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Identity Formation Among Central American Americans

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IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG CENTRAL AMERICAN-AMERICANS

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“Growing up, I mainly thought of myself as Latino. Guatemalan was what I was and what my family was, but in the world outside my family, I was Latino.”
“I say we’re Salvadorans, but I was born in San Francisco; I’m a Central American from El Salvador.”

“What really motivates me is trying to identify with and respect humanity as a whole...I think this desire to identify with the broadest possible category comes from growing up in a place where to be classified in one category vs. another means your life could be in danger.”

INTRODUCTION

As the above quotes by young Central American Americans² suggest, identity formation is a complex, fluid and multifaceted process. Identities may change over time in response to shifting contexts and experiences; individuals may have multiple identities, and a person may invoke different identities in response to different situations. Although we are primarily concerned with ethnic identity, other types of identity are an important part of the ways in which Central American Americans conceive of themselves and of their experiences and values.

The following is an exploration of the factors influencing identity formation of a small group of young 1.5 and second generation Guatemalans and Salvadorans in California. It draws on earlier research on Central Americans in Southern California (Hamilton and Chinchilla 2001) and interviews with ten young Central Americans in Los Angeles and San Francisco as well as informants who have worked closely with them. The initial interviews took place in 2006-07; information on more recent activities is from websites, publications, and in some cases follow-up interviews.

In this article, we are concerned with young Central Americans who are part of the second generation or the 1.5 generation, arriving in the United States as young children. This group is of

¹ We would like to express our appreciation to Arturo Arias, Pierette Hondagneu-Sotelo, and an anonymous reviewer at CSII, who reviewed earlier versions of this study, as well as to our interviewees and to Aquiles Magaña for assistance with this study.

² The term “Central American-Americans” refers to Latinos born or raised in the United States with ancestry from Central America. The term was initiated by Maya Chinchilla in a poem “Central American-American,” (1999) and now is widely used to refer to people of Central American ancestry in the U.S. (Arias 2003; Rodriguez 2013). In the following, we will generally use the term Central American to refer to this group except where the meaning is not clear from the context.

particular interest for several reasons. Like other 1.5 and second generation immigrants, young Central American Americans grew up exposed to the dual and often contradictory influences of their families and immigrant communities on the one hand and socialization into U.S. culture through attendance at U.S. schools, relations with peers, and interactions with other ethnic/national origin groups, on the other. And like other foreign and U.S. born children of immigrants, as well as U.S- born minority groups, many were influenced by the characteristics of their immediate neighborhoods, typically urban, low income, economically depressed, and frequently violent.

Unlike most other 1.5 or second generation immigrants, however, Central Americans who entered the United States in the 1980s often came from countries torn by war and violence and economic difficulties related to these conflicts, and entered a country that rejected their claims to official refugee status. At formative periods of their lives, therefore, young Central American Americans experienced both the insecurity associated with being “illegal immigrants” and the individual or collective scars of traumatic events in their countries of origin (Mahler, 1995; Menjivar, 2000; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001).

Finally, while the interviewees share important characteristics and experiences with other members of their age group of the same ancestry, they differ from many of them in that they have a college education, including several with graduate degrees, and all are professionally active in the areas of art, education, community service, and/or politics. They have given considerable thought to issues of ethnic identity, the place of Central Americans in the United States, and the influence of their Central American roots in their own lives.

In the following, we address two questions: how, and why, did the trajectories of these young Central American Americans deviate from those of many in their cohort, and how do they conceptualize their identities. We begin with a brief overview of their personal stories, followed by an examination of how their experiences both paralleled and deviated from those of other Central American Americans and helped to shape them and the way they think about themselves. The next section examines how the 1.5 and second generation immigrants we interviewed conceptualize issues of identity and how they think of their own identity. The final section presents a summary of our conclusions.

PERSONAL STORIES³

Randy

Randy was born in the United States and is therefore a U.S. citizen. When he was nine months old, however, his mother, who was undocumented, was arrested and they were both deported to El Salvador. They stayed with his grandparents in Usulután, which was the scene of constant fighting during the war. Young men were recruited by both the government forces and the FMLN (Farabundo Marti Force for National Liberation, the unified guerrilla organization). Even members of Randy's own family fought on both sides of the conflict, and many of them were killed.

Randy returned to the United States with his mother when he was five, and has lived here since then. He grew up in South Los Angeles, a predominantly African American neighborhood that, by the end of the 1980s, was undergoing demographic changes due to the influx of Central American and Mexican immigrants. He learned English from African Americans, and his early heroes were Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. He was also moved by reading James Baldwin, noting parallels between the problems of gangs, drugs, and police brutality in Harlem in the 1960s and similar issues in his South Central community in the 1980s. Several gangs were active in his neighborhood, including the 18th Street Gang (predominantly Mexican American), and the Mara Salvatrucha, a Salvadoran gang established in Los Angeles which subsequently spread to El Salvador and other Central American countries. "Salvadorans came from violence," Randy observed, "and found violence of a different kind in South Central. [It was] part 2 of a war – from a national civil war to an urban civil war." Randy himself never joined a gang, but many of his friends were gang members. "Kids I grew up with are now dead...I don't want other kids to be killed."

Randy attributes the fact that he himself avoided becoming involved in the gang culture to the encouragement he received from teachers while he was growing up and a three-year scholarship from A Better Chance, a program that provides support for students in inner city areas with good grades. He went on to Occidental College (a private college in the Los Angeles area), where he began to think about issues related to his identity as a result of courses he took and an internship at CARECEN, the Central American Refugee Committee (now Resource Committee). He was instrumental in the formation of CASA, the Central American Student Association, for students interested in Central America at Occidental, and later helped establish similar organizations at other campuses. He recently obtained his Master's degree from Azusa Pacific University.

³ Names are used with permission of the interviewees.

Subsequently Randy worked with several civic and community organizations, including the California League of Conservation Voters and CARECEN. In 1998 he helped establish the Salvadoran American Political Action Committee, SALPAC, dedicated to involving young Salvadoran Americans in politics and supporting candidates sympathetic to the community. In 2000, he went to Washington, D.C. to work in the office of Hilda Solis, a congresswoman from California of Mexican-Nicaraguan descent and the first person of Central American ancestry in congress. While in D.C. he gained an awareness of how the legislative process works, and became particularly concerned about the limited representation of Salvadorans, and Central Americans in general, on Capitol Hill. On returning to Los Angeles he worked with several Central American organizations and the Pasadena Unified School District. He is the former Executive Director of El Centro Pasadena de Acción Social, one of the oldest Latino organizations in the Pasadena area, which specializes in programs and services for youth - particularly in education - and seniors. His op eds have appeared frequently in *La Opinion*, the major Spanish language newspaper in Los Angeles, as well as other publications, and he has written two books, *Hope in Times of Darkness: A Salvadoran American Experience*, and *The Life of an Activist: In the Frontlines 24/7*.

Randy's community and political work has been informed by two objectives: to increase the political presence of Salvadoran Americans and Central Americans at the local, state and national levels and to work together with other ethnic groups on issues of mutual interest. He is deeply concerned about the welfare of the Salvadoran American community and believes it is essential that Salvadorans, and Central Americans generally, become politically and economically involved. This concern was reinforced by his experience in Washington, D.C., where he felt that Salvadorans and Central Americans were generally absent from the political process, although he notes that their influence has increased. As he states, "It's important to get members of your community into positions of power." At the same time, he recognized that issues such as unemployment and the problem of violence are not limited to one ethnic group or community, and believes it's important "to go beyond our own comfort zones," and to interact with other communities.

Karina

Karina was born in El Salvador but came to the United States as a child. Her grandmother was the first to migrate, first internally from Santa Ana to work in a factory in San Salvador and subsequently, in the late 1960s, to Los Angeles, where she worked in a factory. Her grandmother went back to El Salvador to live but would return annually to the U.S. to visit. Karina has never gone back to El Salvador, but she maintained her connection with her country of birth through her grandmother (until her death in 2011).

Karina grew up in a violent neighborhood in Pico Union, a traditional migrant entry area west of downtown Los Angeles. In addition to community violence, "[t]here was violence in my family;" with an abusive father; she used to "dread the hour when he would come home." Karina's strongest attachments

were with her mother, who was head of the household following the divorce of her parents and “had to be strong, but...remained maternal and caring,” and her grandmother, who she describes as the family historian, “pragmatic and factual,” stern but generous, and with whom she was particularly close. After becoming a widow, Karina’s grandmother married a Texan of Mexican ancestry and it was through knowing him that Karina became aware of the issue of Tejano identity, referring to Texans of Spanish or Mexican descent. Karina’s mother’s second marriage was to a Cuban; he and his father looked down on Salvadorans as inferior, an experience that expanded her awareness of differences among Latino communities.

In school, Karina had both positive and negative experiences. At Hoover Elementary she was chosen for a gifted program which placed emphasis on creativity and opportunity. "I loved learning for its own sake, not just grades, and this program encouraged that." She continued to be in the gifted program through middle and part of high school. On returning to Belmont High School after having her first child, she however, "encountered an extremely negative school environment with passive teachers and administrators" who assumed that immigrants were incapable of superior work. When she wrote a paper on George Orwell’s *1984* for her English class she was accused of plagiarism. An administrator asked her to prove her writing ability by composing an analysis of a piece of literature in his presence; when she wrote an analysis of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, he was convinced and apologized saying "we don’t expect this level of work. We are a school of immigrants."

After marrying at an early age and having her first child at age 16, Karina took a ten-year break after finishing high school. She then enrolled in Los Angeles Community College, subsequently transferring to the University of California, Berkeley where she became an English Literature major and developed an interest in African American, Chicano and Central American literature. In 2007 she received her Ph.D. in Comparative Ethnic Studies at Berkeley, focusing on Central American-American scholarship and cultural production in the United States.

Karina is active in Epicentro, a group of artists dedicated to fostering Central American culture in the United States and a sequel to Epicentroamerica, a poetry and performance group of young Central American Americans. She has taught at California State University, Los Angeles; the University of California, Santa Barbara; Scripps College in Claremont; and UCLA, and continues to write poetry and paint. Some of her poetry has been published, including a book of poems and a co-edited anthology of poems by Central American Americans. She is also connected to indigenous spirituality networks and feels that spirituality has had an important influence on her poetry and art ; as she notes, spirituality “...is a way to give voice to my ancestors.”

Mario

Mario grew up in the department of Morazán, El Salvador during the war. As a child, he witnessed the violence of the conflict, commonly seeing dead bodies on the streets. His father, a trade unionist, was assassinated, and Mario himself was incorporated in the guerrilla forces at the age of ten. After three months he was captured by government forces and spent eight months in captivity; during this time he was physically and psychologically tortured. He came to the United States shortly after that, hiding his identity during a harrowing three-month trip through Guatemala and Mexico.

At his new home in Pico Union, Mario confronted the fact that they were “different” economically: “My cousins lived in homes,” he said, “but we lived in a garage. Living in a garage wasn’t really being American.” Like Karina, Mario grew up in a home torn by domestic violence and abuse. His stepfather beat his mother, and his relationships with his sister and his mother were also difficult. His mother, who was only 28 when he was 14, “didn’t really understand me or know how to talk to me” His sister, who had been brought up in the city while he had grown up in the countryside, considered him a peasant. In Los Angeles, Mario went to high school in South Central where, like Randy, he saw gang violence that reminded him of the violence he experienced in El Salvador: “Witnessing shootings among gangs in 1993, I felt I was still living through civil war” (Madera et al, 2008, 25).

The trauma of his war experience coupled with his problematic family life resulted in a difficult adolescence for Mario; he was getting into a lot of fights and dropped out of high school. Teachers in his school, Mario felt, didn’t understand the trauma experienced by Central Americans who had been through war. He entered a relationship with a girlfriend and had a daughter. The relationship did not work out, however, and he returned to live with his mother where he began hanging out with gang members from the Mara Salvatrucha. In 1998 he became a security guard; he met a Salvadoran-Mexican American woman and they had a son in 2000.

While Mario was working as a security guard, a man was shot during a robbery, triggering flashbacks and other symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Mario was referred to a Program for Torture Victims, and in the course of his treatment he was encouraged to continue his education. Enrolling in LA Trade Tech marked “the beginning of my new life, my academic life.” Someone who saw him writing poetry at Trade Tech took him to the coffee house *Expreso Mi Cultura*, where he met some of the members of *Epicentroamerica*, the poetry group of young Central Americans. Mario transferred to UCLA, where he graduated with honors and a dual degree in Literature and Chicano Studies in 2007. At UCLA he was, among other things, one of the founders of IDEAS, an organization for undocumented students, and the Director of *La Nueva Tendencia*, a journal covering politics, art, and literature and oriented to “opening a vital space of the Latino immigrant diaspora.”

Despite his experiences in El Salvador, it was only in 2006 that Mario obtained asylum, after having lived in the United States for fifteen years as undocumented. By this time he was married with three children. Shortly after receiving asylum, Mario was informed that he had been admitted to a Ph.D. program in literature at the University of Arizona, where he completed his M.A. degree in Spanish literature. He owns a small publishing company, Izote, and is the author of numerous poems, many of them drawn from his own experiences, including a book of poems, *Gritos Interiores*, and a forthcoming novel.

Mariana

Mariana came to the United States from Guatemala in 1991 at the age of seven, along with her grandmother, aunt, and her aunt's three children, to rejoin her mother and her new stepfather. Her mother had migrated in 1988 to earn money due to economic instability resulting from the Guatemalan civil war. Her father had remained behind in Guatemala. Her maternal grandmother already lived in the United States, having initially come to work in a garment factory in 1971 to earn money for her seven children back in Guatemala. Mariana's stepfather was a dentist in Guatemala but in the United States he worked at maintenance jobs and as a dental assistant until he was able to be accredited as a dentist. Her mother is a certified nurse assistant and had worked as a nurse in Guatemala before coming to the United States, where she currently works as a home health aide.

Although initially fearful in school, Mariana excelled as a student, and in the third grade took an exam that enabled her to enter the program for Gifted and Talented students (GATE). She was admitted to the Berendo Middle School in Los Angeles, and from there into an honors junior high magnet program at Hamilton Music Academy High School in Culver City. Going to Hamilton, which she chose because she thought she wanted to be an actress, required being bussed to Culver City and meant a long day, with little time for after-school activities. It was also a big culture shock: "It was my first diversity experience with mainly black and white students. I felt picked on because of my accent. I felt different, I looked different. I hated my Latino identity." In addition to her experience of social isolation, she found the courses difficult, particularly English, where she had to work hard just to get a C.

At home, Mariana was beginning to experience tensions with her parents that were not atypical of those of other adolescents. Conflict between her parents culminated in Mariana's stepfather leaving her mother. Eventually, Mariana's mother found solace from the church that she joined, and Mariana found a place in the teen ministry of the church which linked her to college students and information about colleges. After a year of separation, Mariana's parents reconciled and Mariana left Hamilton for a high school closer to her home. She subsequently entered into honors and advanced placement classes at Belmont High School. Her dream was to go to UCLA which she had visited on a field trip when she was in the fifth grade.

When she entered Belmont High School she again felt isolated from other students. "At Belmont, I was stereotyped as a white girl because of the way I came across, the way I spoke, and because I was studious." Despite her initial sense of isolation at Belmont, Mariana joined organizations such as the Key Club, became class treasurer, and was editor of the school yearbook. She wrote for the LA Youth Newspaper and participated in a summer fellowship program sponsored by SALEF (Salvadoran American Leadership and Education Fund).

As an undocumented student Mariana was aware that she was ineligible for in-state tuition at California public universities, precluding the possibility of attending a UC school because of the high cost, so she initially decided to accept a scholarship to California State University in Los Angeles. But with the passage of AB540⁴, which gave undocumented students who graduated from California high schools the right to in-state tuition – and against the advice of her parents and teachers who thought she should remain at Cal State LA - she enrolled in Los Angeles City College with the goal of later transferring to UCLA. At LACC she again became very involved in student activities: she was a student senator and lobbied against fee hikes. She was ultimately accepted at UCLA, where she majored in psychology.

Mariana describes her two years at UCLA—the school of her dreams- as difficult ones. The bus ride from her parents' home to UCLA sometimes took up to four hours roundtrip. In order to live in a co-op closer to campus, she had to work, which, combined with her parents' hard-earned savings, enabled her to meet expenses. Conditions at the co-op were far from ideal, however, and she was harassed by one of the managers. After her mother became ill, Mariana decided to move back to live with her parents. In addition to financial pressures and transportation challenges, the academic demands of the psychology major were daunting, and at times she felt like quitting. As an undocumented student, she was also confronted with the question of what kinds of jobs she would be able to get upon graduation; many of her undocumented friends who graduated now worked in construction or as waiters (National Public Radio, 2008). Discussing a poem she wrote during this time, "Undocumented," she stated "I wrote this poem on one of those days when hopelessness takes over, and I began wondering, why do I submit myself to such

⁴ AB540 was passed in 2001 and enabled undocumented students to pay in-state tuition at public universities and colleges if they had graduated from a California high school. It was not until 2011 that the "California Dream Act" was passed, enabling undocumented students to receive state-based financial aid beginning in Spring 2013. There has been no legislation providing for legalization of undocumented students at the national level, but in August 2012, President Obama issued an executive order which enables undocumented youth who came as children and meet certain criteria to remain and work in the United States for at least two years, subject to renewal .

agony. Sometimes I felt that little by little, a piece inside me would die, and I was tired of working hard and of being motivated when in the end, I was not going to go anywhere” (Madera et al, 2008, 59).

In spite of the difficulties and frustrations Mariana kept going, thanks in part due to the help and encouragement she received along the way, in addition to her own determination to succeed. She acquired a support system that included her family, a home room teacher in middle school as well as other teachers and counselors, and the group of fellow students she met through the Academic Advancement program. She also met Vilma, a janitor at UCLA who would give her a ride back to her parents’ home when she worked in the library until 2:00 a.m.

While at UCLA she worked with IDEAS, a group of undocumented students. Initially the organization was clandestine, but the students subsequently became more open about their condition which “empowered us in many, many ways.” (NPR, 2008). Mariana also became involved in the California Dream Network established by CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights in Los Angeles) for AB540 students, which campaigned for legislation that would enable undocumented students in public institutions obtain state-based financial aid. (They were eventually successful with the passage of the California Dream Act in 2011.) In June 2007, Mariana graduated with her B.A., and subsequently received her residency card. She was accepted a Master’s program in Education program at Harvard University, where she received her M.A. in 2008.

At the time of our first interview, she was uncertain as to exactly where she would end up but said that "whatever I do, I want to serve my community...Eventually, I want to help overcome the lack of research on Central Americans and make our experiences better ones." Since graduating from Harvard, she has worked in programs to promote childhood literacy and higher education for immigrant students. She is currently working at CHIRLA as the Dream Center Coordinator and starting a doctoral program at UCLA in Fall 2013. Her research interest includes the educational trajectory of undocumented youth and Central American immigration. Mariana and her mother were featured in *Harvest of Empire*, a documentary that highlights the role of US government actions in Latin America and their impact on creating migration patterns to the US.

Susan

Susan was born in El Salvador and came to Los Angeles with her mother at the age of eight. Her father, a veteran of the Korean War who served in the U.S. Army for ten years, was born in the United States of Salvadoran and French-Jewish parents. Her mother’s parents were Salvadoran and Palestinian. Several members of her family served in the military in El Salvador, but her mother became involved with an opposition group during the presidency of General Humberto Romero, the last active-duty military president in El Salvador. Since General Romero was friends with Susan’s family, her mother took her to the Presidential Palace for what she thought was a social event. Instead, her mother was

detained and interrogated by the Salvadoran military while Susan was kept for hours locked in an officer's room, unaware of what was happening and thinking that she would never see her mother again. After three weeks, Susan's mother was released and told to leave El Salvador immediately; she and Susan went to the airport with a military escort. Susan and her mother assumed that their stay in the United States would be temporary, but because of fear of immigration agents after her mother's asylum claim was denied, Susan was told to tell everyone she was born in Miami, where her father lived at the time. It was not until years later that Susan was told by an immigration attorney that she had derivative citizenship through her U.S. born father, something that immigration officials had neglected to tell her mother years ago when they applied for permanent residency.

Susan's initial school years were difficult. Her inability to speak English when she first arrived in the United States led to negative expectations by school authorities, forcing her to repeat the third grade. Fellow students would taunt her when she was unable to understand their games, leading to frequent fights and other problems. By the time she entered LeConte Junior High in Hollywood, there were more Salvadoran students who banded together for safety, or as Susan describes it: "a support group of sorts," which was the founding generation of what became a transnational gang. Subsequently she was enrolled at King Drew, a Magnet High School in Compton oriented to minority students interested in studying medicine. At age 15, however, she was taken out of school and sent back to El Salvador to live with her grandmother who believed she should learn to cook and sew and marry a nice man, preferably in the military, which would be "safer" in terms of job security.

Susan returned to the United States in 1987 at age 17 and entered California State University at Northridge (CSUN), but dropped out two years later and moved out of her mother's house. She had grown up with the founders of a gang in West Hollywood, and became involved with the gang. It gave her a sense of belonging, but she was repelled by the violence and "the fact that I was constantly going to funerals." Susan went back to El Salvador in 1993 and worked at a job where she was responsible for military accounts for a Miami-based company that sold firearms to the Salvadoran military and the police. While at that job she was sexually harassed by the general manager, a man the owner had recruited from the newly formed National Civilian Police. When she tried to deal with this by reporting it to the Salvadoran District Attorney and the owner of the company, she was told that it would be her word against that of the manager, and since he was from an established Salvadoran family she had little hope of obtaining justice. The owner reminded her that she was not in the United States where she could sue him.

At this point Susan decided she could not live in El Salvador and returned to the United States. She took courses at a community college and then returned to CSUN, at the same time working at Children's Hospital, continuing there after completing her degree. She was also on the board of Girls and Gangs, a non-profit organization that works with young women in the juvenile justice system, focusing on

mentoring, workshops and public education advocacy. In 2000 she founded Sin Fronteras, a similar program for immigrant youth, of which she continues to be president.

Susan obtained her B.S. degree in 2004 and, in 2008, a Master's degree in Public Health at California State University/Northridge. She was also founder and first president of the Central American Studies Alumni Society (CASAS) at CSUN, which organized annual conferences, brought students to campus, and attempted to recruit students to the Central American Studies program. She moved to the Washington, D.C. area and is currently an Adjunct Faculty member in the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland, where she obtained her Master's in Social Work. Aside from being a licensed clinical social worker, she is a Research Coordinator for an NIH-funded RCT at the School of Medicine.

Susan gives frequent presentations in the U. S., Latin America and Europe on topics related to gangs, migration, social and reproductive justice and human rights. She was on the steering committee for planning and implementing the Summit Against Violent Extremism in 2011, an event sponsored by Google Ideas, the Council on Foreign Affairs and the Tribeca Film Festival, which created the Against Violent Extremism network, a global collaborative of individuals and organizations focused on preventing children and youth from violent extremism. She has received recognition and several awards for her work from the U.S. Congress, the California State Senate, and the Children's Hospital in Los Angeles, among others.

Hector and Miguel

Hector and Miguel were born in San Francisco of Salvadoran parents. Their grandmother's aunt migrated to the United States many years before the rest of the family and, over time, other family members followed her. While growing up, Hector and Miguel lived in the Mission District; subsequently the family moved to the nearby Bernal Heights neighborhood. In contrast to most areas of Los Angeles, where the Latino population was predominantly Mexican or Mexican American, the Latino population in the Mission District was split relatively evenly between Mexicans and Salvadorans, and relations between Mexicans and Central Americans were not a point of tension. While "the Mission" was a relatively poor neighborhood with a certain amount of crime and gang activity, Hector and Miguel remember that there was also a sense of community and a number of community organizations. Their parents were involved in the Central American solidarity movement during the 1980s, often housing refugees and Salvadoran activists visiting the United States on speaking engagements.

Hector and Miguel became involved in political activities around Central America and were active in forming groups such as Juventud por la Paz. They also hung around with gang members who generally reflected the ethnic mix of the neighborhood. Ironically, their interest in gang activities diminished when they became active in wrestling. Hector was challenged by an African American friend to try out for the high school wrestling team: "You're always fighting anyway; you would probably be

good at it.” His friends in the gang considered this cool, but it also forced a change in life style: as members of the wrestling team, they could not drink, smoke, or do drugs, and had to maintain a 2.0 GPA.

Hector and Miguel went to San Francisco State University, where they continued wrestling and became active in student organizations, including La Raza, which at that time included different Latino groups. Hector entered the Master’s program in Latin American Studies at Stanford University where he wrote his thesis on the effect of neoliberal economic reform in El Salvador, and subsequently entered the Ph.D. program in Political Science at UCLA. While in graduate school he received an internship with the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA). He found academic life at UCLA very lonely; at the time there were few Central Americans there. He considered dropping out of the program, but was persuaded by his advisor to remain, and received his Ph.D. in 2005. He subsequently became an Assistant Professor at Ohio University, and currently is at UC Santa Cruz, where he continues to do research on issues related to Central America and the Central American diaspora. He has also been engaged in outreach to the Salvadoran and Nicaraguan communities in the United States, and is a faculty advisor for the Union of Salvadoran University Students (Union Salvadoreña de Estudiantes Universitarios – USEU).

Miguel also graduated from San Francisco State University with a degree in International Relations; he subsequently received an M.A. in Latin American studies from UCLA. He has been involved in community organizing in the Los Angeles area and is now a public relations consultant working with non-profit organizations, helping them in such areas as capacity building, organizing, and fundraising. Miguel is actively involved in trying to connect young Salvadorans and Guatemalans to each other with the hopes of constructing networks that can insert their perspectives into Central American/Latino political and cultural life, and publishes a blog, The Central Americanist, which disseminates information and invites dialogue on Salvadorans and other Central Americans in the United States.

Marvin

Marvin came to the United States from San Miguel, El Salvador in 1980, fleeing in the middle of the night with his father, who had received death threats from both the guerrillas and government forces. Ten years old at the time, Marvin had an image of the United States from watching TV as “the land of Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck.” He was shocked on arriving at the “excess of everything” such as the size of supermarkets, as well as the wide range of food available; as he put it, “in El Salvador, only rich people ate apples and grapes.”

In Los Angeles, Marvin lived with his extended family – nine in all – in a studio apartment in Pico Union. The neighborhood was plagued with drugs and gang activity; in retrospect, Marvin feels that he and his family were very lucky to escape the violence. At school, he was quickly plunged into a multi-ethnic environment. He had never seen an African American or an Asian American before; there were

also a large number of Caucasian kids. Learning English was difficult; while some classes were bilingual others, such as math, were not. It was several years before he felt comfortable speaking English.

After a couple of years Marvin moved to El Monte to live with his grandparents and an uncle; the rest of his family remained in Pico Union and he would visit them on weekends. After ten years in Los Angeles, the entire family moved to El Monte. The family, which had been undocumented, eventually adjusted their status as a result of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act.

In high school Marvin joined the Migrant Education Program, a program of the County Office of Education that provided support for migrant students and included tutoring, college preparation, summer leadership programs at UCLA and in Sacramento, as well as dozens of field trips to museums, universities and colleges, and other sites. He attended a summer education leadership conference in Sacramento, where he met Latino leaders in the State Assembly, universities, private industries, and other fields. This experience marked a major turning point for Marvin; when he returned to school he became very active, joining a number of clubs and joining the leadership of various organizations. This experience, together with the encouragement from his teachers, reinforced his desire to go to college although his parents had only gone through elementary school.

He was also motivated by a strong sense of responsibility toward his parents, whose lives had been difficult. His father had jobs as a dishwasher in different hotels, a janitor, and day laborer. His mother took care of children in the building where they lived and cleaned houses in affluent neighborhoods in Los Angeles. “When I think back, it was very courageous of [my parents] to move to a different country. It must have been a very difficult decision.”

After finishing high school Marvin worked at a series of jobs and took courses at East Los Angeles Community College. It had been his ambition to go to the University of Southern California (USC); in 1995 he applied and, to his surprise, was accepted. He received scholarships, grants and loans, and graduated in 1998 with a double major in Political Science and International Relations. While at USC he had volunteered at CARECEN (the Central American Resource Center), and in 1999 began working there full time, serving in various capacities, including Director of Education and subsequently Executive Director. In December 2011, he joined Asian Americans Advancing Justice/LA (Previously the Asian Pacific American Legal Center - APALC) as Leadership Development Director, which oversees programs in leadership development and interethnic relations for youth and parents.

Juan

Juan was born in Guatemala and came to the United States at the age of six with his family in the late 1980s. His grandparents, who had spoken Quiché, had migrated from the highlands to the southern coast of Guatemala, where they assimilated into the mainstream Ladino culture and lost their indigenous language and culture. It was a period of prosperity on the southern coast fincas and Juan’s grandparents

and parents did well economically relative to other workers. Juan's father, a brick layer, was able to accumulate enough land to provide a house to each of his married children.

When Juan and his parents arrived in the Los Angeles area they initially lived with his uncle in Lakeview Terrace on a street where most of their neighbors were retired Anglos. Students at his elementary school, however, were primarily Latino and Black. The family later moved to North Hollywood and subsequently to Van Nuys, where the neighborhood was rougher. Juan's mother worked as a housekeeper and babysitter, living in with a family in West Los Angeles. This meant that he did not see her all week long, which "was very difficult for me."

Several factors that were influential in Juan's life and the direction it took. First, he had a strong family network, including numerous cousins that served as a safety net after migrating and provided a buffer against the rough neighborhood in which he lived. Second, on weekends he often spent time with the family his mother worked for. "Her employer became like a second mom." The experience of interacting with a middle class family served as a "cultural bridge" and gave him "the skills I needed to navigate in an Anglo world." Like other children of immigrants, he became a cultural mediator for his parents, helping them integrate into the U.S.

A "self-identified nerd," Juan also attributes his experience in school as being formative in his life. In middle and high school, he was able to enroll in magnet programs that emphasized math and science; and in which the students were very competitive. Most of his classmates were Asian and white. Reflecting on his experience, Juan mentions that "I became very conscious of being a 'super-minority' and of the big gap between the magnet program I was in and the experiences of regular students. I began to understand how I had been detoured off the course that would have been normally intended for me."

Also formative was a summer bridge program he participated in prior to entering college. Juan had several options for college, among them UC Berkeley, UCLA, and USC; he chose UCLA in order to remain closer to his home and family. Initially intending to majoring in science, math or business - similar to his classmates in the magnet program, the summer bridge program led to a change of heart; "I discovered that what I really wanted was to learn more about my culture."

Juan decided to major in Chicano Studies and Latin American Studies with a minor in Portuguese. He "found a very welcoming space" in Chicano Studies where he was particularly attracted to its focus on social justice, culture, and politics. Through his activism in the Chicano Studies program Juan became involved in initiatives of the Academic Advancement program, and participated in the community outreach programs of the Student Retention Center, through which students create bridges with the community, and the Barrio Youth Alternatives program, which mentors urban youth and of which he was a co-director. He subsequently entered the graduate program in the Ethnic Studies at UC Berkeley and worked with day laborers, including Mayans from Guatemala, in a nearby town.

Oscar

Oscar grew up in Cuscatzingo, a rural town in El Salvador which was the scene of frequent battles between the FMLN forces and government troops during the 1980s. His film, *Innocent Voices*, vividly portrays this experience, in which the everyday lives of innocent children are continually interrupted by the violence of war and conflicts between insurgents seeking change and government forces attempting to preserve the status quo.

Oscar fled to the United States in 1985 as a young teenager; he lived with an uncle in Pico Union and attended Belmont High School. He estimates that eighty percent of the students at Belmont were gang members or hung out with gang members, and he himself began to be involved in the gang lifestyle. His life changed as a result of a Spanish teacher who encouraged him to read and sent him to the track and field coach to participate in the Belmont Cross-Country Team, all Latino and one of the best in the nation. He also began to associate and compete academically with Filipino and Korean kids, and by the time he graduated he was accepted to several universities. He went to UC Berkeley with the intention of majoring in Engineering but shifted to Latin American Studies and Spanish.

In college, Oscar developed a passion for film and would spend his free time at the movies, sometimes seeing three a day on weekends. After his third year, undocumented students were no longer eligible for in-state tuition; unable to afford the \$7,000 in out-of-state tuition, Oscar left Berkeley and returned to Los Angeles, where he taught English as a second language and looked for a job in the film industry. He began as a driver delivering packages for a talent agency; when he decided he wanted to quit in order to take acting classes the agency offered to pay for them and asked for rights to represent him as an actor.

Throughout this period, Oscar rarely thought about his experiences in El Salvador. After 9/11, however, he started having flashbacks to his childhood and eventually experienced a breakdown. His therapy was to write what became the script for *Innocent Voices* in which the young protagonist, Chava, is his alter-ego. He showed it to a well-known Latin American director Luis Mandoki, who agreed to work with him on it. The experience was a wrenching one, requiring him to dredge up repressed memories that he didn't want to think about, but the end result was a powerful statement about the effects of war.

Innocent Voices was a critical success and has been distributed nationally and internationally, including in El Salvador, where it led to a public dialogue about the war of the 1980s. It has had a powerful emotional and, in some cases, life-changing effect on children as well as adults. In Mexico, Oscar recalls "we were seeing that children as young as seven, eight, nine years old were actually coming to see the movie, and then they would come back and bring their parents to see it." The director's son, after seeing the film, reportedly threw away all of his violent toys. When it was shown at Belmont, his old

high school, students were so captivated that they stayed to discuss it for hours. There have been special showings for other schools and organizations such as Homies Unidos.

Oscar has also written a book based on his childhood and continues to work in film; he was a writer for the film *Máncora* (2008), set in Peru, and producer for *Boom Town*, a western action drama set for release in 2013. He remains in close contact with his family, which he sees every weekend. "I try out my ideas on my family. We all came from poverty and war, from never having enough. Things are much better for us now, but we still limit ourselves or make choices as though we were poor and living in the midst of war." As part of UNICEF's campaign against child soldiers, he presents his film and speaks about it all over the world. He is also pushing local programs to help children and youth: He mentions, "My real passion is helping kids who have been victims of violence and helping to create conditions so they don't have to be victims of violence...I really want to reach out to kids like me in L.A...trying to change the opportunities for kids in this city is all part of trying to change me, to heal me. It's a way to create the possible life for me while I live in this world."

BUILDING A COMMON NARRATIVE

As these cases show, the influences of families and neighborhoods, school and peer groups, college and in some cases the conflicts in their home countries, interacted in various ways to shape the identities, interests, and values of young Central Americans. Several of them (and/or their parents) had been directly or indirectly influenced by the conflicts in their respective countries. Randy's family had fought on both sides of the conflict in El Salvador. Marvin's family was forced to flee when his father received death threats. Susan had come with her mother following a harrowing experience in which her mother had been detained as a member of the Salvadoran opposition and Susan thought she would never see her again. Mario's father was killed as a result of his union activism.

Some, such as Oscar, lived in war zones where violence was a daily experience. Mario's experiences included military service in the FMLN, which he joined at the age of ten, and capture and torture by government forces.

These experiences with the conflicts in their home countries affected young Central Americans in various ways. For some, the violence in their new communities was only an extension of the violence back home: Randy compared the violence of the civil war in El Salvador with that he and other young Central Americans encountered in Los Angeles. For others, the encounters left emotional and psychological scars. Both Mario and Oscar suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, a condition that was triggered by events several years later, as is common with PTSD. Ironically, this experience was a turning point for them both. During treatment for PTSD, Mario was encouraged to get a college education

and enrolled in Los Angeles Trade Tech, where further encouragement from a teacher persuaded him to pursue his poetry. Oscar wrote the screenplay for the critically-acclaimed *Innocent Voices*, which launched his film career.

Although born in the United States, Hector and Miguel were influenced by the political activism of their parents and their interaction with former combatants of the FMLN during a visit to El Salvador. According to Hector, through conversations with these politically committed Salvadoran counterparts who were about their age, he came to understand what they were fighting for and the strong feelings of belonging and empowerment that being part of the revolution had given them. Having been a gang member in the U.S., he found similarities with their gang experience: “we risked our lives together (with FMLN youth activists)...; several FMLN youth activists – our friends – were killed or injured during electoral campaigns that we participated in.” But the sense of empowerment they felt and the conviction they could be part of an important change—”fighting for something worthwhile, to make a better world” - was something he had never felt growing up in the United States.

For Miguel as well, the experience was a turning point: “...something broke for me...I got into politics – Proposition 187, the elections in El Salvador.” Both Hector and Miguel continue to be concerned about events in Central America and Central Americans in the United States. Hector’s subsequent academic research has focused on the revolutionary movements in El Salvador and Nicaragua and issues related to solidarity and resistance to U.S. policy in Central America in the 1980s. Miguel’s blog, *The Central Americanist*, focuses on providing information about Central Americans and enabling them to dialogue with each other.

The circumstances of their departure from Central America also affected the conditions immigrants encountered in coming to the United States. Similar to other Salvadorans and Guatemalans arriving during this period, many of them were undocumented; and despite their experiences in Central America they were not necessarily accepted as refugees. As a result, many new immigrants worked long hours in difficult, low-wage jobs. In some families both parents worked, often leaving little time for their children, particularly in those cases when women worked as live-in housekeepers or child care workers. Due to their undocumented status and lack of English language skills, even those who had been professionals in their home countries were able to find jobs only in the rapidly growing low-wage manufacturing and service sectors. Families often lived in crowded and cramped conditions, sometimes sharing an apartment or small house with several other families: Marvin noted that nine members of his family lived for several years in a one-room apartment. In addition, in contrast to other refugee populations, such as those from Cuba and Vietnam, Salvadorans and Guatemalans were undoubtedly aware that they were perceived to be on the “wrong side” of conflicts back home from the point of view of the U.S. government.

Many of these families settled into neighborhoods, such as South Los Angeles and Pico Union in the Los Angeles area, in which gangs, delinquency, poor schools and low expectations on the part of teachers were the norm – conditions that often lead to assimilation into a low-performing subculture among second generation immigrants (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, 45-6). Several young Central Americans we interviewed had friends among gang members. They are unusual in that they either avoided participation in gangs or withdrew from gang activity, but some continue their friendships with gang members. One respondent noted that he may have as many friends in the California prison system as among his peers in the university. Their experiences gave them an understanding of the reasons young people join gangs and a desire to help inner city youth. Randy, Mario and Juan, have worked with these youth as part of their professional or volunteer work. Oscar screened his film in inner city schools and to former gang members in Homies Unidos. Susan has dedicated her life's work to projects to assist former gang members or youth in the juvenile justice system.

Like other youth growing up in low-income minority neighborhoods, several of our informants criticized the low expectations and conditions of the schools they attended as barriers to success. Reflecting the conditions of their neighborhoods, the schools were often deteriorating and understaffed. As Mario pointed out, many teachers were unaware of the traumatic conditions some of their students had experienced in their home countries. The lack of English language ability among some students also presented obstacles and school administrators often did not know how to address their needs; Susan was obliged to repeat the third grade as a result. Karina's experience at Belmont High School presents an example of low expectations when she was falsely accused of cheating and was told by an administrator that as a school of immigrants, they did not expect high performance from their students.

In many of the schools the students were largely Latino and predominantly Mexican and Mexican American, and at times there has been tension between more established Mexicans and newly arrived Central Americans. Historically, this tension goes back to early nineteenth century when the Central American provinces became independent of Mexico; in addition, some Mexicans resented the fact that undocumented Central American immigrants, unlike their Mexican counterparts, claimed refugee status. Some Central Americans in turn had negative experiences while traveling through Mexico en route to the United States. Mario and Randy, among others, experienced discrimination from Mexican Americans who ridiculed their use of Salvadoran words and phrases. These tensions were apparently less salient in San Francisco than in Los Angeles, perhaps because Salvadorans were historically a sizeable part of the Latino population prior to the influx of Central Americans in the 1980s.

At the same time, Los Angeles was experiencing a demographic change due to the dramatic growth in the number of immigrants coming to the region, primarily from Mexico, Central America and other Latin American countries but also from Asia and the Middle East. Partly as a result, many

neighborhoods were undergoing change: South Los Angeles, for example, was experiencing a shift from a predominantly African American to a mixed African American-Latino population. African Americans were among Randy's closest friends when he was growing up and his heroes were African Americans such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. For Marvin, school was the first encounter with Asians as well as African Americans. Juan, Mariana and Oscar found that many of their classmates were Asian when they went into special programs for gifted students. Hector and Miguel grew up in a community in which "it was normal to socialize and be close friends with non-Latinos and non-Central Americans." Growing up in these rapidly changing communities allowed for a greater opening to multi-ethnic diversity among this generation of Central Americans, but in some cases also created concerns about inter-ethnic relations.

Despite negative experiences in inner city schools, several Central Americans interviewed were singled out as having exceptional ability or potential: some were given scholarships or sent to magnet schools or other special programs for high achieving students. Randy attributed his ability to avoid joining gangs to the support he received from teachers and a three year scholarship from the Better Chance program. Several others, including Mariana, Marvin, Oscar, Hector, and Mario, mention encouragement they received from particular teachers or counselors as an important factor in giving them confidence in their own abilities. Hector states that he had had "several guardian angels" who helped him along the way, including his faculty advisor, who encouraged him to remain in graduate school when he was ready to give up. Mario was encouraged by an instructor at Trade Tech who after reading his poetry steered him to poetry groups at the bookstore Mi Casa; Mario sees this encouragement as an important turning point in his life. Others, such as Marvin, took advantage of special programs provided for migrants and inner city students, including leadership training and information about applying for college. Sports could also provide an alternative to gangs for young immigrants and minority groups; Hector and Miguel took up wrestling; Oscar was encouraged by a teacher to participate on the all-Latino Belmont Track Team.

Families were of course important influences. Juan's extended family provided a buffer against the rough neighborhood he lived in. Although some experienced tension and violence in their homes, individual family members served as positive role models, as Karina's mother and grandmother, both of whom she admires as "strong women" and cites as major influences in her life. There is also recognition among these second and 1.5 generation Central Americans of the sacrifices and struggles their families had to endure; Marvin and Mariana, among others, expressed appreciation for their parents who worked hard to provide opportunities for their children that they had never enjoyed. Hector notes that the solidarity activities of their parents influenced his and Miguel's decision to major in political science, and undoubtedly influenced their civic and political activism.

College was a transformative experience for many of the young Central Americans we interviewed. Many were the first in their families to pursue higher education; the parents of Marvin and Juan, for example, had not gone beyond elementary school. For some, the process of entering college itself was a challenge. College costs were often prohibitive for families with limited incomes, and while the young Central Americans we interviewed were highly qualified, many were undocumented and precluded from receiving financial aid. Between 1985 and 1990, undocumented students who had lived in California could pay in-state tuition to attend public colleges and universities, but a California court decision (Bradford vs. UC Regents) in 1990 made undocumented students ineligible for financial aid or in-state tuition. Thus Oscar, who was unable to pay out-of-state tuition, was forced to drop out of college as a result. It was not until the passage of California AB540 in 2001 that undocumented students who had graduated from California high schools were able to pay in-state tuition. But they still lacked access to financial aid until the passage of the California Dream Act in 2011, so many, like Mariana, had to work to support themselves while in college.

College was often the place where young Central Americans encountered issues of ethnic identity and national origins for the first time. By the mid-1980s, some professors and instructors had begun to introduce courses on Central America and incorporate information and analysis on Central America into their other courses. Randy, a Salvadoran, took course on Central American history and politics while enrolled at Occidental College. He subsequently was instrumental in the formation of Central American student organizations on several campuses. For Marvin, another Los Angeles student, it was through college courses in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Southern California and an internship at CARECEN-Los Angeles that he became aware of the Central American experience, the conflict of the 1980s, the peace accords, the solidarity movement, and the experience of immigrants in the United States. This experience motivated him to read more, to ask questions such as why had his parents come to the United States, and to think about his own identity - what it meant to be a Salvadoran. Several interviewees, such as Juan and Oscar, shifted their plans from majoring in fields such as engineering or business to concentrate on ethnic and cultural studies while in college.

At the same time, several of the college graduates we interviewed shared their frustrations and those of other students of Central American ancestry with the absence of Central American studies programs or Central American course material in Chicano Studies programs at their colleges. Mario, a Salvadoran, acknowledged that he learned a lot as a Chicano Studies major at UCLA, but was frustrated by the fact that few professors focused on the Central American experience. As he noted

“ [very few] have any interest in or appreciation for the Central American experience. When you try to raise it in class, the reaction is often negative. One professor actually told me ‘the last time I checked, this was a Chicano studies class!’ We have had to fight

for our space. There is only one Central American studies class in the program, and it has only been taught once.”

Despite frustration at the absence of Central American content, students of Central American ancestry who took courses in Chicano studies programs recognized that Chicano contemporary achievements are the results of past struggles. Juan was attracted to the Chicano Studies program because of its focus on social justice, culture, and politics. As he commented,

“I am indebted to Chicano Studies courses...for their emphasis on pride in where you come from and on activism. There is a huge activist tradition within the department at UCLA. The spaces we have today were created by previous struggles by Chicanos in the 60s and 70s. I was grateful for those spaces.”

Similarly, as Hector expressed it, “Chicanos have earned a space to get their history told.” But Central Americans do not see themselves as fitting into the mainstream or the Chicano context. There is a space for Chicano studies but “that doesn’t reflect us, doesn’t reflect who we are.... We have to fight for our own spaces and earn the right to tell our own history.” For some Central American Americans, interactions with Chicanos, Mexicans and other Latinos resulted in their emphasizing a single national identity—Guatemalan, Salvadoran, Honduran or Nicaraguan—100 percent. Others embraced a broader Central American or pan-ethnic identity and community. Several joined Epicentroamerica, a cultural organization with a specific Central American focus, not limited to a specific country of origin. Over time, the Central American presence has itself influenced the content of ethnic and Latino studies programs, which now include the Central American experience. Central American students at California State University, Northridge, a campus with the largest concentration of Central American ancestry students in Southern California, lobbied for a Central American program, and in fall 2000, the university established the first program in the country offering a minor in Central American studies, followed by a research center focusing on studies of both Central America and of Central Americans in the United States and, in 2007, the first bachelor’s degree in Central American Studies. As noted above, Susan was a founder of the Central American Alumni Association at CSUN. Several students at UCLA, such as Mariana and Mario, were also active in the undocumented student movement and efforts to pass the Dream Act, through organizations such as IDEAS.

IDENTITY FORMATION

Imposed identities vs. Optional Identities

Identities have been defined as “perceptions that people construct about themselves and others” (Gans, 1999). Identities may be ascribed, i.e., imposed by others, or optional identities, i.e., chosen by the individual, or self-identity (Gans, 1999; Suarez-Orozco, 2004, p. 277). Imposed or ascribed identities assign an individual to a specific group, such as an ethnic or racial group, which in turn is associated with certain characteristics, both positive and negative, and may result in acceptance, or discrimination and exclusion, of the relevant group. This identity may also be internalized as part of the self-identity of the affected individual(s). Mariana’s response to perceived discrimination by her non-Latino peers in a special studies program had the temporary effect of fostering a negative feeling toward her own Latino identity; later on attending a predominantly Latino high school she was deemed to be “too white” in contrast to her Latino peers.

As the above suggests, identities often are negotiated or defined in reaction to the perceptions of others, or one’s own perceptions of similarities and differences with others (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001, p. 151; Obloler, 2002, p.74). For second and 1.5 generation immigrants it is particularly complex. New immigrants often find themselves in a context in which for the first time their “differentness” is apparent, in which their nationalities, and in some cases race and ethnicity, are distinct from the “norm.” Many young Central Americans live and go to school in Latino neighborhoods, but school may also be the first venue where they interact with other ethnic groups. This is particularly true in Los Angeles where the growth of the Central American population in the 1980s and 1990s was part of broader demographic changes with the influx of immigrants from Asia and the Middle East as well as Mexico and other Latin American countries. Juan, Mariana and Oscar experienced their “differentness” when they entered magnet schools or advanced education programs in which their classmates were primarily Anglo, Asian American or African American.

For young Central Americans, their “otherness” was not only experienced in connection with other ethnic groups, but other Latinos and settled Central Americans as well. As noted above, Central Americans coming to Los Angeles in the 1980s arrived in a region in which Mexican and Mexican Americans had been the dominant Latino group for many generations. Some Central Americans experienced a certain amount of resentment or ridicule on the part of Mexican Americans. Additionally, some Central American migrants were embarrassed by the reputation of their countries for violence and poverty, and the way their own poverty as new arrivals compared to the status of their more established relatives and friends. Some well-established Salvadorans who had arrived in the U.S. decades earlier even looked down on the new arrivals and didn’t want to be associated with them (Menjívar, 2000, p.105-106; Hamilton and Chinchilla, 2001, p. 203).

Whether because of the traumatic experiences from their home countries, negative stereotypes and discrimination by Mexican Americans and other Latinos, fear of being deported, or some

combination of these, many new Central American Americans developed what has been termed a “strategic non-identity” (Arias, 2003). This could mean keeping their pre-immigration origins hidden (as in the case of Susan and her mother), or adopting a more generic Latino identity in public. In some cases, Central American immigrants did not tell their children why they came or about the history of the war and U.S.-Central American relations as a defense mechanism and a way to protect their children. But not all families adopted a “strategic non-identity” approach with their children: among the Guatemalans and Salvadorans who came to the U.S. in the late 1970s and 1980 were activists -- leaders of political, labor, or student movements in their home countries -- who often continued their activism in solidarity activities in the United States, as Hector and Miguel’s parents.

For many 1.5 and second generation immigrants, college is often where ethnic identities become crystallized, it is also where multifaceted identities may develop. Classes, interaction with other students, and the availability of a range of ethnic and other types of organizations and programs broaden knowledge and understanding of possibilities for choosing and integrating different identities in the formation of one’s own unique identity (Brittrel and Nibbs, 2009: 679-80).

Individual Identities

As discussed in recent literature on the subject, identities are not necessarily fixed over time and can change according to the situation or context (Levitt, 2002; Obloler, 2009; Tovar and Feliciano, 2009). In a discussion of second generation Haitians, Fournon and Glick-Schiller note that “as young people mature, they develop multiple, overlapping, and simultaneous identities and deploy them in relation to events they experience at home, at school, at work, in the country of their birth, and in the country of their ancestry” (2001, p. 64; see also Lam and Smith, 2009). In short, identities are often fluid and multiple, changing over time and varying according to context.

Thus, depending in part on the context in which they are received, and the nature of identities “imposed” by society at large, as well as the interaction of various influences – family, community, school, college - young Central Americans found that they had certain options in the ways they define themselves. They might think of themselves as Salvadoran or Guatemalan; Salvadoran American or Guatemalan American, Central American, Latino, as well as various combinations and non-ethnic identities. Juan commented “my identity changes based on the setting.” Growing up he thought of himself as Latino while recognizing that he and his family were Guatemalan. Later “I wanted to be Chicano for a while because I wanted to identify with social change activism and this was a space I thought I could claim, one that I didn’t see restricted to Mexican Americans.”

Individual ethnic/national identities often emerge gradually or even imperceptibly over time, the seemingly “logical” outcome of family and community networks and experiences. Marvin, who came to

the United States from El Salvador as a child, considers himself Salvadoran American at the same time that he has a strong sense of loyalty to the United States: “I’ve lived here most of my life; I went to school here; I have friends and family here. My two kids are U.S. citizens. I love this country. It is my adopted country; I feel strongly about it.” This sense of dual identities occurs frequently among first generation immigrants, although they may express it in distinct forms.

In other cases, identities are crystallized by a particular event. For Karina, discrimination resulted in a form of “reactive identity” – an identity that is formed in reaction or opposition to actual or perceived discrimination. Although born in El Salvador, Karina grew up thinking of herself as an American, but a pivotal incident convinced her that others didn’t think of her that way. She was married and expecting her first child when she was approached by an immigration officer on a train who proceeded to cross examine her at length: As Karina recounts, “I can be a feisty woman when it comes to defending myself or others, and I told him he was harassing me.” The train was full of immigrants and tourists, speaking other languages, including Japanese and East European languages, but it was clear she was being targeted “because I was a small, brown, pregnant woman.” The agent later told her husband that she could be jailed for her behavior. “Up to that point, I hadn’t questioned my Americanness...But I had just been kicked out of the American nation...I felt that I would always be picked out of the group and made to verify that I belonged.” Not considering herself American – although admitting that she is acculturated, and not considered sufficiently Salvadoran by Salvadoran nationalists, she often thinks of herself as “a person without a nation,” but she retains her Central American connections through participation in organizations such as the Centro Cultural Centroamericano of Los Angeles and her exploration of Central American-American poetry and literature.

But for Karina and others, ethnic/national identity is not their only important identity and for some, it is not even their most important one. Karina sees herself as having multiple identities. She identifies strongly with being an immigrant. Other identities important to her are being a mother, an artist, and a scholar. Her spirituality is an important part of her identity and she also claims “... a strong ‘urban inclusive’ identity that comes across in my work.”

Few identified specifically as Central American, in part reflecting diverse histories and demographics and considerable variation within countries in terms of class and rural-urban origins as well as ethnicity and politics. In thinking about organizing as Central Americans in a city like Los Angeles, a number of activists also point to an historic tendency of Salvadoran organizations to dominate in organizations and political coalitions, reflecting their greater numbers and the percentage of Salvadorans with organizing experience prior to migrating in the 1980s. One Salvadoran we interviewed commented: “Salvadorans are great at organizing, but the problem is sustaining unity. They lack appreciation of what others are doing.”

In contrast to many young Central Americans, Mario thinks of his identity more broadly, as encompassing the whole Central American region. He feels that calling himself Salvadoran is too limiting. He knows that he is different from the Central Americans back home but feels, nevertheless, that “Central American” fits him and people like him the best, especially when distinguishing themselves from Mexicans and other Latin Americans; as he expresses it:

“I feel like we are all Central Americans and that Central America is really one country...We are mixed, historically, racially, etc. but we are united too. We share a common history with [in terms of relations with] the United States, for example, and of war and repression. We share a certain collective experience. Within the U.S. context, I think Central Americans are an ethnicity. The Central American experience is unique and distinctive within the Latino-Latin American context.”

Hector considers himself a Salvadoran, but also believes there is a self-conscious identity among Salvadorans and other Central Americans as part of the Central American community. He also asserts that he has “no problem with identifying pan-ethnically...It’s context-dependent.” Several of those we interviewed believe that the apparent absence of Central American unity had begun to change, especially around issues of U.S. immigration policies and mobilizing voters to influence U.S. elections. Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans and other Central Americans have not only begun to coordinate some of their efforts but have also forged alliances with other U.S. Latino groups and in some cases other ethnic groups. They highlight the fact that Central Americans in the United States have also come together on regional issues of mutual interest, such as the campaign against the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), which they believed would worsen conditions for the poor in their home countries.

The move towards greater cooperation among Central American national origin groups, alliances with other Latinos, and in some cases collaboration with other ethnic groups seemed to be especially notable at colleges and universities where students from different backgrounds began to form social, political, and artistic networks to support their projects. As noted above, one example of these networks was Epicentroamerica, a group of Central American writers and artists who met periodically to encourage each other and plan public performances and which continues to exist through the internet, nurtured by occasional special reunion performances. Epicentroamerica became an important vehicle for the visibility and promotion of cultural production by Central American Americans through the presentation of performances, tours, and workshops. The group, now called Epicentro, continues to exist as a communications network in cyberspace to discuss issues of common interest, including identity(ies). An anthology of the work of Epicentro poets and writers is currently in process. Another example is the mobilization of undocumented Central Americans as well as other undocumented students in California to

push for recognition as in-state residents, enabling them to obtain a reduction in tuition costs, and subsequently for access to financial aid. Their efforts have not only been successful at the state level, but also have national implications.

For still others, such as Oscar, the Salvadoran filmmaker described earlier, the very concept of identifying ethnically or nationally is too limited. He expands the concept of identity to a global level, wishing to

“identify with and respect humanity as a whole... I seem to always have had something that resists being defined and isolated...I feel that the desire for communication and connection is something that you find all over the world, something we are all hungry for...The identity I feel strongest about is being a human being that is alive.”

Generational Identities: The “Nueva Vanguardia”

In defining themselves in terms of, or in opposition to, the “other,” several young Central Americans we interviewed, chiefly Salvadorans and Salvadoran Americans, expressed a strong sense of being part of the “new generation” as distinct from the “old generation” – those Central Americans who immigrated as adults, were very active politically, and continue to be focused on their country of origin. According to Mario: “We are the “nueva vanguardia” in contrast to the “vieja vanguardia”... We are very aware that we are between two, two time periods, two generations...” Although they may express respect and admiration for the commitment and dedication of this earlier group of migrant activists, some believe that many of them are stuck in the past; their notion of what it means to be Salvadoran is frozen in time. According to one young adult, the older generation doesn’t necessarily speak to their needs: younger people want a culture that is more open to their perspectives: “[w]e want venues to promote our ideas, our world, our visions – what being Central American means to us.”

The distinction between the “old” and “new” generation was drawn at various levels. According to several, members of the old generation, particularly those from El Salvador, are focused on the home country and often think in terms of eventually returning, while the younger generation recognizes they are here to stay and is more oriented to Central Americans in the United States. The younger generation also sees itself as more pragmatic: for the older generation, community and political work came first; the younger generation seeks a balance between these commitments and personal life.

The older generation is inclined to associate with other members of their own nationality while the younger generation is more open to intra-ethnic and inter-ethnic cooperation, an inclination that undoubtedly is related to their experience growing up in ethnically mixed neighborhoods and interacting with different ethnic groups in school and college. Although Los Angeles tended to be ethnically

segregated, some neighborhoods were undergoing change as a result of the new immigration; Randy grew up in what had been a predominantly Black neighborhood and he continues to emphasize the importance of coalitions between Blacks and Latinos working together. “Both communities face high unemployment rates, high dropout rates, systemic poverty, gang violence, a disproportionate number of prison inmates, and continual discrimination” (Ertll, 2009, 15). Several other students interacted with other ethnic groups in high school and college. At Belmont, Oscar “started hanging out with Filipino and Korean students and competing actively with them.” Asians also predominated in the gifted and honors programs that Karina was enrolled in during elementary and middle school. At UCLA, Juan had “mostly Latino friends,” especially Mexican Americans, but also “a sprinkling of others – Asian, Pacific Islanders, Blacks.”

Finally, according to some among the younger generation, there is a distinction between the concepts of identity that characterize younger vs. older folks in terms of their ease with diversity and multiple identities. As Mario expressed it,

“The vieja vanguardia homogenizes the different identities in our community – indigenous, gays and lesbians, women, etc. We on the other hand, take seriously the multiple identities within us and among us. We know we are very multi-dimensional. We know that there are differences among us – linguistic differences, differences in our views of nationalism, etc. – but we emphasize that which binds us.”

Transnational⁵ Identities

Many young Central Americans have a sense of being part of a diaspora that retains personal, cultural, economic and/or political relations with their countries of origin; they see their roots as an important element of who they are. For many, their specific ancestral identity is important, even if they were born or raised in the United States. At the same time, the large and growing presence of Central Americans in the United States facilitates a sense of community among compatriots across borders that are not limited by location. As expressed by Marvin, “I see the Salvadoran community not as geographic. El Salvador is everywhere...Salvadoran Americans include my parents, me, my children.” Oscar stays “grounded in where I came from through my strong ties with my family in L.A.”

For those who migrated as children, attitudes toward their countries of origin are colored by memories and perceptions of childhood experiences. Oscar now associates El Salvador with the violence that shattered his childhood; Mario remembers a country “in which assassinations, death, blood were

⁵ Transnationalism as used here refers specifically to immigrant populations and their descendants who maintain ties with families and communities in their home countries. It is thus distinct from the concept of global identity, which refers to a sense of identity with humanity as a whole.

daily [occurrences].” Often memories are mixed; Randy, who left El Salvador in the 1970s at the age of five, remembers living in an area characterized by conflict and violence, but also has beautiful memories of the home of his early childhood: “my world was a magical place filled with trees, birds, mountains, and a beautiful stream that ran near our house in the countryside of Usulután...” (Ertll, 2009, 3).

Mariana, who left Guatemala at age seven, also has mixed memories. She missed her mother, who had migrated to the United States; her father had left her mother when she was two, and she met him only once, while living with her aunt. Mariana’s case, among others, demonstrates the pain and sense of abandonment often experienced by young children whose parents migrate, often in the hope of providing a better life for their children. But along with a sense of loss and neglect, Mariana had some positive memories: “I remember escaping through the second-story apartment window with my cousin to go out in the street and play when my Tia, who was taking care of us, was at school” She was reunited with her mother when she came to the United States, and finally reconnected with her father again in 2008, nearly twenty years after she left Guatemala.

Few of the young Central Americans interviewed expressed a desire to return to live in the country they and/or their parents had migrated from. Several who traveled to El Salvador were disheartened by the disparities they saw between the newly rich and the abject poverty suffered by many in the population. Some, among them Susan and Randy, complained of the Americanization of the country and loss of national culture, as well as the dependence on remittances from immigrants. They also complained of the efforts of the Salvadoran government to control the immigrant population, including what one termed the “tourism of nostalgia” – counting on migrants in the United States, or their families in El Salvador who receive remittances, to support the modernization of the country by shopping at the new shopping malls, for example. Mario commented on how Central America has changed as a result of foreign, especially U.S., influence:

“When I think of Central America in traditional terms, I think of the marimba, the food, indigenous people, and war. When I think of contemporary Central America, I think of McDonalds, of the dollarization of El Salvador, and of Oliver North in Nicaragua.”

Despite criticism, all of those we interviewed retain a sense of identity with their country of ancestry. Some use terms such as “my country,” “my people” in referring to the country they left as young children. Susan, who lived in El Salvador for an extended period, was turned off by the sexism and injustice she encountered there, and realized she could never really live there permanently. Nevertheless she continues to have a strong attachment to El Salvador, going back “every chance I get, mainly to work, to feel like I’m part of a process to change the tide in my country.” Randy described the Salvadoran people as “heroic people, people who struggle...The Salvadoran people have had to survive war, violence,

exploitation, abuse against women and children, of our own people against each other...But the bulk of people are honest and hard-working.”

The significance of ties with the home country was also expressed by several Central Americans who emphasized the importance of young Central Americans returning to visit their home countries, or taking their children so they can learn more about their country of ancestry. In some cases Central American or Latino organizations have sponsored such trips. Young Central Americans also spoke of the importance of educational and cultural programs that reinforce their roots. The Central American program at CSUN is seen as having a critical role in developing a consciousness among young Central Americans of their roots as well as a consciousness of the transnational nature of the Central American community and respective national communities.

Young Central Americans have an increasing sense of taking charge not only of their own personal destinies but also of the future of their communities in the United States. As pointed out by Mario, “Today, some of us of Central American background are becoming scholars. With more Central American programs we will be writing our own literature, form our own discourse, shape our own culture, and forge our own identity.”

Conclusions

The individual stories of the Central American Americans we interviewed are unique, and their specific trajectories distinguish them from the general population of young Central Americans in the United States. Nevertheless, certain patterns can be identified in comparing them, both with other Central American 1.5 and second generation immigrants, and with each other.

First, similar to other Central American Americans arriving in the 1980s and early 1990s, many of our interviewees had left countries in the midst of conflict and in some cases had been traumatized by their experiences of war and persecution. Like others, they and/or their parents were often undocumented and confronted the reluctance of the U.S. government to recognize them as refugees. Most of their parents worked long hours in low wage jobs, and many lived in neighborhoods where poverty, the presence of gangs, underperforming schools, and low expectations were often the norm. Several had friends among gang members, and some became involved in gangs themselves. Tensions with other ethnic groups, and even other Latino groups, were not uncommon. Some also experienced abuse and violence within their families.

At the same time, there are several factors shared by these young Central Americans which differentiate them from others in their cohort and help to explain why their trajectories deviated from what is generally considered the norm. Many received encouragement from individual teachers or counselors which reinforced their interest in their education and their ambition to excel. They also took

advantage of various programs which expanded their knowledge and understanding of different opportunities and options available and further prepared them to enter college. Some received support from their parents, many of whom had only completed grade school, as well as encouragement from friends and peer groups.

Finally, these Central American-Americans have generally thought about issues related to identity. They do not necessarily see themselves as bound by a single identity, but generally claim multiple identities which they can invoke according to the situation. Many of these young Central Americans differentiated themselves from the older generation as being more inclusive, open to cooperation with different national and ethnic groups, and often less preoccupied with conditions in the home countries and more concerned with Central Americans and other ethnic and minority groups in the United States. Furthermore, ethnic identities are not the only, or often even the major, type of identity; personal, professional, or various types of group identities might be equally or more important. Thus college students who organized to obtain legal status “came out” and openly identified themselves as undocumented – often after many years of struggling to hide their undocumented status, signaling a new political and personal identity. Families and community could be sources of identity formation, Although some parents downplayed their Salvadoran and Guatemalan identities - whether due to their undocumented status or the trauma they had experienced and wished to forget, and often as a means of protecting their children - other families chose to embrace their ethnic and national identities.

Frequently it was in college where ethnic and in some cases other identities became solidified. Courses on Central America or reaction to the presence of other ethnic groups led them to seek answers to questions regarding their own ethnic identities. Common experiences, such as efforts to address their undocumented status or becoming active in groups such as Epicentroamerica, led to identification with specific groups. In addition, the changing context, shaped to some extent by the “older” generation, provided exposure to a growing number of organizations, such as CARECEN, SALEF, and others, that were specifically or primarily oriented to Central America and Central Americans in the United States and provided them with opportunities to learn more about their countries or origin. Although few express a desire to return to live in El Salvador or Guatemala, they attempt to maintain relations with the home countries through visits, contact with family members and relatives, professional relationships, or political collaboration.

Despite the difficulties they have experienced, the young Central American Americans we interviewed are a relatively privileged group among their cohort of 1.5 and second generation Central Americans; many of their counterparts are trapped in low-wage jobs, or worse, in the world of gangs and drugs and/or the prison system. To paraphrase Juan’s observation, the trajectory of this small group was not the one normally intended for them, and they recognize they have benefited from the help of others.

They have not forgotten their roots and many have become involved and in some cases dedicated their careers to those less fortunate than they, whether in their countries of origin or U.S. inner cities. Although none specifically claimed ‘activist’ as an identity, nearly all of those we interviewed could be considered political, community, or cultural activists. They are concerned with such issues as promoting immigrant rights, improving conditions in inner city communities, and advancing understanding of Central American history and culture - including participation in community and immigrant rights organizations, providing opportunities for disadvantaged groups and alternatives for former gang members, and promoting an understanding of Central America through teaching and research. Today they are part of the “nueva vanguardia,” emerging leaders in their respective fields, that will help to shape the context for those who come after them.

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