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Gringo Chapín: Seven Perspectives on Being Guatemalan-American

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.S. 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.

But that was nothing to me at age two-going-on-three, safely at play in Michigan. My parents, padre guatemalteco and gringa Mom, had decided a decade before to make a life in her country rather than his. According to my mother, she knew she wanted to marry my father, whom she first met at a student dance in Detroit in 1946, on news of the coup in 1954. He had returned to Guatemala after college, to his family, to work, to his beloved car, that olive-green MG-TC of family lore. If she was that worried about him, a year after visiting him in Guatemala, taking in the volcanoes, coffee plantations, and old colonial capital from the passenger seat of that car, it must, she realized, be love.

Their courtship coincided with "Spring in Guatemala," a period of unprecedented reform that lasted from 1945 to 1954. Inspired by the New Deal and the Allied defeat of fascism, presidents Arévalo and Arbenz ended forced labor in the countryside, provided remote villages with water and medicine, and favored schools in the national budget. They defended the right of peasants, workers, and students to organize, and their own entitlement as elected executives to act in Guatemala's best interest. This put them at odds with the military, the church, and the wealthiest landowning families, but most crucially, with U.S. corporations and their right-wing allies. When Arbenz enacted land reforms, expropriating uncultivated properties—with compensation—for distribution to peasants, the New York media machine, like something out of a Frank Capra movie, printed the legend of the United States being the Capital of the World.

My father passed through that same airport two months later, though fortunately extended the usual dignities, like remaining dressed on his way to the plane. He had reconsidered living in the United States, at least temporarily, after June 21, a day that could have been his last. He was driving that olive-green MG, a familiar sight around Guatemala City, headed to a construction site (he moonlighted building houses while working as a civil engineer at Obras Públicas). Passing La Aurora airport, he observed a plane diving in an obviously aggressive formation. (The pilot, an ex-U.S. Marine, meant to destroy oil tanks.) The plane’s trajectory indicated a pass immediately above my father’s location. Survival instinct engaged, pulse beating wildly at wrists and temples, he quickly swerved behind the garden wall of a nearby house. The last shells slammed into the pavement, precisely where my father had been about to drive.

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 inconsideration 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 y 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 ponders over books on Mayan design, reads histories: Bitter Fruit, A Beauty That Hurts, Arevalo’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, broaching, 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. “The 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 Ríos inform my consciousness now.

Yet I am not Cubano, Boricua, or Chicano. Despite our shared inheritances, which are many, my biculturalism 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 Najera, 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. Francis Ford Coppola’s novels include The Long Night of White Chickens, in which the son of an 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 Popol 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 phantasmas 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, familialcentric 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,’ ‘dramatic,’ ‘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 egoism 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 Guatemala-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 Guatemala-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 Castañeda. Photo provided by Rima Hassounah.
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 Peru. 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?

 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 cafeíto. 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 charín. 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.

In Latin America, my attire never betrays the passport in my chest pocket. Lacking chunky 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 William Barillas. 1962

William Barillas in Costa Rica. 1991

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 charín, as Guatemalans call themselves; there I remain gringo, as much Other as in Los Estados Unidos.

REFERENCES


Agustín, 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.

Family pictures courtesy of Caroline Barillas.