista* attitude implicit in his argument, the effect of Mairena's comment is to question hegemonic notions of Latinx identity by alluding to the racial assumption of *mestizaje* embedded in the concept of *Latinidad*. Mairena is acutely aware that his blackness does not coincide with the "Latin look" that, as Clara E. Rodríguez maintains, has been constructed in the U.S. mass media (1). Quesada's portrayal of Mairena thus aligns with Vielka Cecilia Hoy's contention that Central American blacks "continue to be invisible as Latin@s" (429).

The group of friends that Eduardo develops further embodies the cultural, linguistic, and ethnic diversity that is often lost in hegemonic conceptualizations of *Latinidad*. His social community is composed of friends from countries and territories as diverse as Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, and Puerto Rico. The linguistic diversity of his companions is highlighted in a conversation with a Colombian who realizes that Eduardo is not Colombian when he doesn't understand his use of Colombian slang, has to explain certain words, and acknowledges that he'll have to speak to him in "español estándar" (126). The textual effect of this dialogue is to insist on the heterogeneity of U.S. Latinx culture. Quesada's decision to include New York City residents with cultural heritages from various parts of Latin America is noteworthy because many of these nationalities do not register on what Cárdenas refers to as the "Latina/o grid of intelligibility." This grid, she contends, created by mass media, U.S. Census categories, and state policies, is arguably dominated by Mexican-Americans, Cuban-Americans, and Puerto Ricans, thereby rendering Latinxs with other cultural heritages unintelligible or illegible to most U.S. citizens (118). The notion that U.S. Central Americans, in particular, are illegible within this system of recognition is present in *Big Banana* in a passage in which Eduardo dreams of having achieved such a degree of career success that he purchases a mansion in Beverly Hills and marries a famous actress. When he proposes that they spend half of the year in the U.S. and half in Honduras, she spreads a map before him and searches for Honduras in Asia. When she can't find it there, she searches for it in Africa (278). Eduardo's fantasy wife thus recognizes him as from "un país del Tercer Mundo," but not as a Latino (174). Similar to Cárdenas's analysis of public perceptions of Honduran-American comedian Carlos Mencia, within the Latinx grid of intelligibility, Eduardo's Honduranness is "decisively viewed as *other* but not exactly a Latina/o *other*" (132 emphasis in original).

Also evident in the novel is the tension between the way in which Latin American immigrants may identify themselves by nationality, ethnicity, and the way in which they are identified in broader U.S. culture, if, indeed they are recognized at all. For example, in one passage the narrator refers to Eduardo as a Honduran actor, but then revises his description to Latin American: "el actor hondureño, o, más bien, por el actor latinoamericano" (371). In contrast to Eduardo's fantasy wife, who is unable to locate Honduras in Latin America, and is thus incapable of identifying Eduardo as occupying even a peripheral space on the Latina/o grid of intelligibility, the narrator does locate Hondurans within *Latinidad*. One the one hand, this could be read as the novel's insistence that U.S. Central Americans deserve a distinct space within *Latinidad*, a space that has not yet been afforded within the current regime of recognition. On the other hand, the narrator's self-correction can simultaneously be read as an acknowledgement of the erasure of national and ethnic identities that often occurs when Latin American immigrants and subsequent generations of family are identified by the more broadly encompassing terms "Latin American" or "Latinx."

As Casagrande gets to know Eduardo better and relinquishes his stereotypes of Hondurans, he expresses his desire to better understand Honduras (335). Indeed, continuing its didactic function, *Big Banana* provides glimpses of insight into Honduran history and culture that offer insight into Eduardo's country of origin. Such insights are an important way in which the novel insists on cultural differences within the concept of *Latinidad*, for, as Allatson has convincingly argued, "whenever Latinidad is evoked it encodes within itself a dialectic between an imagined Latino/a community and the different historical material realities and experiences of diverse Latino/a communities" (138). The novel evokes the unique realities of the Honduran diaspora by making brief historical allusions to events and figures such as Francisco Morazán, whom Eduardo's friend Leo is passionate about. The narrator informs the reader that for Leo:

> Ni el marxismo ni ninguna otra doctrina política podían, para él, compararse con el ideal de su compatriota más importante: Francisco Morazán. Morazán fue un revolucionario de la primera mitad del siglo xix, que intentó reunir a Centroamérica en una sola nación, para hacerla grande y poderosa. Combatió las dictaduras, peleó con honor en varios países de Centroamérica. (154)

Morazán also appears in a passage in which Eduardo's girlfriend Mirian reflects on the historical figure as she passes his statue in Tegucigalpa: "imaginó, como si viviera una película, al revolucionario Morazán en pleno combate, espadeando sin darle tregua al enemigo, buscando la manera, a través de las armas y las ideas, de convertir a Centroamérica en una sola nación, grande y poderosa y que se diera a respetar frente a otros mundos" (51). The inclusion of references to and images of Morazán in the novel gestures at yet another complexity with regard to the identity of (U.S.) Central Americans. As Cárdenas has convincingly argued, the history of Central America, and, in particular, the brief existence of the Central American Federation (1824-1838), which consisted of Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, has enabled (U.S.) Central Americans to simultaneously assert two national identities (73). Within this conceptualization, Central America as nation is recognized as a "*patria grande*," whereas the individual nation-states of the defunct Central American Federation are understood as the "*patria chica*." Cárdenas explains, "There is a symbiotic relationship between the *patria grande* and the *patria chica*, as one does not negate the other; via its histories, mythos, and political rhetoric, the *patria grande* is always spectrally present in the *patria chica*" (26). Leo's devotion to Francisco Morazán in *Big Banana* suggests that Central America as *patria grande* is central to his identity, and thus alludes to a form of dual nationalism that, as Cárdenas asserts, "is one of the unique features of a Central American diasporic identity" (52). A secondary effect of the references to Morazán is to contrast his power and idealism with the stereotype of Hondurans as subservient neo-colonial subjects. The text acknowledges the poverty and corruption that exist in Honduras but offers a symbol of hope in one of Honduras's great leaders and the democratic ideals for which he stood (287).

In other instances, references to Honduran and Central American history present a critique of U.S. imperialism. For example, Casagrande takes jabs at Eduardo such as "En Honduras sólo producen bases militares yanquis, ¿verdad, huevón?" (34) and "sin tomar en cuenta las bananas ni las piñas, porque se cultivan allá, pero no son de ustedes, ¿qué más producen?" (35). Such dialogue, reminiscent of similar critiques of military imperialism and economic neocolonialism made in Quesada's 1988 novel *Los barcos*, evokes the ubiquitous presence of the U.S. military in Honduras and its role as the staging ground for counterrevolutionary movements in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. As Medea Benjamin explains:

> In the 1980s Honduras, once the sleepy backwater of Central America, suddenly became the nerve center for U.S. policy in the region. The Sandinistas were in power in Nicaragua, and in El Salvador the growing strength of the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) threatened to topple the U.S.-backed Salvadoran government. The U.S. government, appalled by the specter of left-wing governments in "its back yard," saw Honduras as key to its geopolitical interests. (xviii)

Although Eduardo is resentful of the U.S. military's presence in Honduras and its interventions throughout the region, he also acknowledges the role of Honduran politicians in allowing their country to become in thrall to U.S. interests. The narrator reveals Eduardo's feelings on the neocolonial status of his country:

> Eduardo fue presentado por Andrea e inmediatamente los colombianos hicieron bromas sobre Honduras debido a la ocupación militar. Sintió rancor contra los políticos de su país pues ellos, más que los propios estadounidenses, poseían el mayor número de culpas de que Honduras fuese tan irrespetado. La ambición e ignorancia de la mayoría de los políticos hondureños de afirmar y firmar todo por unos cuantos dólares tenía el país tan desprestigiado que no eran pocos los hondureños en el exterior que cuando les preguntaban su nacionalidad respondían centroamericano, y si el que preguntaba insistía en que fuera más específico, el hondureño se apropiaba la nacionalidad del vecino más inmediato: El Salvador, Guatemala o Nicaragua. (182)

Eduardo astutely observes that the colonization and neo-colonization of Central America has led to structural inequalities, and that the root of the rebellions in Central America that the U.S. has repeatedly suppressed is an enduring lack of social justice. He argues, "Puede haber paz por algún tiempo, pero si perdura como hasta ahora la injusticia social, más temprano que tarde volverá la guerra a Centroamérica, aunque no sea una rebelión marxista ni nada por el estilo, simplemente una rebelión a causa de que la gente no aguanta tanta miseria que produce la injusticia" (184). Notably, the U.S. military bases in Honduras have repeatedly been used to quell political movements across the region aimed at addressing the forms of social injustice Eduardo alludes to. Other critiques of U.S. imperialism in the novel include historical references to the U.S. invasions of Grenada in 1983 and Panama in 1989, the 1988 burning of the U.S. embassy in Tegucigalpa, foreign exploitation of forests, and the 1990 fall of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua as a result of the Contra War. Eduardo and his missionary friend Julio succinctly summarize the dynamics of neo-colonization in a conversation about the construction of military bases in Honduras and the U.S. view of Central

America as its "backyard:" "Los países pobres estarán sometidos a los países ricos. ¿Cómo puede un país pobre negarse a ello? Lo mejor sería que los países no fueran tan abusivos, dieran la oportunidad de negociar a los países pobres" (287).

The overall impact of the historical references, the dialogues about military imperialism, and the discussions of economic neo-colonization in *Big Banana* is to provide insight into the underlying historical circumstances and systemic inequalities that compel Hondurans and other Central Americans to migrate to the United States. The creation of characters such as Mairena, with complex ethnic, national, and transnational identities sheds light on the heterogeneity of Central American diasporic communities. Moreover, the presence of characters from various Latin American countries underscores the diversity of the Latin American diaspora in the U.S., thereby differentiating important cultural characteristics and carving out a unique space for U.S. Central Americans within the broader Latinx demographic. The question of visibility is raised in the novel when Eduardo's friend Javier inquires, "dicen que viven más de cien mil hondureños, ciento cincuenta mil, dicen. ¿Y dónde están? ¿Qué hacen? ¿Por qué nadie los ve?" (87) Javier's questions resonate with Arturo Arias's assertions regarding the invisibility of U.S. Central Americans. Arias argues that Central American immigrants, "remain 'invisible' to the great majority of U.S. citizens despite their overwhelming presence in the country, particularly since the wars fought in the 1980s, when three to four million Central Americans fled from the nightmare of violence" to seek refuge in the United States (202). Through its literary representation of Honduran immigrants in the U.S., *Big Banana* takes a modest step toward increasing the visibility of the Honduran diaspora in New York, and sheds light on the challenges that many U.S. Central Americans face.

Quesada's 2002 novel *Nunca entres por Miami* offers similar insights into the Central American diaspora. It is the story of Elías, a sculptor from Tegucigalpa, seeking to create a new life in New York City and earn enough money to purchase a flight to bring his girlfriend Helena from Honduras to the United States as well. The narrative begins in the Miami International Airport at the immigration checkpoint with the protagonist fearing that the door to his dream of entering the U.S. will be abruptly closed on him because he hasn't purchased a return ticket to accompany his six-month visa. After several tense hours of questioning and waiting, he is finally allowed to enter and continues on to New York City where he finds work as a waiter and settles in with a fellow Central American who works at the same restaurant. Helena and her meddling mother Dina desperately await Elías's phone calls hoping for news that their dreams of moving to Miami will soon come true. With their unrealistic vision of living in Miami, based on the luxurious lifestyles that they have seen in magazines, they are determined to make it to the city of their dreams, and are thus distraught when Elías insists that Helena should never enter through Miami because he claims to have been traumatized by his experience with customs and immigration (in spite of the fact that, as his perplexed roommate likes to remind him, the agent eventually allows him to enter even though he does not have a return ticket, as regulations stipulate.) When Elías finally earns enough money, he sends it to Tegucigalpa, and Helena and Dina purchase a ticket to Miami against Elias's will. Upon arrival in Miami, Helena flirts with the same agent that stamped Elías's passport, ends up marrying him, and thus never makes it to New York to reunite with Elías. Despite this humorous and whimsical plot, *Nunca entres por Miami*, like *Big Banana*, makes several serious social commentaries related to the visibility of the Central American diaspora, the challenges that it faces, and the historical reasons for its existence.

First, by portraying the challenges that Central American immigrants face, and by linking their migration with the history of U.S. intervention in the isthmus, *Nunca entres por Miami* takes a small step towards increasing the visibility of U.S. Central Americans who, for Arias, have failed to establish a distinct identity in the cultural landscape of the United States, often accepting invisibility as a survival strategy, or preferring to pass as Mexican, which for political reasons was seen as less threatening in the context of the Civil Wars. Therefore, asserts Arias, "They have not organized themselves around a name, around identity politics, and thus remain invisible in the fractured landscape of multiculturalism" (192).

Quesada primarily creates a distinct Central American identity for Elías and his roommate Mario by connecting them to the history of Central America. In doing so, the novel aligns with what Juan Flores describes as the analytical approach to Latino unity and diversity. He maintains:

> From a Latino perspective, analysis is guided above all by lived experience and historical memory, factors which tend to be relegated by the dominant approach as either inaccessible or inconsequential. [. . .] Differences are drawn among and within the groups not so as to divide or categorize for the sake of more efficient manipulation, but to ensure that social identities, actions, and alliances are adequately grounded in the specific historical experiences and cultural practices that people recognize as their own. (187)

An early example of the novel's emphasis on specific historical experiences is found in the novel's opening scene as Elías grows impatient with the customs agent. He argues, "No soy un asesino, no soy ladrón, soy simplemente un artista. Es increíble que esto pueda suceder, ustedes envían a quien les da la gana a mi país. Los hemos dejado que instalen más de veinte bases militares. Han hecho para ustedes y sus guerras tres aeropuertos" (18). This is the first glimpse of the entangled histories of the U.S. and Honduras in the novel, alluding to the fact that, as LaFeber acknowledges, "Honduras had become so important for U.S. covert operations against Guatemala in 1954 and then Nicaragua in the 1980s that one expert called it 'the USS Honduras, a [stationary] aircraft carrier of sorts'" (310). Nevertheless, when Elías makes a similar argument to Mario later on in the novel, suggesting that the U.S. has a moral obligation to allow Honduran citizens to immigrate because of his country's cooperation with the U.S. military during the Central American revolutions, Mario admonishes him: "Qué bárbaro, debería darte vergüenza utilizar la tortura y la muerte de compatriotas para establecerte aquí" (108).

By contrast, Mario, who was the leader of a leftist student organization in his country before the fall of the Soviet Union, is conflicted about the fact that he now lives in the U.S. He is proud of his militant past and couldn't bare the hypocrisy of his former colleagues, who once denounced their country's corruption, now rejecting their leftist roots and fighting over governmental posts. Ironically, though, he decided to leave for the United States. The following passage captures his conflicted relationship with his current country of residence:

> Cuando Estados Unidos invadió Panamá lloró de la impotencia, de tristeza por no poder hacer nada. Se sintió más traidor que nunca al vivir en el país que se especializaba en invadir los suyos, en dictar las pautas a seguir en todas las manifestaciones de la vida. Veía aquellas escenas de marines disparando en medio de humaredas en la ciudad de Panamá y se llamaba a sí mismo cobarde. Lo único que pudo hacer ante la indignación fue vengarse con la persona menos indicada: su novia, una chica estadounidense pero absolutamente inconsciente no sólo de la política que su país aplicaba extra fronteras, sino de la política en sí. (117)

The description in this passage of marines actively invading a sovereign Central American country underscores the broader history of U.S. imperialism in the region that, as Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández suggest, has played an integral role in creating the Central American diaspora in the U.S. (5).

Through a conversation between Elías and Mario, Quesada also reminds the reader that U.S. interventionism in Latin America has not been limited to Central America. In Mario's insistence that Elías should forget about Helena and marry Laura, who has fallen in love with Elías, he argues that she is not to blame for the sordid history of the U.S. military and CIA in Latin America:

> Tampoco es culpable de que los sandinistas perdieran el poder en Nicaragua, ni del asesinato de Salvador Allende, de que la guerra en El Salvador haya dejado tantas muertes, de los treinta mil desaparecidos en Argentina, de que Honduras se haya convertido en una inmensa base militar extranjera, de que Costa Rica se volviera cómplice de Estados Unidos, de que en Guatemala continúen maltratando a los indígenas… (127)

Although not explicitly stated, the references to Central America in this passage allude to the fact that U.S. support for right wing military governments during the 1970s and 1980s resulted in the massacres in El Salvador, the genocide in Guatemala, the disappearances in Honduras, and the political instability in Nicaragua, which, as Juan González has thoroughly documented in *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, led so many Central Americans to flee their countries and seek refuge in the United States. As LaFeber notes in his historical analysis of the U.S. in Central America, "the years from 1979 to 1991 turned out to be the bloodiest, most violent, and most destructive era in Central America's post 1820 history" (362). This context renders lines from the novel such as the following all the more ironic: "Eran tiempos difíciles; se anunciaban deportaciones masivas de inmigrantes hacia sus respectivos países. Las leyes cambiaban con una velocidad espeluznante. El blanco más directo eran los inmigrantes latinoamericanos" (99). In spite of its role in supporting state-sponsored torture, assassinations, and genocide in the region, as Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández point out, the official U.S. response was to deny refugee status to Central American immigrants during this period of upheaval, preferring to designate them as "economic migrants" (9). The result of this policy, they argue, was that large proportions of Central American immigrants were relegated to undocumented status, thereby predetermining "their precarious economic and social stability" (9). This history of Central American migration to the U.S. is evoked in the novel through its repeated references to U.S. imperialism in the region.

The topic of migration is the central focus of the key chapter “Así se bate el cobre,” in which governmental representatives from several Latin American countries organize a seminar about immigration in response to a crisis of deportation. The climax of the chapter is a speech by the Consul of Ecuador in New York, who challenges his audience to consider immigration from a biological perspective as a completely natural process that is necessary as a survival mechanism. He asks, “¿Cómo es posible que este ser, [el ser humano] realmente tan minúsculo desde el punto de vista zoológico, tan incipiente en un proceso evolutivo, sea el único que cierra las puertas a otros de su misma especie?” (102), and then continues on to a historical overview of human migration beginning with the movement out of Africa to Europe and Asia and then from Asia to the Americas. When the Mongols first arrived in Alaska, he reminds the audience, they did not find uniformed officers requesting their passports and visas, impeding what he refers to as “el derecho inmanente a la movilidad y a la ubicación” (104). With the dawn of feudalism and the creation of borders, asserts the consul, this right was annulled, a trend which continues in the era of nation-states:

> El estado es una figura jurídica novísima; es un resultado del intelecto; es una creación del ser humano, muy nueva y, sin embargo, ya vieja, obsoleta y anticuada, ya no soporta los nuevos cambios. El estado hereda del feudo el concepto de autoridad divina para ser ‘soberanía’, y aquello de la frontera pasa a ser el límite, la obra domadora de la frontera. De esa manera el planeta Tierra queda dividido en corrales que se llaman estados y el ser humano se queda adentro como un animal doméstico: ‘Prohibido entrar, prohibido salir’. Se acabó el derecho inmanente, inalienable de la movilidad y la ubicación. Los estados modernos reemplazan al señor feudal [. . .] Y los esclavos de la gleba son los países tercermundistas. (105)

He concludes his speech by reaffirming the biological necessity of migration: “Las migraciones son movimientos naturales espontáneos y además legítimos, que no se detienen con leyes, ni con reglamento, ni con prohibiciones o sanciones. Y no valen muros, no valen murallas, ni siquiera las de acero inoxidable [. . .] De tal suerte que no hay justificación alguna de esta actitud antiinmigrante, injusta, incierta, ingrata, porque todos los seres humanos en algún momento son, han sido, o serán inmigrantes” (105-107). The Consul’s talk in this chapter thus provides a counter-discourse to anti-immigrant rhetoric by reminding the reader that migration is a natural phenomenon that is often necessary for survival and, further, by suggesting that migration is an inalienable human right. His speech echoes the sentiment expressed by Eduardo in *Big Banana* when he argues, “el mundo debería de ser de todos. Los papeles los inventamos los hombres. Como habitantes de este planeta deberíamos de vivir en el lugar que más nos plazca sin ninguna restricción” (32).

By telling stories of Honduran immigrants trying to make it in New York and underscoring the interconnected histories of the U.S. and Central America, *Nunca entres por Miami* and *Big Banana* recreate the ‘in-between space’ and ‘in-between moment’ of the Central American diaspora and can be read as enunciations of what Ana Patricia Rodríguez posits as transisthmian cultural production (Bhabha quoted in Rodríguez 194). The transisthmus, for Rodríguez, is “an imaginary yet material space—[…] a spatial periodizing term and [. . .] a ‘cultural provision’ for reading Central American literatures and cultures outside of categories that up to now have elided larger regional complexities” (2). Rodríguez maintains that “Central American narratives transect and transcend national political boundaries and traverse the entire region, destabilizing not only insular and isolationist notions of national literatures but also integrative and holistic readings of the Central American region and its cultures and peoples” (3). Noting the importance of Central American transnational migration, Rodríguez includes cultural production from the Central American diaspora in her concept of the transisthmus, arguing that the art, music, and literature emanating from Salvadoran communities in the Washington D.C. area “challenge hegemonic versions of history and deconstruct national mythologies” (194). Similarly, *Big Banana*’s attention to racial and ethnic identity undermines the “myth-building efforts” identified by Amason Montero “to construct a national identity based on an imagined indigeneity in which the subject holds pride in having an indigenous heritage as long as it is associated with the grand culture of yesteryears, and as long as he or she doesn’t appear to be racially ‘too indio’” (4-5). *Nunca entres por Miami* deconstructs the myth that everyone who reaches the U.S. will become wealthy and lead a life of luxury. Both novels, similar to the works Rodríguez analyzes from “Departamento 15,” challenge the hegemonic version of the history of U.S. foreign policy in Latin America that would maintain that propping up right wing dictators, assisting with the suppression of so-called subversive elements, and overthrowing democratically-elected socialist governments was a necessary Cold War strategy. Both novels emphasize that many of these policies had tremendous adverse consequences for the citizens of Latin America. In this sense *Big Banana* and *Nunca entres por Miami* offer a critique of U.S. imperialism launched from within the empire itself. Quesada’s novels are thus reflective of the notion of resistance that Héctor Tobar maintains is central U.S. Latinx identity, as characters from both texts grapple with “how their life stories fit inside a larger narrative of colony and empire" (283). Moreover, as evidenced by the Ecuadorean Consul's discourse and Eduardo's philosophy of migration, both novels also challenge the very concept of nationhood that underpins anti-immigrant nationalist rhetoric.

Big Banana and *Nunca entres por Miami* are but two examples of a wave of cultural production focusing on the Central American diaspora published over the last two decades, a trend that is likely to continue. As Rodríguez notes, "Regional economic, political, social, and environmental issues will continue to be determining factors in people's decisions to emigrate from the Central American isthmus and resettle in specific locations in the United States and elsewhere" (180). Indeed, as Nicholas Kristof points out in a 2016 New York Times editorial, "In the last five years, Mexico and the U.S. have deported 800,000 people to Central America, including 40,000 children, according to the Migration Policy Institute" (Kristof 11). The U.S., he argues, "must work at the highest levels with Honduras and El Salvador to address the chaos in those countries, particularly because the U.S. bears some responsibility for the problems: The Central American street gangs were born in the United States and traveled with deportees to countries like El Salvador" (Kristof 11). Although the historical context has changed and the crisis has shifted from civil wars to drug-trafficking and gang violence, one might speculate that the characters from Quesada's novels, and Mario, in particular, would agree with Kristof, given that the U.S. also bore some responsibility for the prolonged violence of the wars in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, and thus for the massive waves of migration to the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s. Novelists such as Quesada, Mario Bencastro, Francisco Goldman, Claudia D. Hernández, Héctor Tobar, and Adolfo Méndez Vides, as well as poets such as Leticia Hernández-Linares, Quique Áviles, and Maya Chinchilla, to name just a few, are helping to raise consciousness about issues of Central American migration and make U.S. Central Americans more visible.[3] This is precisely what *Big Banana* and *Nunca entres por Miami* achieve by portraying a glimpse of what Arias refers to as "life on the margins of those marginal hyphenated others (Cuban-Americans, Mexican-Americans)" (186). Many of the obstacles that the protagonists face as newly arrived immigrants are no different than those faced by many other émigrés, Latin American or otherwise. These include confronting stereotypes, anonymity, linguistic challenges, separation from loved ones, and the prospect of failure, among others. However, one important component of their identities that distinguishes these Central American characters from Cuban-Americans or Mexican-Americans is their connection with the unique history of Central America and its conflicted relations with the United States. By rooting these characters firmly within the framework of *Latinidad* and connecting them to the history of U.S. economic and military imperialism in Central America, Quesada's novels make U.S. Central Americans more intelligible to readers previously unacquainted with their histories. Through their textual renderings of the liminal space of the Central American diaspora, their critiques of U.S. interventionism in Central America, their confrontation with stereotypes and anti-immigrant, nationalistic rhetoric, *Big Banana* and *Nunca entres por Miami* make a move towards establishing the identity politics that Arias asserts will be necessary for U.S. Central Americans to emerge as a unique, recognizable, and influential entity in the multicultural landscape of the United States in the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Whereas some scholars have used the terms "Central American-American" and "American Central American," I follow Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández in their use of U.S. Central American. They argue, "The placement of 'U.S.' before Central American recognizes the social and national location from which we as members of the Central American diaspora construct our identities, histories, communities, and cultures. It brings attention to the presence, often via violent interventions, of the United States in the isthmus, which resulted in the migration of thousands of Central Americans to the United States" (29).
2. Amason Montero points out that Mairena's own identification in the novel as "negro" "does not take into consideration any nuances such as the Garífuna's hybrid ethnic identity of being black and indigenous," but potentially provides the opportunity for him "to adhere to a more monolithic identity" (140-141). She views Mairena's role in the novel as a Garífuna Afro-Latino as a construction of Garífuna homelessness, suggesting that "whereas Ladinos cannot repress their desire to return to this home, the Garífuna can potentially reject Honduras as a home" (122).
3. Méndez Vides's 1998 novel *Las murallas* provides an interesting comparison with Quesada's novels as it narrates the challenges and experiences of two Guatemalan immigrants in New York City.

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