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Cover Page Footnote
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ONE
A photograph. A two-year-old boy, his hair closely cropped in the style known as a Princeton, stands in the leaf-littered yard of a house in the United States. He is dressed in the traje of a Mayan Indian: an outfit of colorful Guatemalan textiles—all cotton, except for the gray and black woolen bag at his left side, its matching strap crossing diagonally over his right shoulder like a single bandolier. The child—myself—sports a shirt, vertically striped in tones of black, orange, purple, and yellow, more elaborate details, orange and geometrical, woven just above each elbow length cuff. The pants: white, with widely spaced red vertical stripes, a motif of red and blue parallelograms winging around the legs, identically colored human figures circling the legs just above. A bright yellow tasseled sash wrapped around the waist and a bigote de carbon, black penciled mustache, complete my first Halloween costume. The date is October 31, 1967, and my parents have posed me outside their house in Flint, Michigan. Oblivious of the lens, my gaze fixes on something to my left. I am smiling, or so I imagine, at the approach of other children after the obligatory offering of candy. I have anticipated this moment. My parents have coached me for this, the first Halloween that I am old enough to appreciate. My smile tells me so, as does the jack-o’-lantern grinning gap-toothed in the window. I am ready for this festival of sweets, the mostly (North) American holiday, done up as an archetype of my father’s country, the only Mayan in a crowd of monsters, angels, and figures stepped out of television cartoons.

DOS
Guatemala in 1967 found itself waist deep in a civil war that would rage until the 1990s. President Julio César Méndez Montenegro governed in name, but military leaders like Carlos Arana Osorio, the “jackal of Zacapa,” wielded actual political control. In theory, the army was fighting a Marxist insurrection. In reality, the generals were conducting a “scorched earth” campaign in the countryside, killing thousands of Indian peasants with little or no connection to the guerillas. In Guatemala City, death squads with appropriately ugly names like Mano Blanca and Ojo Por Ojo eliminated reformist politicians, union officials, and student leaders—anyone espousing land reform, human rights, even the most modest movements toward social justice and democracy. The dead in 1967 included the poet Otto René Castillo, tortured for five days then burned alive at the Zacapa army base. “Vámonos patria a caminar,” he had written.

“Let us walk forward together, my country / . . . I will drink your bitter cup, / I will go blind so you may see / . . . / I have to die so you may live.”
of Communist conspiracy in the banana republics. Washington, acting in behalf of the United Fruit Company—El Pulpo, an octopus feeding on Guatemalan bananas, free land, and the bodies of underpaid workers, an American corporation with tentacles in the U.S. State Department and C.I.A. (headed, respectively, by brothers John and Allen Dulles, U.F.C. lawyers and major stockholders)—mounted the first U.S. intervention in Latin America since the abandonment of Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy. On June 17, 1954, mercenaries and exiles crossed the border from Honduras, while planes bombed and strafed the cities. President Arbenz resigned on June 27. On departing with his family for exile in Mexico, Arbenz was humiliated at the airport by supporters of the new dictatorship, forced to strip on his way through customs.

My father was un niño bien, favored son of una buena familia—not one of the ruling families, but one with a name, a place in the small world that was the capital city at that time. Papito, mi abuelo, my grandfather, was a businessman, a friend of novelist Miguel Angel Asturias, Guatemala's first Nobel Laureate. (Mamita thought the writer crude, vulgar, maleducado; she did not want him in the house). His father died before Papito was born, in a farming accident that would suit the plot of a magical realist novel. Papito's grandfather, abuelo de mi abuelo, era Manuel Lisandro Barillas, Presidente de la República entre 1885 y 1892, coffee baron, and central figure in an attempted coup that ended in his assassination in Mexico City in 1907.

How does my father remain Guatemalan, even after a half century in los Estados Unidos? In his sense of decorum, for one thing. He appears so serious at the weddings of his children, his gravity could be mistaken for grief. He has never accustomed himself to the occasional extremes of informality in the U.S. I have seen him seethe at the consideration of beer-swilling yahoos at a Michigan state park. Which recalls his potential rage, thoroughly tamped now that he is un viejito, hard at work at the Mayan-inspired sculpture that he only started upon retiring as an architect. Such a sweet man, everyone who meets him observes, often aloud. You should have been there the day he found my sister's cigarettes.

His desire for consensus is Guatemalan, his tendency to deliberate, equivocate between possible beliefs and courses of action. He lives by dichos. "Poco a poco," he says. Little by little. In the 1980s I confronted him with reports of military brutality in Guatemala, accounts of massacres, rape, and torture garnered from sources other than our blind television and complicit newspaper. We happened to be in Guatemala visiting family on August 8, 1983, the day that the military overthrew Efrain Rios Montt, an evangelist who asserted that God had granted him absolute power. As before, one murderous regime replaced another. "Extremes are bad," my father said, assigning equal blame for the violence to both left and right. He can accept the results of the truth commission now that
the civil war is over (leaving over 200,000 dead) and a closer semblance of civilian
government has been installed in Guatemala: "las fuerzas del Estado y
grupos paramilitares afines fueron responsables del...92% de las ejecuciones
arbitrarias and el 91% de las desapariciones forzadas." Little by little we learn the
truth. Poco a poco...

His loyalty to family and country. The oath of U.S. citizenship moved him as
much as his marriage vows. In each he abandoned, in some respect, his native
land, no casual action for a man who
still insists Belize belongs to Guatemala, who pores over books on Mayan design,
reads histories: Bitter Fruit, A Beauty
That Hurts, Arévalo's The Shark and the
Sardines. His loyal silence about his own
father belies a history of conflict. I want
to know more, but he will only say that
Papito was a good man. His silences, his
absence in (not from) the house when I
was a child. It's the mother who teaches
the children how to speak, he said,
years ago, when I asked why I was not bilingual like my older brother,
breach, in truth, the silence between
us. He invented the saying; there is no
such dicho. Spanish amounted to a
secret language between my parents,
though the gist never escaped me, even
when my mother did not respond in
English. I knew when they were talking
about me, the peculiar middle son.
Now that I speak Spanish, and strokes
have marred my father's English, the
twin languages of Spanish and
Spanglish serve as our legal tender, our
quetzales, our precious pesos of exchange. I deposited the name "Dad"
at that bank. He's Papi to me now.

**CINCO**

I live through books, with books, by
books. As a North American, I consider
myself an Emersonian, admiring most
those Anglo-U.S. writers who labor in
the sage's golden fields: Thoreau,
Whitman, Dickinson, Roethke, and so
on. "[T]he good man should have
walked here," a character says in a
novel by Jim Harrison, thinking of
Emerson while describing northern
Michigan, "country beside which the
woodlots of New England are pale." Emerson of course knew that true love
of place is as cosmopolitan as it is local.
Summer in the northern hemisphere, he
wrote, allows us to "bask in the shining
hours of Florida and Cuba." To be
American[o] to embrace the Americas, I
also read the Latin Americans—Neruda,
Valenzuela, and others—and Latino/a
writers of the United States, the latest
revisers of the U.S. canon. Cuban-
Americans, stateside Puerto Ricans, as
well as Mexican-American giants like
Tomás Rivera, Ana Castillo, and Alberto
Rios inform my consciousness now.

Yet I am not Cubano, Boricua, or Chicano.
Despite our shared inheritances, which
are many, my biculturality is not precisely
that of these peoples, who benefit from
large communities in the U.S., and
distinguished literary traditions. Having
keenly felt the absence of Guatemalan-
American literature, I embrace it when it
finds me. Poets include Francisco Nájera,
exiled since 1965, who lives in New York
but publishes in Guatemala, and Rebecca
Balcárcel of Texas, who writes in an
imagistic English. Journalist Héctor
Tobar has contributed The Tattooed
Soldier, a suspenseful novel about a
homeless ladino in Los Angeles who
recognizes another Guatemalan exile:
the special forces soldier who murdered
his wife and child. Arturo Arias, prolific
novelist and scholar, also co-wrote the
screenplay for El Norte, a rare portrayal
of Guatemalan migration to the U.S.
Francisco Goldman's novels include The
Long Night of White Chickens, in which
the son of a U.S. father and Guatemalan
mother investigates the murder of his
adopted sister, an orphan who returned
to Guatemala to help the youngest
victims of state violence. Although
Goldman knows Guatemalan literature,
citing the Popul Vuh and Asturias at key
moments, his densely colored prose and
sense of justice remind me more of
Dickens, Cather, and Fitzgerald. He is, in
other words, thoroughly Latino.

two story collections, Remembering to
Say 'Mouth' or 'Face' and Naranjo the
Muse. These last two mix naturalism
with Mayan mythology, magical realism,
and postmodernist metafiction, stirring
in a potion distilled from the
phantasmagoria of Poe, Kafka, and
Borges. Born in Guatemala, son of a
distinguished philosopher, Omar grew up
in Michigan and Indiana, another reason
his life and work so haunt me. He too grew
up "in Anglo-American neighborhoods,
becoming agringado, seemingly losing
everything Guatemalan, even what color
[his] flesh had." He too found his
"Guatemalan, familial centered style of
speech," his sincerity, passion, and
duende stereotyped as "macho" and rejected by
a society dominated by "urban-Midwestern-
white English as Standard American," a
purportedly "'nurturing,' 'dipomatic,'
'warm,' 'self-effacing'" discourse that
values "the material world above the
transcendent, even as it pretends human
kindness," that "seeks to maintain the
status quo by shaming noncompliant
individuality and making difference
of opinion an egotism or aggression." (In
the Twin Cities they call it Minnesota Nice.) Born in the year of Arbenz's exile,
and passing in 1997, just after the peace
accords, Omar was an artist, a scholar, a
deep and ancient soul. I wish I had
known him.

**SIX**

The 2000 census counted 372,487
Guatemalan-Americans, though the
actual number is probably much higher.
Recent arrivals predominate, working-
class and indigenous. I would like
to identify with them, though my father's
family was ladino, mixed-blood and
middle-class. An older Guatemala
produced Papi, Guatemala before
genocide, the nation that gave rise to
Arbenz and democratic reform. Mine was
the only Guatemalan-American family I
ever heard of. No other suburban homes,
as far as I knew, featured weavings like
ours, wooden masks of el conquistador
Alvarado, a hollow gourd with a single
leather cord suspended inside, used to
produce a jaguar's growl. To be
Guatemalan-American, in my experience,
is to know solitude, distinction, an
unsettled dignidad.

At some point I stopped wishing to be
white, which as an adolescent I craved,
though I would not have articulated it
as such. School made me hypersensitive
to my appearance, to the palpable
difference of my name, mispronounced
by everyone, including myself. I yearned

Omar Castaneda. Photo provided by Rima Hassouniah.

But deserving a passage discrete is Omar
Castaneda, late conjurer of novels,
books for adolescents and children, and

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for invisibility, even extinction. To disappear, not from the library or my favorite teachers, but from the forces of regimentation; to blend into the creamy paint of textured cinder block walls, the gymnasium’s parquet floor and ubiquitous dust, or to seize my notebooks and record jackets and scramble out through a cafeteria window in search of coffee, an equally disaffected friend, a quiet grove of white pine.

Seeking the indigenous, the autochthonous, I took elementary Ojibwa as an undergraduate, wrote a Ph.D. dissertation on Midwestern pastoral writers, lectured on Frank Lloyd Wright in Ecuador, Bolivia, and Perú. To the aforementioned photo I must parallel another snapshot: Halloween 1970, age five in faux buckskin, feathered headband, toy bow and arrow. I cherished that ensemble. Something always draws me earthward, to the memory of place. My older brother, who looks like a big Irishman, despite his fluent Spanish, preferred a cowboy’s stance and guise. Are political valences prefigured here?

In Latin America, my attire never betrays the passport in my chest pocket. Lacking clunky athletic shoes and a baseball cap, I am taken for Italian, French, possibly a cosmopolitan from the capital, be that San José, Quito, or Buenos Aires. Then I open my mouth. Suddenly I become estadounidense, a gringo where the term does not simply refer to the fair-skinned and blue-eyed, or where the preferred expression is not yanqui. The notion of Latino identity will not float; I am norteamericano and that’s that. Which is fine. I prefer

Motown to merengue, cut my teeth on Jonathan apples and sweet corn, not plátanos del Caribe, gallo pinto de Costa Rica, dulce de leche rioplatense. I will never be chapín, as Guatemalans call themselves; there I remain gringo, as much Other as in Los Estados Unidos.

Yet when I leave the States, even stepping into Mexico at Nogales, my shoulders relax and my mind clears as I stroll the sidewalk in search of un cafecito. Part of me is more at home where people first inquire about my family, rather than ask what I “do.” Within the empire, I must continually assert that Latin America does, in fact, exist. South of Tucson and north of Cape Horn, engaged in la sobremesa, the leisurely after-dinner conversation over a table no one hurries to clear, I allude to Billie Holiday, Louis Sullivan, Leslie Marmon Silko, anything to summon the North American heart and defy the fist. This is my circumstance as a first-generation gringo chapín. Had my parents stayed in Guatemala, by now I would be a dead poet or a dead student activist. As it is, I survive as one ambassador of a conceptual nation spanning the Western Hemisphere, una nación mestiza, multilingual, las Américas sin fronteras ni ejércitos ni exiliados ni extranjeros.

Having married an Argentine, I find myself enamored of tango, asado, mate, Buenos Aires in sunshine or rain. Should fortune grant us children, they will speak two languages and bear Spanish names. William es un nombre inglés; I imagine a son named Joaquín David, Santiago José, or Francisco Agustin, un americano chapín, argentino, estadounidense, at once Central, South, and North American. As for Guatemala, that land of marimbas, blue volcanoes, the quetzal—the iridescent green bird that graces the cloud forest, lends its name to the currency, and adorns the flag (between a pair of nineteenth-century firearms)—it remains for me to reclaim, a half century after the fall of Arbenz separated us from easy consort. Guatemala, verde oscuro, incienso de copal, caminas a mi lado. Patria de mis padres, sabor de cilantro, lágrimas de la viuda, llevo granitos de tu tierra por donde voy. Tengo que vivir para que sobrevivas en mí.

William Barillas, an assistant professor of English at the University of Wisconsin - La Crosse, has also taught in Costa Rica and Ecuador. His essays, interviews, and poems have appeared in Bloomsbury Review, American Studies, and other publications. Contact him at barillas.will@uwlaex.edu

Family pictures courtesy of Caroline Barillas.

REFERENCES


