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Central American-Americans in the Second Decade of the Twenty-First Century: Old Scars, New Traumas, Disempowering Travails

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Abstract
This paper analyzes the changing effects of the Central American migration in the first decade of the 21st century. It argues that after 9/11, security conditions at the border gradually became tighter. Despite immigration into the US in massive numbers, because the Central American post-war period became marked by attacks, robberies, and kidnappings for ransom, regardless of social status. Thus, illegal immigrants kept crossing the Mexico and US borders, despite the fact that safety conditions for passage through Mexico became harrower, until repressive measures against them were implemented in the US with the launching of the Postville Raid in 2008. The article proceeds to analyze three key components that marked the 2000s for Central American immigrants: 1) “the crossing” of the 3,000-mile long journey from the isthmus to the US border; 2) military service in the Middle East for those with legal resident status; and, 3) the daily risk of living without legal papers in the US in an increasingly hostile environment. Ultimately the paper places these experiences within what Aníbal Quijano has called the “coloniality of power” deployed to move thinking beyond Western and Eurocentric conceptualizations, to provide a new way of dealing critically with the Central American-American diasporic experience.

The question posed in this article, “where are Central American-Americans going in the second decade of the twenty-first century?” would appear at a primary level to be a simple question. After all, Central America is no longer contained in a small collection of nation-states “over there,” south of Mexico, but is, increasingly, also “over here,” in the US. Central America is both a real site and a sight, a representation of a place that has gained visibility and significance in the US though discourses, images and other cultural productions since the 1980s, and Central-American Americans have followed a similar process in the first decade of the twenty-first century.1

As has already been endlessly documented by countless books and articles, the massive flow of Central American immigrants to the United States was a direct result of the brutality of the Central American civil wars of the 1980s, and of the toll they extracted on peasant communities. As armies advanced destroying village after village and massacring its occupants, thousands of refugees, primarily from El Salvador and Guatemala, seeking safety for themselves and their children, fled to Mexico. Some remained there in U.N.-sponsored refugee camps, but many more continued on to the United States and Canada. Anti-Sandinista Nicaraguans also fled from their country, flying primarily to Miami and the Florida area.

The earliest US Central American migrations can be traced to the mid-1850s California gold rush, as was the case for other Latin American migrants like Chileans and Peruvians. By the early 1910s and 1920s, there were increasing numbers of Central Americans migrating to and establishing communities in places like San Francisco and New Orleans, headquarters of the infamous United Fruit Company that treated the entire region as an enclave economy. But the great migration of Central Americans, of course, occurred during the last three decades of the twentieth century. The 1980s civil conflict created what Nora Hamilton and Norma Stoltz-Chinchilla have conceived as a model in which Central Americans “differ from many other immigrant groups . . . in that they are neither strictly economic migrants nor accepted as refugees, but have the characteristics of both” (2).

Ostensibly, after the civil wars of the 1980s that displaced hundreds of thousands from their home countries, Nicaragua changed course when the Sandinistas lost the presidential election in 1990. Peace was signed in El Salvador in 1992, the same year that the Los Angeles riots took place, and in Guatemala in 1996. This implied, in principle, a process of social reconciliation, reconstruction, and development. Nevertheless, the peace dividend never took place. The arrival of peace did end military combat and state violence in the region, as guerrillas turned their weapons in and formed legal political parties. But the much-promised international aid never materialized in sufficient quantity. What was expected to be a massive Marshall-like plan to fully modernize these nations to uproot social inequalities became only a trickle that dwindled to almost nothing after the downward turn of the economy in 2000. The most delinquent country in terms of economic aid was the United States. Despite President Clinton’s apologies to the populations of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua in 1997, when he visited the region, the US Congress only approved negligible aid to them in the post-war period. As a result, the actual effect of the post-war was one of little economic growth, massive unemployment (officially recorded at 50% in both Guatemala and El Salvador, but most likely higher in both countries), and the gradual emergence of a non-regulated parallel power to...
the state produced by criminal gangs and drug cartels. The gangs gained muscle, wealth, and prestige, as unemployed youngsters and immigrants deported from the United States, most of them members of either Mara Salvatrucha or 18th Street Gang (Mara 18), gangs originally formed in the streets of Los Angeles by young, alienated youth of Central American origin, joined their ranks. These last two factors were direct consequences of the United States reneging on most promises made prior to the signing of the peace treaties after the election of George W. Bush in 2000.

After 9/11, security conditions at the border gradually became tighter. Despite this, immigrants continued to enter the US in massive numbers. Nonetheless, safety conditions for the passage through Mexico became harsher. A corridor running from Colombia to the United States that crosses the entire Central American isthmus to transport cocaine into the US had been complicating matters since the late 1980s. This passageway became the object of dispute by competing drug cartels in the first decade of the present century, exposing burdensome transnational anxieties on violence, public safety, government surveillance, and the implications of repressive anti-gang policies. In the so-called “Northern Triangle” of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras), drug cartels gained a foothold in the first decade of the 21st century as well. They became entrenched in government, recruited important segments of the army and police to their ranks, and created a parallel power, more powerful than forces deployed to combat them.

The lack of economic opportunity, combined with the massive amount of unemployed soldiers, including known torturers and other criminals who implemented counter-insurgency measures in these countries, as post-war armies were reduced in size and military budgets much reduced, led to a rapid rise in banditry, drug violence, and street crime. This unexpected factor meant that instead of enjoying greater safety as a blissful consequence of the end of the war, most Salvadoran and Guatemalan citizens were exposed to the greatest crime wave in their history, with the added caveat that neither individual citizens nor governmental institutions had any control over these mobile, translocal, transnational groups. Within a short period of time most social sectors lost faith in their state’s capacity to control these criminal elements and began to arm themselves, paying for private security, or endorsing draconian measures to eliminate them, even when they trampled hard-won civil liberties. Shootings became an everyday occurrence, even in elite restaurants and malls. Imprisoned criminals often enjoyed a high standard of living while in jail, and continued to direct their criminal activities from the inside with the aid of cellphones, Internet and other technological equipment.

Thus, the Central American post-war period became marked by attacks, robberies, and kidnappings for ransom, regardless of social status, political ideas, ideological stand, or religious belief. Express kidnappings—those where small sums are paid in a matter of hours upon news of an individual’s abduction—became common, even among the poor. Robberies in city buses and all modes of public transportation, often used only by the poorer sectors of society, became equally common.

These conditions were not uniquely Central American. Colombia had undergone a similar experience in the wake of the booming of the cocaine trade in the 1990s, and Mexico is undergoing a similar process since the middle of the first decade of this century. Still, for those with nothing to lose, the fact that conditions turned for the worst after the signing of the Central American peace treaties became a stimulus for migration. As a result, Central Americans flowed into the US in large numbers at least until 2008, when the Great Recession turned the immigrant tide around, and the great raid in Postville in Iowa took place.

The scars of this nightmarish history remain engraved in the Central American-American population, even if the 1980s civil war is no longer a suppurating open wound. It is still, nevertheless, a fearsome memory. Especially in the context of the turn the US has taken immigration-wise, since the beginning of the Great Recession. Indeed, war trauma has been now substituted by newer traumas, such as “the crossing” of the 3,000-mile long journey from the isthmus to the US border, military service in the Middle East for those with legal resident status, or, the daily risk of living without legal papers in the US in an increasingly hostile environment. We will emphasize these three elements in the analysis that follows. We will then place these experiences within what Aníbal Quijano has called the “coloniality of power” deployed to move thinking beyond Western and Eurocentric conceptualizations. This will provide a new way of dealing critically with the Central American-American diasporic experience, as we articulate it within the framework of Latinoness.

CENTRAL AMERICAN-AMERICANS IN THE US

Particularly in the current political context, both nationally and more specifically for Latino/as in this country, the Central American population’s experience at the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century is of primary importance. This is so given the obvious growth, and consequent visibility and significance of Central Americans in both the US as a whole, and among Latino/as. Salvadorans are today the 6th largest immigrant group in the US, and the fourth largest Latino/a group in the country. Indigenous Guatemalan Mayas are present in new destination areas and regions such as Iowa, where the Postville raid took place in 2008, or the South, where indigenous Mayas sparked a strike and a unionizing campaign at Case Farms, a poultry plant. Thus, it can no longer be denied that Central Americans are making their presence felt within the US and Latino/a landscape at the end of this first decade of the 21st century. Far from presenting Central American-Americans as a complete
and coherent terrain, I aim to provide a blueprint for the present, as well as explore how Central American-Americans are gradually becoming another integral component of Latinoness.

Entering the country primarily through California, Arizona, and Texas, this population fanned out throughout the vast North American territory, including Mexico and Canada, where major pockets of Central Americans reside. The bulk of US Central American migrants remain in California and Texas, with Los Angeles and Houston serving as dominant hubs. Despite this, significant Central American pockets are present, and indeed, visible in all US cities. By now it is well-known that the Adams-Morgan neighborhood of Washington D.C. has become a “little El Salvador.” The Pico-Union district of Los Angeles has been officially designated as “Little Central America.”

Central American migrants either worked the urban service economies, or followed agricultural jobs and manufacturing throughout the US. The Postville Raid, of which more will be said in the section on living without legal papers in the US, made visible the magnitude of Central American migration to northeastern Iowa. This heavily militarized roundup by the US Customs and Immigration Enforcement agency (ICE) became this nation’s largest single immigration operation in 2008. Hundreds of ICE agents stepped into Agriprocessors’ kosher meat processing plant and detained 389 undocumented workers. Most of them were of Guatemalan Maya origin. Los Angeles Times reporter Hector Tobar’s book Translation Nation documents Central American-American immigrant communities emerging in unexpected places (Alabama, Georgia, Nebraska). All of them were formed by immigrants arriving where jobs could be had. Often, they were bused 6 or 7 hours to these sites specifically searching for cheap, illegal labor. Tobar went undercover and worked in some of them himself, making friends and interviewing his co-workers, or those sharing a dormitory trailer with him. This was the case in Anniston, Alabama, where he traveled by bus from Eagle Pass, Texas, to do swing-shift work dismembering chickens at a food processing plant. Other scholars have documented Central American-Americans in the Eastern seaboard, the Sun Belt, and Florida. This population helped rebuild New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, and resided in most US rural areas until 2008’s economic collapse.

The commonality of Central American migrants’ experiences is traced back to the massive exodus of the 1980s. This was previously documented in my essay, “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power, and Representation in the US Latino World,” published in the 2003 premiere issue of Latino Studies, and the ensuing dialogue between Arias and Milian on this analytical topic (2003: 168–187). I explained this phenomenon as an “originary terror,” a result of the limit-experience that witnessing and surviving massacres constituted for many immigrants fleeing the 1980s civil wars, and with the problematic of thinking of themselves as a “disposable” population. In the sections that follow I will concentrate, as previously indicated, on elements marking the Central American-American experience of the last decade.

“THE CROSSING”

Central American migrants literally risk their life in their efforts to cross Mexico and try to enter the US. Uli Stelzner’s film Assaulted Dream (2006), by way of example, documents how, by crossing the Northern border of Guatemala into Mexico, these immigrants embark on one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world. In Tapachula, a border town in the south of Mexico, these immigrants embark on one of the most dangerous migration routes in the world. In Tapachula, a border town in the south of Mexico, migrants try to jump on top of freight trains, riding on top to the US-border. But very few manage to complete the 3,000 mile trip. From the beginning of their journey they often get robbed by their own coyotes (smugglers), get mugged by youth gangs, or fall prey to corrupt border officials. Women are often raped. Those who succeed in climbing to the top of the train often fall exhausted from the roof, get kicked out while asleep so as to steal their belongings, or get arrested in large-scale raids by the Mexican migration police and army, who jail them for days, take whatever money or valuables they have left, and then deport them to their countries of origin. Stelzner accompanied the migrants in the train stations during their grueling wait for “the beast”, as they name the trains that haul them, because of the risk involved in riding them. He filmed assaults by armed border
units and succeeded to infiltrate the nearby deportation prison. He met women, men and children, who recounted the traumatic experiences of their odyssey, spending days in a miserable hostel where people lived, some crippled by the train and/or by muggers. Most of them had already been in the US, had been expelled, and were attempting to return. We thus see a cycle that goes from survival of “the crossing,” to its repression via being expelled from the country, to the return. If they got away the first time “apparently unharmed,” by the time of a second, or third, or fourth try, they can no longer “forget” its danger that can hence never be fully known, but they are forced to come to terms with the experience itself. The trauma was already present the first time around, but only in latency. Thus, they “forget” how miraculous it was to succeed. Psychologically they cannot do this once they attempt it a second time. As Caruth argues:

If return is displaced by trauma, then, this is significant insofar as its leaving—the space of unconsciousness—is, paradoxically, precisely what presents the event in its literality. For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence. (17-18)

Virtually covering the same story despite its fictional nature, a feature film, Sin Nombre (2009), written and directed by Cary Joji Fukunaga and produced by well-known Mexican actors Diego Luna and Gael García Bernal, became a successful independent film in 2009, winning the Sundance Film Festival, the Stockholm International Film Festival and the Austin Film Critics Association Award, among others. The poster title is written Sin nomBre, with an emphasis on the “M,” to indicate the connection to the Mara Salvatrucha gang. The film traces the story of a Honduran family consisting of a teenage girl, Sayra, her father, and her uncle, on their way to join relatives in New Jersey. They stow away on a passing train at La Bombilla, a gathering spot for immigrants, and ride on the train's top. Members of the Mara Salvatrucha also climb to the train's top, rob immigrants of their money, and el Mago, the gang leader, tries to rape Sayra. Casper, another member of the Mara whose girlfriend was killed by the gang leader, intervenes by killing him. He nevertheless allows Smiley, the third member, a young boy whom he himself had initiated into the Mara, to go. Smiley goes back to the gang and reports the leader’s death. The new gang leader accuses Smiley of collusion, to which Smiley protests. He begs to be sent to kill Casper to prove his loyalty. Smiley travels north to get the help of the local gang members. Casper continues the trip on the train, and befriends Sayra. He decides at one point to leave the train while the others are sleeping because he knows he’s the target of the Mara. However, Sayra follows him. Her father and uncle continue the journey until the train is apprehended by immigration officers.

Traveling north, Casper and Sayra barely escape a trap laid for them and enter an immigrant shelter, where Sayra sees a familiar face. She is informed that her father died when he fell from the train to avoid getting arrested, and her uncle has been caught. The couple finally reaches the US border, the Rio Grande. While Sayra is crossing, Smiley finally catches up with Casper and shoots him. The rest of the gang proceeds to empty their magazines and clips into Casper, while Sayra watches in shock from a raft approaching the US side. The closing scenes show Sayra phoning her father’s new family from outside a US mall, her uncle setting off on another attempt to cross the border, and Smiley getting his lip tattooed as a sign of his loyalty to the gang.

Sin Nombre begins with a medium shot. Casper is sitting in a chair in his cubbyhole in Tapachula. He then stands up. The camera focuses on his back as he walks out shirtless into an orange, yellow and red fantasy-fall image that evokes his daydreaming of being in the northern US. His back has a huge tattoo: the initials MS, for Mara Salvatrucha. When he turns his head, we see a tear tattooed in the corner of his eye, which represented a dead gang member, and names tattooed in his neck, the gang symbolism of mourning for those he has killed. We then find out he's going to pick up Benito, nearly a child, for his rite of passage; he is going to be kicked nearly to death by all members of the gang. The camera shifts to a close-up of the gang’s leader, el Mago (the Magician). His face looks at first glance like the painted face of a pre-Hispanic shaman about to go to war. But, upon closer observation, we see that he, too, has the letters MS tattooed in his face. Three other man stand slightly behind him. All are shirtless and have their chests full of tattoos. A yellow umbrella to the right belongs to a girlfriend of one of the gang members. The image could easily be that of the high priest in Mel Gibson's Apocalypto (2006), but it is a contemporary urban tribe what we are witnessing here, not pre-Hispanic Mayas. The scene of kicking Benito nearly to death is one of the most violent scenes ever filmed. It is the first of a series of shocking and unexpected limit-experience occurrences in the film that attest to their endless impact on Central American lives throughout “the crossing,” preserving a deterritorialized communal trauma marking social behavior, even when national identities are disintegrating, behavioral patterns emotional and cultural spheres. At least a dozen men punch and kick him during 13 long seconds, while their girlfriends stand passively under umbrellas to protect themselves from the sun, in an ordinary dirt street of the town with passers-by and open businesses. An ordinary day in the Tropics. In the end, el Mago kisses him on the head and Benito smiles. El Mago then calls him a “cipote,” betraying his Salvadoran origin despite the gang’s residence in Tapachula, and baptizes him as Smiley, because he smiled after such a cruel beating.

Introducing this filmic narrative through these problems, the film opens up the question of the relationship between history, violence, masculinities, racialization and the body.
If we emphasize details of this film, it is because images such as the one described above convey a certain degree of incomprehensibility. They are like gaps in speech. These images communicate what the subject cannot say, yet haunt him/her. What haunts many Central American-Americans is not just the reality of this daily violence, but the fact that the reasons for it remain widely misunderstood and have been silenced by those who endured it. Important in this aspect are both Central American-American gangs, Mara Salvatrucha and the 18th Street gang.

Initially as a mechanism of self-defense copied from rural villages in war-torn El Salvador, desperate teen-agers formed the Mara Salvatrucha in the Pico-Union area of Los Angeles. The latter included only Salvadorans, at least initially, and was formed to defend themselves from existing Mexican-American gangs (Rodriguez, 2005). Many hybrid subjectivities were left in the limbo of no longer being Central American, but not being accepted by Mexicans either. The latter two groups conflated defensively in the 18th Street gang, originally Chicano, but accepting of “cross over” Salvadorans, Hondurans and Guatemalans, who joined for still one more defensive move, this time to defend themselves against the Mara Salvatrucha (Rodriguez, 2005).

By the beginning of this century, the Mara Salvatrucha was already a transnational gang operating in the cultural corridor extending south to north from Panama to California, with a true globalizing emblematic of a regional power. After 9/11, it operated in most US cities, with a significant presence in the New York area, Washington D.C., Newark, Miami, and Texas (Thompson 2004:1; López, Connell, and Kraul, 2005:1). Mara Salvatrucha has been reported to operate in 31 states, with 100,000 members (Rodriguez, 2005).

The post-9/11 syndrome brought the gang’s attention to the newly-created Office of Homeland Security. Soon, the latter was describing the gang as the fastest-growing and most violent in the country, and hysterical comments even began mentioning possible ties to Al-Qaeda. “Mara Salvatrucha is not a gang, it’s an army,” said Officer Frank Flores, a gang expert with the Los Angeles Police Department, as quoted in the New York Times (Thompson, 2004). He added: “Within the United States, these guys pose as much a threat to the well-being of ordinary citizens as any foreign terrorist group.” Just like the specter of Communism was associated with yesterday’s national liberation movements, the specter of terrorism is presently associated with Central American gang members. For young men of Central American origin, the transition from modernity to postmodernity, then to globalization, might very well be just the transition of labels along a structural continuum. At the same time, it is mostly members of the Mara Salvatrucha, in association with drug cartels such as Los Zetas, who primarily target immigrants during “the crossing.”

Like Assaulted Dream and Sin Nombre, the last ten years have been marked by the immense filmic archive on the abject nature of “the crossing,” the long trajectory across Mexico from its southern border to its northern one. Suffice to search YouTube videos on “crossing the border illegally” to obtain more than 191 results, most of which have had more than 20,000 views. If becoming war refugees marked the 1980s immigrants, branded by the double trauma of both originary terror and cultural displacement, “the crossing” has played an analogous role in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Perhaps no news has been more horrific than the one in August 2010 near the town of San Fernando, Tamaulipas, when Los Zetas (a drug cartel founded by a small group of Mexican Army Special Forces deserters that now includes corrupt former federal, state, and local police officers as well as ex-Kaibiles, Guatemalan Special Forces) kidnapped over 250 immigrants, torturing them, raping them, and holding them for ransom in a stash house. The immigrants were forced to give the telephone numbers of relatives in the United States or back home. They were required in turn to transfer ransom payments to the abductors. One managed to flee and contact the Mexican Army. He reported that 65 were massacred after they refused to work as Zetas assassins and get paid $2,000 a month. Photos by local media showed piles of corpses, some of them blindfolded with their hands tied behind their back, slumped on top of each other along the cinderblock walls of an abandoned warehouse. In an April 2011 report, Amnesty International called the plight of tens of thousands of mainly Central American migrants crossing Mexico for the US “one of the most dangerous in the world” and stated that, every year, an untold number of migrants disappear without a trace:

An estimated six out of 10 migrant women and girls experience sexual violence, allegedly prompting some people smugglers to demand that women receive contraceptive injections ahead of the journey, to avoid them falling pregnant as a result of rape.

The violence is perpetrated by Mexican authorities as well.
After walking for hours, the group was assaulted by armed men that raped Veronica and killed at least one other migrant. Due to efforts by local activists, two Federal Police were later captured and accused by the migrants of these crimes, but no action was taken against them by Mexican authorities.

In its most recent study, Mexico’s National Human Rights Commission said that at least 11,333 Central American migrants were kidnapped in Mexico during a six-month span of 2010. However, its figures were based on the number of reports it received between September 2008 and February 2009. The volume of deaths, disappearances and kidnappings has taken a turn for the worse since mid-2010. Indeed, as this was being written, news came out that on April 7, 2011, 59 new corpses were discovered in a “narcofosa” (narco-ditch) in San Fernando, Tamaulipas, in the same property, if not the exact same place, where previous corpses were found in both August and October 2010.

Thus, whereas the specific nature of trauma is different nowadays for present-day Central American immigrants to the US than it was in the 1980s and early 1990s, and its source varies as well, its occurrence is still one marking this group as different from most other Latinos in the US (with the possible exception of recent Mexican immigrants who themselves suffer similar trauma in the border area prior to crossing into the US, yet do not have to endure “the crossing). Their story is not based on straightforward models of immigration patterns to this country. It is nevertheless one of suffering, an injurious repetition of horrific limit-experiences, a profound and persistent discontinuity in their travels prior to crossing the border, and an ensuing trauma that continues to mark them even if they succeed in crossing. Indeed, trauma, by its very nature, does not dissipate should they actually succeed in becoming US citizens. The unarticulated implications of trauma among this segment of the population within the US itself, has never truly been acknowledged. It is an event “not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivors” in Caruth’s words. As she states, trauma “is not locatable” in any particular event of an individual’s past, “but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature ...returns to haunt the survivor later on.” The historical effect of trauma is ultimately the inscription of Central American-Americans in a history always bound to the imperial history of the US.

MILITARY SERVICE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Within this same framework we have to locate a new experience of war for Central American-Americans, though this time it is not in their originary isthmus: it is the war in the Middle East, lived by a considerable number of members of the 1.5 Central American-American generation. As has been traditional in the US throughout the twentieth century, joining the military has functioned as a short-cut to obtaining citizenship and legal status. Following this trodden path, many paper-less Central American-Americans volunteered to join the US Armed Forces since at least the 1990s. This phenomenon, mainly invisible for the majority of Americans, made headlines when the first soldier to die in Iraq was a Central American-American whose family, residing in California, remained paper-less. Lance Cpl. José Gutiérrez, age 22, from Hawthorne, California, was killed in combat in southern Iraq on March 21, 2003, near Umm Qasr. Born in Guatemala, Gutiérrez held permanent US resident status, which he obtained in 1999. At 14, with his parents dead, Gutiérrez followed the path of 700,000 of his countrymen to California. He made the 2,000-mile journey from Guatemala City without entry papers. Much like Assaulted Dream and Sin Nombre, he hopped 14 freight trains to get through Mexico. US immigration authorities detained him. Gutiérrez was made a ward of Los Angeles Juvenile Court, and was then placed in a series of group homes and foster families. He learned English and finished high school in Lomita. When he joined the Marines, he was assigned to the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division in Camp Pendleton. After his death, his body was returned to Guatemala to be buried. The headline in The Huffington Post stated, “Lance Cpl. Jose Gutierrez—Illegal Immigrant, American Hero.”

When the US casualty list in Iraq hit 4,000 in 2008, Ray Suarez did a profile of them on PBS. According to his estimates, 11% of them, or approximately 440, were of Latino origin. The numbers were not classified by national origin in the Department of Defense, but it is estimated that approximately 10 to 12% of them were Central American-Americans. According to the Population Reference Bureau, the past 20 years have witnessed dramatic increases in the percentage of Latinos (of both sexes) among active duty enlisted personnel. Though they also acknowledge that it is hard to know exact numbers because the Department of Defense did not use to keep separate categories of ethnicity and race until 2003, they estimate that, as of September 2006, Latino men accounted for 11 percent of all enlisted men and Latino women were 12 percent of enlisted women. The Hispanic share of commissioned officers was much lower: 4.8 percent for men and 5.3 percent for women. Latinos’ representation has been highest in the Marine Corps and lowest in the Air Force. In 2004, nearly 15 percent of US Marine Corps enlisted personnel were
Latino representation in the Navy was also noted as rising. By September 2006, they constituted 14 percent of Navy enlisted personnel, about the same as in the Marine Corps that year. According to the US Department of Defense, as of 30 September 2010, 1,430,895 people are on active duty in the military with an additional 848,000 people in the seven reserve components. This means that approximately 200,000 Latinos and Latinas are presently involved in the US Armed Forces. According to the most recent data, Central American-Americans constitute 8.6% of the Latino population in the US. Extrapolating these figures, we can guess that approximately 17,200 Central American-Americans are members of the US Armed Forces. At a conservative average of 4 persons per household, we can easily presume that close to 70,000 Central American-Americans are, or have been, impacted by the consequences of having a family member in the Middle East. The families of all returning soldiers have to deal with the symptoms of combat stress: flashbacks, inability to relax or relate, restless nights and more, and with the readjustment of their return. As we already know, post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD, is an often-debilitating mental condition that can produce a range of unwanted emotional responses to the trauma of combat. It can emerge in weeks, months or even years later. If left untreated, it can severely affect the lives not only of veterans, but their families as well. Troubled sleep, irritability, anger, poor concentration, hyper-vigilance and exaggerated responses are often symptoms.

PTSD has even made it to mainstream newspapers. USA Today reported how Jesus Bocanegra, an Army infantry scout for units that pursued Saddam Hussein in his hometown of Tikrit, was diagnosed with PTSD. According to the paper, he “had real bad flashbacks. I couldn’t control them. I saw the murder of children, women. It was just horrible for anyone to experience.” Bocanegra recalled participating in Apache helicopter strikes on a house by the Tigris River where he had seen crates of enemy ammunition carried in:

“When the gunfire ended, there was silence. But then children’s cries and screams drifted from the destroyed home, he says. “I didn’t know there were kids there,” he says. “Those screams are the most horrible thing you can hear.”

The paper added that individuals may feel depression, detachment or estrangement, guilt, intense anxiety and panic, and other negative emotions. They often feel they have little in common with civilian peers; issues that concern friends and family seem trivial after combat. The paper added that when Bocanegra returned home, his friends threw a homecoming party for him, and he got arrested for drunken driving on the way home.

War trauma in Iraq and Afghanistan has become a staple. Raymond Monsour Scurfield, a professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Southern Mississippi-Gulf Coast who is a Vietnam veteran and worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs for 25 years and directed PTSD mental health programs in a number of locations, published a major book on the topic, War Trauma: Lessons Unlearned, From Vietnam to Iraq (2006), that not only reveals the psychiatric impact of war on soldiers and veterans, but has opened a trend in this regard. Combat Stress Injury: Theory, Research, and Management edited by Charles R. Figley and William P. Nash, followed. Afterwards there was a deluge of books on the topic. Routledge opened a Psychosocial Stress Series, the topic has become both fashionable and fairly mainstream, to the point that the US Army, which resisted accepting the existence of PTSD, has acknowledged it and began treating veterans for its effects.

RAIDING CENTRAL AMERICAN-AMERICANS IN THE WORKPLACE

War is not, however, the only trauma suffered by Central American-Americans in the last decade. abUSed: The Postville Raid (2010), begins with the camera offering a glance of the peaceful town in the northeastern corner of Iowa, as captions tell us that it is “a town of 2,000, with no traffic lights,” while the song, “This land is my land” plays in the background. It then cuts to the news report of the plant’s raid, with helicopters coming down as if this bucolic town were a war zone in the Middle East, or in 1980s Central America. Miriam Schechter describes how agents entered the plant, guns drawn, and yelled “you have to come with us!” Witnesses begin describing what happened. According to Kerris Dillon, a high school teacher, workers were lined up on their knees “like dogs, and they were chained”. It was “a sea of black, all you saw was bullet-proof vests and black hoods” according to her.

“There were state police with rifles, there were county police,” said Pastor Steve Brackett of the Postville Lutheran Church. Rosa Zamora, one of those arrested and sent home with a GPS bracelet, said she had just been working for 10 minutes when the supervisor yelled “La Migra!” Everyone started running in all directions. Laura Castillo said she was threatened with a baton and a gun, and told she’d be shot if she ran. She said she told the agent, “I’m not going to run, but I don’t want you to touch me.” He just said, “Shut your trap!” Rosana Mejia also claimed they pointed a gun at her while yelling not to move. She just cried and feared she would never see her daughter again. María López claims she saw when they grabbed a young man by the hair and sat him down by pulling his hair. “I saw when they hit him. They hit those who tried to escape.” When a panicked woman was able to escape and run, a female ICE agent yelled at her “Stop, you whore! Stop, you bitch!”

David Vásquez, the campus pastor of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, as captions tell us that it is “a town of 2,000, with no traffic lights,” while the song, “This land is my land” plays in the background. It then cuts to the news report of the plant’s raid, with helicopters coming down as if this bucolic town were a war zone in the Middle East, or in 1980s Central America. Miriam Schechter describes how agents entered the plant, guns drawn, and yelled “you have to come with us!” Witnesses begin describing what happened. According to Kerris Dillon, a high school teacher, workers were lined up on their knees “like dogs, and they were chained”. It was “a sea of black, all you saw was bullet-proof vests and black hoods” according to her.

“There were state police with rifles, there were county police,” said Pastor Steve Brackett of the Postville Lutheran Church. Rosa Zamora, one of those arrested and sent home with a GPS bracelet, said she had just been working for 10 minutes when the supervisor yelled “La Migra!” Everyone started running in all directions. Laura Castillo said she was threatened with a baton and a gun, and told she’d be shot if she ran. She said she told the agent, “I’m not going to run, but I don’t want you to touch me.” He just said, “Shut your trap!” Rosana Mejia also claimed they pointed a gun at her while yelling not to move. She just cried and feared she would never see her daughter again. María López claims she saw when they grabbed a young man by the hair and sat him down by pulling his hair. “I saw when they hit him. They hit those who tried to escape.” When a panicked woman was able to escape and run, a female ICE agent yelled at her “Stop, you whore! Stop, you bitch!”

David Vásquez, the campus pastor of Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, said he ran to the auditorium of the Child Care Center and saw all the children crying and hysterical, the older ones trying to console the younger ones. “What we were trying to do reminded me so much of the images in Guatemala of ‘the disappeared,’ right from the beginning.”
Indeed, the horrific images descending on the Agriprocessors Inc. kosher slaughterhouse and meat packing plant while armed, hooded men surrounded it, was an exact replica of how the Guatemalan army would land by surprise in the 625 Maya villages erased from the face of Earth during their 1980-85 genocidal campaign that first pushed Mayas north. According to Erik Camayd-Freixas, Echoing what I think was the general feeling, one of my fellow interpreters would later exclaim: "When I saw what it was really about, my heart sank..." Then began the saddest procession I have ever witnessed, which the public would never see, because cameras were not allowed past the perimeter of the compound (only a few journalists came to court the following days, notepad in hand). Driven single-file in groups of 10, shackled at the wrists, waist and ankles, chains dragging as they shuffled through, the slaughterhouse workers were brought in for arraignment, sat and listened through headsets to the interpreted initial appearance, before marching out again to be bused to different county jails, only to make room for the next row of 10. They appeared to be uniformly no more than 5 ft. tall, mostly illiterate Guatemalan peasants with Mayan last names, some being relatives (various Tajtaj, Xicay, Sajché, Sologüi...), some in tears; others with faces of worry, fear, and embarrassment. They all spoke Spanish, a few rather laboriously... They stood out in stark racial contrast with the rest of us as they started their slow penguin march across the makeshift court.  

We will never know how many of the 290 Guatemalans had legitimate asylum claims for fear of persecution, back in a country stigmatized by the worst human rights situation in the hemisphere, a by-product of the US backed Contra wars in Central America under the old domino theory of the 1980s. ... we also will never know which of these deportations will turn out to be a death sentence, or how many of these displaced workers are last survivors with no family or village to return to. (6) He himself draws the evident connection between the 1980s and the present in his personal account. The traces of this disaster cannot be effaced. It is involved in the political entanglement of Central America and their US persecutors, an opaque history of imperial ambition that can be traced to the 1850s when the isthmus suffered its first US, albeit Confederate, military invasion.  

The legal charade was the first step in the direction of what is presently taking place in Arizona, that Cecilia Menjívar labels "legal violence," to name a systematic process of de-naturalization through allegedly legal means. It is not, therefore, surprising that, living once again a trauma reminding them of their people's suffering at the hands of brutish armies back home, survivors reacted as they had done in Guatemala or El Salvador in the recent past. Of those not arrested, "...many had fled the town in fear. Several families had taken refuge at St. Bridget's Catholic Church, terrified, sleeping on pews and refusing to leave for days" (Camayd-Freixas). Indeed, abUSet also states how the evening of the raid, over 400 were crowded into St. Bridget's, fearing that ICE would raid their apartments during the night like death squads used to do in Central America. Likewise, David Vásquez states how they began to address those taken away as "the disappeared," and drawing lists of those "disappeared" much like in the 1980s. Those arrested, symbolically, were kept in the National Cattle Congress, a compound where cattle are shown, of a nearby town with the very appropriate name of Waterloo. Postville became the Central American-Americans’ "Waterloo" to some extent. The metaphor is ICE's, not our own. To enter the compound, lawyers and translators such as Camayd-Freixas, who narrates this episode in the film, had to go through a truck container, literally, one open at both ends, where metal detector machines were kept. The symbolism could not have been more cliché, given how many probably entered the country hidden in containers themselves. Cheryl, one of the defense lawyers, explained how they were brought into the locale where the arraignments took place in shackles, like a chain gang, surrounded by ICE agents wearing flak jackets as if they were highly dangerous terrorists. Camayd-Freixas also states in his article:  

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THE COLONIALITY OF DIASPORA

Camayd-Freixas’ long quote in the previous page, names the colonial legacy of racism as one clearly marking the biopolitics associated with the surgical removal of Central American-Americans from the body politic of Anglo-centered mainstream US when convenient (though it should be stated that most Anglo residents of Postville were extremely supportive of the immigrants, as abUSed makes abundantly clear). As Sara, one of the defense lawyers, made clear in abUSed, “even though these gentlemen had a lot of those same rights (as US citizens) they didn’t believe that they did.” Coloniality, with its distinctive trait of racialization, would certainly explain this sense of feeling “less than” a “normal” US citizen.

For the last 15 or so years, many theorists have been working on the concept of “coloniality of power,” deployed to move thinking beyond Western and Eurocentric conceptualizations, a term coined by sociologist Aníbal Quijano in 1991. As Quijano has pointed out, we cannot conceive of Latin American-ness without the definitional framework of this concept that informs the positionality of non-European migrants in the US, while simultaneously problematizing ethno-racial subjective formations grounded on the social classification of the world’s population around the idea of race and/or caste and the memories of violence that these invoke when articulated in discursive productions. Coloniality of power basically means the production of identities based on race, conjoined with a hierarchy between European and non-European identities in which the first have oppressed all others, together with the construction of mechanisms of social domination designed to preserve this historical foundation and social classification. Coloniality began with the Spanish conquest of indigenous peoples in the Americas by articulating a colonial matrix of power that configured an epistemological perspective through which racialization was channeled. Even if colonialism no longer exists, coloniality continues to operate as an epistemological framework in contemporary intercultural relations. The novelty of the argument is, therefore, both in regard to the explication of the world-historical nature of coloniality, as well as its systemically constitutive role in the making of the modern world. The local histories of Latin American nations, and their diasporic movements, appear to be as systemic and intrinsic to the broader relations ensnared in what José David Saldívar, himself applying this concept to Chicana/o literature, has labeled “the global division of labor, racial and ethnic hierarchy, identity formation, and Eurocentric epistemologies” (339). This is why Saldívar speaks of a “globalized coloniality.” The Postville raid, while clearly comprehensive within this perspective, also points in the direction of a coloniality of diaspora, one where ethno-racial and historical traits not only bind people to a colonizing past. It is also one where discontinuities continue to mark the way subjects are identified and labeled, and explains how they are left grappling with variable structures of power, many exercised by other minorities themselves, in function of them.

It is in this logic that Claudia Milian delves, in her forthcoming book, into what is contained—the grammar, the bodies, the “Latino” experiences—within the Central American-American scheme, one with no previous antecedent. As she states, “there have been no other US ethnoracial models... that accentuate reiterative modes of American-American excess to underscore a triumvirate US (American), regional (Central and Latin American), and panethnic (US Latino and Latina) disenfranchisement.” Her thinking then moves in the direction of racialization, an indelible marker within our understanding of globalized coloniality:

Other Latinos, like current US Latinos and Latinas, are imagined as Central and South American aggregates to “brown.” It is a brownness that is not revamped and that does not cross any ethnoracial borders that attend to divergent forms of the national. How is an Other Latino, in the context of Central Americanness, produced? An undisputable “browned” indigeneity could very well be its definitive Central American marker. But more than an other form of Latinoness, another type of Central Americanness is emphasized, another neglected Latino and Latina simultaneity whose “presencing” has yet to be localized in the US Latino and Latina landscape. And, to be sure, that have yet to be fully
mobilized in our critical practices and their political implications.

Milian also reminds us that Garifunas in the US are Central American-Americans, and asks: “Will the presumed African Amerianness of these Central American groups be localized within the theoretical directions and dimensions that mark Central American-Amerianness: unnameability, invisibility, awkwardness, and off the hyphen status?”

Milian’s quotes implicitly invoke Foucault’s notion of biopolitics as a regime of discipline, one concerned with the surveillance, manipulation, and management of human life. Biopolitics explains the State’s attempt to regiment people, from prohibiting certain actions to actively shaping and manipulating peoples’ actions overall, and from drawing lines of exclusion, lines that are forbidden to transgress. The various institutions that normatize behavior find ways to include everybody and everything within a grid of carefully managed alternatives and possibilities. We can see in this logic ICE’s raid on Postville, the overall US policy of looking the other way while “illegals” enter the country’s geographical habitus while it is convenient, yet represses them when it is not, why it is no longer enough to deport immigrants but first they have to put them in chains, stripped of their dignity and humiliated publicly. Biopolitics evidences how the US’s colonializing perspective articulates the particular way it conceives the multiplicity of lives, living beings, and life processes that surround its Anglo-centric imperial perspective.

Nonetheless, Central American-Americans, subalternized though they may be, are not unaware of their situation. In Uli Stelzner’s Assaulted Dreams, as a migrant looks at Mexico from Tecín Umán, Guatemala’s border city, he says that the rich conceptualize people like him as “trash.” But, adds an immigrant in Ciudad Hidalgo, Mexico, George W. Bush is also trash. The US is trash. It is not a country where these Central American immigrants want to live an “American dream,” a phrase they laugh at, but a country where they want to go and collect what they claim rightfully belongs to them but was usurped by their own corrupt governments with US complicity. Their stay in the US, if they survive “the crossing,” will last just long enough to make some money before returning home to build a house, provide their children an education, and no longer be seen as “trash.” Here we have a Central American-American version of Nelson Maldonado-Torres’s concept of “coloniality of Being,” one where something that seemed to make colonIALIZED subjects the target of annihilation equals for the named subjects a beingness as trash; recognizing the other gazing at themselves and seeing trash in it. We are back to pure abjection, to Fanon’s wretched of the Earth, as a logic of coloniality. As Maldonado-Torres argues, the coloniality of Being refers to the process whereby common sense and tradition are marked by dynamics of power that are preferential in character; they discriminate people and target specific communities. In this logic, Central American-Americans can be defined as a preferential target of the violence spelled out by the coloniality of power, and Central American-Americaness gives expression to a consistent decolonial consciousness. Speaking of Iraq in 2004, Maldonado-Torres stated:

The American Dream today, as it is adopted by the state, is expressed by the desire to achieve the global pax Americana, one in which US ideals of sociality, government, and life become regulative ideals for the people of the globe. Coloniality takes different faces in this new order, but it has not ceased to exist. Its present is very obvious both in the unequal distribution of goods and in the articulation of a Manichean vision of things according to which the West represents civilization and the so-called Arab Muslim world is portrayed as the incarnation of evil... There are different geo-political relations at work. The emergence of a transnational network of commercial connections and political sovereignty is predicated on these differences. That is why it is so easy for the logic of coloniality to assert itself so clearly in moments like the “war on terror.” (The Topology of Being, 26)

Substitute “Arab Muslim” for Central American and “war on terror” with “Central American immigration” and you have the perfect articulation of the present situation for Central American-Americans. Their “invisibility” thus continues a decade later, not because they have not been more forthcoming in asserting themselves, nor because other Latinos deny them any space. It is simply that without context and a continuity that would bring events such as “the Crossing” or the Postville raid into the lives of mainstream Americans, they can only, at best, elicit empty sympathy. At worst, they are objectified as abject “illegals,” condemned to be erased from the visual memory of the US to non-existence.

Those Central American-Americans exposed to scenes such as those depicted by Assaulted Dreams, Sin Nombre, abUSeD, or by carnage in the Middle East, may only recall their experience dimly because of blockage to cognition. Nevertheless, it marks their daily existence. The trauma is embedded in their unconscious, informing their behavioral patterns, and their relationships with their next of kin. They may suffer delayed responses, such as repeated hallucinations, dreams, and other intrusive phenomena. If the locus of referentiality for the prior trauma was the massacres endured during the civil wars of the 1980s, and it is still one impacting them unconsciously even if they did not live through them personally, at present the new traumas are those of “the passage,” the aftermath of military service in the Middle East, and ICE raids against migrants residing in the US. This nefarious trilogy associates forever the reference with the Latino present, threatening those deep affections that constitute subjectivity, impacting Central American-Americans’
lives endlessly. Often they can conflate, as Camayd-Freixas narrates:

That first interview...took three hours. The client, a Guatemalan peasant afraid for his family, spent most of that time weeping at our table, in a corner of the crowded jailhouse visiting room. How did he come here from Guatemala? “I walked.” What? “I walked for a month and ten days until I crossed the river.” We understood immediately how desperate his family’s situation was. He crossed alone, met other immigrants, and hitched a truck ride to Dallas, where he heard there was sure work. He slept in an apartment hallway with other immigrants until employed. He had scarcely been working a couple of months when he was arrested... “The Good Lord knows I was just working and not doing anyone any harm.”

After all, memory articulates a representational space by means of imaginary and symbolic elements. According to Cathy Caruth, it is through trauma “that we can begin to recognize the possibility of a history that is no longer straightforwardly referential” (11). It thus resituates Central American-Americans’ history in a space where it may emerge, to paraphrase Caruth, despite the fact that these subjects still have no “immediate understanding” of what they have lived through, and because of their own suppression of the trauma they have lived through. The history of Central American-Americans as a cultural entity is related to Central American politics as previously stated, and is inextricably bound up with the notion of departure from the isthmus. E. Ann Kaplan frames this problematic when addressing 9/11’s “disturbing remains.” She argues that trauma produces new subjects, and “the political—ideological context within which traumatic events occur shapes their impact” (1). Analyzing films about immigrants until employed. He had scarcely been working a couple of months when he was arrested... “The Good Lord knows I was just working and not doing anyone any harm.”

According to Luis J. Rodríguez, as many as 40,000 people accused of belonging to either the Mara Salvatrucha or the 18th Street gang were deported every year to both Mexico and Central America.

1 “Central American-American” was originally defined by me as “an anadiplosis that sounds more like a redundancy, a radically disfigured projection of what ‘Latin Americanism’ has been assumed to be...[T]he clumsiness of the sound itself, ‘Central American-American,’ underlines the fact that it is an identity which is not one, since it cannot be designated univocally as ‘Latino’ or as ‘Latin American,’ but is outside those two signifiers from the very start.” See “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power, and Representation in the US Latino World.”

2 See The Maya of Morganton.

3 See The Maya of Morganton.

4 Guatemalan filmmaker Luis Argueta and Vivian Rivas have produced a documentary film on the raid, titled Ab/USe: The Postville Raid. See also Camayd-Freixas’s article “Interpreting after the Largest ICE Raid in US History: A Personal Account.”

5 Search conducted 4/1/11.


7 http://sweetness-light.com/archive/mexican-drug-cartel-killed-72-illegal-aliens


9 http://www.publicopiniononline.com/nationalnews/ci_17455288


11 In this same context, we should not forget that many Indians from India, Chinese, South Americans, and others, are also arriving illegally into Central America, primarily Guatemala, and “sharing” the experience of “the passage” with Central American and Mexican subjects, an abject expression of global coloniality indeed.

12 Unclaimed experience, p. 4.

13 Ibid.


Ibid.

http://www.defense.gov/


17 It is hard to estimate, because the US Armed Forces include in their statistics Salvadoran and Honduran units that form part of the “Coalition Forces.”

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20 Ibid.

21 http://www.defense.gov/


23 It is impossible to know exactly how many of Latino members of the US Armed Forces are Central American-American. But we do have the US total Central American-American population as self-identified by national origin: Salvadorans, 1,736,221 total population, or 3.6%; Guatemalans, 1,077,412 or 2.2%; Honduran, 624,533 or 1.3%; Nicaraguan, 368,720 or 0.8%; Panamanian, 170,057 or 0.4%; and, Costa Rican, 131,331 or 0.3%. Needless to say, the margin of error is wide, given the illegal status of non-censed population.


25 Ibid.

26 Suffice to google Amazon on the topic. 11 recent books on the topic were listed on 4/5/11 when I consulted last/

27 See “Interpreting after the Largest ICE Raid in US History: A Personal Account.”

28 Seven of the arrested migrants formed a group theater and staged a theatrical piece, “The Story of Our Lives” about what they went through at the Postville High School on May 12, 2009. The performance can be seen in abUSed.

29 In 1855 William Walker of Tennessee seized Nicaragua. His aim was both to disrupt transit between the Eastern seaboard and California, seize California’s gold, and annex Nicaragua to the CSA. For once, all Central American states united to defeat Walker in 1857. He was executed by Honduran authorities in 1860.

30 US invasions of Central America are well documented. Suffice to mention the major ones: Panama in 1903, Nicaragua in 1907, Nicaragua once more in 1925, leading to Sandino’s war, Guatemala in 1954, leading to a 36-year long civil war, El Salvador in the 1980s.

31 The film interviews legal defendants elementary and high school teachers, nuns, etc., all of whom rushed to support those arrested, their children, and their families. All of them were Anglo.

32 See Maldonado-Torres’s analysis when critiquing the limits of Lévinas.

33 See Caruth, p. 13.

WORKS CITED


