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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA
RIVERSIDE

Racial Passages: Central American Migrants and the Condition of Non-Belonging

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Alejandro Villalpando

September 2018

Dissertation Committee:

Dr. Anthony Macias, Chairperson

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2018

The Dissertation of Alejandro Villalpando is approved:

Committee Chairperson

University of California, Riverside

My ancestors are my wildest dreams and I dedicate this project to them and the many whose lives involve an urgent desire to exist and survive. Gracias.

Many teachers and teachings have nourished my intellectual endeavors. I find myself in perpetual gratitude for the love, support, and guidance I have received throughout my journey. To my sunshine, Mayasol, I love you. To my partner, accomplice, and co-conspirator, Susie, I am forever inspired by your existence. To Maria Consuelo Cayax, I am what I am because you are who you are. To Alejandro M. Villalpando, you have given me a true gift in this life. I respect and love you. And finally, Adrian, I will see you one day. Hold me down when I get there, my boy.

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Racial Passages: Central Americans and the Condition of Non-Belonging

by

Alejandro Villalpando

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Ethnic Studies
University of California, Riverside, September 2018
Dr. Anthon Macias, Chairperson

Racial Passages: Central American Migrants and the Condition of Non-Belonging examines the link between U.S. hemispheric dominance and Mexican settler-colonial power. Through an examination of the lives and experiences of Central American migrants, I demonstrate that the exploitation and policing of Central American subjects by Mexican state agents reinforces and advances the United States of America's imperial, political, and economic reach beyond Mexico's southern border, simultaneously facilitating the Mexican nation-state's enforcement of its own physical and discursive borders. The collusion between the U.S. and Mexican governments in their respective and shared wars on drugs and terror results in dire consequences for displaced Central Americans. Rooted within the intellectual genealogies of decolonial epistemologies and anti-imperial social movements focused on the relation between U.S. imperialism and Mexican, as well as Central American, colonial nation-building practices, *Racial Passages* maps the discursive

and physical violence on Central American populations, highlighting historical continuities of colonial systems that produce hyper-vulnerable Central American subjects outside of space and time.

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Introduction

In the early days of January, 2007, Mayan Q'eqchi' farmers of El Estor, in the eastern Guatemalan department of Izabal, were violently evicted from their lands in order to make way for nickel mines, representing profitable progress. Hundreds of soldiers marched into these indigenous lands and met spontaneous resistance from the Q'eqchi' people. Part of the encounter was caught on video by a documentary filmmaker, Steven Schnoor, a doctoral student from York University.¹ On January 9th homes were burned in one of the small villages as the indigenous residents watched. The expressions of violence and power continued, culminating in a tremendously traumatic event on January 17th, according to testimony from eleven indigenous women. Irma Yolanda Choc Cac was one of the victims of the alleged gang rape and sexual assault in the small town of Lote Ocho. Armed men descended on the women while the community's men were out in the fields tending to crops. Choc Cac, three months pregnant at the time of the attack, was accompanied by her ten-year-old daughter. She has stated that a dozen men raped her. Choc Cac suffered a miscarriage².

On August 24th, 2010, seventy-two migrants traversing Mexico on their way to the United States were executed in an abandoned ranch in the small town of San Fernando in the northern state of Tamaulipas. Many of the victims were found with their hands tied behind their backs, with bullet wounds to their heads, strewn alongside two perpendicular walls in an abandoned warehouse. Pictures of the gruesome discovery show that the victims were blindfolded at the time of their

murders. Of the seventy-two migrants, sixty-eight hailed from Central America, the other four from South America, fourteen women and fifty-eight men. They spent their last minutes on Earth one hundred miles south of the United States and thousands of miles away from their families and loved ones.

Less than two weeks later, on September 5th in the Westlake area just east of Downtown Los Angeles, a Mayan day laborer named Manuel Jaminez Xum was shot twice and killed at close proximity by a Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) officer. This violent death reverberated throughout both the Pico-Union neighborhood and the Mayan village of Xexac in the Guatemalan department of Solola. Six months later, on March 15th, 2011 the LAPD announced that its internal investigation ruled the killing of Jaminez Xum to be within policy, and that no charges were filed against the officer who ended the Mayan man's life that day. The officer who fired the two fatal shots said he felt that he was being considerate of the surrounding community by aiming at Jaminez Xum's head³.

These spectacular and heartbreaking accounts of extra-legal and state-sanctioned violence upon diverse Central American bodies in the Isthmus, Mexico, and the United States via Los Angeles highlight the heart of this dissertation. The dispossession of Indigenous peoples' lands in the Isthmus has survived beyond formal colonialism as evidenced by the violence in Lote Ocho. The continued incursion onto native land has served to disrupt and displace Indigenous and working-class Central Americans within the Isthmus and beyond. They "beyond" is often unknown and fraught with danger, peril, and uncertainty. The life and death of

Jaminez Xum demonstrate the indelible imprints of the past scripted on communities and individuals in the present. Jaminez Xum's transnational story was one shaped by the very same forces that seized upon the lands of the Q'eqchi' community of El Estor. These seemingly disparate moments illuminate much when we think of them as historically intertwined. "The tradition of the oppressed," Walter Benjamin asserts, "teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."⁴ The history of race, gender, and power in Mesoamerica from Conquest to the present must be taken into account when thinking about contemporary moments of crises that marginalized Central Americans are currently confronting.

These three inter-related violent events introduce the ways in which Central American subjects attempt to navigate the convergence of a multitude of historic and structural forces through migration, resettlement, and active, organized resistance to the vicissitudes of transnational global capitalism. Central Americans' attempts to survive as individuals and collectively are refuted with unimaginable, intricately linked forces that create a pervasive condition of non-belonging. Further, the violent gauntlet Central Americans confront does not always culminate in sensationally tragic conclusions. Central Americans also encounter what Rob Nixon terms "slow violence," which he defines as "violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all."⁵ The history of Central American subjects is lived between the instantaneous forms of violence

during conquest, colonization, and genocidal civil wars and the drawn out, incremental violence involved in development, settlement, and vexed pathways towards political and economic development. The tragedy of Central American histories lies in their relative invisibility and illegibility. By illuminating variegated examples of immediate and accretive violence on racialized and gendered Central American bodies, communities, and lands, while marking their relative obscurity in the academic, journalistic, and popular historical memory, I contend that Central Americans' visibility and legibility only become possible to outsiders through crises.

Racial Passages: Central American Migrants and the Condition of Non-Belonging examines the link between U.S. hemispheric dominance and Mexican settler-colonial power. By analyzing the lives and experiences of Central American migrants, I demonstrate that the exploitation and policing of Central American subjects by Mexican state agents reinforces and furthers the United States' imperial, political, and economic reach beyond Mexico's southern border, simultaneously facilitating the Mexican nation-state's enforcement of its own physical and discursive borders. The collusion between the United States and Mexican governments in their respective and shared wars on drugs and terror results in dire consequences for displaced Central Americans. Rooted within the intellectual genealogies of decolonial epistemologies and anti-imperial social movements focused on the relation between U.S. imperialism and Mexican, as well as Central American, colonial nation-building practices, *Racial Passages* maps the discursive and physical violence on Central American populations, highlighting historical

continuities of colonial systems that produce hyper-vulnerable Central American subjects outside of space and time. Colonialism exists in the present moment rather than the past and, I argue, that the multiple forms of violence on racialized and gendered populations is necessitated by the maintenance of U.S. and Central American nation-states in their perpetual march towards “progress” and global power. As such, my dissertation addresses the following questions: How do the perilous passages taken by Central Americans through Mexican territory reflect historic practices of racist and settler-colonial state violence? In what ways are the dangers associated with being an undocumented Central American in Mexico indicative of Spanish colonial residues in contemporary nation-building projects? How does the large influx of racially and ethnically diverse Central American migrants complicate common hegemonic notions of (Mexicanized) *Latinidad*, and how does this shape the often-contentious relationships between Mexican and Central American communities in Los Angeles?

In examining the *longue durée* of history, my research uncovers the ways Central Americans embody a rupture of imperial linear visions of time and space. Intra-isthmus displacement, transmigration in Mexico, and efforts to reach and ultimately settle in the United States represent continuity from the epoch of formalized Spanish colonialism to present settler-colonial, white supremacist neoliberal nation-building projects. In other words, Central American movement, existence, and survival strategies through migration need to be linked to longer histories of conquest, land exploitation, and genocide to emphasize how Central

Americans produce dynamic modalities of being a human outside the parameters of western recognition. When pressed in media, interviews, and in documentaries, Central American migrants discuss embarking on uncertain journeys as efforts to help their families and loved ones survive or live a better life. These consistent expressions disrupt facile narratives of migrants fleeing violence by revealing migration as a collective approach to navigating the slow violence brought forth by militarization, neoliberalism, and imperialism. Linking over five centuries of history can be easily dismissed as essentialist or reductive; however, these linkages elucidate colonial residues that structure the principles of modern borders, laws, and nations and the ways these projects continue to create hyper-vulnerable subjects. Consequently, the condition of non-belonging generates radically pragmatic approaches to survival.

Central America is a site of collisions from all over the world due to conquest, colonialism, and settler colonialism. As such, employing a category as diverse and fraught as Central American requires clarification. There is no quintessential Central American experience. Indigenous peoples, Afro-descended communities, and European conquistadors and settlers compose the majority of the Isthmus. My project focuses on the structural locations and tensions that emerge historically between these three central components. I look into historic expressions of specific forms of Central American identity rooted in resistance struggles and fights for liberation. My intention is not to argue that there exists a homogenous and essential Central American experience across time and space and lose the specificities along

racial, ethnic, gender, and territorial lines. I privilege Central American as an identity to demonstrate shared histories experienced on the land of the Isthmus and the people of the Isthmus to indict the violently racist and heteropatriarchal social orders that emerge from and continue to be animated by the rubrics of (settler) colonialism. Central American in this dissertation comes to categorically represent the racialized populations who have been rendered disposable elements of Central American nationalisms. In addition, this historic disposability has led to the expulsion of these vulnerable populations and has subjected them to distinct and foreign terrains where they experience different modes of racializations the further amplify their precarious condition. The Central Americans featured in this work are the ones that have clawed their way for survival in the face of insurmountable odds only to continue to face more violence and walls.

In this sense, I follow Ana Patricia Rodriguez, Central American Studies scholar and literary critic, who declares the need for “transisthmian critical practices [...] to respond to hegemonic regional cultural agendas sweeping through the isthmus.”⁶ The articulation of a Central American identity is exemplified by a three-day convocation of Latin American and Caribbean feminists in Taxco, Guerrero, Mexico in 1987. The focus of the *encuentro* was to center Central American women’s experiences from the war-torn nations of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua and the countries that were receiving refugees from their neighbors, Costa Rica and Honduras. The title and trajectory of the conference are emblematic of how I envision a Central American identity: *Mujer Centroamericana*,

Violencia y Guerra (Central American Women, Violence and War). Central American gendered identities were being imagined through a solidarity framework that produced dynamic political, intellectual, and social understandings of the disruptions that war, militarism, and imperialism were catalyzing throughout the region. By no means does this indicate a perfect or completely symbiotic process of unity but these bonding meetings and productions of a Central American identity gave voice to shared struggles against racialized and gendered state-violence without losing the specificity of each distinct region and group of women.⁷ Struggle against the condition of non-belonging has bonded the Central American populations in question in this dissertation.

Revolutionary struggles against military and authoritarian regimes throughout the Isthmus brought global attention to Central America from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. However, this attention tended to obscure or objectify the voices of the most vulnerable to state-sanctioned genocidal violence. The aftermath of war shrouded some Central Americans within the Isthmus and those ejected from the region in secrecy. Widening my lens to envelop Central Americans from different regional, racial, ethnic, and gendered backgrounds also serves to ameliorate the deafening silence and invisibility that many Central Americans in the Isthmus and the diaspora confront. Central American Studies scholar and sociologist Leisy Abrego illuminates this battle for Central Americans through her analysis of Salvadoran silences:

There is the silence that is the large void in generations of children of Salvadoran immigrants growing up in the US being denied access to our own histories (*Children of the Diaspora 2013*). There is the silence that was filled by others who did not know how to understand us and so used stereotypes and imposed their own experiences to make sense of who we are. And we continue to reproduce the silences when we do not know, cannot locate, have never been told of the structural, political, and economic sources of our collective pain, of our collective resilience.⁸

While Abrego's analysis indicates a focus on the condition of Salvadoran refugees (whether officially recognized as such or not), it also encapsulates a relational experience by other Central American displaced populations. On February 1st, 2018, Daniel Alvarenga, a Salvadoran-American queer digital journalist for Al-Jazeera Plus sparked a conversation with the following message on the microblogging social media platform Twitter: "Salvi war trauma is my dad being afraid of me fronting presenter pieces of me criticizing (sic) the govt."⁹ Within minutes, Central American Studies scholar Ester Trujillo responded and began the hashtag #SalviWarTrauma with the following tweet: "Salvi war trauma is mom saying, 'Those are the first who get killed,' when I told her I got a job as a university professor. #SalviWarTrauma."¹⁰ The hashtag quickly expanded with multiple users citing examples of the lasting legacies of civil wars and displacement. By the early afternoon Alvarenga decided to expand the hashtag to include the collective Central American diaspora under the hashtag #CentAmWarTrauma.¹¹ Hundreds of examples have been shared since, which speak to how a collective sense of Central American identity is galvanized for Central Americans in diaspora, particularly for first-, 1.5, and second-generation Central American youth finding their identities in the Latina/o milieu of the United

States. Further, I wish to suggest that it is in the telling, performing, and being heard and seen that Central American identity development (and formation for many) becomes a site of healing and transformation. Finally, I echo the work of Central American Studies scholar Steven Osuna when he posits, "(l)earning through peoples' subjectivity is key to explaining the complexities of the social formation and allows [us] to make larger connections to global processes and power relations."¹²

Crises, Apparitions, and the Fleeting: Central Americans and the Outskirts of Latina/o Studies

As an adolescent I visited my family in Guatemala for the fourth time in my young life. The year was 1995 and the country was nearing the end of its 36-year long genocidal civil war. I remember coming across an image of a bearded, longhaired man in my family's makeshift library. The pictures, engravings of this individual were sharply imprinted in my mind. The images were of the Argentinian doctor turned revolutionary, Ernesto "Che" Guevara. My aunt's husband had been involved in organizing rural communities via his work as an educator. My aunt was associated with this advocacy work as an educator as well. I grew up listening to my mother, who had left Guatemala in 1973, speak, sometimes derisively, of the locuras (crazy things) that her sister and brother-in-law were involved in back in Guatemala. These memories piqued my intellectual curiosity about the history of Guatemala and the militarization of the country I had visited from the late 1980s through the mid 1990s during a civil war. One thing became clear: I rarely came across information about Guatemala or any of the other Central American countries

in school. The little I knew came through conversations with my mother and my Central American peers growing up in South Central Los Angeles.

My desire to learn more about my mother's country and story led me to an undergraduate history course on Latin American revolutions at the University of California, San Diego. I learned about the uprisings in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua against U.S. funded and backed authoritarian regimes and paramilitary forces. I was exposed to a history that made my mother's own indigenous heritage come into full focus. This foray into Latin American history led me to major in History, with specializations in both the United States and Latin America. I took multiple classes on Mexican, Brazilian, and Southern Cone history. I studied the long shadow cast by United States military, economic, and political influence on Mexico and South America. I was taught plenty of history involving the Chicano Movement in the United States, but provided little to no knowledge about Central Americans in the United States like my mother, my neighbors, or myself. Upon finishing my degree, I reflected on the lack of attention, the paucity of recognition beyond that initial class on Central America and Central Americans. I began to question why a region so central to questions of U.S. national security during the Cold War remained relatively obscure in the study of Latin America.

After entering the Masters program in Latin American Studies at California State University, Los Angeles I quickly became aware that there was indeed a deep tradition of studying Central America. Early examples of North American-based inquiry into Central America resides in the travel logs of John Lee Stephens through

his two-volume *Incidents of Travel in Central America, Chiapas, and Yucatan*. While the title of the book betrays notions of innocent travel by one person, Stephens' trip to Southern Mexico and Central America was requested by then President of the United States Martin Van Buren. The memoir lays out the ways white men from the United States would interpret and engage with the Isthmus in the next few decades. Stephens was struck by the ways race, specifically Blackness and Indigeneity, were operationalized differently than in the United States. Familiarity arises throughout his writing, as the treatment of Blacks and Indigenous people was still relatively unequal. The wars throughout the Isthmus from 1960 to 1996 inspired a wide range of scholarship analyzing wars, the causes leading to revolutionary movements, analyses of wars, and the legacies of the violence. For instance, monumental publications like Walter Lafeber's *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* are emblematic of the attention given to Central America by historians, political scientists, and Latin American Studies scholars. LaFeber details the history of United States aggression in the Central American Isthmus along with the global and local political catalysts and consequences of these incursions. The historians Greg Grandin, Jeffrey Gould, and Hector Perez-Brignoli have all produced monographs focusing on El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Central America writ large¹³ that examine the ways race, ethnicity, and development shape experiences of both the elite and vulnerable populations in rural areas, and how dispossession leads to rapid urbanization. These early works of historians and area

studies scholars help us understand internal and external displacement that would be catalyzed by the civil wars of the mid-to-late twentieth century.

Anthropologists and literary scholars have also paid a significant amount of attention towards Central America. Leading North American anthropologists Charles Hale, Victoria Sanford, and Diane Nelson have each engaged in racial, ethnic, and gendered analyses of Central American countries like Guatemala and Nicaragua to specify how post-war governance and neoliberalism converge to amplify inequity, gendered violence, and insecurity throughout the region.¹⁴ In addition, their scholarship located the logics of gendered and racialized systems of control that justified the brutal civil wars. Peace in Central America was an absence of civil war but not the development of societies based on justice or dignity. My work expands on these crucial interventions by arguing that the centuries worth of racialized stratification, genocidal civil wars, and post-war neoliberal governance have made possible nations that eviscerate and expel the historically undesirable.

Literary scholars and western feminists descended on Latin America and on Central Americans to capture their vivid stories of resistance, struggle, and survival. Arguably the most universally recognized piece of Central American cultural and intellectual production emerges through the testimonio of Rigoberta Menchu Tum's 1984 *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman of Guatemala*. The works of Central American women like Elvia Alvarado, Giaconda Belli, and Maria Teresa Tula provided further insights into the process by which histories of colonialism, imperialism, and militarism domestically and through U.S. intervention was

impacted indigenous, working class people, and most vividly, women. Central American testimonios reconstructed “a past obliterated by the violence of power” and created new “forms of dialogue, cooperation, and coalition between intellectuals, scientists, educators, artists, and social movements of the subaltern, crossing previous class, gender, and ethnic boundaries.”¹⁵ Central American cultural producers have also compelled scholars to examine the rich tapestry of art, poetry, and music that served as an archive of liberation struggles. An example of this scholarship comes from the work of Jose Ignacio Lopez Vigil who captured the story of the courageous programmers, artists, and rebels who established and operated the Salvadoran guerrilla radio station that was crucial to the communication efforts by the Farabundo Marti Nationalist Liberation Front, Radio Venceremos.¹⁶ The spirit of resistance that propelled everyday people into action against oppressive military regimes in the region is a thread that is woven throughout this history of Central Americans fighting to survive. My work honors the struggles of Central Americans by demonstrating the ways that their exercises of being human indict and expose the contradictions of “the human” as a supposed universal construct.

In May of 2000 the first Central American Studies program was established in the United States at the California State University, Northridge (CSUN). The program’s mission seeks to promote knowledge about Los Angeles’s second largest Latino population.¹⁷ The development of the program mirrors the continual growth and tremendous impact of Central Americans in the city. Moreover, the Central American Studies program demonstrates the necessity and importance of offering

courses that highlight the voices of communities that traditionally experience silence. The establishment of the Central American Studies program did not occur in a vacuum; the support and guidance of faculty from the Chicano Studies department at CSUN was vital to its creation. This expression of solidarity between Chicanos and Central Americans emphasizes the power of dialogue between ethnic groups. Furthermore, the construction of the only Central American Studies Department in the United States also stresses the significance and power of studying the particular experiences of specific ethnic groups.

Unfortunately, this example of camaraderie has not always existed between certain wings of Chicano Studies departments and Latina/o Studies programs. Some Chicano scholars who toiled in the proverbial fields of academia since the 1960s and 1970s have expressed an antagonistic attitude towards the emergence of what they perceive as competing Latino interests. Frances R. Aparicio illustrates this adversarial attitude when he quotes the Chicano scholar, Ignacio M. García:

Many centers find themselves challenged by non-Chicano Latino scholars who want to promote their scholarly interests. They argue that all Latino groups have a common experience with racism and poverty in American society ... Because immigration has been a major area of study for Chicano Studies and because the immigrant groups are now more diverse among numerous Latino groups, there is an intellectual challenge to Chicano Studies to become inclusive or else to be seen as shallow and exclusionary.¹⁸

The overprotective tone with which García speaks is understandable considering the difficulties encountered by Chicano students, faculty, and activists in establishing Chicano Studies as a department. The arduous history of contestation

and struggle of Chicanas/os in the United States is seemingly threatened by the arrival of diverse people from Latin America.

Yet García's assessment of the commonalities in experiences of Latinos with racism and poverty in the United States misses the possibilities that relational studies could produce. As Aparacio states:

The reluctance among Chicano/a scholars such as García to develop a larger, national vision regarding the historical parallelism between Chicanos and U.S. Puerto Ricans, the strategies of colonization and empire, the diversification of immigration and settlement ... has to do with the fact that Mexican-Americans have a longer, historical presence in the academic world and that they still constitute the largest percentage of U.S. Latinos.¹⁹

Dialogue across ethnic lines provides spaces where people of color may begin the process of decolonization. Examining the way the vestiges of colonialism and the tentacles of racism operate throughout Latina/o communities in the United States gives scholars from those communities the ability to deconstruct and undermine those systems of oppression. The rise of academic programs that cater to other Latina/o groups does not imply homogenization. Programs like Central American Studies focus on specificities of experience. These programs enable members from different Latin American origins the ability to learn about their histories bringing much-needed scholarly recognition. For Central Americans, this acknowledgment represents an intellectual arrival beyond the realm of cultural contributions.

Many Mexicans and Central Americans share histories of migration and settlement in Los Angeles. However, during the 1980s the threat of deportations affected each group differently. Sociologist Claudia Dorrington asserts that while

Salvadorans and Guatemalans arrived in the United States as undocumented immigrants, much like Mexican immigrants, “their arrival under ‘refugee-like-conditions’ ... made them particularly vulnerable ... they ... had to contend with the constant fear of apprehension and deportation to nations where their lives were at risk.”²⁰ Because of the civil wars and state-sponsored repression in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua deportation to these countries meant possible death. The act of deporting human beings is contingent on their marking of illegality. As historian Mae Ngai contends deportation cancels the possibility for racialized peoples to assimilate into U.S. society and culture.²¹ Although Mexican and Central American undocumented communities share an intimate relationship to deportability across the United States, the attention given to each group’s plight has been disproportionately focused on Mexican struggles. The need for more nuanced approaches to vulnerability and precarity across national, ethnic, and gendered lines is crucial to develop new strategies to confront the advancing surveillance, policing, and punitive state measures in the United States.

Anti-immigrant attitudes are a staple of United States history. These positions echo racist narratives that construct Latinas/os as permanently alien. Ngai argues poignantly that undocumented immigrants become “impossible subjects” in the United States through the advent of restrictive immigration laws and coherence of a racialized and gendered policing apparatus to control, intimidate, and deport these communities. The possibilities to incorporate and ingratiate oneself into American society are disallowed, thus undocumented people become reduced to

conditions of non-being, dismissed as problems that cannot be solved.²² Keep in mind—how a group experiences racism shifts in relation to the group’s positionality in particular times and places. Hall reiterates: “there are certain general features to racism. But even more significant are the ways in which these general features are modified and transformed by the historical specificity of the contexts and environments in which they become active.”²³ Central Americans’ relationship to the threat of deportation exhibits different historical flashpoints than Mexicans’ relationship to that same threat. While the imperialist projects of the United States in the nineteenth- and twentieth-centuries led to land theft, displacement, and second-class citizenship for Mexicans, the foreign interventions of the United States in Central America in the 20th century resulted in the increased risk of premature death for countless dislocated people in the 1980s. This is not to minimize the traumatic effect of deportations on Mexicans during the decade; however, it is meant to demonstrate how United States racism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism affected Mexicans and Central Americans in variegated forms. A relational approach between the two groups facilitates an analysis of how, when, and on what levels systems of oppression work. Spanning histories of white supremacy, dislocations, and imperialism preempts obfuscations of crucial Central American experiences and historical figures that exhibit solidarity.

Take, for example, Guatemalan labor activist Luisa Moreno, an entry for whom exists in *Latinas in the United States: A Historical Encyclopedia, Volume 1*. The synopsis details her life from her childhood in Guatemala to her involvement in

labor organizing throughout the United States and her deportation from the United States back to Guatemala. Moreno's stay in Mexico City also merits mention in the encyclopedia. While in Mexico City she wed an artist by the name of Miguel Angel de León.²⁴ From this entry it is not clear whether or not de León was Mexican or another Latin American national like Moreno. However, George J. Sánchez concludes that de León was a Mexican artist.²⁵ While it seems an inconsequential detail whether or not Moreno's husband was actually Mexican, it does beg interesting questions: Does her husband's national origin serve to tie Moreno to a Mexican identity? Is her Guatemalan identity diminished or obscured by her husband's national origin? Moreno's positionality as a Guatemalan and exposure to Puerto Rican socialists in New York in the late 1920s undoubtedly shaped her political views. I argue that a figure like Luisa Moreno presents an exemplary case to examine the relevance of a diversified and nuanced approach to examining Latinas/os in academia.

Latina/o Studies programs have taken on the difficult task of addressing points of commonality while attempting to maintain a semblance of historical and regional particularity. As Pedro Cabán summarizes, "scholars began to contemplate an overarching non-essentialist rubric of Latinidad as a process of identity formation that, while respectful of national origin differences, nonetheless identified points of historical, cultural and economic commonality and affinity of Latin American ... origin US populations."²⁶ As García reminded us earlier, not all scholars were eager to recognize parallels between Latina/o communities in the United

States. Moreno's presence and visibility in the United States prior to the mass influx of Central Americans northward can serve to demonstrate the long tradition of transnational mobility from the region. By minimizing her Guatemalan national-origin scholars perpetuate the erasure of Central Americans' histories and experiences in the United States. In a brief section describing the involvement of Mexican-American women activists' roles in the infamous trial of the Sleepy Lagoon incident, Catherine S. Ramirez misrepresents Moreno.

"While the Sleepy Lagoon case catapulted a handful of Mexican American girls and women into the public eye as juvenile delinquents, it also mobilized many others as activists. Josefina Fierro de Bright ... at the age of eighteen, she, along with Luisa Moreno, a labor leader, played a key role in establishing ... one of the first civil rights organizations for Latinas and Latinos in the United States."²⁷

In coupling Moreno with Josefina Fierro de Bright and stating that "Mexican American girls and women" were mobilized as activists, Ramirez gives the impression that Moreno was in fact just another one of those "Mexican American girls and women." As Rafael Pérez-Torres reminds us, "these different identities and positionalities are most assuredly not the same ... they are, rather, the source of differential forms of knowledge and epistemologies."²⁸ While Ramirez's omission of Moreno as Guatemalan may have been an honest mistake, it acts as an example of the obfuscation that has occurred when speaking about Los Angeles Latino/a history and the role of Central Americans. As Sánchez recounts Moreno was ultimately deported back to her home country of Guatemala for her labor activism, not Mexico. Moreno passed away in Guatemala.²⁹ For Moreno, the option of

returning was not as easy as it would have been for a Mexican because of the geographical distance of Guatemala to the United States. It is important for Central Americans to know that they also have a history in Los Angeles, specifically, and in the United States, generally.

More recent work developing from U.S. Central American scholars has gained momentum across a multitude of disciplines. Central American descended scholars like Leisy Abrego, Maritza Cardenas, Kency Cornejo, Floridalma Boj Lopez, and Steven Osuna have furthered the pioneering work of Arturo Arias, Cecilia Menjivar, Horacio Roque Ramirez, and Ana Patricia Rodriguez in Central American Studies to name a few. The research of these provocative intellectuals has grapples with the multiple forces expressed upon the lives, bodily integrity, and cultures of Central Americans in diaspora across the United States. Central American Studies as a field of scholarly inquiry possesses a history of literary criticism, and, more recently, sociologists, anthropologists, and other critical interdisciplinary theorists have advanced the antagonism of settler-colonialism, global capitalism, and white supremacy with a transnational scope. Questions of Indigeneity, critiques of mestizaje, and LGBTQ rights and dreams have begun to compel and challenge Central American Studies scholars to think beyond the rubrics of racial, cultural, and sexual homogeneity. In 2017, the excitement and energy of various conferences, community gatherings, and impromptu conversations and connections resulted in the publication of a monumental anthology called *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance*. The collection

unites nine U.S. Central American scholars and deals with issues of in/visibility, feminism, and space. Ultimately this edition 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 My dissertation builds on and extends the project of U.S. Central American Studies by heeding to the call to foster a transnational historical memory, and by interrogating the meanings of Central Americans encountering racialized and gendered violence in the Isthmus, Mexico, and United States. Employing urgent theoretical work by Ethnic Studies scholars along with the historical work of Central American based scholarship around issues of race, indigeneity, and gender bridges intellectual trajectories that have previously remained adjacent at best and isolated at worst.

Unbounded Interdisciplinarity: Methodological Crossings

Anthropologists, historians, sociologists, area and literary studies scholars have largely dominated the study of Central America and Central Americans, but the direction of the field has changed by bridging these more traditional methodological approaches along with those of scholars who have blend ethnic and area studies in their works, thereby establishing a dynamic groundwork to advance the interdisciplinarity of Central American Studies. According Beth Baker and Ester Hernandez, “Central American studies scholars have had to be creative in developing their research and teaching in distinct and often challenging institutional and intellectual contexts.”³¹ The research conducted for this dissertation expands

the Central American studies tradition of building an interdisciplinary methodological approach.

My project's ambitious nature is best encapsulated by an adage my mother always said when going window-shopping: *Por soñar no se cobra* (To dream is not charged/To dream does not cost anything). The complicated conversations linking seemingly disparate processes like (settler) colonialism, nation-state building practices, United States militarism and security regimes, and neoliberal development push Central American struggles from out of the shadows. Toward that end, my work combines first-hand Central American accounts, archival research, and critical readings of documentary films on Central American migration through Mexico. My research has involved both a lifetime of my own experiences as a U.S. Guatemalan-Mexican, born and raised in South Central Los Angeles and well over a decade of participant and activist observation and advocacy throughout Southern California and Central America. My archival work includes visits to Tulane University's Howard-Tilton Memorial Latin American Library and the Hemeroteca Nacional de Guatemala Lic. Clemente Marroquin Rojas.

The non-sedentary, non-periodized aspect of my dissertation requires two less common methodological approaches: a transnational method and a riff on itinerant ethnography. The transnational nature of Central American studies compels scholars to employ a transnational methodological approach. Micol Seigel details her working definition of transnational method as follows: "Where international history explores the relations of nation-states or just states as well-

bounded subjects, transnational history explores the global in the local, via interaction of groups or entities that do not fit national borders, whether because they are greater or lesser or both.”³² My analysis of Central American migrant experiences speaks to the larger implications their journeys, struggles, and triumphs have for global processes like neoliberalism and global racial regimes. As Matthew Hart explains, “transnational modernist studies combines an attention to historical specificity with the desire to articulate portable concepts and interpretive models that can subtend generalization across national traditions usually studied separately.”³³ Seigel and Hart gesture towards the analytical value of studying groups that have historically been marginalized in order to complicate our understanding of global processes. Such studies can create new understandings of how these processes are related beyond the constraints of geographical location and eras. Seigel reminds us that that “transnational subjects are not the exception but the rule, at least in globalized eras such as the past half-millennium of European expansion, capitalism, and African slavery. Everything has a transnational aspect or two, for every local has global threads woven through.”³⁴ The concept of an itinerant ethnography is initially introduced by Luisa Schein and is described as a non-traditional ethnographic method “because it is siteless, and lacks any fixed duration.”³⁵ Anthropologist Beth Baker’s work on Salvadoran migrants and their settlement in Southern California utilizes Schein’s methodological approach, which more closely resembles the method I employ. Baker argues that an “ethnography of Salvadoran migration to Los Angeles should be an ethnography of interstices and

borders, of movement and change.” Further, an ethnographic study of Central American migration “unfolds in several very specific sites [and] does not lack a fixed duration, but is the result of historical forces.”³⁶ The scope of my project compels the usage of these mobile and malleable methods. The distended story of colonized, racialized, and displaced Central Americans necessitates the blending of different interdisciplinary scholarly approaches. If people have and continue to make these historic, complex, and arduous journeys then there has to be a way to map them out. This dissertation is a cartographic expedition of historical relationships to power as experienced by real people.

While my project centers first-hand experiences it will not be a traditional ethnographic or oral history project. Nevertheless, it echoes the intention of oral history projects in that it highlights typically unheard voices in order to understand the very real ways in which colonialism, racism, and uneven power is negotiated and confronted by Central Americans. Further, I will take direction from oral historian Alessandro Portelli in my analysis of Central American experiences by arguing that they tell less about the events or contexts that these Central American contributors lived through and more about the meanings of these contexts in these individuals’ lives.³⁷ How do larger macro-level processes interact in my collaborators’ lives? How have centuries of exploitative and extractive economic policies from the times of the colonial period to present-day neoliberalism shape the conditions that ignite Central American diasporic movement? What roles do silence and violence play in their stories? These questions speak to another asset of oral

history approaches in that they illustrate participants' subjectivity. The way they navigate these complex realities and the way they perceived to have confronted their hardships and come to decisions to migrate. "Subjectivity is as much the business of history as are the more visible 'facts'. What informants believe is indeed a historical *fact* (that is, the fact that they believe it), as much as what really happened."³⁸ To reiterate this point it is in the dialogical approach to oral history that I find Central American voices and theorizations are pronounced and I am able to hear them when I listen closely.

I conducted oral history interviews with eleven Central Americans who migrated to the United States, through Mexico between 1972 and 1986. This time period captures several historic transitions in Central America. The early 1970s witnessed massive social movement organizing in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua. Consequently, the 1970s also marks the consolidation of violent military and governmental responses to resistance from popular classes throughout the Isthmus. Technological advances by Central American armies culminated in genocidal consequences for hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans, Salvadorans, and Nicaraguans in the early- to mid-1980s. Further, the climate of civil war devastated the ability of hundreds of thousands of people living in rural areas to sustain their livelihoods. As a result, an unprecedented amount of displacement and migration occurs during this era. The interviewees consist of eight women and three men who all migrated at different ages. Of the eight women, three migrated from El Salvador and the remainder from Guatemala. All three of the male participants

migrated from Guatemala. Of the eleven interviews conducted, six were conducted in the participants' respective homes. One interview was conducted at one of the participants' place of employment. Another interview was conducted in a person's temporary home. The remaining three interviews were conducted in the participants' family's home. The same set of guiding questions was utilized during all the interviews and the conversation would shift in relation to the answers and dialogue between the collaborators and myself. The majority of the interviews were conducted in Spanish while one was conducted in predominantly English. Some interviewees mixed sparse English phrases and words whenever the Spanish words escaped them. During the interviewing process many collaborators detailed traumatic and emotional stories and I felt that these instances reflected the broader processes of violences that I will detail throughout this project.

To bolster the oral histories, first-hand accounts of migration will be analyzed through multiple documentary films about Central American migration through Mexico. Two films will be examined: *Asalto al Sueño (Assaulted Dream)* (2006) and *Maria en tierra de nadie (Maria in Nobody's Land)* (2011). These films provide powerful visual evidence of the dangers encountered by migrants from Central America in Mexico, who are interviewed throughout their perilous journey, detailing the reasons why they left their native lands and offering offer searing critiques of the violences of neoliberalism and the displacement that these processes catalyze. Furthermore, these narrative accounts give synoptic examples of the lived effects of centuries of exploitative and extractive capitalism on actual

people, families, and communities throughout Central America. The documentaries also interview officials, lay workers, and volunteers who aid Central American migrants and work to denounce some of the injustices committed on their persons in Mexico. These participants offer moments of solidarity across racial, ethnic, gender, and national lines.

While this project does not involve traditional ethnography I do not reject the anthropological practice. Many have contributed to this project in ways that are not identifiable by the vexed methods of citation. Family members, friends' family members, and friends and colleagues have all contributed to the development of my approach. In many cases, the participants' lives and my own experiences have guided my work. I view the words and stories shared with me by the participants in this project as valuable flashpoints of lived history. My project lies more in the tradition of employing the practice of listening to peoples' *testimonios*. As Bolivian Indigenous activist Domitila Barrios de Chungara eloquently and masterfully articulates, "it's important to take experiences from our own history,' as well as from 'the experience of other peoples.' And to this end, 'there must be testimony' which will help us to 'reflect on our actions and criticize them.'"³⁹ My commitment to centering the voices of people with whom I am close lends insights that someone outside of my close circle of relations would not be privy to. I am privileged in that sense.

In documenting the life stories of Central Americans I am reminded of the work of Akemi Kikumura's oral history of her mother, a Japanese Issei woman who

immigrated to the United States in 1923. In describing an experience during her project, Kikumura detailed the following: “When I asked my mother if she would have revealed her life experiences to anyone other than a family member, she replied, ‘No! You don’t disclose your soul to *tanin* (a nonrelative).’ [...] My mother’s attitudes exemplify the importance of uncovering the life history participant’s own definition of terms ‘insider’ and ‘outsider,’ since these definitions could affect the kinds of information gathered and the interactional process within the interview sessions themselves.”⁴⁰ My close proximity to the experiences of Central Americans as a son of a Guatemalan mother who migrated in 1973 to Los Angeles has granted me the privilege of listening to some harrowing stories of survival. Also, my understanding of particular cultural nuances has allowed me to be more attentive when reading and listening to the stories shared by Central Americans in community meetings, media, or print. I am able to laugh and understand the brash humor that Central Americans are known for. These seemingly trivial interactions indicate my positionality as an insider and provide me with an ability to be present in ways that a non-Central American researcher may miss or overlook.

In listening to these stories I have been able to understand the roles played by secrecy and guilt, triumph and agency, in the lives of my people. In addition, I also work through the thoughts and theorizations shared by Central Americans with a reflexivity inherent to activist scholarship. As Chris Calhoun concludes about reflexive research, it recognizes the privilege academics have in spending time articulating and working through understandings of others’ experiences. This

privilege brings with it a responsibility “to make more specifically scholarly contributions to knowledge that may matter to others engaged in other practical pursuits in the future.”⁴¹ As Calhoun reminds us, research, no matter of what nature, belies a responsibility on behalf of the scholar to contribute to knowledge production. The accounts utilized for my project will serve as corroborators of academic research and the participants’ conclusions will be used as subjugated theorizations and examples of the complex ways Central Americans navigate violent discursive and literal terrains.

However, I do not wish to romanticize the experiences and stories of the participants and leave them immune to critical examination; as with any other theorization, the words of the contributors shall be subject to critique. In listening to Central Americans share their personal histories at community meetings and presentations one finds a sense of both anxiety and relief. A useful framework to understand the stories shared with me is Maylei Blackwell’s concept of retrofitted memory which she describes as a form of countermemory that uses fragments of older histories that have been fractured and disjunctured by colonial and masculinist organizing historical knowledge that disappear women’s political involvement in order to create space for women in historical traditions that erase them. As Blackwell contends this form of historicization brings forth the possibility of fracturing dominant narratives and creates spaces for new historical subjects to emerge. This is not merely an act of recuperation, for highlighting untold narratives allows new political subjectivities to emerge that draw from specific historical and

geographic contexts in order to be refashioned in others.⁴² I understand the narratives of Central Americans in this research as revealing alternate contestations to narratives of the plight of immigrants in the United States. They reveal specific challenges, persistence, and lived realities faced by Central Americans on their roads to the United States. They embody a refusal of flattening the migrant experience by documenting the obstacles and negotiations made during Central American passages through Mexico. In other words, centering the transnational history of Central Americans' struggles speaks back to the silences created by the marginalized space historically ascribed to this global region and its people.

This project is an amalgamation of thoughts and conversations, scholarly and otherwise. In approaching this project I employ various narratives. Central to this work will be experiences and stories. Memory is a living entity and one of the main registers through which it manifests is through the recounting of narratives. For the migrant, as Chicana scholar Alicia Schmidt Camacho theorizes, the experiences of displacement amplifies migrant desire and exaggerates the demands of memory because the traumatic separation from home makes narrative a vital instrument for staving off further loss.⁴³ Many of these experiences and stories will be derived from the aforementioned documentaries on Central American migration through Mexico to the United States and Canada. The ultimate goal of this work is to produce knowledge that is collaborative and practical and also to mobilize that knowledge via public discourse in everyday circles of friends, families, and the many communities I am a part of outside of and within academic spaces. The kind of

knowledge I intend to produce reverberates with Calhoun when he describes the depths that activist scholarship can contribute to the world: "if activist scholarship is to contribute all that it really can, it has to do so through production and mobilization of knowledge."⁴⁴ As a member of multiple Central American local, transnational, and digital communities, I heed to Lanita Huey-Jacobs assertion that "native scholars negotiate and experience different positionalities in the field stemming from their ethnic, linguistic, gendered, educational, and class/caste backgrounds, as well as their communicative competence" and this concept involves understanding not just the language and lives of the participants but also an adherence to specific discursive parameters.⁴⁵ In other words, because I am not a stranger to the communities with which I engage, the work produced is not solely for my advancement. I owe this work to the members of the many communities I am a part of, and I look forward to having it engaged, challenged, and expanded upon by any one of them. As a result, I owe a commitment to listen for the crevices and fault lines of pain, the happiness, the jubilee, and the struggles.

The interdisciplinary approach of this research intends to construct various texts as evidence of the relationship between the vestiges of colonial structures and current processes of economic development directed towards Central American nations. The breadth of what I utilize as sources of research comes from various conversations that I have engaged in throughout my life about the role of silence within Central American communities in the United States with regards to the decades of hyper-violence. Silence and revelations are important within Central

American communities. During my time as an educator on various levels whenever I bring up Central American histories, different students react with wonder, pain, and excitement. The silences or withholding memories are a form of memory for the sons and daughters of Central American migrants. They reflect the depth of trauma associated with living in a war-torn region and the renewal of life via the forgetting of an old past. This adds to the political nature of my work in that it seeks to expose younger Central Americans to the histories that because of various reasons, their families have omitted. Many Central Americans living in the United States are a direct result of imperial violence and oftentimes when discussing immigration this is elided.

To further this work I employ what Harvey Young terms, critical memory. He states, “Critical memory assists the process of identifying similarities – shared experiences and attributes of being and becoming ... the announcement of such memories of racial violence” illuminate the widespread and institutional abuses of Central Americans.⁴⁶ In analyzing these experiences within an Ethnic Studies paradigm, I seek to interrogate the intimate links between colonialism, foreign intervention, and neoliberalism. Critical memory challenges the long history of silence within Central American communities in the United States that occludes stories of violence, sexual and otherwise, just as, storytelling and memory highlights active responses to daunting obstacles. Critical memory can serve to remind U.S. Central Americans that many of their histories are a result of direct contestation, confrontation, and agitation of neocolonial power.

Finally, by ruminating on the powerful words of Salvadoran poet Jessica Grande, I would like to reflect on some of the core reasons I have chosen this path of research. Grande, when speaking about her relationship to the Salvadoran community in Los Angeles, concludes, “It’s always been love, they give me so much love... it’s like I represent the hope for them or something. And I’m glad... I have people on my back and I know I have my community on my back and I’m holding them down.”⁴⁷ My intimate relationship to the stories shared with me during this project drive me produce work that antagonizes, ruptures, and reveals the specific struggles of Central Americans throughout the last five decades. My existence in this country is predicated on the violence my parents faced and carefully navigated. It is my hope that the uncovering of these narratives will lead to a more nuanced understanding of the historic levels of violence inflicted upon the people of Central America and also reveal the dynamic ways in which people refuse to be extinguished. To echo Grande’s words, I represent the hope and I know that I have my community on my back and in my heart. This knowledge deepens my commitment to producing rigorous and productive work, inside and outside of the academy, that foregrounds Central America and Central Americans and fleshes out elisions that flatten and homogenize. As Charles Hale concludes,

for people who feel directly and personally connected to broader experiences of oppression and to struggles for empowerment, claims of objectivity are more apt to sound like self-serving maneuvers to preserve hierarchy and privilege; and the idea of putting scholarship to the service of their own communities’ empowerment and well-being is more apt to sound like a sensible, if not an inevitable, way to practice their profession.⁴⁸

This research is an attempt to do what Hale asserts is oftentimes inevitable for those researchers who feel they are part of a group directly affected by the broader processes of oppression, to put scholarship to the service of my communities. It is the words and lives of my participants, not just during interviews that continue to guide and shape my work and I. This effort is produced with the hope that it will be distributed in whatever forms throughout the community that it is about.

Chapter Outlines

The dissertation begins with an exploration of the history of race, gender, and power in Central America. Namely, Central American nation building projects are analyzed through the analytics provided by settler colonial and Afropessimist scholars in order to understand Central American national histories as grounded in systematic logics of elimination of Indigenous peoples and their claims to land, and the marginalization and ultimate erasure of Afro-descended communities. This chapter is guided by the understanding that these projects are rooted in conquest and are the conditions of possibility for the existence of Central American settler nations. Finally, I position these histories as materially producing vulnerable populations in the Isthmus that would be subject to exploitation, evisceration, and ultimately expulsion throughout the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries.

The project continues with an examination of Mexican national history projects in the post-revolutionary period and the grounding of Mexican mestizo futures in the logics of settler white supremacy. The chapter details the racialized and gendered violence employed throughout the Porfirian and post-revolutionary

period that attempted to cohere the idea of Mexican mestizo nationalism. The chapter argues that these national constructions create boundaries of belonging that are incessantly policed through discriminatory and exclusive immigration policies in the twentieth century. Further, the legacies of operationalizing racism through policing immigration live on and impact the treatment of Central Americans in the second half of the twentieth century.

Central Americans experienced catastrophic violence and disabling inequity throughout the twentieth century that propelled many to seek refuge and possibilities domestically and internationally. U.S. imperial intervention amplified the ruthless nature of authoritarian regimes throughout the region and led to genocidal civil wars. The fourth chapter examines both the conditions that expelled Central Americans from the Isthmus and their experiences in Mexico through oral history interviews and documentary films. The chapter argues that Central Americans experience re-racializations in Mexico that symbolize the Mexican state's settler colonial history by extending the racist and patriarchal attitudes reserved for Mexico's indigenous and Afro-Mexican populations onto Central Americans in transit from the 1970s to the present. The collusion between the U.S. settler empire and the Mexican settler state has dire consequences for both vulnerable Mexican and Central American populations in the territory. It ends with an understanding that these experiences color the underlying and sometimes overt tensions that exist between Mexican and Central American communities in Los Angeles.

Los Angeles as a contested, colonized, and occupied space is the focus of the final chapter. It is an exploration into multiple histories of racialized state-sanctioned violence and exclusion that impacts the ways Central Americans become incorporated in the city in the 1970s and 1980s. The chapter details the struggles of the Tongva, Mexicans, and African-Americans in the construction of the City of Angels. It closes with a reflection on the power of space making and how forms of non-belonging and politicized remembering produce possibilities for indicting transnational settler states.

¹https://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2010/06/17/former_canadian_ambassador_guilty_of_slander.html

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/dec/13/guatemala-canada-indigenous-right-canadian-mining-company>

³ *Abridged Summary of Categorical Use of Force Incident and Findings by the Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners: Officer-Involved Shooting – 072-10*. Los Angeles: Los Angeles Board of Police Commissioners, 2011.

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⁵ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

⁶ Ana Patricia Rodriguez, *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, & Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 11.

⁷ Lilia Monroy Limón, *Memorias del Taller: Mujer centroamericana, violencia y guerra* (Mexico: Oxfam, 1988).

⁸ Leisy Abrego. "On silences: Salvadoran refugees then and now," *Latino Studies* 15.5 (Mar. 2017), 76.

⁹ Daniel Alvarenga, Twitter post, February 1, 2018, 6:32 AM, https://twitter.com/_danalvarenga/status/959071863593885697.

¹⁰ Ester Trujillo, Twitter post, February 1, 2018, 6:54 AM, <https://twitter.com/entrujillo/status/959077394886877185>.

¹¹ Daniel Alvarenga, Twitter post, February 1, 2018, 12:38 PM, https://twitter.com/_danalvarenga/status/959164103246802944.

¹² Steven Osuna, "Obstinate Transnational Memories: How Oral Histories Shape Salvadoran-Mexican Subjectivities," in *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstituting Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* ed. Karina O. Alvarado, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, and Ester E. Hernandez (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), 82.

¹³ Jeffrey Gould, *To Die in this Way: Nicaraguan Indians and the Myth of Mestizaje, 1880 – 1965* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Greg Grandin, *The Blood of*

Guatemala: A History of Race & Nation (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000); Hector Perez-Brignoli, *A Brief History of Central America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989).

¹⁴ Charles Hale, *Mas Que un Indio (More than an Indian): Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2009); Diane Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Victoria Sanford, *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹⁵ John Beverley. *Testimonio: On the Politics of Truth*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 6.

¹⁶ Jose Ignacio Lopez Vigil, *Rebel Radio: Story of El Salvador's Radio Venceremos* (Willimantic: Curbstone Press, 1993).

¹⁷ For more information regarding the Central American Studies program at CSUN visit: <http://www.csun.edu/cas/>

¹⁸ Frances R. Aparicio, "Reading the 'Latino' in Latino Studies: Toward Re-imagining our Academic Location," *Discourse* 21.3 (Fall 1999): 7.

¹⁹ Aparicio, "Reading the 'Latino' in Latino Studies," 8.

²⁰ Claudia Dorrington, "Central American Refugees in Los Angeles: Adjustment of Children and Families," in *Understanding Latino Families: Scholarship, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Ruth E. Zambrana (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 109.

²¹ Mae Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004): 2.

²² Ngai, 5.

²³ Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, ed. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 435.

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- ²⁸ Rafael Pérez-Torres, *Mestizaje: Critical Uses of Race in Chicano Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 45.
- ²⁹ Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American*, 251-252.
- ³⁰ Karina O. Alvarado, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, and Ester E. Hernandez, "Introduction: U.S. Central American (Un)Belongings," in *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstituting Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* ed. Karina O. Alvarado, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, and Ester E. Hernandez (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2017), 30.
- ³¹ Beth F. Baker and Ester E. Hernandez. "Defining Central American studies," *Latino Studies* 15.5 (Mar. 2017), 86.
- ³² Micol Seigel. *Uneven Encounters: Making Race and Nation in Brazil and the United States*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), viii.
- ³³ Matthew Hart, "Transnationalism at the Departure Gate," in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabat (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2013), 158.
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- ³⁵ Luisa Schen. "Forged Transnationality and Oppositional Cosmopolitanism," in *Transnationalism from Below*, eds. Michael P. Smith and Luis Eduardo Guarnizo (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 294.
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- ³⁷ Alessandro Portelli. "What makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 67.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Domitila Barrios de Chungara with Moema Viezzer. *Let Me Speak!: Testimony of Domitila, a Woman of the Bolivian Mines*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 10.

⁴⁰ Akemi Kikumura. "Family Life Histories: A Collaborative Venture," in *The Oral History Reader*, eds. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 141.

⁴¹ Craig Calhoun. "Foreword," in *Engaging Contradictions: Theories, Politics, and Methods of Activist Scholarship*, ed. Charles R. Hale (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), xxii.

⁴² Maylei Blackwell. *¡Chicana Power!: Contested Histories of Feminism in the Chicano Movement*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 2.

⁴³ Alicia Schmidt Camacho. *Migrant Imaginaries: Latino Cultural Politics in the US-Mexico Borderlands*. (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

⁴⁴ Calhoun, xxi.

⁴⁵ Lanita Jacobs-Huey. "The Natives are Gazing and Talking Back: Reviewing the Problematics of Positionality, Voice, and Accountability among 'Native' Anthropologists," *American Anthropology* 104 (Sept. 2002), 799.

⁴⁶ Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010), 18.

⁴⁷ Sara Aguilar. *Palabras Sin Fronteras*. Independent Film, 2002.

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Chapter 1: Pigments of our Imagined Nations: Indigeneity, Blackness, and the Clearing.

In the past nearly four years a mass exodus of Central Americans from the Northern Triangle (the region of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras) has received a tremendous amount of popular, journalistic, and some academic attention. The people making the trip across two to four borders are usually abstracted from nuanced stories. They become narratives and tropes when interpreted for mainstream audiences in the United States: fleeing from gang violence, unaccompanied child minors, wolves in sheep's clothing, hordes, etc. These huddled masses are framed within a temporality understood as instantaneous, leaving political pundits and large swaths of civil society asking, "why are these people coming?" To answer this question, we must understand displacement and the condition of non-belonging of marginalized Central American populations within a genealogy of nation-state building rooted in racial hierarchies established during conquest, colonization, and racial chattel slavery that are embedded in social, economic, and political apparatuses throughout the region. I contend, we must root our analysis in the construction of blackness in the New World via slavery and the logics of eliminating Indigenous peoples' existence, land claims, and sovereignty as concomitant projects of white supremacist, settler colonialism to expand possibilities of political resistance. By obscuring how vulnerable Central Americans arriving at the borders of the United States are descendants of the historically aggrieved and aggressed in the Isthmus, and by ignoring how the now is intimately

imbricated in the past undermines our “revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”¹ Not knowing how Indigenous people have been constructed as always disappearing or as being absorbed into a ladino or mestizo future would disallow me from understanding why my maternal grandfather became a non-Indian of Indigenous descent in Guatemala.

My analytical lens draws into focus the names of Afro-indigenous migrants like Junior Basilio Espinoza who came from a small Garifuna community in Honduras called Triunfo de la Cruz near the town of Tela in the department of Atlantida.² Garifuna founded the town of Triunfo de la Cruz after being expelled from their riverside community by non-Indigenous Hondurans. The town is comprised of 13 barrios and one of the names is of particular interest: Barrio Nueva York.³ These brief stories of the people who reside here speak to a longer history of anti-black racism, exclusion, and the resistance to that violence. Barrio Nueva York highlights the ways Afro-descended people throughout Central America navigate and maintain their existence through transnational migration. New York is the center of Garifuna life in the United States and has been since the 1940s.⁴ Junior who had a son with his namesake was 24 years old. Junior’s dreams of getting to the United States were violently ended in a massacre that took the lives of 71 other migrants in the northern Mexican state of Tamaulipas in August of 2010. He planned on sending money back to his family, living in a town that relied heavily on fishing and tourism for its subsistence, so he can improve the house they lived in. He wanted his son to go to a private school when he turned six. But his son turned five

without a father. Junior's family and loved ones were left having to deal with the extinguishing of that possibility. We can expand our contextualization of Junior's story by placing it within the historic development and maintenance of an anti-black racial calculus that renders Black bodies as hyper-expendable and displaces Black death to the margins of our attention spans. As Afro-Brazilian scholar João Costa Vargas reminds us that the very invisibility of Black and Brown genocide not only propel and continue to animate the process of an ongoing genocide but also the lack of attention "is the very condition of possibility and reproduction of White supremacy and a racialized economic and political order in which Whites perpetually benefit by simply being white."⁵

This chapter places into conversation histories and theories that have rarely come into contact. Central American history comes into contact with the intellectual work of settler colonial and Afropessimist scholarship in order to indict national doctrines that tell stories of contentious but ultimately inevitable miscegenation. Efforts at disappearing Indians and marginalizing blackness have rendered myths of a desirable and essential mestizo present and future throughout the Isthmus. The problem is that the Indians have not disappeared and blackness continues to be obstinately present in dynamic forms. The traces of indigeneity and blackness lie on the different shades of brown bodies that are showing up at the U.S.-Mexico border.

Cecilio Cayax: Language, the Public Sphere, and Impossible Ladinoization

My mother is from Mazatenango, Suchitipequez, Guatemala. Her family's last name is Cayax. It is my understanding that our ancestors are from Xelaju. Growing

up many phrases were used when someone in the family was being stubborn, loud, or aggressive and they often included our last name. “Vos sos puro indio Cayax (you are a pure/straight Cayax indian)” was a common utterance. My introduction to settler colonialism came early on throughout my family’s relationship to their own indigeneity. To be a Cayax meant to be Indian and to be Indian was undesirable, uncivilized. In their quest to become modern nations, Central American countries enacted various discursive, militaristic, and economic projects to cohere nationalisms predicated on both the objectification and elimination of the Indian and the alienation and erasure of Black historic presence. Mestizaje is a critical tool of establishing the legitimacy of settler colonial nation-states throughout Central America. I argue that the discursive project of mestizaje reinforces the inherent white supremacist logics of modern nation-state building throughout the region. Indians are cast as a romantic object of the past, a challenge to modernization and progress in the present, and completely disappeared in the future. Additionally, blackness and Afro-descended populations are characterized perpetually outside of national belonging. As Afro-Mexicans have argued, mestizaje clips the third root of Central America, the African. This invisibilization of blackness makes it impossible to understand anti-black violence as part and parcel of development in Central America.

I was fortunate to meet my maternal grandfather for the first time in 1990. His name was Cecilio Cayax. At the time of our first meeting he was in the thick of Alzheimer’s. His hair a bright white and his skin a dark brown. He seemed like a

gentle man. He was born in 1915. My mom made annual treks to Guatemala to ensure his safety and health. My grandfather passed away in 1996. Since then my mother and I have shared many conversations surrounding her childhood. I always asked her about any indigenous language that she or her family ever spoke. She contends that Papa Chilo never spoke any other language besides Spanish. That both of her aunts, Papa Chilo's sisters, both spoke their language and wore *corte* (traditional Indigenous clothes). They made tortillas and sold fried pork in the central market in Mazatenango. My grandfather was a skilled carpenter. My mother describes Papa Chilo's commissioned work for foreigners and local Ladino (non-Indian) people as exceptional. After studying and teaching Guatemalan history I began to understand these stories within a broader context.

Popular nationalist discourses throughout Latin America evoke the process of mestizaje as a unifying project. The rightful and recognizable citizens of modern nation-states are always an amalgamation of the European and the Indian. In Guatemala, "mestizaje is a ladino discourse about Indians and as such is in large part about ladino and national identification, an attempt to create a singular meaning out of bodies and the body politic."⁶ As many scholars dealing with race and Guatemalan national formation have contended, Indian bodies have been thought to weigh down the ability for Guatemala to move forward. From the post-independence period to the era of liberal political reforms in the mid-nineteenth century the Indian body was constructed as a perpetual impediment. Indians were cast as villainous and eager to devolve the country through a caste/racial war. Both

Liberal and Conservative political elites desperately desired to address Guatemala's Indian problem. In September of 1848, an extensive article ran in the newspaper *Garceta de Guatemala* in response to several uprisings in the western part of the country. The article mapped out the major problems left behind by Spanish colonialism regarding the Indians. The solution to the Indian problem was education in order to bring Indians out of their backwardness and barbarity. Guatemalan elites wanted their country to be seen by civilized (read Euro-American) nations as a country committed to modernity not one of unworthy barbarians. Forced assimilation of the Indian was touted as a preventative measure meant to assuage Ladino anxieties regarding a potential race war.⁷ The thought of insurrectionary Indians continues to persist throughout Guatemala and is an obstacle to instituting justice and dignity for Indigenous and other racialized populations in Guatemalan multicultural governance.

In June of 1848, another article appeared and called for a different solution to the Indian problem: annihilation. The author urged the Guatemalan political elite to follow the example of General Juan Manuel Rosas from Argentina where they sought to eliminate the Indigenous races in order to open up the land for impending immense European immigration. An invitation to settle newly independent nations with European immigrants was prevalent throughout Latin America. Both of these narratives painted Indians as alien to civilization. The Indian was always destined to disappear for the rightful citizens of the newly forming Guatemalan nation to prosper, safely and soundly.⁸ The moldings of non-Indian futures transcend the

nations bounded by borders in the Isthmus. These histories continue to reverberate through transnational families like mine. Excavating the past through piecing together information presented through familial storytelling serves to disrupt official state narratives that conclude that “real” Indians are a thing of the past.

Mestizaje as a racist nation-state project intends to eliminate the native. Andrea Smith eloquently illustrates genocide as a central pillar to white supremacy. Smith stresses that in order for non-Native peoples to become the rightful inheritors of all that was indigenous—land, resources, indigenous spirituality, or culture, the Indian must always be disappearing.⁹ This destiny is inevitable in Guatemala. A CIA backed coup in 1954 re-entrenched militarism in Guatemala. My mother recalls a military base that opened up in the central city square of Mazatenango, next to the Catholic Church. During this time, Papa Chilo was able to get a contract to do carpentry work for the military garrison. My mother recalls how young Indian boys were dragged down from the mountains to join the expanding military in Guatemala. She remembers the large numbers of Indigenous mothers, daughters, and sisters crying in the park as their kin were taken away from them. My grandfather was able to avoid any targeting by the military because he chose to sever his ties to an Indigenous language in public. He was an apprentice for a ladino carpenter at the age of twelve. These opportunities would have never been available to him if he had asserted his Indigenous identity. To deny his indigenous language allowed him to prosper, to be protected at a time of spectacular violence against indigenous people in Guatemala. My grandfather’s story symbolizes the racial

passages my family has traversed over time and space due to historical projects that are unknown to most families like mine in the Isthmus. Genocidal settler colonial logics foreclosed my family's relationship to our indigenous language and many of our ways.

The Weight of the World

1492 inaugurates a monumental shift in the world order because of European conquest. The groundwork for the epoch of European expansion to the Western hemisphere occurred decades earlier. Incursions of Iberian imperial powers into Western and Central Africa had been happening in the early fifteenth century and culminated in Pope Nicholas the V's edict in 1455 that granted the Portuguese the legal right to enslave sub-Saharan Africans.¹⁰ Other church leaders mobilized discourse that naturalized and made righteous the project: "slavery served as a natural deterrent and Christianizing influence to 'barbarous' behavior among pagans."¹¹ However, new methods of weaving together slavery and conquest would be developed in the "New" World. Historian David Stannard summarizes: "From almost the instant of first human contact between Europe and the Americas firestorms of microbial pestilence and purposeful genocide began laying waste the American natives."¹² The numerical damage is spectacular and signals the dynamic ways in which European colonizers enacted their discovery claims through all-out war, or what religious and legal scholars of the time termed "*Jus ad Bellum*."¹³ The conquest of the Americas inaugurated the coherence of philosophical and sociopolitical constructions of the "human" and "man." As Europe discovered the

“Other” it simultaneously came to discover and define its “Self.”¹⁴ Colonization has been met with a long, dynamic history of Native resistance. Conquest was presented as a logical and inevitable project for the proper ordering of the world. This ordering produces rubrics that define sovereignty, rights, and civilization along newly developing notions of race, gender, and power. Racial chattel slavery, conquest, and genocide/elimination are co-constitutive systems in the settling of the New World.

This chapter seeks to situate the legacies of the catastrophe of conquest and the project of converting Black bodies into chattel as fundamental to the advancement of both colonization and settler colonialism in the western hemisphere. “The Negro, too, was to have his place, though he did not ask for it: it was the oiling sun of the sugar, tobacco and cotton plantations of the New World,” remarked Eric Williams in his classic work *Slavery and Capitalism*.¹⁵ Too often these projects are analyzed as separate or the narrative follows that kidnapped and enslaved Africans served as the labor that settled newly conquered lands. Latin America, specifically Central America, present a unique opportunity to expand and connect the systemic convergences of anti-Black racism, settler-colonialism, and white supremacy. Patrick Wolfe provides a helpful way of thinking of these linkages with his understanding of the relationship between race, history, and colonialism: “race is colonialism speaking, in idioms whose diversity reflects the variety of unequal relationships into which Europeans have co-opted conquered populations.”¹⁶ While race, racism, and their incumbencies operate distinctly in different locations, these social constructs have proved resilient and have heavily

informed the ways nations come to be fashioned. Wolfe's rigorous development and advancement of settler colonial analysis has provided fruitful avenues to think through the deeply imbricated ways racial, gendered, and class hierarchies have both been shaped by conquest and colonialism and also tremendously shifted in the post-independence periods throughout the Western Hemisphere. However, Wolfe's construction of reading history has produced a rather rigid dichotomy between Blackness and Indigeneity. Blackness is associated to slavery and consequently labor exploitation thus producing a settler need for the biological reproduction of more Black bodies. Indigeneity has been marked by an eliminatory antagonism in order to dispossess land and transfer it to settler ownership. Ward Churchill furthers the understanding of settler colonial constructions of indigenous peoples being constituted by the very nature of genocide and elimination.¹⁷ Bianet Castellanos pushes back on the construction of this binary because it tends to "mask articulations spanning imperial and colonial regimes."¹⁸ I will return to the significance of this analysis when analyzing Honduran history.

I employ the work of Black feminist scholar Tiffany Lethabo King to understand the roles that the erasure and quarantining of Blackness in the sociohistorical development of notions of nationhood and national memory in Mexico and Central America play in the making of settler-colonial nations. The rise of Hispanicized nationalisms and subsequent attachments to mestizaje as projects of national belonging belie the significance of understanding the marginalization of Blackness alongside the onslaught of violence to dispossess Indigenous peoples of

their land and cultures. King terms the ways enslavement of Africans becomes disconnected from narratives of conquest as a form of “colonial unknowing.”¹⁹ Settler-colonialism as a land-centered project requires a logic of eliminating of the native and consistently re-telling and naturalizing settler descendants as rightful rulers of newly settled territory. This has firmly been understood in settler colonies like the United States, Australia, and South Africa. Latin America, on the other hand, has not received substantial analysis as a site where settler colonial structures have persisted. A settler colonial interpretation of Indigenous dispossession from conquest to the present affirms Wolfe’s assertion that “invasion is a structure not an event.”²⁰ Further, I aim to situate the concept of Black fungibility introduced by intellectuals like W.E.B. Du Bois, Ida B. Wells, and Angela Davis²¹ and extended by Afropessimist scholars like Hartman, Wilderson, and King to highlight the extraction and dilution projects related to historic constructions of Blackness in Central America. Regarding Afropessimist analytics around what is often termed the unthought, Wilderson points out that “slavery is and connotes an ontological status for blackness; and that the constituent elements of slavery are not exploitation and alienation but accumulation and fungibility.”²² In other words, Wilderson posits racial chattel slavery becomes the foundation of the ideological construction for Blackness, and, contrary to popular understandings, slavery was not merely an economic or labor system. Rather, chattel slavery inaugurates the possibility to make material sense of new conventions of the “Human” emanating from Europe and diffused through the colonies. Colonizers congealed the meaning of what it

meant to be human through establishing the enslaved and colonized as negations of the colonizers themselves.²³ Wilderson notes, “African slavery did not present an ethical dilemma for global civil society. The ethical dilemmas were unthought.”²⁴ The dominant logics of controlling and barring Blackness from humanity are necessary to both enforce the conditions of racial chattel slavery and assuage the mindset of masters and everyday colonizers. These logics lasted beyond the institution of slavery itself, and Black fungibility speaks to this persistence.

Alborotos: Race, Power, and National Mestizo Futures

Critiques of nationalism, nationhood, and the varied concomitant processes required to bring these notions to fruition abound from feminist, ethnic studies, and critical theory scholars. Central American nations have distinct, entangled histories with political destabilization, foreign military and economic intervention, and the internal challenges present when confronting the remnants of colonial rule in the forms of Indigenous, Afro-descended, and Afro-Indigenous communities. In response to the endurance of these racialized and territorially linked populations, Central American nations have developed dynamic ways of incorporating, marginalizing, and eliminating these metaphoric thorns-in-their sides. The title of this section is the Spanish word “*alboroto*.” An *alboroto* translates to both disturb and perturb. Additionally, *alboroto* means to produce large waves. I will illustrate the ways Blackness, Indigeneity, and settler colonialism is confronted and established in the post-independence period of Central American nations. Conquest produced coerced miscegenation and left quite a conundrum for newly independent

countries. The analysis of secondary literature on race and nation building projects through the lens of critical theory scholarship will produce a re-telling of national fictions. Examination of newspaper articles from the late nineteenth- through the mid-twentieth century in Central America provide an insight into the ways race became understood while being unseen.

While in Central America not all Afro-descended populations have a history of enslavement, the parameters of Blackness as ontologically linked to slavery remains a powerful fundament. Further, racial chattel slavery throughout Central America did not always mirror the ways that plantation slavery operated in the British colonies but it nonetheless reflected similar forms of brutality, cognitive dissonance, and ideological underpinnings necessary to maintain. Blackness, indigeneity, and “whiteness” became intertwined and situated throughout Central America via *mestizaje* as a linchpin to nation building. Whether Black enslaved bodies were treated better in places like Honduras or Costa Rica than in Jamaica or the United States is irrelevant to my intervention. My concern is to elucidate the ways Blackness gets narrated out of stories of national belonging, how the logics of dehumanizing and dispossessing indigenous peoples persists, and how both of these co-constitutive processes are the conditions of possibility for Central American nations themselves. Finally, I assert these projects have spurred massive inequity along racialized lines throughout the Isthmus. The challenge encountered with this argument is that often these racialized lines have been blurred because of the hegemonic power of the myths of *mestizaje*. In the national period, the first racial

passages that Central Americans undertake are these impositions of colonial racialized power that attempt to discursively disappear what is viscerally felt throughout the Isthmus: the role of race. The imprints of these histories can be traced through the internal displacements, expulsions, and targeting for genocidal, state-sanctioned violence.

The post-independence period in Central America begins with a brief entrance into a fledgling Mexican empire. Central America then attempts a transition into a fleeting effort to unify the Isthmus into a single republic from 1823 – 1838.²⁵ Five different countries emerge in the Central American isthmus (Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua) from the dissolving of the republic with two countries being carved out through and against competing imperial powers (Belize and Panama). Political independence from Iberian empires preceded the abolishment of slavery with few exceptions (namely, Cuba). Central America was not exempt from this timeline. As Latin American historian Damien Davis highlights “Independence meant freedom from colonial government, not necessarily universal liberty.”²⁶

With the dissolution of the Federal Republic of Central America, Central American nations were left with many questions regarding how each country was to reorganize itself. In many of the countries, land, wealth, and political power remained in the hands of an oligarchic elite. Hispanic elites of Central American nations generally shared notions of innate white supremacy that fueled racist and discriminatory attitudes towards their individual country’s racialized populations.

The descendants of slaves and other Afrodescended communities and the many Indigenous populations who remained relatively autonomous in the remote topography of places like the highlands of Guatemala or the Caribbean coasts of Nicaragua and Honduras were the central targets of elite ardor.²⁷ While major encroachments and epochs of indigenous dispossession had occurred since conquest, the transition into newly forming nations and simultaneous shifts in global economies called for new encroachments on indigenous lands and communities. In the mid nineteenth century the United States had expanded its territory by engaging in a war against Mexico. The war, as historians Laura Gomez and Reginald Horsman argue, was as much about economic and land accumulation as the advancement of white racial superiority.²⁸ Horsman terms this territorial and material advancement racial Anglo-Saxonism. The Mexican-American War, or as it is known in Mexico, the War of North American Aggression, was underpinned by the juridical, military, and religious notions mobilized by Manifest Destiny. The war and resulting spoils energized white capitalist elites' desire to expand their capacity to grow their wealth beyond the newly defined borders. Central America became a target for new incursions of white supremacist capitalist development.²⁹

As Walter D. Mignolo poignantly asks "(T)he fundamental issue underlying this intellectual tradition of rereading European encounters in the Americas is not class or hegemony or sublaternity but rather the question, What does it mean to be human?"³⁰ Mexican and Central American nation building projects needed mestizaje in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries to cohere racialized,

patriarchal, and ethnic visions of countries experiencing national consolidation. Mestizaje as a national ideology sought to make sense of the racial, gendered, and ethnic *alborotos* brought forth during colonization. Mestizaje is a vexed, specific formation that “played an important part in the thinking both of racists and antiracists” in places like Mexico.³¹ Mestizaje has been mobilized as a top-down effort to make sense of troubling amalgamations of populations, highlighting the mixture of Amerindian and conquering Europeans as foundational to the production of a new, hybrid race. Simultaneously, mestizaje has relegated the contributions and roles of enslaved Africans and mixed-race Afro-descendants to episodic, peripheral renderings that facilitate the exclusion, forgetting, and abandonment of Black populations throughout Central America.³² Tanya Kateri Hernandez introduces the concept of “racial innocence” in understanding the ways Latin American nations have narrated the story of racial mixture.³³ Mestizaje has proven to be a persistent project despite incisive critiques levied against it by academics. It remains a popularly held belief throughout Latin American nations where the myth of racial harmony or democracy along with the historical absence of formalized racial segregation seek to silence condemnations of racism by racialized populations. Mestizaje has done the dirty work of making sense of the *alborotos* of racial mixture in Mexico and Central America in order to further discipline diverse populations into accepting and no longer seeing racial discrimination as pertinent. Hernandez corroborates this understanding of mestizaje when she declares that it is “the belief

in the use of racial mixture to lighten the complexion of a nation in the movement toward whiteness and thereby promote racial harmony.”³⁴

Mestizaje as a dynamic is amenable to its spatial and temporal contexts. It becomes a modality to maintain and ascend to white supremacist and heteropatriarchal social orders and norms of progress throughout Central America. Dylan Rodriguez’s helpful definition of white supremacy as a “sociopolitical imagination and changing historical apparatus of human dominance”³⁵ assists in understanding the logics of mestizaje as another form of white supremacist social organization that seeks to reinscribe racial, gender, and class hierarchies in racially mixed and diverse locations. Its impact is also historical as it narrates national histories that isolate and ultimately erase impacts and presence of Afro-descended populations in Central America. Further, mestizaje and its incumbent calls for both biological miscegenation and cultural hybridity facilitate the eliminatory projects of settler colonialism. Myths of mestizo homogeneity flatten sociopolitical identities where land, political, and cultural rights claims are to be made based on recognition of specifically territorialized and ethnically identified indigenous and Afroindigenous communities. The result of making mestizaje a hegemonic ideal means that these claims by Indigenous, Afro-Indigenous, and Afro-descended communities are undermined by the state when settlers in power invite new avenues for national development and aspire to amorphous conceptions of progress. These elite, white supremacist desires are packaged as universal improvements for civil society.

In Guatemalan Mayan communities this is evidenced by continued hydroelectric and mining projects invading their territories with the backing and support of the Guatemalan settler state. In 2013, Canadian ambassador Hugues Rousseau claimed that the Guatemalan and Canadian companies engaging in mining prospects in Indigenous territories are going with new approaches that veer from aggression to transparency and dialogue. Ambassador Rousseau shows as evidence of this shift that GoldCorp, a Canadian-based mining company, agreed to pay increased royalties to the Guatemalan government. According to Rousseau “[GoldCorp] didn’t have to because they are grandfathered under the law right now and they only have to pay one percent. GoldCorp has decided to pay five percent which is quite an increase in the money the communities will start receiving.” Rousseau went on to stress “if [Indigenous peoples] want to understand how mining can help develop this country, if the communities don’t participate there will not be any kind of investment from other countries because companies don’t like chaos, really, frankly.”³⁶ These comments betray the naturalization of settler national power over Indigenous peoples and territories in Central America in recent history.

Rousseau assumes that money doled out to the Guatemalan government will somehow improve the livelihoods of Indigenous communities whose lands are central sites for these extractive, neoliberal projects of development. The nation of Guatemala stands in for the “country” whose existence is premised on a condition of perpetual war on Indigenous peoples epitomized by the thirty-six year genocidal civil war that killed well over 200,000 people from 1960 – 1996. Of these, eighty-

three percent of the victims who lost their lives were identified as Indigenous.³⁷

Indigenous communities throughout Central America, Mexico, and all of the Western Hemisphere continue to engage in acts of resistance against these projects because they understand them to be an assault on the very nature of their collective being, a collective being that's integrally tied to protection of the land and water sources for ontological survival. However, in the visions of transnational capitalists, economically and politically powerful western nations, and the Guatemalan settler state, the future is contingent on modes of production that necessitate displacement and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. These Indigenous communities are expected to eventually disappear or blend into rapidly industrializing or urban space.

Central America as an idea is empowered by the racial and gendered traditions of a colonial past and settler colonial present. Mignolo posits that Latin America is a "profoundly reactionary and colonial concept that gave prominence to the population of European or Latin descent while effectively rubbing-out the Indians and the Blacks."³⁸ Conquest and colonialism catalyzed a cataclysmic shift in world history and left devastated lands, communities. Colonial racial and gendered logics have continued to give shape and form to settler colonial nations like Mexico and those of Central America. Historian Robert Perez presents a poignant intervention in understanding the survival and ultimately the thriving logics when he argues that they required both legal and moral flexibility by colonizers and I would extend, settlers. Perez argues that this "flexibility allows for legal and moral

justifications for such things as appropriation of land, genocide, forced relocation, and enslavement of indigenous populations while allowing the colonizer to retain its moral sense of superiority.”³⁹ This is clearly the case during the colonial period for many casual observers of Mexican and Central American history.

Evidenced by the example of GoldCorp, continued desires to advance on Indigenous territory in Guatemala illustrate the continuity of uneven power relations fomented in conquest. Perez contends that the logic of colonialism is “defined by its very flexibility and how it provided the ability to justify and achieve the ultimate goals of colonial entities while simultaneously claiming that those actions are usually in the best interests of all concerned, including the colonized.”⁴⁰ This type of adaptability is facilitated by what Tiffany King calls “quotidian circulations of colonialist common sense.”⁴¹ Colonialism and its incumbent logics, as King and Perez argue, continues to not only shape the present but also remain large enough to contain other formations of power, namely settler colonialism in Mexico and Central America. King asserts, “conquest is a larger conceptual and material terrain than settler colonialism and far more suited for the regional/hemispheric particularities of colonality in the Americas and the specific ways diasporic Blackness gives conquest, genocide and settlement its form and feel.”⁴² The limits of critical theory like that of colonality as proposed by Anibal Quijano are that while they correctly and ardently propose that colonial nature of power relations persist in the post-colonial era, settler colonialism is established via Indigenous dispossession and history of erasure and resistance of Blackness in Central America

in post-Independence era. This reality demonstrates that conquest and colonialism have far outlived the end of the formal relations between empire and colony. In other words, there is nothing “post” colonial about the conditions Indigenous, Afro-Indigenous, and Afro-descended people experience from independence to the present.

Slavery’s impact on Afro-descended and Afro-Indigenous populations in Mexico and Central America requires looking beyond the specificities of the institutions in those actual regions. Latin American experiences of the enslaved varied from place to place. Complicating the matter of chattel slavery is that the institution involved both Africans and Indigenous peoples. Understanding these historical realities and leaving them as a backdrop I turn to Black Studies scholar Saidiya Hartman and her critical intervention on the study of Blackness through what she terms the “afterlife of slavery.” Hartman declares,

slavery had established a measure of a man and a ranking of life and worth that yet to be undone. If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days of the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.⁴³

The relations between Spanish colonizers, European-descended settlers, and enslaved and free Afro-descended populations continued to be shaped by the logics that underpinned racial chattel slavery established during conquest after independence throughout Latin America. Blackness was marred by global

antiblackness galvanized during conquest. Calvin Warren provides a useful definition of the concept of antiblackness: “an accretion of practices, knowledge systems, and institutions designed to impose nothing onto blackness and the unending domination/eradication of black presence as nothing incarnated ... antiblackness is anti-nothing.”⁴⁴ Antiblackness is an essential building block for modernity and consequently for the future of national health. Blackness became marked as inconsequential and marginalized in history and space.

Honduran historian Dario Euraque provides an exemplary case study to understand how the afterlife of slavery takes form in Central America. Euraque examines the obscured history of Blackness in Olancho in the department of Yoro in Honduras. During the 16th century a mining boom led to the importation of 1000-1500 enslaved Africans to Olancho. Simultaneously, the Honduran indigenous population declined from 800,000 to 132,000 from 1524 to 1550. The precipitous decline of Indigenous peoples continued unabated according to colonial tributary records. A popular Honduran historical account of racial mixture tends to categorize *mestizaje* in two different periods, the early sixteenth century to the early-eighteenth century and from the mid-eighteenth century to early-nineteenth century. The initial period is characterized by minimal racial mixing while the second period is marked by heightened mixture between the Indigenous and Spanish. According to Honduran anthropologist Manuel Chavez Borjas “Honduran black disappeared in the *mestizaje* process. Nothing remains of his culture, but the phenotypical factors present in the great part of the Honduran population.”⁴⁵

This settler retelling of history symbolizes the relegation of Blackness to nothingness. In subsequent periods, Honduras' Indigenous populations were decimated by disease, war, and attrition associated with conquest and colonization and Afro-descended communities who were essential in the clearing of Toluca Indians in Olanchito had ceased to play any significant role in the developing Honduran nation of the nineteenth century. Further, Indigenous genocide and Black enslavement and erasure form the conditions of possibility for settlers to make sense of themselves in the nineteenth century. The colonial residues of individual non-whites being able to maneuver their way up the socio-racial hierarchy continued to impact Afro-descended peoples with similar desires in the post-independence period. In fact, many Afro-mestizo individuals who ascended through military service to high-ranking political offices firmly subscribed to prevailing anti-Black customary ideologies. As a tourist book of the municipality of Olanchito stated in 1930, "its residents are of the Indian and Spanish race; at present the municipality has 10,000 inhabitants, products of the mixture of the two races."⁴⁶

The scrubbing of Blackness from the history of the conquest and colonization of Honduras got an unexpected reinforcement in the form of the arrival of the Black Caribs or Garifuna in 1797. The Garifuna are an Afro-Indigenous population with a distinct history of freedom and resistance. They were never enslaved and fought both alongside and against competing colonial powers like the British, French, and Spanish. The arrival of Garifuna from the island of St. Vincent in the late eighteenth century is a result of their resistance to British aggression and ultimately,

deportation to Roatan, on the Caribbean coast of Honduras. Through matters of nomenclature and developing narrations of history the Garifuna became labeled *morenos*, an ethnic reference specifically linked to the Afro-Indigenous population. Euraque contends that the Garifuna were more marked as foreign, treasonous, and produced the solution to eliminating traces of pre-Garifuna African colonial impact for the emerging mestizo nation. "In fact, Honduran leaders and many free mulattoes who descended from *cimarrones*, runaways slaves, have historically denied their African ancestry and do not use the term *moreno* to define themselves."⁴⁷ This denial of African ancestry must be situated within the context of an anti-Black, settler colonial, and white supremacist developing mestizo nation. Indigenous genocide and amalgamation through intimate relations with settlers and the simultaneous disappearance of Black history and containment of Blackness to conditions of non-belonging and national impossibility give form to the settler mestizo nation. King's contention that "conquistador and conquistador relations and modes of life [...] are the historic and ongoing daily processes of white human self-actualization that require the making of the Indian as non human as well the making of Black Slave as forms of property," is applicable to the Olanchito and Honduran case. Regardless of Garifuna resistance and evasion of slavery within the settler and mestizo futures being constructed in Honduras, Blackness would always be linked to the afterlife of slavery and be treated as outside the boundaries of national and human belonging alongside Indigenous people.

Honduras is not unique in its attempts to disappear Blackness from its national history in post-independence history. Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua serve as other key examples of this racialized developmental approach of antagonizing, disciplining, and framing Afro-descended populations as threats to mestizo national futures. Mulatto was another referent that survived the colonial period to describe the amalgamation of Europeans and Africans. Mulatto was mobilized as derogatory during the upheavals arising in the late colonial and early independence eras. In Guatemala and El Salvador mulattoes were characterized both by elites and commoners as barbarous, fearsome, and as intruders.⁴⁸ Mestizaje narratives again reveal themselves to explain the disappearance of Blackness in other Central American nations. The whiteness of the mestizo formula operates differently in Central America than in the United States in that it consumes what the eugenic influenced elite intellectuals and authors of the national histories come to believe are the inferior and beleaguered races. Eugenicist thinkers of Latin America subscribed to Lamarckian ideals on cultural heredity. Hernandez illustrates, “Lamarck’s notion of genetic acquisition intuitively provided indirect support for the mestizaje concept that interracial intimacy between a white person and a black person would allow the resulting child to acquire whiteness and all the positive attributes socially associated with whiteness.”⁴⁹ Mestizaje was ultimately premised on an eliminatory logic of both Black and Indigenous peoples to ensure mestizo futures. This involved the continued rewriting of history that narrated the

disappearance of Blackness as tensionless in places like Guatemala as was the case in Honduras.

Central Americanists Gudmundson and Wolfe remind us that Black labor was crucial in building the foundations of Guatemala. They write,

amid the tensionless resolution even Antigua's very architectural legacy had been reinscribed as a Spanish or white cultural legacy rather than being traceable to the mulatto master builders of the Porres family. That the University of San Carlos itself and many other beneficent institutions owes their endowments to the sugar and African slave-driven wealth of the Dominican order in the region somehow continues to escape notice entirely in such a happy-ending version of the region's drama of mestizaje.⁵⁰

Antigua was the first capital city of Guatemala. It was known as Santiago initially. It is a world-renowned city for its colonial architecture. Its aesthetic is an ode to what continues to be central to Guatemalan racialized national myth making, conquest and by extension, whiteness. The University of San Carlos is one of the preeminent higher education institutions throughout Central America and is rooted in the exploitation of enslaved Africans. These "forgotten" histories are not a matter of scholarly oversight. I return to King's explanation of Black fungibility as an analytic framework to understand the ways "Blackness, as expansion and spatial possibility, becomes a constituting feature of the spatial imagination of the conquistador/settler rather than just another human laborer exploited as a mere technology to produce space."⁵¹ In this Guatemalan case, the wealth created by enslaved Afro-descended and the work done by skilled mulatto laborers became one in the same, invisible.

The invisibility speaks to the ways mestizo futures make Blackness an impossibility in Central American nations. In the case of the Black master builders, their creations literally entrench white supremacist conquest. Wealth generated through racial chattel slavery is central to the erection of markers of progress, development, and futures like universities, churches, and national plazas. Blackness is written out and can never be written in lest the myths of mestizaje and the nations they cohere were to crumble.

For Indigenous populations systematized disappearance from national recognition did not come solely through physical extermination. Demographic record keeping proved to be a politically effective and efficient tool to eradicate the numerical presence of both Afro-descended and Indigenous populations throughout Mexico and Central America. Census takers in the post-independence tracked the supposed decline of Indigenous and Afro-descended people through questionable methods of marking racial and ethnic difference which were heavily influenced by scientific racism. Furthermore, census records throughout Latin America continue to rely on problematic binaries that occlude more than they reveal. Noted anthropologist on race and racism in Latin America, Peter Wade highlights the limits of these approaches, “this binary classification tends to hide the fact that racism and ideas about racial difference also operate on those people who define themselves as mixed.”⁵² Data indicating population loss through assimilation, acculturation, or miscegenation throughout Latin

America is a product of (settler) colonial logics of power that seek to entrench settler dominance and racialized and gendered hierarchies.

Settler colonial state-sanctioned clerical erasure is another tool to foreclose Indigenous land claims and advance dispossession throughout colonial territories. The case of Native Hawaiians, or Kanaka Maoli, and their relationship to United States settler colonial rule proves instructive. As J. Kehaulani Kauanui describes, “Blood quantum is a fractionalizing measurement—a calculation of ‘distance’ in relation to some supposed purity to mark one’s generational proximity to a ‘full-blood’ forbear.”⁵³ These measurements, as crafted and manipulated by the U.S. settler state have operated effectively “through a reductive logic in both cultural and legal contexts” at undermining “expansive identity claims based on genealogy.”⁵⁴ Kauanui accurately suggests that the ultimate goal of these settler state-run efforts legally minimize the numbers of Indigenous peoples and “originates in the dispossession of Native claims to land and sovereignty.”⁵⁵

Indigenous disappearance through assimilation in Central America has also come through narratives of proletarianization. The stories go that Indigenous peoples have succumb to the modernizing effects of export-oriented agro-industrialization that has forced these communities into seasonal laboring pools on large plantations. This process has resulted in Indigenous identification being minimized, as communities become individual laborers, losing their ties to culture, genealogy, and traditions. As

blood quantum regulations on Indigenous peoples of the United States demonstrate, these calculations seek to not only limit populations but also undermine any demands made by Indigenous peoples. In places like Nicaragua and El Salvador census questions and tracking have produced similar reductions in Indigenous demography using the idea of a rising, assimilatory notion of laboring class as explanation. Proletarianization and concomitant ladinoization (the process of becoming non-Indian) is evidenced in census data in Nicaragua from 1906 – 1920. During this period the Indigenous population on record fell from thirty percent to under four.⁵⁶ In a relational manner labor, or becoming a laborer for Indigenous peoples meant deracination while labor for enslaved Afrodescended populations could never contend with their fungibility.

The precipitous demographic decline involved a recognition and invocation of the historical racist settler violence of the nineteenth century that decimated populations and dislocated them from their territories. The numbers emerging through tracking census data needs to be revisited and placed under a microscope as historians like Jeffrey Gould have done. Gould contends that a closer approximation of Indigenous peoples in Nicaragua would be measured by looking at communities that belonged to “Comunidades Indigenas” (Indigenous communities). Communities’ membership into these societies, “entailed notions of common provenance, land rights, religious and political autonomy, and a bitter history of conflict

with ladino neighbors.” The numbers that emerge for Indigenous peoples from 1920 would shift when accounting these communities to fifteen to twenty percent of the national population, up from the under four percent that official records indicated.⁵⁷

In Guatemala and Nicaragua the concept of ladinoization preceded the transformation towards a presumably biological mestizo. Ladino identity is ultimately produced by a negative relationship towards being Indian. In other words, one is a Ladino because one is not Indian. During the nineteenth century in Guatemala Ladino identity takes shape. Local ladino power holders joined forces with Euro-Guatemalans to govern and exclude Indians from roles in government and uphold colonial racial discrimination. Anthropologist Charles Hale maintains that ladino identity is solidified and maintained through a dichotomous and aggressively antagonistic relation towards Indigenous peoples in Guatemala.⁵⁸ Likewise, Diane Nelson corroborates, “ladino identity is closely tied to notions of modernity.”⁵⁹ In Nicaragua ladino identity was also tied to notions of progress via the “civilizing” logic of education, promotion of wage labor, and a move away from communal living for Indigenous peoples. Ladinos were moving forward, while “Indians were pitiful, static, locked in the past, and incapable of progressing on their own. Education, therefore, would wrench the Indians out of the past and convert them into the civilized ladinos, with the same rights as other citizens, but with not special rights to land.”⁶⁰ Thus, becoming

ladino was procedural in becoming a rightful citizen in newly forming national polities. It meant a dispossession of politicized Indigenous identities. Consequently, the allure of ascending out of an Indigenous identity became a masterful weapon to weaken legal and juridical advances by Indigenous communities when it came to questions of land, sovereignty, and human rights. Further, becoming a laborer required seasonal dislocations throughout the Isthmus. These dislocations are the precursors for the expulsions out of the country from the 1970s onward where structurally vulnerable Central Americans fled to find refuge and economic opportunities for survival.

However, being ladino was not a linear process, nor one that produced neat binaries. Further, North American scholars' obsessions with focusing on ladino-Indigenous tensions in Central America have occluded the role the organizing logics of white supremacy play in the Isthmus. Euro-descended settlers continue to dictate the government, economy, and overall institutional apparatuses in countries like Guatemala. Guatemalan anthropologist, Jorge Ramon Gonzalez-Ponciano details this essentialization in U.S.-based scholarship by highlighting the ways Western ethnographic imaginations convert ladinos into stand-ins for whites and making their racism against Indians the primary axis to understand Guatemala's deep history of racism and social contradictions. Gonzalez-Ponciano contends that resultant linear explanations of Guatemalan ladino-Indigenous racism

obfuscate the roles of “imperial whiteness” and the internal racial and pigmentocratic hierarchies on and within Guatemala.⁶¹ While some ladinos with money experience and express power and discriminatory attitudes towards Indians, most ladinos are not part of the Euro-descended settler elite class that rules the country. Local settler colonial elites in Central America “wish to be considered as white as their gringo neighbors and conspicuously perform Euro-American-identified styles—including speaking English and showing familiarity with U.S. academic discourse—as signs of a cosmopolitanism that also ‘whitens.’”⁶² This expression of white supremacist, settler order becomes invisible to white academics from the global north because exchanges between working poor ladinos, Indigenous communities, and Euro-descended settler elites are so few and far in between that they remain unacknowledged.

Imperial whiteness throughout Mexico and Central America provides a historical analytical frame to understand the ways colonial, settler colonial, and imperial modes of white supremacy are intimately tethered. To be clear, Spanish colonialism perpetuated distinct, institutionalized forms of white supremacy. Spanish colonial residues are foundational in the racial subordination that has developed from the nineteenth- through the twenty-first centuries in Mexico and Central America. The dynamics of United States white supremacy descend upon Central America during the nineteenth century via the incursions of white transnational capitalists. I illuminate both

Spanish colonial and U.S. imperialism to underscore that white supremacy is a transnational dynamic. Historian James Colby's history of the United Fruit Company's rise in Central America denotes that "Hispanic elites generally shared white American prejudice toward peoples of African and indigenous descent."⁶³ This by no means indicates harmonious relations between U.S.-based white capitalists and local Euro-descended Spanish elites in Central America, but it does demonstrate that white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and anti-Indigenous ideologies were generative bonds for the congealment of transnational capital. These tenuous but unified relationships are best symbolized by the story of William Walker, a white, would-be settler from Tennessee in the mid-nineteenth century Nicaragua. Nicaraguan liberals recruited Walker in 1855 to lead a fight against conservatives and take over power of the country. Walker successfully conquered Nicaragua and established his authority in Granada. He pushed for U.S. whites to migrate to Nicaragua and reinstated racial chattel slavery as an incentive. He advertised the region as a "home for Southern men." Amidst the growing momentum for abolition, Southern white men took up this call to provide a "national method by which to heal the social and political disorder of Spanish America, and to restore the choicest portions of the continent to the uses and purposes of civilization."⁶⁴

The convergence of white supremacist, anti-Black, and settler colonial power is powerfully evinced in the history of Walker and the white

supremacist filibusters who supported him. He relied on the discourse made popular during the rise of Manifest Destiny along with a deep commitment towards maintaining racial chattel slavery to promote the rightful role of white supremacist order of the civilizing world. While his actions were met with powerful resistance by Euro-descended settler elites in Central America (he was eventually killed and defeated because of his own greed and incompetence), their negative reaction was ultimately catalyzed by the thought of more Black bodies being brought into their nations. The language of “civilization” resonated with the settler elite’s political and racialized nascent Hispanic nationalisms.

Costa Rica seized upon prevailing ideas that national progress and recognition as a functioning nation-state hinged upon racial purity. Costa Rican national pride has relied upon an investment, albeit fraught, into its own national whiteness. This investment by Costa Rican economic, political, and social elites has produced myths of exceptionalism that are upheld by comparisons to neighboring countries. “Costa Rica was distinct from the rest of Central America, they claimed: its Spanish settlers had neither enslaved nor interbred with Indians, and the nation therefore represented a progressive white outpost in a mixed and degraded region.”⁶⁵ While these myths of a white nation are not true they do mirror white supremacist logics undergirding the national periods of other Central American nations. Costa Ricans were distinct in that they did not cohere their nationalisms upon

prevailing ideologies of national mestizaje. Instead, they celebrated a manufactured white history, present, and future to be fortified by encouraging white immigration into the country.

While Lamarckian notions of cultural improvement through positive eugenicist thought was animating pushes for gendered and racial mixing in other nations, white immigration was meant to preserve and ensure the continued progress and profile of the nation. Afro-descended Costa Ricans occupy the position of the unthought and are primarily relegated to the periphery of national concerns. Afro-descended migrant laborers from the United States and the West Indies help settler new frontiers in the Caribbean zone of Costa Rica and their labor amassed wealth for both U.S. and Costa Rican whites. Antirblackness, white supremacy, and settler colonialism dotted the topography of the nation through institutionalized segregation on banana and coffee plantations and the naming of these large farms after U.S. cities and sites of imperial conquests like “Manila,” “Bataan,” and “Cheyenne.”⁶⁶ It is no surprise that with this history Costa Rica continues to be a destination for white ex-pats from the United States today.

El Salvador is perhaps the exemplar when it comes to the hegemonic ascendance of mestizaje. El Salvador is often considered a place where Indigenous people no longer exist and where Blacks are nowhere to be found because it has no Caribbean coastline. The remnants of Indigenous peoples shape national allusions to pre-colonial pasts. Virginia Tilley’s 2005 book

Seeing Indians: A study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador provides a history of the genocidal exertion of Salvadoran national power on Indigenous populations. State-sponsored massacres in response to Indigenous uprisings in 1833, “at least five [...] between the years of 1872 and 1898 in the coffee growing regions”⁶⁷, and the tragedy of 1932 where thousands were brutally murdered and villages scorched to the ground become historical flashpoints that in El Salvador there’s no Indians. The notions of Indigenous extinction have been proven to be false by both a resurgence in identification spurred by both local and diasporic Salvadorans’ desires for reconnections to severed pasts and international monies being doled out to protect Indigenous rights by NGOs. Following the logics that have been mapped out in this section, anti-Black erasure has served to cohere the myths of mestizaje buttressing the Salvadoran nation. Tilley notes, “a local official opposed further imports because the number of blacks was so large in his region that he feared an uprising [...] By the mid-eighteenth century, observers of festivals in the region could still observe communities signing in ‘the language of Guinea or of Angola.’”⁶⁸ In the Salvadoran national imagination, Blackness is impossibility, an *alboroto* solved through being written out of reality.

The succinct recap of the ways mestizaje, settler colonialism, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy have shaped Central American nation-states is crucial in understanding the ways racialized communities’ systematized discrimination and marginalization has persisted in obscurity.

The lack of attending to the ongoing legacies of colonial, settler colonial, and white supremacist, heteropatriarchal social orders invisibilizes the bodies that are most vulnerable to the machinations of white supremacist, settler colonial elite-led governments and economies. The conclusion of this chapter will provide intimate details of the impacts these metanarratives around mestizo nations and futures have on actual families and people, while highlighting the violence of erasure and occlusion. Violence against Black, Indigenous, and other racialized populations becomes unmarked as racist state violence and efforts at social control. Indigenous, Afro-Indigenous, and Afro-descended communities protesting increased militarized encroachment on their lands, the undermining of titles to their lands, and increasingly hostile displacements become symbols not of righteous resistance but emblematic of the racialized impediments to progress, rooted in their historic barbarity, backwardness, and savagery. I will continue this conversation in the following chapter when I speak about the conditions of expulsion that Central American racialized communities have faced and responded to through uncanny acts of bravery and collectivity by seeking refuge beyond national borders.

What I have mapped out in this chapter is a non-chronological outline of Central American national building projects. I have re-interpreted the telling of national histories throughout the region to demonstrate not only how Blackness and Indigeneity are contained and disciplined but also why this has been essential in

purported efforts to move Central American countries forward. The fact of the matter remains, Black and Indigenous people continue to exist throughout the Isthmus. They contend with the continued onslaughts on their dignity, lands, and futures. Central Americans within the Isthmus and beyond have been severed from their own cultural pasts as the promise of becoming a mestizo or ladino remains a naturalized order. I suggest that Afro-descended, Indigenous, and deracinated but racialized Central Americans have and continue to be made structurally vulnerable, disposable, and targeted for elimination. The treatment and abandonment of racialized and consequently impoverished communities throughout the Isthmus thus is seen as proper. Indigenous and Black people are poor not because they have been pushed to the margins of society, dispossessed, and exploited to the point of exhaustion. These populations are wretched because of their laziness, lack of desire, and education. And these attitudes have been impervious to time.

On June 20, 1922, a section called “Notes from the Street” from the Guatemalan newspaper *El Imparcial* (The Impartial) captured commentaries from readers. In one of the commentaries a person wrote about their dismay at seeing an alarming increase of beggars “polluting” the streets with their “misery, deformities, or diseases.”⁶⁹ The previous day, the same section published another piece of commentary entitled “The Black Street.” In this brief note, the author is exasperated by a street in the heart of Guatemala City because of a particular corner where “men from poor neighborhoods” ominously hang around doing “what only you can imagine.”⁷⁰ And finally, a short article reflects the ways eugenics and history

permeated the national imagination. The title of the entry: "Showering, One of the Most Urgent Problems in Guatemalan Life." In it the author critiques the lack of cleanliness that pervades Guatemalan life, presumably in the capital city. Nowhere in the article is there a mention of how many people have access to clean water or adequate housing. What the author is compelled to assert is the lineage of the "overwhelming majority" of Guatemalans. The ancestry of most citizens is "dirty [...] "their ancestors are afraid of the water." These people, which presumably the author is not a part of, "have a love of filth on their bodies" that reflects the "dirtiness of their souls and minds."⁷¹ These pieces illustrate how a nation still in the process of understanding and making itself saw its present and future. All three of these entries highlight the discriminatory attitudes towards the poor, racialized people of Guatemala. The poor are incorrigible and are spoken of as irredeemable on their own. The specter of criminalization is evident when describing poor young men being in public.

One could easily reduce these attitudes to an antiquated past that has been changed dramatically by the shifts towards nascent efforts at multicultural governance that espouses respect and tolerance. But these attitudes continue. Racialized and poor communities throughout the Isthmus are talked about as dregs and true impediments to national progress. In the summer of 2014 I returned to Guatemala for the first time in nearly a decade. I met the partner of a cousin of mine. The young man came from a family of land and business owners in the neighboring department of Escuintla. One night we were talking about the news that was strewn

across television and cell phone screens: the Central American refugee crisis of 2014. I remember saying how sad it was that these people have to fight so hard to just leave their countries in hopes that they can make it to and in the United States. I expressed my knowledge about how much people had told me it costs to be guided through Mexico and into U.S. soil. The figure I was sharing was 10,000 dollars. His retort was that people were making foolish decisions. He could not understand why these, the wretched of the Earth, could not take those 10,000 dollars and just start a business like he had done (with the help of his wealthy family). Why would they go to a country where they were not going to even make it?

This conversation reflects the long-lasting legacy of colonial racialized residues throughout Central America. Local settler elites and the non-Indian, non-Black class that aspires to that existence cannot understand why the poor do not just educate themselves or work harder. The success of mestizo futures is that they allow differently socially and politically located people in Central America to feel like they all have the same life chances. These histories animate disdain and antipathy towards the poor, racialized masses of the Isthmus. They further reflect the attitudes of governmental leaders who maintain the conditions of economic stratification because this inequity lines the pockets of local and global capitalist elites. What are left in the dust are actual human beings who are faced with unimaginable decisions to survive.

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⁵⁴ Ibid, 3.

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⁵⁶ Jeffrey Gould. "¡Vana Ilusion!': The Highlands Indians and the Myth of Nicaragua Mestiza, 1880 -1925," in *Identity and Struggle at the Margins of the Nation-State: The*

Laboring Peoples of Central America and the Hispanic Caribbean eds. Aviva Chomsky and Aldo Lauria-Santiago (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 53.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 54.

⁵⁸ Charles R. Hale. *Mas Que un Indio (More than an Indian): Racial Ambivalence and Neoliberal Multiculturalism in Guatemala* (Santa Fe: School of American Research Press, 2006), 157.

⁵⁹ Diane M. Nelson, *A Finger in the Wound: Body Politics in Quincentennial Guatemala* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999): 78.

⁶⁰ Gould, 70.

⁶¹ Jorge Ramon Gonzalez-Ponciano. "The *Shumo* Challenge: White Class Privilege and the Post-Race, Post-Genocide Alliances of Cosmopolitanism from Below," in *War by Other Means: Aftermath in Post-Genocide Guatemala* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 308.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Colby, 9.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 28.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 63.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 94 – 99.

⁶⁷ Beth Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 32.

⁶⁸ Virginia Tilley, *Seeing Indians: A Study of Race, Nation, and Power in El Salvador* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 209.

⁶⁹ "Mendigos en la calle," *El Imparcial*, June 20, 1922.

⁷⁰ "La calle negra," *El Imparcial*, June 19, 1922.

⁷¹ "El baño, uno de los problemas urgentes de la vida de Guatemala," *El Imparcial*, June 21, 1922.

Chapter 2: Of Mestizo Love and Racist Warfare: The Construction of Boundaries of Belonging in Post-Revolutionary Mexico

Soccer matches capture the imaginations of diverse global audiences. The World Cup tournament brings together teams from all continents every four years in a spectacle that is unparalleled in terms of viewership. Soccer games have also been sites of dastardly acts of racism, homophobia, and misogyny. Matches between the Mexican and different Central American national teams have illustrated the historically contentious relationships between the two regions. In November of 2015 the Mexican national team was set to play a qualifying match against El Salvador in El Estadio Cuscatlan in San Salvador. The match had little relevance for the Mexican team as they had already etched their qualification to the World Cup. This did not stop a Mexican newspaper, *Tiempo Real*, from posting an insensitive and vitriolic cover story prior to the matchup. On the cover, an image of Dustin Correa, a U.S.-born Salvadoran member of the national team was transposed over a stock image of a train that had the insignia of the Salvadoran Soccer Federation prominently displayed. The caption of the image was equally polemical: "Send them to the Beast."¹ The imagery and caption referenced the dire conditions Central American migrants face while attempting to cross Mexico towards the U.S. border. La Bestia is an allusion to the cargo trains that have carried countless, hungry, and desperate human beings on an uncertain and perilous journey north. The dangers associated with this type of travel are symbolized by the lost lives, dismemberments, and sexual assaults encountered by its passengers. The

insensitivity of the cover story highlights the ways Central Americans are dehumanized and devalued in Mexican territory. In addition, this episode demonstrates the ways Mexican nationalist rhetoric relies on feelings of cultural and racialized superiority through the etching of Central Americans as beneath Mexicans.

In Central America and Mexico the story of The Beast is well known. The train of death as it is also called, becomes a rite of passage for those Central American transmigrants, too poor to pay for a guide through Mexico and are trying to avoid encounters with Mexican state officials. The Beast makes Central Americans visible in Mexico. Traveling on this unstable and violent vehicle performs the work of congealing Central Americans as a flattened entity of desperate and racialized “others” while in Mexican territory. Maritza Cardenas writes, “The Beast [...] acts as a binding force for transmigrants conjoined by the fact that they have to undergo the same perils,” and forges individuals “into ‘Central Americans’ by the experience of crossing Mexico.”² I intend to map out the history that produces Mexico as another racial gauntlet that Central Americans must cross on their way to seek refuge and survival. Mexico is settled and its territory becomes a violent borderland for Central American migrants. I want readers to consider extending the location of the borderlands beyond the U.S.-Mexico border to incorporate the entire Mexican territory as a violent “*herida abierta* wehre the Third World grates against the first and bleeds.”³

In this chapter I detail the ways white supremacist and settler colonial projects gave shape to a fractured Mexican nation trying to recover from a brutal civil war. Development efforts throughout Mexico sought to make productive previously undeveloped regions of the country. These plans relied on celebratory narratives and investments in ideas that non-Indian bodies were the rightful, best, and proper subjects to carve the pathway to modernity. Indigenismo and mestizaje became top-down edicts to pave the way for a more harmonious Mexican future. Consequently, nation building desires hinged on anti-Indian attitudes that attached Indigenous populations and presence as backward and uncivilized obstacles of progress. Analisa Taylor corroborates, “indigenismo equates mestizaje with modernization and social equality. It equates indigeneity with remoteness and social stagnation, casting the Indian as *other*, within, yet always external to, the nation.”⁴ Ultimately, roads to economic stability and prosperity were intimately linked with racialized and heteropatriarchal forms of control. The resistance that sparked the Mexican Revolution became discursively tied to Indian rebellion or the biological and cultural inferiority of mestizos.⁵ Mexico was consumed with managing a racially and ethnically diverse populace and preventing any further cultural and social devolution.

Mexican governmental and intellectual leaders worked diligently to transition the country from social, political, and economic turmoil to a stable settler nation. Shaping the nation’s immigration system became a central site to reach this stability. The chapter then shifts to examine the racial and heteropatriarchal logics

that undergird Mexico's immigration policies. Many of the restrictions and enforcement policies were influenced by the scientific racism of the time in the forms of eugenics. Nancy Stepan describes eugenics "as a social movement with an explicit set of policy proposals that appeared to their proponents to be suggested by, or be logically derived, from hereditarian science itself."⁶ Mexico was confronted with migrants from China, Japan, the United States, and the Middle East between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Mexico's racial politics in the post-revolutionary period sets the stage for a racialized and gendered antagonism revolving around mestizaje as a cohering national logic, but one that must be contained by impeding further social, cultural, and biological mixing of races deemed inferior by prevailing scientific and social knowledge. Anti-Chinese, anti-Arab, and anti-Black racist attitudes lay the discursive groundwork that influences Mexican refugee and immigration policies on the influx of Central Americans crossing through Mexico, beginning in the 1970s. By focusing on immigration and refugee/immigration policies and Mexican civil society's relationship to mestizo nationalism, I highlight the salience of race and gender in crystalizing the Mexican nation's sense of self. In other words, the construction and control of racialized and gendered "others" help to define Mexican mestizo national identities by attempting to construct boundaries of belonging around a seemingly fluid racial construct.

Mexican Mestizo Futures

This section contends with the contextual consolidation and attempts at coherence of the post-revolutionary Mexican state from the Porfirian period where

Europophilic attitudes were parroted by elites to the revolutionary and post-revolutionary epoch where intellectuals, politicians, and artists rendered anti-imperialist narratives of what was then assumed to be an ascendant and inclusive Mexican mestizo future. Mestizo futures required not only the mobilization and naturalization of ideology, but it necessitated new boundaries to be constructed in terms of race, gender, and migration policies. To illustrate these boundaries we will take a look at the rise in anti-Chinismo and anti-Asian violence that emerges during and after the post-revolutionary nation-state building stage (change time period to be part of World War Two). Indigenistas of the era believed in a flattened, alternate reality in which hierarchies, which had calcified racial attitudes from Spanish colonization onward, could be eradicated through governmental tinkering. Intellectual framers of the nascent official anti-racist praxis were deeply embedded in the racial science of the late nineteenth century emerging from Europeans like Herbert Spencer and Louis Agassiz. While shifts from more clear understandings of white supremacy to government led anti-racist acculturation may mark a significant change for some scholars with regards to racism in Mexico, I argue that it is an adaptation to find new methods of control. Heightened tensions towards other racialized populations in Mexico demonstrate the valence of racial dominance for the nation-state.

Mexican history is replete with genocidal violence against Indigenous peoples and racial chattel slavery throughout specific economic regions. Historian David Stannard notes of the conquest, "Tenochtitlan effectively was no more. About

a third of a million people dead, in a single city in a single lake in the center of Mexico. And still this was just the beginning.”⁷ The holocaust of Indigenous communities involved not only strategic military onslaughts coordinated with other Indigenous groups, but it involved the mobilization and ultimately biological warfare with the untreated spread of debilitating disease throughout. While enslaved Africans did not uniformly experience plantation-based slavery, many did. Enslaved Africans were brought to work on sugar plantations in Morelos, for example. Historian Paul Hart describes a chattel slavery institution that despite having laws that regulated the treatment of enslaved Africans still practiced anti-Black disciplinary and dehumanizing methods. Hart asserts:

Despite regulatory laws, in the p practice few restraints controlled the behavior of slave owners. Hacendados in Morelos housed their slaves in special quarters called the *real de esclavos*. Slaves were routinely disciplined, subjected to corporal punishment, had their bodies branded with searing-hot branding irons, and sometimes hacendados had their overseers brand slaves on the face for easy recognition in case of flight. Estate owners kept whips, handcuffs, neck irons, and chains for their administrators to use to restrain and punish rebellious or disobedient slaves.⁸

Studies of Afro-Mexico abound in the post-1970s period. Scholarly attention from academia within and beyond Mexico has focused on specific periodizations of Afro-Mexican history, looking for distinctions and specificities. What the example above demonstrates is the importance that racial chattel slavery and conquest throughout epoch of European imperial expansion. Slavery impacted Indigenous, Africans, and Chinese in the formation of New Spain. For Afro-Mexicans the consequence of a

global logic of antiblackness would shape their erasure and existence on the margins of Mexico.

The enslavement of Africans in New Spain furthered the notions of objectification and subjection of the Black body. Through the second half of the eighteenth century enslaved Africans played a significant role in Mexico's urban centers. Enslaved Africans were employed as status symbols by elites. Historians of this period highlight the marked occupations slaves played throughout as artisans, shopkeepers, and day laborers.⁹ Ultimately, enslaved Africans were still thought of as chattel, objects or as Aime Cesaire effectively describes, they had gone through the process of "thingification." Conquest and slavery involved and inaugurated "relations of domination and submission which turn the colonizing man into a classroom monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production."¹⁰ As previously discussed, slavery, conquest, and colonialism are central components to the birth of modernity, progress, and the concept of freedom itself. The unfree came to define the free in the modern world. Orlando Patterson indicates that the, "joint rise of slavery and cultivation of freedom was no accident. It was [...] a sociohistorical necessity."¹¹ The colonial legacy of racial chattel slavery across the western world indelibly marks Blackness as slavery. Afropessimist critic Frank Wilderson echoes, "African slavery did not present an ethical dilemma for global civil society. The ethical dilemmas were unthought [...] modernity marks the emergence of a new ontology because it is an era in which an entire race appears, people who, a priori [...] stand as socially

dead in relation to the rest of the world.”¹² Césaire’s notion of “thingification” coupled with the idea that Afropessimists like Wilderson and Hartman provide of chattel slavery converting the Black body into Black flesh foreground the ways Blackness is understood in Mexico beyond the colonial period.

Parallel to the fundamental antagonism that racial chattel slavery and the creation of Blackness instilled in the modern world was the creation of the “Indian.” Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla describes conquest and colonialism as establishing two irreconcilable poles, the Indian and the Spanish. Batalla explains, “the individuality of each of the subjugated peoples passed to a second level and lost meaning. The only fundamental distinction was that which made all of them ‘the others,’ that is to say, those who are not Spaniards.”¹³ Granted, colonial relations between Spanish invaders and Indigenous peoples varied depending on a number of contexts. What can be understood is that the figure of the “Indian” became a powerful symbol that would shift and change throughout Mexican history. The “Indian” would eventually be tasked with being open to changing their condition by accepting or succumbing to the will of modernity. The Indian was conscripted into a mission of progress that involved their elimination, conversion, and acquiescence to white supremacist settler colonial order. Blackness and Indigeneity would become integral components to be tamed in the national and post-revolutionary periods of Mexican history.

A preeminent intellectual, theoretician, and educator by the name of José Vasconcelos emerged as a central figure in shaping the discourse around post-

revolutionary Mexican national character along racial, spiritual, and gendered lines. Mexico had undergone a brutal, nation-wide civil war that further fractured the polity from 1910 – 1920. The nation was also reeling from the dictatorial rule of Porfirio Diaz who presided over the nation from 1876 – 1911 for most of that time period. Diaz encouraged foreign investment and a Europhilic development model that lamented racialized dregs of society. Diaz and his contemporaries were heavily influenced by eugenics and this would leave a profound legacy in the nation in the post-Porfirian era. Complementary racial, gendered, and political ideologies emerged in Mexico in the form of Indigenismo and mestizo nation-building projects.

Manuel Gamio, the intellectual framer of indigenismo, a settler paradigm that bequeathed the figure of the Indian as a special symbol at the heart of Mexico's mestizo future. The abstracted notion of the Indian became a linchpin in moving the nation forward culturally under government tutelage and patronage. This state-sanctioned, anti-racist vision was another imposition from outside of Indigenous peoples' political, social, or historic worldviews. It maintained the notion that Indians were in need of civilization from the state and their culture, perpetually backward. Gamio understood Indians as a "poor and suffering race" that was not to "awaken spontaneously." Gamio believed it to "be necessary for friendly hearts to work for [Indians'] redemption' [...] It was therefore the task of skilled and sympathetic intellectuals, ethnographers, and anthropologists above all, to 'forge... an indian soul.'"¹⁴ The fissures exposed by the war were grand. Settler intellectual elites searched to render a core of a nation that would not disrupt the trajectory of

development and maintain racial and ethnohierarchy. Indigenistas believed in a disciplinary assimilationist project via education, cultural, and social policies that would transform Indians into mestizos. Effectively, these projects were rooted in eliminating Indian people by ethnocide and undermine any future claims on the land that settlers sought to further generate wealth from through development.

Indigenista national narratives prescribed incorporation for Indigenous peoples on the condition they would welcome cultural amalgamation and relinquished ties to their glorious pasts. Bonfil Batalla corroborates, "The Indian presence as depicted in murals, museums, sculptures, and archaeological sites, all open to the public, is treated essentially as a dead world."¹⁵ Great Indian civilizations became placeholders that settler elites and mestizos could claim as a collective past. The underpinning of mestizo futures sought to obfuscate the dynamism, adaptability, and continuity of Indigenous peoples, cultures, and political visions. Mexican mestizaje myths reorganized colonial antagonisms. Indigenismo framed Indians as a problem and their policies along with official mestizaje discourses were the remedy. The problem of Indians in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries was not the history of exploitation, dispossession, and genocidal violence but their own indolence. During the Porfiriato Indigenous peoples were subject to state-led aggression across the vast geography of Mexico. Powerful forces assaulted the Yaqui of the northern part of Mexico and the Mayan of the Yucatan. Indigenous peoples who resisted moved from noble savages to stubborn Indians who were resisting not deracination but civilization.¹⁶ These

actions reflect the continuance of colonial attitudes and the customary practices embedded in conquest via the Doctrine of Discovery. Civilization became a weaponized force to justify settler expansion throughout Mexico. New frontiers were made through genocidal war and starving Indians out that followed the paths of settler nations like the United States and Argentina. The epistemological undergirding of these aggressive acts gave form to the practice of *mestizaje*. The crux of these projects was the elimination of Indians and the continued conversion of these bodies into laborers for the accumulation of wealth in the hands of a settler minority.

The discourse of conversion is important to recognize in the project of further naturalizing new forms of frontier making and settlement in Mexico during this epoch. Vasconcelos' *La Raza Comica: Mision de la raza ibero-americana* is produced and helps further shape the vision of Mexico's mestizo future. His work focused on not just the cultural fusion of the multiplicity of races in Mexico like Gamio, but he believed in a biological mixture to further ascend to a modern nation. Vasconcelos' work was integral in emergent notions of Latin American hybrid races. It was and continues to be lauded in some spaces, including Ethnic and Chicano studies. Some scholars have been dutifully critical of the "cosmic race" thesis and have understood it as a racist and paternal discourse. I contend that in addition to its racism, Vasconcelos' work continued the spirit of the Doctrine of Discovery and was a tool to further justify indigenous dispossession and the elimination of Blackness from the Mexican national imagination. *Mestizaje* was a providential

mission. According to thinkers like Vasconcelos it was a noble cause and alternative to the violence of exclusion and genocide present in the northern settler colony of the United States. According to historian Marilyn Miller,

[Vasconcelos] lamented the disintegration of religious experience as a result of Enlightenment ideals. Vasconcelos' insistence on Christian love as a core value of the cosmic race provided him with another way to distance his notion of race from biological constraints and to offer it as a metaphor for 'pure' and metaphysical communion.¹⁷

Christianity and civilization were essential bulwarks of conquest. Robert Miller remarks, "Euro-Americans thought that God had directed them to bring civilized ways and education and religion to indigenous peoples and often to exercise paternalism and guardianship powers over them."¹⁸ The conviction that the spirit of a mestizo future needed to be central to its fruition and this mestizo soul would be powerful to remove the uncouth practices of Indigenous people is linked vividly with the practices buttressing conquest. Systems of communal land holding were deemed backwards and consistently under attack. Breaking of these human-land relations was crucial to promoting progress on the surface as Indigenous peoples could become industrious farmers but in actuality they facilitated settler dominance over the land.

The fusion propagated by Indigenistas and proponents of mestizaje has been revised, revived, and remunerated by scholars, writers, and activists, transnationally. For its time, mestizaje was framed as an anti-imperialist policy as it was consistently juxtaposed with Jim Crow segregation and anti-miscegenation projects of the United States. When compared to restrictive and discriminatory

practices in the U.S. that were enforced violently, mestizaje was deemed progressive because it was presented as a logical choice. The acceptance and even promotion of racial amalgamation was seen as a move away from the polemics of race and thus understood as a radical departure from the constraints of societies predicated on white racial purity. The celebration of multiracial and multicultural futures where the valence of race diminishes relies on obscuring the ways race, gender, and power intersect. Afropessimist scholar Jared Sexton speaks of the limitations of multiculturalism when he asserts that it “refuses to acknowledge, the suppleness of whiteness—its elasticity and expansiveness; its affinity for ambiguity, impurity, and complexity; its vital dependence on the transgression of borders, continual alteration, and the incorporation of novel elements.”¹⁹ White supremacy is a dynamic and adaptable social organizing principle. It is consumptive. Within this schema whiteness depends on creating, maintaining, and enforcing the boundaries of race.

Throughout Mexico and Central America these boundaries were firmly entrenched through ideological, cultural, and social policing despite biological intermixture. Sexton incisively argues that, “no concept of whiteness [...] is calm, fully present, and self-referential; there are no positive qualities of whiteness, only differences between whiteness and its racial others, blackness in the paramount case.”²⁰ Mestizo futures in Mexico were indeed envisioned as branches of white supremacist modernity. Legal scholar Taunya Lovell Banks clarifies the centrality of anti-Black exclusion and derision in constructing Mexico mestizo futures: “Mexico’s

acknowledgement of its Indian roots was an essential step in the development of an internal oneness that could accommodate the vast race-like differences developed and encouraged by colonial rule. *Mestizaje* with the African roots erased becomes the vehicle to accommodate these differences.”²¹ In relation to the synthesized discussion on the co-constitutive nature of anti-Blackness and settler colonialism in Central America, Mexican *mestizaje* mirrors the logics of elimination required by settler colonialism along with the disappearance of both Blackness and Indigenous bodies. Both practices assuage the wounds of racist and patriarchal conquest by suggesting everyone is welcome and has a choice in entering the multiracial milieu.

Mestizaje as a sexual project relies on romantic notions and obfuscations of conquest and crosspollination. Mexican and Chicana feminist scholars and intellectuals have problematized romanticizing racial mixture. The figure of La Malinche, the indigenous woman who, depending on one’s interpretation, is a traitor or a brave resistor that produces the progeny of the New World. What is less debatable is that conquest involved systematic sexual assault and rape. Race, gender, and sexual violence intersect from the onset in the colonial world and subject Indigenous and enslaved African women to physical and physiological aggression. Conquest converted Indigenous and enslaved women categorically into available and consequently rapable objects.²² The devaluation of women and discounting of women’s agency became a central animating force throughout Mexico and the rest of the colonized world. Women were understood as vehicles for reproduction. *Mestizaje* as a nation-building project reinforced this notion and

vividly demonstrated the ties between race, gender, and nation. Eugenicist ideals shaped attitudes on how biosocial reproduction should develop and eventually honed in on controlling the sexuality and reproductive capacity of poor racialized women throughout the nation. The Mexican state's investment in institutionalizing a revolutionary government pushed forth patriarchal understandings of the nation as a family with the nation as the paternal figure protecting its citizens. As historian Katherine Bliss surmises, "historians of women in Mexico have had little choice but to conclude that the Mexican Revolution was not so much a 'revolution for women' as a 'patriarchal event' that largely consolidated male authority at all social levels."²³ Regulating reproduction of undesirable populations was a redemptive project informed by mestizaje logics and animated by negative eugenics. The legacy of these efforts of social and biological control can be seen in the vast inequity that persists in Mexico across racial and gender lines.

Policing the Foreign and Consolidating the Future of Mexico

To assure the transition into a culturally and racially hybrid mestizo future the Mexican state turned its attention on affirming their sovereignty through the surveillance, criminalization, and policing of racialized others. Chinese and Japanese indentured servants were part of the conquest of Mexico. Asian immigrants continued arriving in post-independence Mexico during the Porfiriato. They came from the United States to avoid intense anti-Chinese fervor and directly from China, Japan, and Korea. Chinese immigrants were allowed to come to Mexico by Porfirio Diaz as a flexible labor force for the developing northern Mexican plantations of

cotton. Japanese immigrants were crucial in the development of the fishing industries in Baja California. Asian Mexicans were generally excluded from social belonging in Mexico at the turn of the twentieth century. The rise in Asian migration to Mexico coupled with the relative lack of European immigrants propelled the establishment of the first immigration law in the country in 1908. Asian migration symbolized the devolution of the nation because of the possibility that unions between Asian immigrants and Mexicans would “have produced an abundant generation of mixed races, which [would] not [have] been particularly advantageous for national identity.”²⁴ Anti-Chinese rhetoric and violence burst out during the revolutionary period. Political organizations in the northern Mexican state of Sonora distributed anti-Chinese literature with slogans like: “Mexican: of every peso that you pay a Chinamen, 50 centavos go to Shanghai and the other 50 centavos go to enslave you and prostitute the women of your race.”²⁵ The discourse was clear; the Chinese were exploitative and sexually predatory. Race, gender, and nation were clearly linked and mestizo futures were being solidified via the construction of racial others. Along with the absorption of Indigenous peoples and the elimination and erasure of Afro-descended populations, anti-Asian policy from above and throughout civil society helped to reassemble Mexican nationhood.

National unity or what Benedict Anderson terms the imagined community relied on exercising racialized and gendered dominance. In addition, Mexico had the dubious distinction of sharing a border with a long time aggressor in the United States. How would Mexico ascend to the status of other settler nations? Policing the

social, cultural, and physical boundaries of belonging became an effective tool to express to Mexican constituents and other western nations that Mexico was serious about ascending on the global stage. Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat assert that, “[s]overeign power, whether exercised by a state, in the name of the nation, or by a local despotic power or community courts, is always a tentative and unstable project whose efficacy and legitimacy depend on repeated performances of violence and a ‘will to rule.’”²⁶ The performance of violence against the Chinese is reflected in the anti-Chinese massacre of 1911 in Torreon, Coahuila. The Mexican revolution was a violent response to the Porfirian regime. Chinese farmers were imported to settle and in distinct colonies under the Porfiriato. Increasing foreign-led economic development and usurpation of the land throughout Mexico increased the poverty, misery, and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Some settler elites grew increasingly discontent with the direction of the nation and aided in inciting a popular uprising. Francisco Madero, who was a wealthy settler and large landowner in Coahuila helped lead the charge against the Porfirian dictatorship. His followers engaged in the most violent episode of anti-Chinese violence in the history of the western hemisphere. After the Torreon Massacre, 303 were left dead and entire Chinese communities were left terrorized. According to Jason Oliver Chang anti-Chinese violence fueled revolutionary fervor for a united mestizo nation. Chang asserts that, “anti-Chinese violence was mobilized in warfare as a vehicle for collective imaginaries, panethnic mobilization, and battlefield tactics.”²⁷ The history of exercising anti-Chinese and anti-Asian violence and policing extended well

beyond the revolutionary period and served to further cohere the Mexican mestizo nation.

The dehumanization of the Chinese precedes the Torreon Massacre. Mexico's proximity and imbricated relationship with the United States sets the stage for narratives around the pathological deviance, inassimilability, and foreignness of the Chinese. The welcoming of the farming skills and labor of the Chinese during the Porfiriato also reflects the continued project of settler colonialism in Mexico. As the Mexican state continued to develop it required more and more communal Indigenous land. The avaricious nature of settler development required an inexhaustible labor force and the Chinese were cast as machine-like subjects. They were termed *motores de sangre* (engines of blood). The idea was that the Chinese would serve their purpose and eventually depart. Chang demonstrates that Mexican settler elites during the Porfiriato did not imagine the Chinese as permanent or equal settlers. As such, the importation of Chinese immigrants was desirable because of the anti-Indian ideologies that saw Indigenous peoples as unreliable agents of capitalism. Eugenic-informed characterizations of Indigenous peoples as inherently lazy made their commitment to settler development an impossibility.²⁸ Further, the northern territory of Mexico was home to Indians who had long resisted colonization and settler colonization. This presented a formidable challenge and opening for the importation of visibly racialized laborers that were easily exploitable and discernible as foreign.

Gamio, the famed indigenista, expressed his disdain for Indigenous practices through the celebration of eugenic forms of development of the north in 1952. Gamio welcomed the return of Mexican repatriates that helped develop the northern region of the country and he attributed their success both to their racial stock and the exposure and experience gained from being in Anglo-Saxon United States. Gamio claimed, "almost all of [them] came from hamlets and *rancherías* in Tamaulipas and Coahuila, where there were never Indian to bequeath autochthonous ideas of and traditions ... so that racially, culturally and psychologically they could be considered criollos ... in their mode of living."²⁹ This reflects the continued relevance and power of whiteness to not merely survive mestizaje, but the centrality to its ultimate end goals. A carefully curated interracial future did not eliminate the relevance of whiteness. Returning to Sexton's indictment of whiteness as not being able to form itself without a reliance on a negative relationship to racial others. Whiteness as an ascendant social organizing project moves beyond biologically essential ideas around racial purity as evidenced by what buttressed desires of mestizaje.

Mexico's turbulent history with the United States is best exemplified by the constant aggression of the budding superpower upon the newly minted Mexican territory of Texas and its northern territories in the early to mid-nineteenth century. The nascent Mexican nation had attempted to firmly settle its own version of colonial rule on Indian country of what is now the U.S. Southwest. The contentious relationship between the two nations is best encapsulated by a quote attributed to

Porfirio Diaz himself when he stated, “Poor Mexico, so far from God, so close to the United States.” The constantly shifting valence of the U.S. – Mexico border and borderlands throughout the beginning of the twentieth century further magnified the strain between the two countries. Both the United States and Mexican settler colonial projects employed genocidal violence against Indigenous populations along the newly forming borderlands. This violence laid the foundation for both U.S. and Mexican sovereignty and boundary making. The border remained porous throughout the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries because of the labor demand created in the developing agricultural hubs of California and other lucrative economic ventures throughout the southwest. Mexicans came across the border to fill in labor shortages left behind by discriminatory immigration laws that curtailed and outright prohibited Asian immigration to the U.S. throughout the period. The border has served as a pipeline of flexible labor at the behest of the U.S. economy. Further, emigration has provided a safety valve for a Mexican state committed to inequity, exploitation, and the maintenance of wealthy settler minority. While tensions have been formidable between the two nations there has been collaboration across the divide. A crucial collaboration has been the racialized policing of the borderlands.

Bilateral and transnational policing of the U.S. – Mexico borderlands that set its sights on Asians, Indigenous peoples, and political dissidents during the post-revolutionary period in Mexico reflect the antecedents of the racialized, gendered, and politicized surveillance Central Americans began to face in the 1970s through

the present. The making of a dual frontier for the United States and Mexico also ensnared Japanese populations in the United States, the borderlands, and across Mexican territory at the onset of World War II. In Mexico, certain sectors of the Japanese arrivals were welcomed to also colonize inhospitable terrains. The Japanese in Mexico faced backlash associated with the anti-imperialist rhetoric emerging in post-revolutionary era. Japan was executing imperial domination throughout the twentieth century and the residues of that marked Japanese migrants and settlers as possible or actual imperial agents. Mexico was also heavily influenced in their anti-Asian policies by the projects in the United States. An example of this lies in the ways that Japanese immigrants were denied the ability to purchase land in Baja California in 1912 following the logics of discriminatory laws that disallowed foreigners from owning land in the U.S. These efforts symbolized emerging hemispheric security measures dictated from the north through the Monroe Doctrine.³⁰

The agreement to police internal racialized threats in Mexico were amplified during World War II. This was further solidified via the transnational collaboration to ensure the enforcement of the boundary that separated the United States and Mexico during and after the Great Depression. Historian Kelly Lytle-Hernandez describes the entrenchment of surveillance and enforcement at the border as an “opportunity for imagining policing and coordinating state violence beyond the limits of the nation-state.”³¹ The environment solidified in the post-revolutionary period combined anti-foreign and anti-Indian sentiments. If the United States was

going to label racialized populations threats, then Mexico could emulate and follow suit. Yankelevic argues, "Mexico nurtured exclusionary ethnic consciousness in which intolerance to indigenous diversity was projected onto certain foreign communities."³² In 1924 the Interior Ministry published Circular 33 that denied the entry of Afro-descended persons into Mexican territory on the grounds of protecting Mexican workers. The carrying out of these types of exclusionary practices were arbitrary but reflected not only a particular vision for mestizo futures but echoed the operationalization of antiblackness in its immigration policies.³³ Racially restrictive immigration policies coupled with racially discriminatory attitudes within the territory coalesced to promote mestizo national unity and a healthy body politic. Racialized populations were seen as poisonous and treated as a contagion that must be prevented from spreading.

Between 1910 and 1930 the numbers of Syrians, Arabs, Turks, Lebanese, and Palestinians in Mexico increased by 175 percent.³⁴ This caused another alarm for the congealing Mexican nation. These groups tended to be lumped together and were deemed undesirable immigrants because of their cultural differences and assumed inassimilable nature. Further, they were represented as undue burdens to Mexican laborers because of their employment as street vendors and perceived business acumen. These concerns were amplified by the global economic crisis and the repatriation of Mexicans from the United States to Mexico. Middle Easterners were also marked as contaminants in Mexico. Middle Easterners themselves attempted to follow the edicts set forth by the Mexican government like that of

registering themselves and attempting to naturalize amidst xenophobic hysteria in the 1930s. Mexican civil society and political leaders expressed disdain for Middle Easterners and pushed the presidential administrations of the 1930s to restrict and ultimately prohibit their entry. Mexican citizens wrote letters to President Lazaro Cardenas expressing the threats Middle Easterners and foreigners writ large presented to Mexican women. The letters indicated that foreigners brought disease to the food available in Mexico and that their unsavory business practices disadvantaged the Mexican middle-class and poor.³⁵ These restrictions were seized upon by political and economic elites to maintain their legitimacy and by Mexican mestizo classes convinced that the nation was for them.

These racialized forms of bilateral cohesion between the surveillance and enforcement apparatuses of the United States and Mexico are essential to cohering the Mexican state, much like anti-Asian, anti-Black, and anti-Arab discourse and policy. The specter of mestizo nationalism, firmly rooted in racialized and gendered disciplining of the nation facilitates new forms of settler order that seeks to eliminate living Indigenous peoples while obscuring and marginalizing Afro-descendant existence. Moreover, these mechanisms of white supremacist domination create a rubric for the Mexican nation to envision itself as an ascendant modern and western nation. These frameworks of racialized policing of foreign entities and the collaboration with the United States re-emerge through the experiences of Central Americans in Mexico as both migrants and transmigrants with tragic and deadly consequences. Mexico becomes a racial passageway for

Central Americans who are expelled from the Isthmus for a multitude of reasons, to be re-racialized as threats to sovereignty and national security.

¹ Yara Simon, "Ahead of World Cup Qualifier, Mexican Paper Makes Tasteless La Bestia Joke at Expense of Salvadorans," *Remezcla*, <http://remezcla.com/lists/sports/el-salvador-mexico-game-newspaper-la-bestia/>

² Maritza Cardenas, "A Central American Wound: Remapping the U.S. Borderlands in Oscar Martinez's *The Beast*," in *Symbolism 17: Latina/o Literature: The Trans-Atlantic and the Trans-American*, ed. Rüdiger Ahrens, Florian Kläger, & Klaus Stierstorfer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 19.

³ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 3.

⁴ Analisa Taylor, *Indigeneity in the Mexican Cultural Imaginary: Thresholds of Belonging* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 3.

⁵ Alan Knight, "Racism, revolution and indigenismo: Mexico, 1910-1940," in *The Idea of Race in Latin America, 1870-1940*, ed. Richard Graham (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990).

⁶ Nancy Leys Stepan, *The Hour of Eugenics: Race, Gender, and Nation in Latin America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 10.

⁷ David Stannard, *American Holocaust: The Conquest of the New World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 81.

⁸ Paul Hart, *Bitter Harvest: The Social Transformation of Morelos, Mexico and the Origins of the Zapatista Revolution, 1840 – 1910* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2005), 17.

⁹ Frank Proctor III, "Slave Rebellion and Liberty in Colonial Mexico," in *Black Mexico: Race and Society from Colonial to Modern Times* ed. Ben Vinson III and Mathew Restall (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 23.

¹⁰ Aime Cesaire, *Discourse on Colonialism: A Poetics of Anticolonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972 and 2000), 42.

¹¹ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), ix.

¹² Frank Wilderson, *Red, White, and Black: Cinema and the Structures of US Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 17 – 18.

¹³ Guillermo Bonfil Batalla, *Mexico Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 76.

¹⁴ Knight, 77.

¹⁵ Bonfil Batalla, 55.

¹⁶ Knight, 79.

¹⁷ Marilyn Grace Miller, *The Rise and Fall of the Cosmic Race: The Cult of Mestizaje in Latin America* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2004), 30.

¹⁸ Miller, 4.

¹⁹ Jared Sexton, *Amalgamation Schemes: Anti-Blackness and the Critique of Multiculturalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 193.

²⁰ Ibid, 197 – 198.

²¹ Taunya Lovell Banks. “Mestizaje and the Mexican Mestizo Self: No Hay Sangre Negra, So there is no Blackness.” *Southern California Interdisciplinary Law Journal* 199 (2006): 219.

²² Gloria Gonzalez-Lopez, *Family Secrets (Secretos de Familia): Stories of Incest and Sexual Violence in Mexico* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 16.

²³ Katherine Elaine Bliss, *Compromised Positions: Prostitution, Public Health, and Gender Politics in Revolutionary Mexico City* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 8.

²⁴ Pablo Yankelevich. “Mexico for the Mexicans: Immigration, National Sovereignty and the Promotion of Mestizaje,” *The Americas* 68.3 (January, 2012): 409.

²⁵ Phillip A. Daniels. “The Anti-Chinese Campaigns in Sonora, Mexico,” *Ethnohistory* 26.1 (Winter, 1979): 69.

²⁶ Thomas Blom Hansen and Finn Stepputat, *Sovereign Bodies: Citizens, Migrants, and States in the Postcolonial World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 3.

²⁷ Jason Oliver Chang, *Chino: Anti-Chinese Racism in Mexico, 1880 – 1940* (Urbana-Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017), 94.

²⁸ Ibid, 8.

²⁹ Casey Walsh. "Eugenic Acculturation: Manuel Gamio, Migration Studies, and the Anthropology of Development in Mexico, 1910 – 1940," *Latin American Perspectives* 31.5 (September, 2004): 119.

³⁰ Selfa A. Chew, *Uprooting Community: Japanese Mexicans, World War II, and the U.S.—Mexico Borderlands* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2015), 39.

³¹ Kelly Lytle-Hernandez. "The Crimes and Consequences of Illegal Immigration: A cross-Border Examination of Operation Wetback, 1943 to 1954," *Western Historical Quarterly* 37.4 (Winter, 2006): 438.

³² Yankelevich, 417.

³³ Ibid, 423 – 424.

³⁴ Ibid, 431.

³⁵ Theresa Alfaro-Velcamp, *So Far from Allah, So Close to Mexico: Middle Eastern Immigrants in Modern Mexico* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2007), 117 – 124.

Chapter 3: Expulsion, Passage, and Precarity: Transit and the Peripheries of Humanity

On April 29, 2013 ABC News published a short video detailing the story of Blackness in Mexico. Marina Guerrero Salinas is one of the feature's protagonists and is from La Costa Chica, a sliver of coastal land tracing the edges of both Guerrero and Oaxaca. Doña Guerrero was sixty-four years old at the time of her interview and was born and raised in Tierra Colorada, Guerrero. She opens the video singing a song full of lament for a love denied based on color and race. She is a songwriter, singer, and artist. Doña Guerrero explains what it's like being Black and Mexican: "When I left t the city they said, 'you are from El Salvador.' And I'd say, 'I'm from Mexico.' And they'd say 'but in Mexico there aren't any Black people.' I would tell them, 'Look how you don't know everything about your own country.'"¹ The misrecognition Doña Guerrero encountered throughout her life for being Black reflects the valence of mestizaje nation-building logics. Blackness has been systematically obscured in the Mexican popular imagination. Further, her misrecognition as being Salvadoran denotes the ways Central Americans are subject to forms of re-racialization while in Mexico. Central Americans are not just linguistically and culturally distinct from Mexicans, they are racialized as "Others" via the constructs of mestizaje that seek to discipline indigeneity and deny Blackness, while in Mexican territory.

Three siblings from the eastern region of the Southern Mexican state of Chiapas set off on a privately chartered bus for the Northern state of Sonora to harvest squash, watermelons, and tomatoes. Two sisters and one brother shared pseudonyms with media who documented their harrowing story for fear of state reprisal. Alberto, Amy, and Esther ranged from fifteen to twenty-four years old. They departed in the early afternoon on September 2, 2015. Less than a day later their bus was stopped at a tollbooth and inspected by immigration officials. The three youths were accused of provided falsified documents and escorted off the vehicle. Alberto, Amy, and Esther were Tzeltal-speaking Mayan youth and spoke little Spanish. They were detained on suspicion of being in the country as irregular migrants from Guatemala. Alberto was separated from his sisters and was tortured by the state. They were told they would be deported to the Western part of Guatemala. A Guatemalan consul confirmed their “Guatemalan” nationality.² The Mexican state marked the Indigenous Juarez siblings, as illegible, and questioned their citizenship, and consequently their ability to belong in the nation. The collusion between Mexican and Guatemalan state agents demonstrate the expanding web of surveillance and policing across Mexican and Central American sovereignties. The fact that they were categorized as Guatemalan reiterates the claim that Central Americans become re-racialized while in Mexican territory.

Coupled together, these stories demonstrate the power of Mexican mestizo nationalism to police, discipline, and dictate proper citizens and subjects of Mexico. Central Americans, as the latest foreign arrivals into Mexico, represent vexed

symbols of criminality. This chapter will examine the impact of the convergence of U.S imperial power with the settler colonial machinations of the Mexican state on the lives of Central Americans in transit. In order to situate this within longer and intricately linked histories, I illustrate the impact of conquest on the power relations between Mexico and the Isthmus, emphasizing how Central Americans have been expelled from their homelands through grinding exploitation, inequity, and genocidal violence. This chapter maps the violence encountered by Central Americans in transit through Mexico by centering the stories of Central Americans themselves through oral history interviews and documentary films. I argue that for Central Americans, and to an extent, racialized Mexicans, Mexico is an extension of the borderlands beyond the U.S.-Mexico border. As such, the structural violence that emigrant Mexicans have encountered on the gash between the United States and Mexico is amplified for Central Americans crossing the entirety of Mexico on their journeys northward to the U.S.

The development of racialized national identities in Central America was not merely an ideological project. Questions of which path Central American nations would follow emerged in the post-independence and national periods. Would Central America continue the extractive colonial relations that fomented a localized, largely European descended elite? How would Central American nations be developed? What capital and investments would be necessary to make real the visions of progress? While Central American elites may have exhibited contradicting political leanings, they agreed on the necessity of resettlement and further

encroachment of collective land holdings. The major transition was from a colonialism that exploited labor, lands, and communities for the avulsion of natural resources and the benefit of the Spanish crown and the empires it owed, towards a nascent settler colonial rule that required racialized and gendered forms of labor segmentation and the concentration of land in the form of private property monopolized by people of largely European descent. From the early nineteenth century to the present, Central American elites, North American capitalists, and United States militarized imperial interventionists have animated a system of pervasive racist, patriarchal economic and territorialized stratification.

It is crucial to chart the ways in which a white supremacist, settler colonial global system cemented in the Isthmus, results in a structural process of precarity for Indigenous and Afro-descended peoples. This perpetual precarity catalyzes the creation of vast pockets of unsettled, racialized, and impoverished communities. Such a system necessitates projects of domestic and international expulsion, which become naturalized through dynamic and concerted efforts to concretize the idea of Indigenous, Afro-descended communities, and racialized foreigners as threats and impediments to the advancements of these nations. The methods to control settler colonial manufactured threats lie in both discursive practices and the mechanisms of economic development. Attempts to challenge the order of things in varying Central American nations are met with ultimate force.

The second section of this chapter focuses on the conditions Central American migrants face upon their passage both to and through Mexican territory,

beginning in the 1970s through the present. The periodization employed here is an effort to demonstrate how the transition of global capitalism towards neoliberalism does not create but amplifies new forms of racialized and heteropatriarchal social control in Central America, Mexico, and the United States. In doing so, I contend that the specters of racism and sexual violence that Central American transmigrants describe during their passages from the early 1970s through the early 1980s become more than just stories or fear in the post-9/11 era. As opposed to seeing the recent reports of unbelievable violence being faced by Central American migrants in Mexico as an aberration, this section makes a key assertion: Central American migrants' experiences of racialized and heteropatriarchal discrimination is linked both to residual colonial racial hierarchies found in the mythical mestizo post-revolutionary Mexican nationalism *and* the history of Mexican racially restrictive immigration policies during that same period.

The chapter closes with the ways Central Americans' experiences in transit through Mexico have changed from the 1970s to the present. In order to trace these shifts, I rely on conversations and informal interviews I conducted with my own family members, coworkers, and an extended network of convivial relationships. My contributors migrated from Central America, through Mexico, to Los Angeles from 1972 through 1986. In addition to the interventions and theorizations articulated by my collaborators, I will employ the contributions made by Central American protagonists in several documentary films that focus on Central American migration through Mexico. The purpose in concluding this key chapter with Central American

experiences is for two reasons. First, it connects current modalities of state-sanctioned and extra-judicial violence aimed at exploiting and extracting whatever value Central American transmigrants hold and reflects the continuity of racialized and gendered ideological constructions of Mexican national belonging. Second, I argue that the migrants subjected to expulsion from Central America and targeted for physical violence in Mexico are the products of racialized notions of exclusion in isthmian nations. Central American narratives in both interviews and documentary films capture a nuanced understanding of the underlying projects that drives the misery they experience. What emerges when we center the words, lives, and struggles of Central American transmigrants is a challenge to normalized racialized and gendered hierarchies that structure the legitimacy of nation-states. The condition of Central American non-belonging has been constant throughout space and time and Central American subjectivity and it is closely related to exclusion from outside of particular western boundaries. However, it is constantly challenged, resisted, and distorted by the strategic individual and collective actions of Central Americans to whither away and disappear. These acts illustrate a transnational community's fight to become something beyond the misery, pain, and invisibility. To find these examples and projects, one has to search and uncover, discover the hidden and obfuscated, dig in the graves of the past and present. The chapter closes with Central American articulations of the present as a desire for the building and maintenance of transnational futures.

Uneven Power: Conquest and Disruptions

European conquest and subsequent colonialism ravaged indigenous people of the Western Hemisphere from the late fifteenth century through the first few decades of the nineteenth century. Colonialism sought to construct a rigid social, racial, and economic hierarchy in which European conquerors and their descendants maintained hegemonic control of colonies and land while indigenous, African, and *mestizo* people, as well as women were to remain at the elites' disposal and control. The conquest of the Americas by Europeans led to an extraction of the abundant natural resources from the hemisphere to enrich foreign empires in Spain and Portugal. Colonialism transformed the way members of distinct indigenous groups viewed themselves in relationship to others. Arturo Arias illustrates this phenomenon in his analysis of the effects that Spanish colonialism had on "the dialectical relation between the cultures of both geographical sites [Maya and Teotihuaca/Toltec/Mexica worlds]."³ Arias argues that prior to colonization the civilizations of distinct regions in Mesoamerica had a complementary relationship through both "commercial exchange and economic interdependency, but also by creating a hybrid cultural matrix ... Symbolically and metaphorically, both groups saw each other as complementary, with an identity based on their local ethnic group, lineage, and relationship to their gods."⁴ Spanish conquest and colonization created a rift that destroyed this complementary relationship between the peoples of the Central American isthmus and the valley of Central Mexico. The Mexica realm was chosen as the site of the new Catholic Kingdom in the New World by the

Spanish conquerors, which led to the imposition of power by the newly dubbed Viceroyalty of New Spain, what would become Mexico, over what would become Central America. Arias contends, "Colonization changed the perception that the survivors of the Mexica world, themselves subalternized by the Spaniards, had about the people of the Isthmus. Now they [people of the Central American Isthmus] were seen as defiled and deflowered peoples, which justified their [people of the Central American Isthmus] placement in a social strata below their [Mexica's] own."⁵ In other words, the people of Central America became viewed and treated as inferior to those of the center of the colonized New World. A new power dynamic emerged in which there arose a hierarchy among not only the colonizers and the colonized, but also between the colonized civilizations themselves. Furthermore, the language employed by Arias to describe the attitudes of the Mexica people towards the people of the Central American isthmus reveals the centrality of sexual violence within the context of conquest. The people of Central America were not simply viewed as less than the Mexica, but as defiled and deflowered, this alludes to a profound and violent loss of a seeming purity and innocence. To be defiled is to be sullied or desecrated; to be deflowered is to be deprived of innocence associated with virginity. Forbes reminds us that the psychosis that is conquest and colonialism produces justifications for a variety of insidious behaviors. He relates the rape of land, women, and the earth to the *wétiko* psychosis. Thus, the conquest causes an incisive attack on the cosmologies of different indigenous groups throughout the

region and ruptures existing relationships across ethnic and regional lines that continue to effect people of Central America and Mexico to this day.

The uneven power relationship established between Mexico and Central American nations because of colonization and conquest became reinforced during the post-independence periods in both regions. Mexican development, spurred by its close relationship with the United States and the government's willingness to accept a North American/Europeanized model of progress, paralleled the model of progress that occurred in Central American countries; however, the development centered on making the coffee-producing industry more profitable for the landed, concentrated, wealthy elite. This reliance on single-crop agricultural production devastated long-term economic and social development in the Central American region. For example,

Spiraling coffee production for export had several long-range, negative consequences ... it diminished the amount of land, labor, and capital available to produce food for local consumption ... Indians were forced ... to become wage laborers ... As a consequence the economic and social position of the Indian majority declined in Guatemala.⁶

The conversion of large swaths of populations from subsistent, communal farmers to wage laborers in Central America amplified the shortage of employment opportunities in peoples' home countries and would force them to look for work across borders. For example, the development of Guatemala and El Salvador in their respective post-independence periods therefore, is a continuation of the legacy of conquest because it effectively shifted large numbers of indigenous people throughout Central America from self-sustaining modes of production to wage,

plantation labor. Displacement and degradation of land and people throughout conquest, colonization, and post-independence reflects the trajectory of violence innately involved with these processes. The subsequent dispossession of indigenous land was not only economically damaging but also culturally and spiritually destructive. Uneven economic development along with racist nation-state building throughout Central America would set the stage for the proliferation of revolutionary responses from below to centuries of exploitation and degradation in the twentieth century.

Resettling Nations: Central America, Development, and Encroachment

My first couple of trips to my mother's home country of Guatemala came in 1990 and 1992. I was eight and ten years old on these occasions. I had grown up my entire life in South Central Los Angeles and become accustomed to what it meant to live in a highly developed, metropolitan city. My family was working-poor but every now and then I would get a treat in the forms of a McDonald's Big Mac combo from either parent. I remember asking my aunt and cousins who would pick us up from the airport if there were McDonalds where they lived. They quickly told me that there were not any in Mazatenango (where my family lived) but that there were a few in Guatemala City, the capital of the nation. I remember sulking at the reality that I would be in another country with no Big Mac combo as a treat for a month. My first trip back to Guatemala as an adult sans my mother came in December of 2004. Things had changed completely in the country I had not visited in eight years. There were U.S.-based fast food chains dotting the landscape, not just in Guatemala City,

but in Mazatenango, as well. I have returned to visit my family multiple times and am increasingly struck by the omnipresence of fast food restaurants, U.S.-based clothing brands, and the feel of a region seeped in global North American consumer capitalist culture. In addition, I am painfully aware of the poverty that jumps out at me through the dark brown bodies of Indigenous mothers and children selling trinkets on the streets of my family's hometown. The precarious conditions that a number of Guatemalans and Central Americans writ large face are historic and structurally produced. This section will provide a succinct overview of the ways historical negligence, systematized abandonment, and U.S. militarized and economic interventions foment conditions of expulsion for the Isthmus' racialized and thus vulnerable populations.

As discussed in chapter one, Central American nation-state building projects relied on eliminatory logics of Indigenous and Afro-descended populations. These racialized populations were generally ostracized from any significant political roles in Central American countries. Following dominant ideologies influenced by scientific racism, Central American settler elites established visions of economic progress that would not disrupt racial and gendered hierarchies that emanated from the colonial period. Uneven and grossly unequal distributions of wealth became standard throughout Central America. Economic stratification in the Isthmus is not sufficiently understood by aggregate measures like that of gross domestic product (GDP) which divides annual total values of goods and services produced by a nation by its total population. Scholars John Booth, Christine Wade, and Thomas Walker

have argued that GDP measures for Central American nations tell a partial story. The GDP of countries are bloated by a small minority's tremendous wealth throughout the Isthmus. An example of this would be El Salvador where a per capita GDP of \$3,547 was twenty-five percent less than the Latin American per capital GDP of \$4730 in 2007. Booth et al. contend, "the real income per capita of the poorer half of the population in most of Central America probably runs between \$500 and \$1000 per year."⁷ Central Americans who have been expelled and forced to leave their countries seeking refuge and familial survival have helped sustain economies throughout the Isthmus. According to sociologist Cecilia Menjivar, "in 2008, Salvadorans sent \$3.8 billion in remittances, Guatemalans sent \$4.3 billion and, in 2009, Hondurans sent 2.9 billion."⁸ Remittances from Central Americans in diaspora have ameliorated some of the economic burdens for working-class families in the Isthmus. The genesis of these remittance networks lies in the genocidal civil wars that engulfed the region from 1960 – 1996.

Tragic inequity found throughout Central America is amplified in the shifts to export-oriented, large agribusiness led economic development throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This form of economic development widened already existing gulfs between the rich and the poor in Central America and embedded imperial global capitalists from the United States and Britain. Fortifying the export-oriented economy meant that national progress and development was not solely concerned capital cities or urban vitalization but extended to the making of new frontiers in the rural areas of Central American nations. Access to land was

necessary to expand the production capacity of labor-intensive crops like coffee, sugar, and bananas and also the infrastructure that would carve out paths to more efficiently export these products. The process of gaining control of large swaths of land involved complex negotiations with local settler colonial elites. Nonetheless, the customary legal logics evinced during the epoch of mass accumulation of territories by companies like Standard and United Fruit had their roots in conquest. Legal principles like *terra nullius*, Indian title, and questions of civilization were employed to dispossess and justify European conquest through the Doctrine of Discovery. Legal scholar Robert Miller describes *terra nullius* as “lands [that] were not possessed or occupied by any person or nation, or were occupied by non-Europeans but not being used in a fashion that European legal systems approved, the lands were considered to be empty and waste and available for Discovery claims.”⁹ Further, this form of development required the maintenance of a hyper-exploited and disciplined laboring class that was embodied by the racialized populations that were either disappeared or disappearing in the nineteenth century.

The implementation of legal constructs like Indian title was crucial to conquest and acquisition. Indian title undermined full property rights and ownership of the lands of Indigenous peoples upon discovery. In essence, Indigenous peoples retained the right to occupy but not own the land after conquest.¹⁰ Along with undermining Indigenous land claims, Indian title and the right for (settler) colonial nations to extinguish said title further entrenched settler hierarchies in the United States and Central America. An example of this can be seen

in the concessions made through the signing of the 1850 Clayton-Bulwer Treaty between the United States and Britain. The treaty prevented an imperial clash and provided for mutual control and non-fortification of any Central American canal. The treaty did not take into account the sovereignty of the Miskito people in Nicaragua, the desired site for a future canal in the Isthmus. U.S. Secretary of State John Clayton expected that “Great Britain would soon ‘extinguish the Indian title ... within what we consider to be the limits of Nicaragua,’ adding that ‘we have never acknowledged, and never can acknowledged the existence of any claim of sovereignty by the Mosquito King or any other Indian in America¹¹.” With these negotiations between imperial powers, there was a recognition and legitimation of the Nicaraguan settler state and simultaneous undermining of Mosquito sovereignty.

The blatant disregard for Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous communities continues unabated through the present. Mayan people in Guatemala have a distinct relationship with colonialism because of the centuries of Spanish colonial rule and subsequent stratification of every facet of society based on indigenous/non-indigenous dichotomies. The trajectories of Spanish colonialism have not dissipated. It is the incompleteness that brings back the assertions by Allen Feldman of the role of violence as reflecting and accelerating the idea that society is in the making but always incomplete.¹² Guatemala has been the site for spectacular forms of violence. As noted by Rob Nixon, in 1980, during the height of a genocidal war, a Guatemalan paramilitary unit carried out a massacre on 378 Maya Achi Indians in order to clear

up land for the construction of the Chixoy Dam.¹³ This example of gratuitous violence is made possible not only by the approval of the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank but also by the logics that have rendered Indigenous people across the Americas as invisible and violable since conquest. We can see the legal principle of *terra nullius* at work in the massacre for the construction of the Chixoy Dam. Nixon concludes that the massacre was made possible by a consortium of European and American engineering consultants “who declared in their feasibility report that ‘in the tract of the study there is almost no population.’ Thus, with the stroke of a pen, 3,400 ‘Project Affected People’ [...] became virtual uninhabitants.”¹⁴ The Guatemalan genocide took the lives of an estimated 200,000 people with the majority of the murdered being Indigenous. Displacements within and beyond Guatemalan territory have left an indelible mark that continues to impact communities today.

In the twentieth century Central American countries continued to be subjected to United States interventions.¹⁵ From direct military actions in the early part of the century to ideological and financial support of genocidal military regimes in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and to a varying degree, Honduras, the United States actively aided the suppression of social and revolutionary movements that sought redress for the misery under which the majority of the region lived. What follows is a synoptic outline of some of the major interventions the United States involved itself in the region.

In his important book, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America*, Walter LaFeber details the history of United States aggression in the Central American isthmus and the global and local political catalysts and consequences of these incursions. LaFeber asserts, “North Americans have always treated the region differently from the remainder of Latin America ... Every twentieth-century intervention by U.S. troops in the hemisphere has occurred in the Central American-Caribbean region ... all five [countries] share a dependence on the United States that is deeply rooted in history.”¹⁶ Considering the history of intense U.S. militarization of Hawai’i the contention that intervention by U.S. troops only occurred in Central America and the Caribbean is debatable. Nonetheless, his point is well taken. Central American countries were victims of direct military interventions from the U.S. disproportionately in the twentieth century. When highlighting this history along with Central American nations’ history with conquest, colonialism, and uneven and exploitative development a clearer picture of the region arises.

The history of Nicaragua is indicative of United States belligerence. The United States fought a six-year war against a rebel army led by Augusto César Sandino. Historian Greg Grandin describes that beginning in the late 1920s, Nicaragua became a veritable laboratory for the United States Marines “for the development of post-war aviation in coordination with ground troops.”¹⁷ Grandin takes this direct quote from an article in 1928 entitled, “Marines Push Drive in Nicaragua Wilds.” The language employed in the article is of great importance. The

discourse surrounding Central America and Latin America during the early years of United States imperial construction reflects a specific racial discourse. As David Theo Goldberg notes, “nonwhite primitives have come to be conceived as childlike, intuitive, and spontaneous; they require the iron fist of ‘European’ governance and paternalistic guidance to control inherent physical violence and sexual drives.”¹⁸ These conceptions of Central Americans as primitives in need of the iron fist of European governance betrays the power that the United States wielded over people from the global South during the beginning of their imperial ambitions. This type of paternal discourse is evident in their foreign policies with Latin American countries at the beginning of the 20th century. “By the late 1920s ... the United States had apprenticed itself as a fledgling empire in Latin America, investing capital, establishing control over crucial raw materials and transit routes, gaining military expertise, and rehearsing many of the ideas that to this day justify American power in the world.”¹⁹ These economic, political, and military exertions of power in Central America further stratified land, wealth, and political power. The practice of hyper-exploitation did not begin with the United States’ presence in Central America; however, their presence in the region amplified existing conditions in the region.

In the midst of a humiliating experience with the Vietnam War at the end of the 1970s the United States the rhetoric produced from Washington asserted that the U.S. had to reestablish their preeminence on the world stage. Amid Cold War hysteria United States government officials viewed Central America as a vitally important place. As noted earlier, violent state-sponsored repression was a

crippling episode in Central American countries' histories for over sixty-five years. Through decades of organization and struggle, people from Central America fought an uphill battle against right wing and/or military-controlled dictatorships in Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala. These revolutionary and social struggles exploded onto the world stage during the 1970s. The United States' response to these movements was forceful. As Grandin notes:

Once in office, Reagan came down hard on Central America, in effect letting the administration's most committed militarists set and execute policy. In El Salvador, over the course of a decade, they provided more than a million dollars a day to fund a lethal counterinsurgency campaign. In Nicaragua, they patronized the Contras, a brutal insurgency led by discredited remnants of the deposed dictator's national guard designed to roll back the Sandinista revolution. In Guatemala, they pressed to reestablish military aid to an army that was in the middle of committing genocide, defending the country's born-again president even as he was presiding over the worst slaughter in twentieth century-Latin America. All told, U.S. allies in Central America during Reagan's two terms killed over 300,000 people, tortured hundreds of thousands, and drove millions into exile.²⁰

The final consequence on this list is of particular interest. The violence that permeated Central America ignited massive displacements of people throughout the Western hemisphere. Displacement and dispossession was a prevalent aspect of Central American life in the Isthmus prior to the war via the need for impoverished families to engage in seasonal migratory labor.

Imperial and settler colonial aggression along with shifts in global market demands catalyzed the internal migrations that characterized much of the late nineteenth- and twentieth centuries in Central America. Labor migration from the West Indies and the Caribbean into Central American banana and sugar plantations

further entrenched anti-Black national sentiments. Seasonal growing patterns and the usurpation of communally owned lands further displaced and converted Indigenous peoples into a nomadic working-class, laboring for what the late Eduardo Galeano termed “hunger wages.” Galeano pens, “in Guatemala, plantation owners boast of paying 19 quetzales (about\$10) a month, most of it in kind at prices they themselves determine [...] The lot of Nicaraguan cotton workers is much worse, and Salvadorans, who supply cotton to Japanese textile industries, consume fewer calories and protein than the hungry peasants of India.”²¹ Poverty produced hunger and misery. It also catalyzes dynamic responses by the historically aggrieved to survive. Throughout places like Guatemala, Indigenous families and communities were impacted by the demands of survival in an increasingly economically stratified nation. The Nobel Peace Prize winning, Mayan woman Rigoberta Menchu details the ways these structural realities impacted her family and community in her widely read and classic *testimonio*, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala*.

Menchu illustrates:

We went down to the *finca* again. It was round about May. My father went to cut cane on another plantation, one of my brothers went to pick cotton, and the rest of us stayed on the coffee plantation. When my father worked nearby he used to come back and stay, but when we worked on another *finca* we wouldn't see him until the end of the month. It was like that most of the time [...] Sometimes we saw each other every month and sometimes every three months. ²²

Seasonal migration impacted familial bonds and further undermined Indigenous political identification and recognition. Coffee barons in El Salvador instigated similar internal displacements via the erosion of communal land holdings and

expansion of plantations. As Indigenous peoples became dispossessed through the nineteenth- and early twentieth century vagrancy laws became powerful tools to conscript landless people into coerced labor for hunger wages.

This system of labor exploitation served to instill gruesome inequity throughout the Isthmus. Throughout Central America, “many foreign-owned enclaves were threatened by agricultural diseases and political conflicts by the 1940s, prompting a general shift toward subcontracting in the following decades.”²³ The subcontracting constrained small landholders to fulfill the demands of the global market. Central American economies were deeply tied to the desires of the United States. The post-World War Two period inaugurated the development of infrastructure to make feeding the United States and lining the pockets of local and transnational capitalists from the North much more efficient. Highways and roadways along with the rising numbers of impoverished, landless peasants produced internal migrations to expanding urban centers like Guatemala City, San Salvador, and San Pedro Sula. As land became more monopolized, the pool of surplus labor expanded and encountered further precarity. With their migration to urban centers they confronted unstable job prospects, lack of access to housing, and marginalization. In 1987, Tom Barry examined the violence of hunger, economic stratification, and the antecedents that led to revolutionary struggles throughout Central America in his book *Roots of Rebellion: Land & Hunger in Central America*. His work uncovered startling results. “In Central America, where at least half the population suffers from malnutrition, there is twice as much land for cattle as there

is for agriculture.”²⁴ The economic discrepancy led to hunger, malnutrition, and death for many of the Isthmus’ most vulnerable. Aside from the political violence, the pressure of starvation was withering populations from the 1950s to the 1980s in Central America. Families found ways to survive but the situations remained dire. Barry found that hunger resulted in other complication for both urban and rural poor throughout the Isthmus. “Gastrointestinal and respiratory diseases are the main child killers. It is well-documented that influenza, pneumonia, bronchitis, diarrheal diseases, and respiratory illnesses are linked to poor nutrition.”²⁵

Genocidal wars certainly displaced and caused the veritable expulsion of vulnerable Central Americans from the Isthmus towards the United States. What remains largely obscured are the centuries of violence wrought by settler colonial governance and incessant infiltration of United States economic and military presence throughout the nineteenth- and twentieth century. However, those that were able to flee and seek refuge were the fortunate ones. Dispossession via state-sponsored terror like scorched earth assaults on Indigenous communities further cemented settler colonial order in the Isthmus. The gendered dimensions of poverty and violence also propelled displacement and suffering in the most intimate of spaces, the household. The decade of the 1980s catalyzed changes throughout the entire Isthmus via war and expulsion. Central Americans were about to encounter, in large numbers, the violence, racialization, and heteropatriarchy of crossing through Mexico en route to the United States. Large numbers that sought refuge were the descendants of the invisibilized, proletarianized, and historically

terrorized by settler colonial governments in the Isthmus. They would be confronted with the realities of a nation in Mexico that was undergoing its own economic, political, and social tumult. A nation where the long shadow of the United States and settler colonial rule carved out its own brutally stratified country.

'Uno no viene de turista:' (One Does not come as a Tourist): Violence, the Visceral, and Visibilizing Collective Humanity

On September 10th, 2014 Erin Siegal McIntyre and Deborah Bonello published an online special report entitled "Is Rape the Price to pay for Migrant Women Chasing the American Dream?" on the American multi-platform media company Fusion. McIntyre and Bonello detail the bleak conditions Central American women confront in their hopes to reach the United States by land through Mexico. Accompanying the online article is a brief documentary where Mexican officials, migrant advocates, and Central American women migrants share their experiences. The directors of migrant shelters throughout Mexico contended that a shocking eighty percent of Central American women migrants are raped while crossing the enormous land mass.²⁶ Unauthorized Central American migrants are targeted by both state and extra-legal actors in Mexico for various forms of exploitation, extortion, and expulsion. Legally, the presumption is that Central Americans will be treated equally in Mexico but historically, Mexican nationalist discourses and civil society are predicated on a racialized and gendered modernization project seeking to improve the citizenry. Central American people fall in line within a genealogy of

mestizaje firmly entrenched in colonial logics of racial hierarchies. They are not seen as embodying progress but accelerating the devolution of Mexican civil society.

This chapter will focus on the treacherous passage through Mexico by many Central American transmigrants reveals how neoliberal securityscapes, along with the further militarization of Mexico's southern border because of an intensified multilateral drug war, render particular bodies disposable and complicate the relationships between Mexicans and Central Americans in their next destination, the United States. The passage through Mexico illustrates the way racialization happens as a process over space and time. Central Americans are marked by place of origin, linguistic variations, phenotype, class, and gender while in Mexico. The marking of difference places Central American bodies in a hierarchy of value that subjects many to different registers of state-sanctioned and extra legal violences.

This section illustrates the linkages between colonial racial and gendered logics between Mexico and Central America and how these convergences animate racist state violence against Central Americans. Specifically, Mexican post-revolutionary nationalist discourses galvanize hierarchies established under colonial rule that shape immigration policies in the twentieth century as discussed in the previous chapter. The concept of a Mexican citizen is made real not only through cultural mestizaje but through an active disavowal of racial and other non-normative subjects. These ideological underpinnings complicate the Mexican state and civil society's relationship toward Central American refugees and transmigrants beginning in the 1970s. I argue that the levels of surveillance, extortion, and specific

violent targeting of Central American transmigrants in Mexico can only occur when an entire group of people has been cast historically as lesser humans. My analysis here will include the continued militarization of the southern Mexican border with funding from the United States. This chapter will incorporate the first-hand stories of Central American migration collected through personally conducted oral history interviews along with analysis of two documentary films dealing with the same subject in a different time period. The critical reflections of Central American migrants betray complex understandings and negotiations of both the dangerous realities that transnational migration through Mexico entails and the alternate possibilities of survival for self, family, and many times, communities.

Gross human rights abuses by Central American governments and the economic hardships spurred by centuries of exploitative capitalist practice have been catalysts for a mass exodus to the United States for countless Central Americans from the 1970s to the present. High unemployment rates coupled with rapid demographic growth have also led to the rise of transnational migration by Central Americans. El Salvador and Guatemala have populations of 300 persons and 250 persons per square kilometer, respectively.²⁷ By comparison the U.S. Census' website reports that the United States' population is 31 persons per square kilometer as of the year 2000. These statistics demonstrate the economic despair that people of Central America face and the challenges that are created with a densely populated region. Migrants thus have to look for economic opportunities elsewhere in order to survive. These conditions have, in effect, expelled Central

Americans from their home countries, forcing them on a dangerous journey with no guaranteed destiny, traveling by land through Mexico, on their way to the United States.

To shed new light on those who chose this perilous path, I conducted eleven interviews with eight women and three men. The three men were from Guatemala but they migrated at different ages and in different time periods. One participant traveled in 1972, another in 1983, while the other migrated in 1986. Of the women I interviewed, five departed from Guatemala and three from El Salvador. Three of the women migrated between the years 1972-74. The other women migrated between the years 1983-1986. During the interviews I asked about their experiences on their journey through Mexico to Los Angeles. Their varied answers reflected the manifestations of the power dynamic between Mexicans and the Mexican state, on the one hand, and Central American migrants, on the other.

The interviewees expressed some of the cultural differences they experienced in Mexico being a Central American migrant. P. N. was seventeen-years old when she migrated from Guatemala to the United States. She came because her legal guardian, her grandmother, passed away. Her mother, M. C., who migrated to the United States in 1972, went to Guatemala in order to bring P. N. and her siblings to Los Angeles in 1983. The trip lasted about a month because M. C. did not have the means to hire a *coyote* (a person who guides immigrants to the United States). P. N. explained that upon arriving to Mexico "*la experiencia de la gente [centroamericana] como ya empezo otro acento al estilo Mejicano* (the experience of the people [Central

Americans] like it started another accent, the style of Mexicans.”²⁸ She goes on to say that “*los Mejicanos son duros para dejar a entrar a un centroamericano [...] todo el tiempo ha sido ... ellos saben como tenemos nuestro acento todo el tiempo han tratado de fregar al latino* (the Mexicans make it [the passage through Mexico] difficult for a Central American [...] it’s always been [strict] ... they know because we have our accent they try to mess up Latinos”. P. N.’s experience therefore indicates the uneven power relationship between the Mexican state and Central Americans when they are traveling through Mexico, towards the United States where they fear of getting exploited and mistreated. “Like most illegal immigrants, [Central Americans] tried to be as indistinguishable from the general population as possible, which meant disguising their origins by adopting new names and identities, linguistic accents, and customs.”²⁹ In short, the power dynamic is evident in the fact that people from Central America must conceal their distinct accent and vocabulary in Mexico for fear of being singled out as a foreigner. This, then, is a continuation of the legacy of conquest, which created a dichotomy between Mexico and Central America that placed Mexico above Central America.

Ethnic Studies scholar Andrea Smith forces us to understand the question of gender violence as “not simply a tool of patriarchal control, but also [...] as a tool of racism and colonialism.”³⁰ The specter of sexual violence and assault appears in the memories of many Central Americans who had to make this perilous passage through Mexico during the height of their exodus from countries like Guatemala and El Salvador. This ever-present threat in the narratives I’ve collected repeats itself

today in stories of young Central American girls and women taking birth control prior to embarking on their journeys through Mexico to avoid any unwanted pregnancies from rape. Countless women have been tormented by sexual assault resulting in the belief that these aggressions are expectations rather than exceptions. Smith contends, “We cannot limit our conception of sexual violence to individual acts of rape – rather it encompasses a wider range of strategies designed not only to destroy peoples, but to destroy their sense of being people.”³¹

G. C., a Salvadoran migrant who made her way through Mexico from San Salvador in October of 1985 shared an experience in an interview I conducted with her in 2009 that echoes Smith’s contentions. An eighteen-year-old, G. C. was traveling with a large group of Central American migrants through Mexico. On their last layover before making it to the U.S.-Mexico border in Texas her group was being held in a hotel room. While in this hotel room she describes talking to a friend she made on the trip about the possibility of the ghost of Chespirito³² haunting them. Jokingly, she stated, that a loud knock was heard at the hotel door. A young man in the group thought nothing of it and proceeded to open the door thinking that it was their *coyote* knocking, alerting them to ready for the next leg of the trip. When the young man opened the door a group of federal Mexican agents barged in with guns drawn. One agent placed a gun at the temple of the young man who opened the door while the others pointed their weapons at the entire group. G. C. recalled that the agents searched each individual in the hotel room. A large agent came up to her and demanded she go be searched in the bathroom. At this point she recalls being

terrified but questioned the agent as to why she had to be searched in the bathroom when everyone else was being searched out in the open. She explained “*mucha gente le pasan cosas en el camino ... despues de eso yo estaba muy nerviosa, aquellos nervios que uno oia cualquier cosa y pensaba que lo iban agarrar* (things happen to a lot of people on the way... after this I was very nervous, I had *nervios*, those feelings that led you to believe when you heard anything you thought you could be caught/grabbed).” She analyzed her situation and said she was leaving a country that was at war and she had never seen a gun and that just for passing through Mexico she had a gun waved in her face. She argued that in Mexico she was treated like a “*delincuente* (delinquent)” when she had done nothing wrong. This theorization of being a delinquent echoes what Smith contends is the loss of personhood that the threat of sexual violence produces. Further amplifying matters is that the threat of sexual violence is state-based and/or implicitly allowed by the state in Mexico by the history of criminalizing unauthorized migrants within its territorial borders.

Political Scientist Kathleen Staudt reminds us that underreporting and the invisibilization of crimes like that of sexual or domestic violence is heightened because of undocumented status of immigrant victims who are anxious about calling attention to their status.³³ When G. C. contends that she and those in her group were treated like delinquents she is not just describing a feeling but an actual subject position that exacerbates their precarious position while in Mexico. There is a helplessness that is understood by Central Americans while in Mexico because the

state creates and controls their legality and ability to have their suffering be recognized as such. Centering the lives of Central Americans allows us to document and archive that this violence, discursive and otherwise happened and is happening routinely and reflects a long-standing structural violence.

Scientific Anthropologist Audrey Smedley provides us with an understanding of race as being produced through and after the Age of Discovery or Conquest. She posits that a racial worldview was produced that “was a way of perceiving the world’s peoples as being divided into exclusive and discrete groups, called races, that are ranked hierarchically vis-à-vis one another.”³⁴ Matters of race in Mexico in relation to Central Americans are questions of power, difference, and human value. As Guatemalan literary scholar Arturo Arias argues Spanish colonialism disrupted the complementary relationships between the empires of Central Mexico and the Central American Isthmus. Arias’ analysis serves as a starting point to understand the lasting impacts colonization had on the valuing or devaluing of Central Americans in relation to Mexicans.³⁵ Many of my collaborators reiterated this provocation when they were told not to speak when crossing Mexico. Their distinct accents served as markers of not just difference but also of inferiority and consequent vulnerability. S. C. migrated from Guatemala when he was thirteen-years old with his mother, two siblings, and three cousins. He describes abuse by both Mexican officials and Mexican civilians throughout the month-long journey in 1983. At one point he shared that some Mexicans were “heartless” because they were robbing those less fortunate.

Central American migrants' stories about Mexico echo Gilmore's definition of racism as "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death."³⁶ O. C. who was a Mayan migrant from Guatemala traveled through Mexico when he was ten-years old with his mother and stepfather. He describes two incidents that I quote at length to capture the intersection of heteropatriarchal racist state violence that coalesces onto the bodies of Central American migrants:

O. C.: We go to Taxco, Guerrero. Uhh, my father, my stepfather, was always a fan of CV radios. And he made a lot of friends in Mexico through the CV radios. So he had contacts that he had never seen before but they knew we're there. And so we stopped at some of these places where my mother had stopped before when she came with my father. And uhh, you know what uhh, my impression of Mexican people was they were really cool cuz we ate like crazy and everybody was just so happy to see us. But then again we had to hide from them and that was like wait a minute. They're treating us nice when we go to so and so house but on the way you, you, you, my mother told me you have to not say a word. Don't say a word. Don't talk to anybody. Um... and umm, it was a tough ride. I remember when we went to, when we stopped at Guerrero there were some girls from El Salvador that were going with us. And they took my mom and those ladies down and they took them to the little, you know, shack where the station was. And they asked my mother for money. My mother didn't have a dime. Except for the money she had hidden in her belt uhh, ummm, you know?

Me: *En el elastico?*

O. C.: Yeah, yeah *en el elastico*. Yeah, yeah, on her belt loops, she sewed the money in there. So umm, when the guards saw the two Salvadoran girls. They were young and beautiful. I remember that because I myself looked at these girls, and they were beautiful, beautiful. Chaparritas, you know. So what they did, is... they thought that my mother was from El Salvador, too. They didn't know the difference. So they thought that my mother was with this group and the kid, me! And so in order for us to get, they said we're gonna send you back to your country or else. Or you have to be, let us be sexually involved. And the girls said, not the lady, not the lady. Send the lady back to her kid and we will take care of you guys. And my mother told me this years later. So my mother goes back to the bus and she says, just close your eyes and

pretend you're sleeping. That was one of the first encounters that I know... And I saw one of the guards hit one of the gentlemen. He says, "where are you from?". And the guy had a heavy accent from Central America. I'm pretty sure if you heard it before you know what an accent from Central America is. He's like, "umm Me-me-mexicanooo". He was trying to sound Mexican. And he, with the back of his gun, he pulled out his gun and with just the, the butt of the gun just smacked him in the face. I was terrified.

The heartless nature that S. C. described while in Mexico reverberates in the experiences O. C. encountered as a young child in 1986. The experiences of these young men and G. C. are not isolated incidents. A survey conducted by Central American Studies scholar, Cecilia Menjivar, of 150 Salvadoran migrants traveling through Mexico in the 1980s revealed that seventy respondents felt their life was in danger at some point during their trip. Sixty-eight of the participants attempted to enter Mexico several times, while thirty-three respondents reported being assaulted once, and thirty-four revealed multiple instances of aggression.³⁷ The economic crisis that Mexico underwent throughout the 1980s undoubtedly exacerbated the treatment of Central American migrants. However, Mexico's treatment of Central Americans during the height of their most urgent needs because of the genocidal civil wars typifies the racist ideologies buttressing Mexico's immigration policies in the twentieth century. By in large, Central Americans fleeing the violence in the Isthmus were not recognized officially as refugees. This denial of status relegated Central Americans into multiple categories that included economic migrants, temporary workers, or 'border visitors.' The Mexican constitution did not offer a legal mechanism for granting refugee status. "In the early 1980s, only one hundred Central Americans were granted the FM-10 visa (asylee), but none were granted this

status from 1986-1990.”³⁸ For context, Mexico received hundreds of thousands of Central Americans to its territory fleeing the Isthmus during this time period. Mexico’s lukewarm and at times, antagonistic response to the arrivants effectively conscripted Central Americans seeking refuge or passage through Mexican territory to a condition of criminality. Criminalization ensured that Central Americans would never truly belong in Mexico and continued the process of Mexican settler mestizaje projects that sought to mark and forbid racialized others entry into their amalgamation nation.

The systematic marginalization of Central American refugees and migrants subjected people to abuse, as they became an additional pool of flexible and vulnerable labor to fill the needs of local plantation owners and the agricultural sector of Southern Mexico. Chiapas saw seasonal exoduses of Mexican Indigenous communities to the northern part of the territory for better paying work, much like the Juarez siblings that opened up this chapter, that left landowners in need for workers for their wealth accumulation. Central Americans in refugee camps did not qualify for work permits and thus were funneled into exploitative labor relations throughout southern plantations. “Local *caciques* (power brokers), many of them wealthy ranchers and growers, also conducted their own immigration policy. Fearing the impact leftist guerrillas might have on Chiapas’s politics and economy, they funded their own paramilitary groups.”³⁹

The question of sovereignty served to justify the neglect and hostility Central Americans received throughout the 1980s in Mexico. Migrants were pathologized as

criminal and were used as scapegoats for Mexico's social and economic ills. Anti-migrant discourse is not uncommon for any nation; however, Mexico's attitude reflected a contradiction as they were hamstrung in the 1980s between a country tasked with mass emigration and immigration. Beth Baker posits, "International migration simultaneously challenges and reaffirms state authority [...] At the same time as migration represents a phenomenon increasingly outside the control of national states, the fixation on controlling migration, and the immense forces brought to bear upon unregulated migration, serve to reaffirm the supposed right of national states to regulate populations, to govern."⁴⁰ As such, the Mexican government defended its lukewarm reception and ill treatment of Central Americans by reaffirming their sovereignty. The Mexican state initially resisted the involvement of the United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR) in dealing with the refugee crisis citing that it could and would resolve its own affairs.⁴¹

New Millennium, Continued Struggle

The experiences of Central Americans during the 1980s were dire. Many were arriving to Mexico with physical and physiological trauma associated with the genocidal civil wars. They encountered a hostile territory, with pockets of much needed support. Despite these challenges, scholars, journalists, and Central Americans themselves recall the 1980s as not being as difficult as what has been going on in Mexico from the mid-2000s to the present. In 2007, the United States congress convened before the Committee on Foreign Affairs to present a

transnational security proposition known as the Merida Initiative. The policy called for solidifying the capacity for surveillance and policing the trafficking of notorious drugs like cocaine. The cost was 1.5 billion dollars to be doled out unevenly between Central America, Mexico, and the Caribbean. Central America was to receive 50 million dollars in aid while Mexico was to receive ten times this amount. This staggering difference symbolized another instance of bilateral policing enforcement between the United States and Mexico. Working together, by no means indicated a sense of equality between the two nations. The United States government worried that funding training and equipping Mexican state agents had the potential to strengthen drug trafficking rings, which routinely enrolled the assistance of the state in their business operations. In the meeting, republican House of Representatives member Tom Tancredo reflected the contentious relationship the United States has with the Global South when he asserted, "Mexico is a drug cartel."⁴² Tancredo was right. The unofficial numbers of dead bodies because of the intensification of a bilateral War on Drugs illustrates the ways expanding the capacity of the Mexican state with U.S. dollars, weaponry, and technology has endangered more lives and lands throughout the region.

Both Mexican and Central American corpses have marked this recent history of securitization. Central Americans are more susceptible throughout Mexican territory because of their undocumented or irregular status. Further, Central Americans become targets of violence, exploitation, and policing because of the ways they become racialized as threatening others. Central American women are

particularly marked by the intersection of racialization and heteropatriarchy. In a study of cultural racism against Central American women in Mexico, Tania Cruz Salazar found that nationality, gender, and ethnicity shape the ways they are racialized while in Mexican territory. Indigenous Guatemalan women migrants are marked as inferior, uncivilized, and as having a very low intellect. Honduran and Salvadoran women are categorized as more sexually open and thus violable. The national backgrounds of women migrants were found to shape the behaviors towards these women and they came to embody fraught national histories of their places of origin. In other words, Central American women migrants became receptacles and representatives of the unstable conditions associated with their nations of origin.⁴³ These formulations melded with the racist underpinnings present in the Mexican mestizo settler national imagination. Anti-Indian, anti-Black, and xenophobic attitudes serve to animate and ultimately justify the discrimination, exclusion, and often the violence committed against Central American populations.

Central American women and LGBT migrants crossing Mexico face layered abuse. Many flee their countries of origin because of gendered and homophobic violence. In 2015, the UNHCR published a report entitled *Women on the Run* that featured the results of a survey conducted with 160 women from the Northern Triangle in Central America and parts of Mexico. The majority of the participants described targeted gendered violence on behalf of transnational criminal organizations in their communities. They also reported suffering brutal domestic violence and the difficulties were compounded for transgender women. Forty

percent of the women did not believe reporting the violence to their local police departments would result in any significant action.⁴⁴ Many women leave Central America to escape domestic violence. This reality forces Central American women to redefine motherhood beyond rigid heteronormative constructs to include mothering from afar.⁴⁵ In addition, to making sacrifices for children, Central American women take on head of household duties and support their parents and extended family. Female single-headed households are not uncommon throughout the Isthmus.

In the film *Maria en Tierra De Nadie* (Maria in Nobody's Land) (2011), two Salvadoran women are prominently featured, Sandra Campos and Marta Muñoz. Sandra shares with the documentarian that she had initially left for the United States after her husband left her without any financial support for her or her children. Sandra was eventually deported from the U.S. She left her U.S.-born daughter behind as immigration officials told her she could not take her away from the U.S. because she was a citizen by birth. Martha met Sandra shortly after Sandra's repatriation through a mutual friend. Martha had always wanted to attempt to travel towards the United States to work and help support her children. Meeting Sandra seemed serendipitous. Sandra was set to attempt a return to the United States and Martha was to accompany her to navigate the gauntlet that is Mexico. Martha expressed that she did not tell the father of her children that she was going to leave because of fear that he would hit her.⁴⁶ The fear was well founded. In 2011, a study revealed that El Salvador had the highest rate of femicide in the world,

followed by Guatemala at number three, and Honduras at number six. Femicide is described on a fundamental level as the gender-motivated killing of women.⁴⁷ Femicide flourishes because of impunity and gender-based violence continues unabated because of the ways heteropatriarchy has been normalized since conquest. The idea that women and their bodies are property of partners is reinforced throughout Central American civil society. These attitudes are firmly entrenched throughout the region and lead to violent forms of control exerted by individuals, the state, and society at large. Women are left to navigate the violence through dynamic efforts, which include migration.

The precarity Central Americans encounter in Mexico has persisted since the 1980s. Asylum is still granted at paltry numbers throughout Mexico. "In 2009, 64,061 foreign nationals were detained by the INM, of whom 60,383 were from El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua. Some 60,143 were voluntarily repatriated or deported, 2,846 were allowed to regularize their migration status and 87 asylum-seekers were status."⁴⁸ These numbers do not include those who have successfully evaded arrest, detention, or deportation. To escape the web of policing throughout Mexico, Central American migrants are pushed to find alternate, subsequently, more dangerous corridors of the territory. Migrants are thus exposed to the schemes of a variety of actors in Mexico that leads to things like robberies and extortions. In essence, the Mexican state criminalizes Central American migrants. Ethnic Studies scholar Lisa Marie Cacho compels readers to interrupt the naturalization of criminality. Cacho writes, "When law targets certain people for

incarceration or deportation, it criminalizes those people of color who are always already most vulnerable and multiply marginalized.”⁴⁹ The criminalized condition of Central Americans in Mexico condemns them to be perpetually unprotected. Further, Central Americans become objectified in a multitude of ways. They are worthless, but maintain a value in the form of kidnappings for ransom, extortions, and coercive labor extraction. The business of exploiting the dehumanized and unprotected is booming.

Recent studies illustrate that the abuse of Central American migrants in Mexico is a lucrative project. Researchers at the Robert Strauss Center for International Security and Law approximated the conversion of misery into capital. Using conservative figures of how many migrants are targeted for kidnapping, extortion fees, robbery, and migrant abandonment by smugglers and how much each of these violations produce on average, the researchers suggest that migrants and their families are paying 134.7 million dollars annually to different entities. As a point of comparison, funding for the Merida Initiative during the fiscal year of 2017 was 139 million.⁵⁰ The figures are staggering. They elucidate the ways settler states collude in order to continue to eliminate racialized and unwanted populations. The United States and Mexican governments collaborate at the detriment of racialized and working-poor Mexicans and Central Americans. The cooperation is further highlighted in the sharing of advanced technology to survey detained migrants. The U.S. State Department’s Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs budgeted \$75 million dollars to install scanning and biometric data collecting

equipment throughout Mexican territory. These efforts are purportedly aimed at sharing information about convicted criminals and “Special Interest Aliens” that are found in custody in Mexico with the Department of Homeland Security.⁵¹ The increased webbing of transnational security apparatuses reveal how “collective representations of crime and terrorism [...] have long animated relations between the United States and [Latin America].”⁵² These transnational relationships, far from being simply an exertion of U.S. imperial statecraft across the hemisphere, exhibit the ways Mexico and Central American nations systematically eliminate their historically unwanted, racialized and vulnerable populations.

The apparatuses of control and discipline leave a trail of terror indelibly seared onto the lives of not just Central Americans who cross Mexican territory but the loved ones they leave behind in the Isthmus. I turn my attention to the 2006 film by German director Uli Stelzner, *Asalto al Sueño* (Assaulted Dream). Stelzner’s film begins on the Mexico-Guatemala border in Tecun Uman, San Marcos Guatemala and segues to the Suchiate River. The film’s title harkens to the mythical American Dream that many migrants are familiar with and wish to attain some semblance of. Dark brown bodies are seen breaking rock in the town and washing clothes and wading through the river. The first person interviewed in this film is a visibly Afro-descended man named “Roberto.” He is shown wandering about the city square and the cameraman asks him to describe this borderzone. Roberto’s description of the Mexico-Guatemalan border highlights the ways borderlands become zones of permissible violence. Young men are featured prominently throughout the

documentary. In many scenes, Black and Brown men are seen waiting around by the train tracks, presumably waiting for the trains to depart so they can hop on and move further northward. Many of the young men speak and show signs of self-medicating with mind-altering substances. They also express their desires and hopes for the future. Multiple times, characters in this human drama talk about their families and loved ones left behind in the Isthmus. They speak about not being able to live in Central America and being essentially forced to leave.⁵³

The young men are clearly criminalized by the Mexican state and civil society throughout the film. In one scene police officers along with state agents from Instituto Nacional de Migracion (INM) descend upon a group of migrants. They ask the young men to lift their shirts up and inspect them for tattoos. Some of them try and explain away their markings as not being gang-related. In Mexico, as in Central America and inner cities in the United States, body modifications like tattoos warrant suspicion and systematic surveillance. While this example of criminalization happens in the mid-2000s it reflects attitudes towards Central Americans from the 1980s. Diana Torres Arcieniega, director of *Servicios Migratorios* (Migratory Services) in the 1980s blamed Mexico's social problems on Central American refugees. Her ardor made her place questions of social disintegration, poverty, promiscuity, ignorance, delinquency, and violence in Mexican society squarely on the shoulders of Central Americans. Attaching Central Americans to criminality makes them ineligible for personhood. Cacho explains, "To be ineligible for personhood is a form of social death; it not only defines who does

no matter, it also makes mattering meaningful.”⁵⁴ The criminalization of Central American migrants makes them not matter. They also attach form to subjects that do matter in Mexico. Central Americans legitimate Mexican settler power by providing a target to control, which permits platitudes of protecting Mexican sovereignty and citizens to become viable while obscuring how the same state, through its continued bilateral militarization practices endangers vulnerable Mexican citizens.

Criminalization is a racial and gendered project. Central American women are subject to deportation, detention, and sexual violence. The specter of sexual violence has become a flesh and bone reality. Stelzner visits a detention center in Southern Mexico. In the cages he interviews a number of Brown women from Central America awaiting their deportations. Many offer analyses through their experiences of the ways patriarchy and poverty enclose their lives in Central America. The women betray a weariness and pain on their faces and bodies. They range in ages but a lot of them are extremely young. Maricela, a young Central American is eighteen and in detention. Wendy, twenty-three and a single mother of two, tearfully expresses the pain associated with leaving her children behind. Many explain that in the Isthmus there are no options. Another young woman, who earned her bachelor’s degree but was not able to find work in her chosen field of study and thus was propelled northward. She needed to find work to support her single-mother who and younger brother, who she wants to continue going to school.⁵⁵ The weight of the world is on this young woman to secure a future for her mother and

provide enough to presumably protect her younger brother from a life with little options. Another Salvadoran woman expresses that the poor are treated like trash in El Salvador. Two women, Mayra Alejandra and Beatriz, describe traversing Mexico and making it to the U.S. border and being captured by organized criminal groups. They were kept as captives and allude to experiencing sexual violence and exploitation. Mayra Alejandra, despite the repeated trauma of sexual violence and captivity expressed her continued desire to make it to the U.S.⁵⁶

I highlight these stories to demonstrate the ways Central Americans are made sub-human through criminalization. In addition, the films allow viewers to glimpse the exercise of humanity made by vulnerable, racialized populations. A Nicaraguan deportee poignantly states that the programs of repatriation by the U.S. will not stop the migration crisis. He prophetically claims, “*va’aumentar* (it will increase).” He correctly claims that wealth is unevenly distributed and that is a fundamental global problem. “With those free trade agreements and globalization worldwide, the stronger party will always have advantage over the weaker one.” His words demonstrate the capacity for knowledge production Central Americans have and their capacity to understand the depths of the problems they face. Many are terrorized by a variety of actors along the trip but they also express that there is a blurring between criminals and the state. The Nicaraguan migrant asserts, “Each country possesses the riches to survive without having to ask for other countries for help. I believe we could all survive with what we have got, but nowadays what we have doesn’t belong to us.”⁵⁷ The wisdom captured in this scene is one that is

generally obscured in discourses surrounding the Central American migrant crisis. It reflects the ways human beings facing the monstrosity of conquest and 500 years of history understand the present beyond spatial and geographically specific regions. This young Nicaraguan, thoughtfully understands the misery of poverty as being rooted in the uneven distribution of wealth and resources on a global level and not on individual choices.

Laws and the Mexican Constitution are meant to protect the rights of migrants. Article 33 of the 1917 Mexican Constitution extends migrants the same rights as Mexican citizens. The notion of universal protection of the rights of citizens and non-citizens alike was reaffirmed in Article 2 of the Migratory Law of 2011. The article states, "In no event is irregular migratory status on its own considered the perpetration of a crime, nor will it be considered the perpetration of illicit acts by the migrant as the result of his or not being documented."⁵⁸ On paper, these laws, among others, reflect an idea that Central Americans will be treated with a certain level of respect and dignity. This is far from the case as the previous evidence demonstrates. There is a presumption present within these laws and policies that all Mexican citizens are treated fairly under the law. Mexico is a racist settler state. It continues to be a site of massive racialized and gendered inequity. Indigenous, Afro-Mexicans, and other racialized populations are subject to persistent incursions onto their lands, poverty, and customary discrimination. The mechanisms that exclude and marginalize racialized Mexicans are expanded and amplified onto racialized, vulnerable Central American migrants. This reality explodes in systematic terror

and abandonment for precarious populations trying to traverse or find refuge in the Mexican state. For those Central Americans that do make it through Mexico and experience the aggression, racism, and gendered violence, the imprints left behind reappear in their next destination.

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- ¹ Marlon Bishop and Nina Macintosh, "Unpacking Blackness in Mexico's Costa Chica," *ABC News*, April 29, 2013, https://abcnews.go.com/ABC_Univision/News/unpacking-blackness-mexicos-costa-chica/story?id=19023238.
- ² Nina Lakhani, "Mexico tortures migrants—and citizens—in effort to slow Central American surge," *The Guardian*, April 4, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/apr/04/mexico-torture-migrants-citizens-central-america>.
- ³ Arturo Arias. "Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World," *Latino Studies* 1 (March 1, 2003), 168.
- ⁴ *Ibid*, 174.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 176.
- ⁶ E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 105.
- ⁷ John A. Booth, Christine J. Wade, & Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change* 5th ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 18.
- ⁸ Cecilia Menjivar. "Transnational Parenting and Immigration Law: Central Americans in the United States," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38.2 (February, 2012): 309.
- ⁹ Robert Miller, *Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and Manifest Destiny* (Westport: Praeger Press, 2006), 4.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*.
- ¹¹ James C. Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011), 22.
- ¹² Allen Feldman, *Formations of Violence: The Narrative of the Body and Political Terror in Northern Ireland*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 5.
- ¹³ Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 154.

¹⁴ Nixon, 154.

¹⁵ This is not meant to imply that the United States did not meddle in Central America before the 20th century. History demonstrates that U.S. incursions by proxy occurred through the travels of John Lloyd Stephens and the belligerent invasion of the mercenary from Tennessee, William Walker, in Nicaragua in the mid-19th century.

¹⁶ Walter La Feber, *Inevitable Revolutions: The United States in Central America* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), 5-8.

¹⁷ Greg Grandin, *Empire's Workshop: Latin America, The United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 22.

¹⁸ David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1993), 156.

¹⁹ Grandin, *Empire's Workshop*, 23.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 71.

²¹ Eduardo Galeano, *The Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1973, 1997), 95.

²² Rigoberta Menchu, *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala* (London: Verso Books, 1984, 2009), 40 – 41.

²³ Mark Moberg and Setve Striffler, *Banana Wars: Power, Production and History in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

²⁴ Tom Barry, *Roots of Rebellion: Land & Hunger in Central America* (Boston: South End Press, 1987), 10.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 17.

²⁶ Erin Siegal McIntyre and Debrorah Bonello, "Is rape the price to pay for migrant women chasing the American Dream?" *Fusion*, September 10, 2014, http://fusion.net/story/17321/is-rape-the-price-to-pay-for-migrant-women-chasing-the-american-dream/?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=socialshare&utm_content=desktop+top.

²⁷ (Arregui and Roman, 2005, p. 44-45)

²⁸ Patricia N. Interview by author. Tape recording. Los Angeles, Ca., 27 February 2009.

²⁹ Maria Cristina Garcia, *Seeking Refuge: Central American Migration to Mexico, the United States, and Canada* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 67.

³⁰ Andrea Smith. *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 1.

³¹ Ibid, 3.

³² A famous Mexican fictional character whose popularity extended far beyond Mexico, throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

³³ Kathleen Staudt, "Violence at the Border: Broadening the Discourse to Include Feminism, Human Security, and Deeper Democracy," in *Human Rights along the U.S.-Mexico Border: Gendered Violence and Insecurity*, edited by Kathleen Staudt et al. (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2009), 9.

³⁴ Audrey Smedley, "Science and the Idea of Race: A Brief History," in *Race and Intelligence: Separating Science from Myth*, edited by Jefferson M. Fish (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 145.

³⁵ Arturo Arias, "Central-American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World," *Latino Studies* 1 (2003): 168 – 187.

³⁶ Ruth Wilson Gilmore. *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

³⁷ Cecilia Menjivar, *Fragmented Ties: Salvadoran Immigrant Networks in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 62 – 63.

³⁸ Garcia, 46.

³⁹ Ibid, 53 – 54.

⁴⁰ Beth Baker-Cristales, *Salvadoran Migration to Southern California: Redefining El Hermano Lejano* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2004), 25 – 26.

⁴¹ Garcia, 50.

⁴² *The Merida Initiative: Assessing Plans to Step up our Security Cooperation with Mexico and Central America, Before the Comm. on Foreign Affairs House of Representatives*, 110th Cong. 110-135 (2007) (statement of Tom Tancredo, Representative of the State of Colorado).

⁴³ Tania Cruz Salazar. "Racismo cultural y representaciones de inmigrantes centroamericanos en Chiapas," *Migraciones Internacionales* 6.2 (July – Dec, 2011): 141 – 143.

⁴⁴ UNHCR, *Women on the Run: First-Hand Accounts of Refugees Fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Mexico*, September, 2015, <http://www.acnur.org/fileadmin/Documentos/Publicaciones/2015/10228.pdf>.

⁴⁵ Leisy Abrego, *Sacrificing Families: Navigating Laws, Labor, and Love Across Borders* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2012), 39 – 44.

⁴⁶ Marcela Chamorro, "Maria en tierra de nadie," (El Salvador: i(dh)reas, 2011).

⁴⁷ "Central America: Femicides and Gender-Based Violence," *Center for Gender & Refugee Studies*, <https://cgrs.uchastings.edu/our-work/central-america-femicides-and-gender-based-violence>.

⁴⁸ Amnesty International, "Invisible Victims: Migrants on the Move in Mexico." (London: Amnesty International, 2010), 5 – 6.

⁴⁹ Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 4.

⁵⁰ Stephanie Leutert, Dir. "Organized Crime and Central American Migration in Mexico," *LBJ School Policy Research Project* (Fall 2017 – Spring 2018), 14 – 15.

⁵¹ Joshua Partlo and Nick Miroff, "U.S. gathers data on migrants deep in Mexico, a sensitive program Trump's rhetoric could put at risk," *Washington Post*, April 6, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-gathers-data-on-migrants-deep-in-mexico-a-sensitive-program-trumps-rhetoric-could-put-at-risk/2018/04/06/31a8605a-38f3-11e8-b57c-9445cc4dfa5e_story.html?noredirect=on&utm_term=.00de5615963b.

⁵² Elana Zilberg, *Space of Detention: The Making of a Transnational Gang Crisis Between Los Angeles and San Salvador* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 18.

⁵³ Uli Stelzner, "Asalto al Sueño (Assaulted Dream)," (Berlin; Kassel: ISKA, 2006).

⁵⁴ Cacho, 5.

⁵⁵ Stelzner, 2006.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ To read an English translation of the Migratory Law of 2011 visit:
https://www.albany.edu/~rk289758/documents/Ley_de_Migracion_en_Ingles.pdf.

Chapter 4: Arrival and its Discontents in the Golden State: Los Angeles as Global Metropolis and Bounded Space

On May 5th, 2017 Los Angeles's city tourism board, Discover Los Angeles, utilized hundreds of volunteers to hold up individual posters that, when held together, spelled the word "welcome" in English, Spanish, Chinese, and Arabic. This grandiose gesture signaled greetings for travelers to the city and those returning home via Los Angeles International Airport. It also symbolized a liberal rebuttal to the Trump's administration's vitriolic, xenophobic Muslim ban and continued mobilization to build an expanded wall on the United States-Mexico border.¹ While Los Angeles has been a site of sustained resistance to racialized, gendered, and class warfare since its establishment, this chapter examines both the significant challenges faced and the dynamic methods of negotiation enacted by Central Americans upon their arrival to the City of Angels since the 1970s. First, I will briefly review how in Los Angeles local and especially federal officials erected intersectional boundaries across the city through state-sanctioned and extra-legal violence. In other words, Los Angeles, much like the previous locations, is a settler colonial site that has required and continues to create necessary conditions of exclusion, marginalization, and containment in its march to define itself.

The media, politicians, and many of its inhabitants tout present-day Los Angeles as a prototypical multicultural metropolis. On any given day people can eat anything from Thai to Ethiopian or Peruvian to Korean. Ongoing urban development is turning downtown Los Angeles and its adjacent areas into welcoming

playgrounds catering to the city's cosmopolitan citizenry. The proponents and active participants in the processes associated with gentrification employ a discourse that demonstrates an intimate link with the rhetoric present from the nineteenth-through mid-twentieth centuries; these narratives maintained that the city must be rid of undesirable inhabitants, whether through elimination or through assimilation. Also, the construction of the pristine city necessitates the hyper-surveillance and policing of bodies deemed dangerous or illegal. This paper seeks to determine linkages and continuities with these logics of cleansing the Los Angeles body politic that sought to establish, insulate, and perpetuate white supremacy in the city through constructions of fit and unfit citizenry continue in current programs like Secure Communities initiatives that, I argue, expose particular bodies to both mundane and spectacular forms of surveillance and violence. In addition, experiences of Central Americans in Los Angeles reveal the relationship between the local and global desires of U.S. racist nationhood and empire.

This section places Central American experiences in a relational position to the ways white supremacist visions of development, law, and order impacted other racialized populations in the city. In particular, this chapter situates the relationships between Central American migrants and their children, Mexican immigrants, and the legacy of Chicano presence within the related genealogy of Mexican nationalist mestizo ideology and Chicano nationalism. On the one hand, Mexican and Chicano nationalisms serve as sources of pride and symbolic resistance to anti-Mexican projects in the United States. On the other hand, Chicano and

Mexican nationalisms have become default stand-ins for a homogenous Latinidad that obscures Central American presence and reignites tensions emerging from Central American travels across Mexico to reach Los Angeles. Finally, the chapter concludes by examining the ways Central American migrants and U.S. Central Americans in Los Angeles carve out new methods of belonging outside of formalized recognition by settler colonial nation-states.

Settler Colonialism and the Elision of Native Los Angeles

In both discursive and literal ways, Los Angeles is and has been a contested space since the arrival of Spanish colonizers in the 1760s and its official establishment in 1781. Many narratives that detail the history of Los Angeles tend to elide the existence of the indigenous people prior to European contact. For well over a thousand years prior to Spanish, Mexican, and United States colonization native people from the Tongva nation occupied the land on which Los Angeles exists. Kevin Starr posits, “[l]ong before European contact, the Tongva people learned that the Los Angeles Basin could sustain and nurture human life in abundant and salubrious circumstances [...] From [...] this sustaining abundance arose a sense of [...] gratitude [...] to place that [...] would never be lost.”² Starr acknowledges the distinct ways Tongva people relate to land and place, reminding us that they were targeted for elimination by colonizing regional powers since the eighteenth century, and that they still maintain their sacred connections to Los Angeles. Moreover, the Tongva had a highly complex model of social organization that mitigated violent conflict. Their systems of mutuality, intermarriage, and trade relations assisted

Indigenous communities in navigating potentially disastrous climactic shifts like wildfires or drought.³ Highlighting Tongva history and present-day existence combats constructions of Los Angeles that minimize or altogether erase native presence from historical accounts. In addition, I contend the treatment of the Tongva people reflects what Patrick Wolfe terms the logic of elimination that actively works to buttress and justify settler colonialism.

Patrick Wolfe provides a helpful theorization in order to understand the trajectories of conquest in the Americas when he describes “invasion [as] a structure not an event.”⁴ Viewing colonialism and invasion as not merely an epoch or event allows us to focus on how settler colonial societies were constructed and are currently maintained. Wolfe also pushes us to understand the centrality of the logics of Indigenous elimination and settler colonialism in the establishment of nation-states. He succinctly argues that the logic of elimination intends to destroy indigenous claim to subjectivity and land in order to successfully supplant their rights to land and space.⁵ In the present, for example, Native people of Los Angeles are continually erased from historical memory via the denial of federal recognition and the destruction of their sacred sites due to, among many reasons, the dense population of the city and public works construction projects. These elisions of Native presence in the city serve as examples of settler colonialism. Scott Morgenson corroborates: “Settler colonialism is naturalized whenever conquest or displacement of Native peoples is ignored or appears necessary or complete, and whenever subjects are defined by settler desires to possess Native land, history, or

culture.”⁶ The settler colonial powers that took control of Los Angeles land employed multiple mechanisms to ensure the dispossession of the Tongva. One such method was the Spanish mission system. Starr asserts:

The mission system [...] at once altered Tongva culture – negatively, most would argue – while bringing it into a new state of extension and awareness. Prior to the coming of the Spanish, the Tongva lived in a network of autonomous villages that included Yaanga at the bend of the Los Angeles River in what is now the epicenter of Los Angeles [...] the Tongva people had their ancient way of life destroyed in an effort to transform them into Hispanicized Christians.⁷

This effort is indicative of settler colonial logics that seek to destroy in order to replace—in this case, Tongva views on land and the environment, which were antithetical to the Spanish’s. As Heather Valdez Singleton describes the displacement and dispossession of native people: “Beginning in 1771, Spanish missionaries recruited Indians of various Gabrieleno villages to live at the San Gabriel Mission, and over the next fifty years the San Gabriel Mission oversaw an often brutal and coercive campaign devised to destroy Indian cultures and convert Indians to Christianity.”⁸ Both Starr and Singleton vividly illustrate how the Spanish utilized Christianity as a method of coercion to usurp Tongva land and labor. As Wolfe concludes, “settler colonialism is an inclusive, land-centered project that coordinates a comprehensive range of agencies [...] with a view to eliminating Indigenous societies.”⁹

A major aspect of Tongva life is a connection to the land of Los Angeles, but this view stood in the way of Spanish expansion. As Starr elucidates, Spanish colonization specifically targeted the tethering of Tongva identity to land in an

intentional attempt to rupture sacred native-land relationships. In addition, Starr gestures towards the continuation of these logics of elimination through assimilation/conversion by other settler colonial powers. Singleton corroborates, “from 1834 to 1836 the Mexican government passed a series of laws that secularized the missions,” but because Catholic Church’s reluctance, “Mexican officials refused to implement the law, leaving Indians in a precarious situation.”¹⁰ The secularization process of the San Gabriel Mission further displaced the Tongva and heightened their vulnerability to hyper-exploitation under Mexican rule. Displaced Tongva were forced to find work in the recently founded Los Angeles and their labor, was vital to the early development of the city.

The brutalization targeted Indians and continued into the US colonial period. California became a state in 1850 and “quickly enacted repressive and discriminatory laws for Indians. Employing methods previously approved by the Los Angeles council, the state adopted a hard-line approach regarding Indians.” One of these laws essentially established a system of indentured servitude for Indians of California.¹¹ Furthermore, once US control of California was firmly established, the development of the City of Los Angeles became a central concern for the city founders. Who was to live and occupy this new American city was vitally important. Natalia Molina argues, “[Los Angeles] was developed as a place for whites [...] The creation of a ‘Spanish Fantasy Past’ was a master narrative in the selling of [the city].” The goal of this meta-narrative was to construct California as linked to Spain more so than Mexico.¹² Obscured in this project is the ways Indigenous indentured

labor was central to the carving out the foundations of modern-day Los Angeles. As the Tongva scrambled to confront the onslaught of continued conquest, Anglo settlers deployed criminalization to extract productivity from the marginalized Native population. The Tongva lost their “right to be” in Los Angeles with the construction and consequent enforcement of Anglo laws, according to Historian Kelly Lytle-Hernandez.¹³

In addition to making Los Angeles much more enticing for Euro-American settlers in the late nineteenth century, the “Spanish Fantasy Past,” and discussions around it, perpetuate the erasure of Tongvan people from historical memory. As Molina argues, this narrative was utilized to move away from linking California’s past from Mexico and towards Spain, however, by not mentioning that Mexico only controlled Los Angeles theoretically, from 1821 to 1846, furthers the eliminatory logics of settler colonialism, negating the central Tongva role during the Spanish colonial period, and erasing the longer historical presence of natives in this area in an effort to center the story of Los Angeles as a contested space around concepts of Mexican struggle. While the struggles of Mexican people during and after the Anglo colonization of Los Angeles is critical to understand how white supremacy further entrenched itself in the city, it is counterproductive to ignore in which the brutalization of the Tongva relates to Mexican marginalization. It is precisely the convergence of settler colonialism with the logics of indigenous elimination that structures white supremacy in post-1850 Los Angeles.

Mexican Incorporation and Migration to the Modern Metropolis

As the largest minority group in Los Angeles, Mexican and Mexican-Americans have a long and storied history of struggle in the city. Mexicans contended with inherently racist institutional and structural practices that sought to firmly establish and maintain white supremacy in the expanding United States. Mexicans, along with other foreign born people, presented the burgeoning country of the United States with a problem in cohering white supremacy. As such, policies to restrict immigration along racial lines became central to the development of Los Angeles. Molina asserts: "Politicians and public figures positioned immigration policy as the first line of defense in keeping undesirables from entering the United States."¹⁴ "Undesirables" threatened to dilute whiteness and lead to the "mongrelization" of the white race via miscegenation. The problem is that curtailing certain bodies through anti-immigrant legislation depletes the pool of cheap labor, which was vital to the expansion of white supremacist capitalist development. Mexican migration to the United States has been happening since the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo of 1848, which ceded a vast portion of Mexico's northern territory, and since the California gold rush of 1849. Technological advances in transportation and agriculture in Mexico and California helped facilitate the mass migration of Mexicans to the United States in the first few decades of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Upon arrival and settlement in Los Angeles Mexican immigrants faced economic, social, and cultural discrimination. As Douglas Monroy details, some Mexicans lived in makeshift villages on the outskirts of the city in dilapidated boxcars.¹⁶ These regions of the city served as quarantined zones for Mexicans and

denied them entry into an American polity despite being granted de jure citizenship and whiteness through the Treaty of Guadalupe-Hidalgo. Mexicans experienced isolation and hostility from the mid-nineteenth century forward. Historian William Deverell encapsulates the racist sentiments: “Mexicans and Mexico were to be approached with arms and martial readiness.”¹⁷

Mexicans faced anti-immigrant and racist sentiments during the Great Depression. The border was closed during and after the Great Depression and many Mexicans, both U.S. and Mexican-born, were repatriated and deported back to Mexico. This harrowing experience highlights the historically antagonistic relationship the U.S. has with Mexicans. Mexicans became the next targets, after the Chinese and other Asian immigrants, for the categorization of the “illegal alien.” The criminalization of Mexicans through the employment of the term and subject of “illegal alien”, Nicholas De Genova argues, “is a juridical status that entails a social relation to the state; as such, migrant ‘illegality’ is a preeminently political identity.”¹⁸ Mexicans, whether citizens or otherwise, become marred by the concept of illegality and the most vulnerable, and I argue visibly Brown or Black, are subjected to the discriminatory and at times violent machinations of the U.S. state. The impacts of illegality became magnified in the late-1920s in Los Angeles through the ideological construct of deportability. Deportability “has historically rendered undocumented migrant labor a distinctly disposable commodity.”¹⁹ Illegality produced deportability and converted Mexicans into targets for policing and detention. Their labor continued to be important and through imprisonment, white

supremacist settlers were able to extract the precious commodity without having to pay for it. Large numbers imprisoned Mexicans reinforced racist attitudes towards them by the white settler system. Mexicans were pathologized as having character defects like weak initiative, small ambition, and a disregard for the law.²⁰

Mexican migration to the United States continued during World War II through [what is commonly referred to as] the *Bracero* program, which re-opened the border between the United States and Mexico for Mexican males to come over to harvest fields and do other forms of manual labor. The importation of Mexican labor continued both legally and illegally until the 1970s, fueled by the demand of large agribusiness in the United States.²¹ Mexicans doubled their population in the United States during the 1980s, a demographic growth largely due to the economic crisis that struck Mexico in 1982. Emigration to the United States from Mexico skyrocketed because of the lack of employment opportunities in Mexico and the abundance of low-skilled jobs in the United States. David G. Gutierrez argues, both the United States government and large agribusiness have been intimately involved in facilitating Mexican migration to the United States for the first nine decades of twentieth century.²²

In response to structurally supported and promoted racist inequality, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans developed various strategies of resistance. One such method was assimilationist rhetoric that sought to establish Mexicans' racial identity as white. The chief proponents of this approach were the members of the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Along with other organizations

they fought against discrimination under these lines because an attachment to whiteness would conceivably ensure the worthiness of Mexican American equality. Consequently, this rhetoric demonstrated its complicity with white supremacy in multiple and insidious ways. One such way was the support of restrictions on Mexican immigration in the 1940s and 1950s under the logics that Mexican immigrants would further weaken the socioeconomic status of Mexican Americans.²³ Furthermore, as historian Edward Escobar contends, the desire of some Mexican-American leaders to be recognized as white resulted in an intimate relationship with anti-blackness. To be white, groups had to completely reject any association with blackness.²⁴

Anti-immigrant and anti-black discourses reflect a dynamic intersection between settler colonialism and white supremacy. On the one hand, anti-immigrant rhetoric demonstrates the desire of whites to firmly establish their “rightful” ownership and position of arbiters of who gets to be part of the United States, while actively erasing indigenous people. Andrea Smith concludes, the logic of indigenous genocide ensures the condition of an always-disappearing subjectivity and converts the non-native into the rightful inheritor of Indian land.²⁵ It is the relationship Some Mexican-American leaders forged a relationship with anti-immigrant narratives, as I will return to later regarding Central American and newly arrived Mexican migrants in Los Angeles.

On the other hand, anti-black rhetoric structures white supremacy by serving as the antithesis of civility and rationality. To be related to blackness is to be related

to the ultimate position of vulnerability and criminality. To move away from blackness ensured a move towards possibilities of socioeconomic and political mobility. As historian Anthony Macias gestures towards, “[Mexican-Americans] began in the 1940s as despised racial groups, their respective social, racial, and class statuses seemed to diverge, as Mexican Americans managed to benefit from the wartime and postwar booms by exploiting the slight but significant advantages they enjoyed over African Americans.”²⁶ While some Mexican-Americans benefited from labor opportunities and were able to engage in some semblance of upward social mobility, Mexicans would never truly be considered white. I am not painting an essentialist portrait of Mexican-Americans by highlighting this particular section of strategic political thought. Rather, I am demonstrating the dynamic nature of white supremacy and settler colonialism. Both of these projects present an opportunity for a form of belonging into the settler nation-state. The seduction of white supremacy and settler colonialism makes promises that become apparitions. Mexican-Americans and Mexicans have been hyper-policed as victims of spectacular forms of violence in Los Angeles; however, this does not preclude the fact that some Mexican-Americans have viewed full citizenship (read whiteness) as a goal for redress. As Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez reminds us, “violence forms the foundations of national histories and subjectivity.”²⁷

To demonstrate the inability and impossibility of Mexican-American claims to whiteness, consider briefly the history of policing Mexican bodies in Los Angeles. Policing, at its root is a violent, racist process because it is linked intimately with

logics of modernity, progress, and rationality. Surveillance of bodies that do not belong in certain places and spaces serves to construct or reinforce the criminality of entire groups of people. As Escobar highlights, “Law enforcement functions as the coercive arm of the state.”²⁸ Police departments and the logics of policing are heavily inflected with the desires of capitalist protection and accumulation by maintaining the subordination of disruptive bodies. During the 1940s, images and news stories of Mexican American youth gang members were mass-produced to the public in Los Angeles. This projection of Mexican American youth as criminals served to justify the brutalization of entire Mexican American communities at the hands of the LAPD. As a consequence, young Mexican Americans became compelled to address the historic unjust treatment that they had faced and were continually facing. The way the police treated Mexican Americans during this time period elucidated, vividly and violently how Mexican-Americans’ non-whiteness exposed their communities to high levels of state-sponsored violence as the LAPD confronted not only Mexican American youth, but also the influx of newly arrived African-Americans into the city.

Black Bodies and Disposable Labor

The number of blacks residing in Los Angeles increased dramatically during the mid-twentieth century behind promises of new economic opportunities. The booming post World War II economy of Los Angeles needed cheap labor and blacks proved to be a quality source. As historian Daniel Widener details:

Seeking economic opportunity, African Americans arrived en masse [...] tens of thousands arrived amid the expansion of defense production after 1942. Between 1940 and 1946, the black population of Los Angeles more than

doubled, growing from 63,774 to 133, 082 [...] Most new arrivals found atrocious housing and poor jobs. Housing restriction consigned nonwhites to less than a tenth of available housing stock, and the homes of recently interned Japanese and Japanese Americans often constituted the only residences open to African Americans. Exclusion from highly paid industries was nearly complete.²⁹

In this poignant excerpt, Widener indicates how the segregation and discrimination conferred upon black migrants to the city of Los Angeles was closely related to the dispossession of Japanese and Japanese-Americans. In addition, the economic isolation of blacks in the workforce in low-paying jobs illustrates the intentionality of racist structures that further the condition of the black in the United States a source of not just surplus labor but of disposable labor. As Joao Costa Vargas asserts, “[t]he roots of today’s Black genocide go deep into the formation of Los Angeles’ White suburbs and their antitheses, the overcrowded, non-White central ghettos.”³⁰ Vargas aptly points out that the conditions under which blacks live in the world are structured by logics of genocide and that this genocide continues today. Widener corroborates when he states the number of gang related homicides in Los Angeles:

For purposes of comparison, it is helpful to recall that gang violence in Los Angeles between 1988 and 1993 alone claimed more lives than thirty years of conflict in Northern Ireland or the fist Palestinian Intifada [...] The 1980s saw the flowering of a generation war on youth. Within Los Angeles, police who spoke openly of counterinsurgency missions made recurring efforts to block gang truces from taking hold.³¹

Larger processes like neoliberalism and racist policing supported and amplified the levels of violence present in the Black and Brown communities of Los Angeles.

These bodies and their march to destruction goes relatively unnoticed and unmourned outside their own communities. In analyzing the works of Vargas and

Widener I am mapping out the ways Los Angeles' formation as a city served to dehumanize and brutalize black people. At the core of the development of the modern metropolis has been a desire to maintain its purity and safety for white enjoyment and leisure. This maintenance has been brought about by the domination of non-white bodies and the extraction of their labor for the benefit of the rise of racist globalized capital.

The expansion of the United States as a global power is predicated on land theft, genocide, and institutionalized racial chattel slavery. The justification of these systems of domination and exploitation required the dehumanization of non-white bodies. Los Angeles as a space reflects these logics in its construction. As Vargas highlights, “[black] dehumanization that sustains this ever more fragmenting and domineering and globalized neoliberal heteropatriarchal capitalist White supremacist world. In it, Black people were never meant to survive. The degrees of inhumanity according to which Black communities exist and against which they resist only attest to the continuity of modernity’s genocidal impetus.”³² Vargas poignantly illustrates the genocidal logics that underlie the march to modernity. His reminder that in this world blacks were never meant to survive is echoed in the words of LAPD Police Chief William Parker in 1965: “It’s estimated that by 1970, 45 percent of the metropolitan area of Los Angeles will be Negro. If you want any protection for your home and family you’re going to have to get in and support a strong police department. If you don’t do that, come 1970, God help you!”³³ The threat of black bodies in Los Angeles had to be curtailed and controlled. Policing

tactics, along with political, social, economic marginalization were tailored to impede the development of black communities and maintain their subordinate position.

To take serious the words of Chief Parker is to take serious the intentional destruction of black life in Los Angeles. The way black bodies were policed and controlled changed according to the different local and global contexts throughout different decades. Widener aptly cautions against facile views of policing tactics in the 1980s by the Los Angeles Police Department on Black (and I would add, Brown) bodies as simple extensions or rearticulations of hyper-surveillance in the 1940s – the 1970s. He correctly cautions us to take note of the socio-political and political-economic contexts in which hyper-surveillance and brash methods of policing developed in the 1980s.

Between 1982 and 2000, California's prison population grew by nearly 500 percent, and the state built twice as many prisons in eighteen years as it had in the previous hundred years [...] Despite falling crime rates, prisons have become the only answer offered in response to the dual question of what is to be done with surplus public investment capital – and workers idled by the economic dislocation of 'globalization' – in an era when redistributive claims have been delegitimized through the victorious politics of an ascendant right.³⁴

I depart only in terms of wording from Widener as far as the utilization of the label surplus. I instead choose to view these bodies as disposable and their disposability and dehumanization allows for their wonton destruction. The rise of the prison industrial-complex makes sense of the illegible and inassimilable bodies of black people and provides a strong economic base for the economy of California and the

United States. As Chief Parker's comments demonstrate, the policing and control of the black is vital to the enjoyment and safety of the deserving white citizen. It is the decade of the 1980s, during the rise of the prison industrial-complex and the intensification of Cold War conflicts abroad that Central American migrants arrive in the city of Los Angeles, which had been policing its space and bounding people to dilapidated enclaves, in both housing and employment well over a century.

Central Americans: The Blowback of Global Imperial Desires

Over the past four decades, the county of Los Angeles has been a receiving site for hundreds of thousands of people fleeing economic hardships and/or violent political repression in Central American nations. Various conflicts in the Central American region were amplified both implicitly and explicitly via economic, militaristic, and diplomatic support of authoritarian governments and counterinsurgency campaigns aimed at toppling the revolutionary government of the Sandinistas in Nicaragua. These wars produced conditions that led to the virtual expulsion of people from their home countries in search of respite and refuge.

Central American immigrants overcome several challenges on their journey to the United States. Salvadorans and Guatemalans who entered the United States via Los Angeles became invisible. They came to a city with an established community of people who physically resembled them – Mexicans/Mexican-Americans – but as a result of a distinct history of struggle and resistance, had carved out various social and cultural spaces throughout the terrain. Central Americans thus had to establish themselves within the complexity of being an “other” within an “other.” Moreover,

Central American immigrants also become lumped into a homogenizing group of people: "Latino." As Suzanne Oboler argues, the Latina/o ethnic group is comprised of several "others". These manifestations of identities shift in relation to the circumstance an individual finds her or himself.³⁵ Central American immigrants who arrived to Los Angeles during the 1970s and the 1980s took on the identity of the Latin American national "other" in order to distinguish themselves from Mexicans.³⁶ The sheer number of Mexicans in Los Angeles creates the assumption by non-Latino groups that all of the Latinos in the city are Mexican. "In the United States, the label Latino generally refers to patterns of immigration and to social stratification. Its specific content, however, varies from place to place and from time to time. Whereas in Los Angeles the category Latino is immediately associated with Mexicans."³⁷ During the 1970s and 1980s this process led to the obfuscation of Central Americans in Los Angeles.

During the 1980s, Los Angeles experienced a period of rapid deindustrialization and, as Norma Stoltz-Chinchilla and Nora Hamilton highlight, a simultaneous reindustrialization. Central Americans were arriving en masse in the 1980s and occupying areas once heavily occupied by African-Americans. After the arrival of more cheap labor to the United States in communities like South Central, "Tensions among these groups were exacerbated by the loss of well-paid, unionized jobs typically held by blacks and Mexican Americans even as new immigrants, chiefly Mexican and Central American and often undocumented, became the preferred employees for low-paying nonunionized jobs in the manufacturing and

service sectors.”³⁸ These tensions are productive and help insulate white supremacist logics inherent to U.S. capitalist expansion in Los Angeles and abroad.

As I have demonstrated, Los Angeles the policing of racialized bodies has been central to the structuring of space. Many Mexicans and Central Americans share histories of migration and settlement in Los Angeles; however, the threat of deportations implied different effects for each group. Sociologist Claudia Dorrington asserts that while Salvadorans and Guatemalans arrived to the United States as undocumented immigrants, much like Mexican immigrants, “their arrival under ‘refugee-like-conditions’ ... made them particularly vulnerable ... they ... had to contend with the constant fear of apprehension and deportation to nations where their lives were at risk.”³⁹ Because of the civil wars and state-sponsored repression in Guatemala and El Salvador deportation to these countries meant possible death. The act of deporting human beings is contingent on their marking of illegality. Anti-immigrant attitudes are a staple of United States history and these positions echo racist narratives that construct Latina/os as permanently alien. As a popular geography textbook concluded in the 1920s, “except where white men have established plantations, the resources [of Central America] are poorly developed. Most of the Indians, mestizos, and negroes are poor and ignorant ... few care to work hard. More white men are needed to start plantations and to fight tropical diseases.”⁴⁰ These racist views of the global south colored the treatment of undocumented migrants in the United States today. Nevertheless, one must remember that how a group experiences racism shifts in relation to the group’s

positionality in particular times and places. Stuart Hall reiterates: “there are certain general features to racism. But even more significant are the ways in which these general features are modified and transformed by the historical specificity of the contexts and environments in which they become active.”⁴¹

Central Americans’ relationship to the threat of deportation exhibits a different historical flashpoint than that of Mexicans’ relationship to that same threat. While the imperialist projects of the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries led to displacement and second-class citizenship for Mexicans, the foreign interventions of the United States in Central America in the 20th century resulted in the increased risk of premature death for countless dislocated people in the 1980s. Central American migrants to the city of Los Angeles are a varied group that includes Afro-descended and indigenous people who speak little to no Spanish, let alone English. For these minorities among the Central American community in Los Angeles, the threat of state-sponsored/justified violence is heightened because of the history of the treatment of Indigenous and Black people in the city. This is not to minimize the traumatic effect of deportations on Mexicans during the decade; however, United States racism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism affected Mexicans and Central Americans in variegated forms. A relational approach between the two groups aids in the understanding of how, when, and on what levels systems of oppression work. The treatment of undocumented Central Americans and Mexicans in Los Angeles reflects the continued need to police the boundaries of civility by eliminating any

threat to whiteness and a white way of life that is heavily inflected by capitalism and individualism.

In this work I have intended to make connections between the treatment of “othered” people in Los Angeles from Spanish colonialism’s attacks on the Tongva to the current conditions in the city that make undocumented and partially documented Central American immigrants susceptible to hyper-policing and deportation. My intention has been to prove that these conditions are necessitated by the desires of white supremacist global capitalism. This project is a work in progress as there are countless nuances to be teased out, but I hope that my exploration has begun to uncover continuities of suffering under logics of white supremacy between communities that are often thought about in isolation. As the city continues to undergo massive transformation, the constant search for modernity creates the need for further monitoring of its urban population along lines of deserving and undeserving. My ultimate goal is to recognize that violence committed against racialized others is, and has always been intentional because settler colonialism and white supremacy are at the foundation of the establishment of the United States. Vargas provides us an outstanding point of reflection: “Until We realize the critique of the oppressor within, We are complicit in the reproduction of the power relations that sustain our present polities – power relations that are capitalist, objectifying, and that depend on the devaluing of human beings according to both market values and to ascriptions of race, gender, social class, sexuality, nationality, age, and others.”⁴² A serious and sustained analysis of the ways in which

everyday people's complicity, whether intentional or not, with systems of domination is necessary in order to begin to untangle the dynamic methods that capitalism uses to convert racialized people into disposable labor. If we take this challenge serious, we can realize our response to these complicated processes, relinquish our complicity, and undermine white supremacy. This ambitious goal only scratches the surface, but still disrupts and complicates issues around white supremacy and its ongoing legacies.

A challenge for Central Americans arriving to Los Angeles is to not be subsumed or enter into the Latina milieu and contribute to the ongoing settler colonization of the city. The story of Central American non-belonging does not have to be one of lament. Central American Studies and Maya K'iche scholar Floridalma Boj Lopez argues that a certain degree of non-belonging is necessary to challenge settler colonial politics and the settler imaginary.⁴³ Understanding the related challenges faced by differently situated Central Americans on their historic paths towards Los Angeles serves as an indictment to the projects of transnational settler colonialism, United States empire, and white supremacy writ large. Moments and movements of dynamic solidarity emerge when we make known the fraught history of Central America and its relationship to conquest and U.S. aggression. Memory has the power to rupture when it is collectively oriented and shaped by the revolutionary possibility of historically oppressed.

On April 7th, 2018 I attended a gathering of mostly Guatemalan, some Indigenous and others ladinos, in the heart of "Little Central America," MacArthur

Park/Westlake, slightly west of Downtown Los Angeles. There was a set of screenings of documentary films that captured the historic struggle and capricious resistance of Indigenous and working-class Guatemalans since the 1980s. A featured presenter and speaker was Mayan intellectual, writer, and overall tour de force, Dr. Irma Velasquez Nimatuj. She lectured on the power of memory. The professor posited that memory allows us to remember historical occurrences, ideas, sensations, emotions, concepts and whatever stimulus has happened in the past. Guatemalan community members in the audience were enthralled and eagerly shared their memories of the genocidal civil war. The audience testified that they had witnessed and experienced horrific violence and dislocations. A gentleman in the crowd recalled the men he knew having to flee to Mexico during the war. The opening up of space that day allowed Central Americans to confront the hauntings of the past. Collectively, people made space to listen, share, and heal. No one in the room talked about being or feeling “American.” If anything, the space reinforced the tension and trauma that the U.S. has inflicted on Central Americans. The condition of non-belonging is confronted by engaging in community and a politicized remembering. This dissertation has been an effort to map out the historic condition of Central American non-belonging across time and space. In doing so, I hope to contribute to further fissures and openings that connect Central Americans to the political, social, and economic struggles of other racialized populations around the world.

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² Claudia Jurmain and William McCrawley, *O, My Ancestor: Recognition and Renewal for the Gabrielino-Tongva People of the Los Angeles Area*. (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2009), xii.

³ Kelly Lytle-Hernandez, *City of Inmates: Conquest, Rebellion and the Rise of Human Caging in Los Angeles, 1771 – 1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 20.

⁴ Patrick Wolfe. "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native." *Journal of Genocide Research* 8 (December, 2006), 388.

⁵ Ibid, 388.

⁶ Scott Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 16.

⁷ Jurmain and McCrawley, xii.

⁸ Heather Valdez Singleton. "Surviving Urbanization: The Gabrieleno, 1850 – 1928." *Wicazo Sa Review* 19 (Autumn, 2004), 50.

⁹ Wolfe, 393.

¹⁰ Singleton, 50.

¹¹ Ibid, 52.

¹² Natalia Molina, *Fit To Be Citizens? Public Health and Race in Los Angeles, 1879 – 1939*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 18.

¹³ Lytle-Hernandez, 36.

¹⁴ Molina, 48.

¹⁵ George J. Sánchez, *Becoming Mexican American: Ethnicity, Culture and Identity in Chicano Los Angeles, 1900-1945* (Oxford University Press, 1993), 18-22.

¹⁶ Douglas Monroy, *Rebirth: Mexican Los Angeles from the Great Migration to the Great Depression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 14-15.

¹⁷ William Deverell, *Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 12.

¹⁸ Nicholas De Genova. "Migrant 'Illegality' and Deportability in Everyday Life," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 31 (2002): 422.

¹⁹ Ibid, 438.

²⁰ Lytle-Hernandez, 147.

²¹ Martin Velez Torres. "Indispensable Migrants: Mexican Workers and the Making of Twentieth-Century Los Angeles," in *Latino LA: Transformations, Communities, and Activism*, ed. Enrique C. Ochoa and Gilda L. Ochoa (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), 31-33.

²² David G. Gutierrez, *Walls and Mirrors: Mexican-Americans, Mexican Immigrants and the Politics of Ethnicity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 207-212.

²³ Edward Escobar. "The Dialectics of Repression: The Los Angeles Police Department and the Chicano Movement, 1968-1971," *The Journal of American History* 79 (March, 1993), 1490.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Andrea Smith, "Heteropatriarchy and the Three Pillars of White Supremacy: Rethinking Woman of Color Organizing," in *Color of Violence: The Incite! Anthology* by INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence (New York: South End Press, 2006), 68.

²⁶ Anthony Macias, *Mexican American Mojo: Popular Music, Dance, and Urban Culture in Los Angeles, 1935 -1968*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 5.

²⁷ Nicole Guidotti-Hernandez, *Unspeakable Violence: Remapping U.S. and Mexican national Imaginaries*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 5.

²⁸ Edward Escobar, *Race, Police, and the Making of a Political Identity: Mexican Americans and the Los Angeles Police Department, 1900-1945*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 12.

²⁹ Daniel Widener, *Black Arts West: Culture and Struggle in Postwar Los Angeles*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 32.

³⁰ Joao Costa Vargas, *Never Meant to Survive: Genocide and Utopias in Black Diaspora Communities*. (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 48.

³¹ Widener, 275-76.

³² Vargas, xx.

³³ Ibid, 62.

³⁴ Widener, 277-78.

³⁵ Suzanne Oboler. "The Politics of Labeling: Latino/a Cultural Identities of Self and Others." *Latin American Perspectives* 19 (Autumn, 1992): pp.18-36.

³⁶ This is one of the forms of "others" Oboler discussed in "The Politics of Labeling" article.

³⁷ Bernadette Beserra. "Negotiating Latinidade in Los Angeles: The Case of Brazilian Immigrants" in *Latino LA: Transformations, Communities, and Activism*, eds. Enrique C. Ochoa and Gilda L. Ochoa (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005), 178.

³⁸ Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz Chinchilla *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles*. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 42-43.

³⁹ Claudia Dorrington. "Central American Refugees in Los Angeles: Adjustment of Children and Families," in *Understanding Latino Families: Scholarship, Policy, and Practice*, ed. Ruth E. Zambrana (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 1995), 109.

⁴⁰ John Booth, Christina Wade & Thomas W. Walker, *Understanding Central America: Global Forces, Rebellion, and Change 5th edition*. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2010), 22.

⁴¹ Stuart Hall. "Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity," in *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, eds. David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen (London: Routledge, 1996), 435.

⁴² Vargas, xxi.

⁴³ Floridalma Boj Lopez. "Mobile Archives of Indigeneity: Building La Comunidad Ixim through Organizing in the Maya Diaspora." *Latino Studies* 15.2 (July 2017): 416.

Conclusion

In December of 2016, a month after being declared the President-elect of the United States, Donald Trump was interviewed for Time Magazine's Person of the Year cover story. "They come from Central America. They're tougher than any people you've ever met [...] They're killing and raping everybody out there. They're illegal. And they are finished [...] They slice them up, they carve their initials in the girl's forehead, O.K. What are we supposed to do? Be nice about it?"¹ With these words, Donald Trump introduced the United States to Central Americans as barbaric, racialized threats, with a taste for a depravity never-before-seen. The rhetoric employed by the Trump administration has served to justify punitive and violent measures of control, caging, and policing of migrant and racialized communities. A reign of terror has gripped historically marginalized citizens of the United States and has placed vulnerable and desperate immigrant and refugee communities in the crosshairs of the administration. This dissertation has been an effort to contextualize and situate the current moment of Central American crisis within the *longue durée* of history. Poor Central American women, children, LGBTQ, and men arriving at the U.S. border are the living legacies of centuries of exploitation, expulsion, and attempts at elimination in the Isthmus. A great deal of these many Central Americans detail the dangers they encountered and survived while crossing through Mexico as irregular migrants. And still, an unknown number of bodies lie somewhere throughout the territory, maybe in clandestine graves dug

up by Mexican civilians or migrant counterparts, or maybe in a random crevice of the Earth where they return to dust.

I began my foray into the field of Central American Studies as a son of a Guatemalan mother and Mexican father. Growing up in South Central Los Angeles, I witnessed and experienced the tensions that existed between Central American and Mexican youth on the playgrounds of our South Central schools. My intellectual curiosity and academic endeavors led me to want to understand why these vexed dynamics were playing out in my neighborhood. Concomitantly, I wondered why my childhood experiences looked so different from those displayed prominently on television series like *Full House* or *The Brady Bunch*. My dissertation demonstrates the way conquest, settler colonialism, and white supremacy shape space, power, and most importantly who counts as “human.” Central Americans and Mexicans, of varying racial and ethnic backgrounds, came to occupy a space that had been marked by the presence of African-Americans. My youth would never look like the youth on national television because I lived in a space inhabited by those populations who were understood as disposable, criminal, and incorrigible. Central Americans and Mexicans had parallel histories but saw each other through the lenses of history that created unreachable and unrealistic paradigms of belonging. And all of these experiences took place on stolen and occupied land.

After excavating deep in the recesses of history and the memories of Central Americans, it is clear that racialized beings across the world are not meant to belong in the realm of the protected, valued, and those deserving dignity and justice. The

violence, inequity, and misery that many of the historically poor in Central America have and continue to encounter and survive are the conditions of possibility for Central American nations to exist. Further, the evisceration of the precarious becomes an expectation. There is nothing exceptional about the denial of basic human rights of Central American transmigrants in Mexico and asylum-seekers in the United States. It is the logical conclusion of a divided world, to use the words of critical theorist Randall Williams. My dreary recollections in this work are meant to provoke anger, frustration, but most importantly reflection on the ways we continue to live in a world so violently unequal. The stories of racialized and marginalized Central Americans struggling to survive in the face of insurmountable odds reflect that we are still living with and through the past. The instruments that are meant to offer some semblance of protection, like juridical practices of human rights discourse are embedded deeply in conquest and imperialism. The law, in both the juridical and customary sense, enforces differential rules for settler elites and the wretched of the Earth. For the most vulnerable, laws, foreign policy, and aid from the United States, Mexico, and Central America has produced heaps of “mounting dead for whom [these edicts were] a useless means of defense or an accomplice to their murder.”²

Nevertheless, the most marginalized and abused of Central America have risen. They have organized, fought, and refused to accept their impending doom as destiny. Even now, as things look increasingly bleak, the spirit of Central American resistance sheds its light in the dark. Central American migrant parents who have

been locked and abused in detention centers that mirror prisons have staged hunger strikes to protest their inhumane treatment. Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous communities throughout the Isthmus continue to stand firmly within their own understandings of the world where they are not subjects of an inhumanity and continue to make claims on their lands and rights. Central Americans who are traversing the perilous passage of Mexico seek shelter and protection with strangers from the Isthmus along the way. They share food, laughs, and their expressions of humanity despite a world that renders them as outside of the hegemonic construct of the “human.”

Central American narratives of struggle for survival indict and should compel those who listen to question and destroy the very world we inhabit.

¹ Michael Scherer, "Person of the Year: Donald Trump," *Time*, December, 2016, <http://time.com/time-person-of-the-year-2016-donald-trump/>.

² Randall Williams, *The Divided World: Human Rights and its Violence* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xxxii.