Original Article

The Central American transnational imaginary: Defining the transnational and gendered contours of Central American immigrant experience

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Abstract In this article, I explore recent cultural production about and by Central Americans in the United States, including the independent film *Sin nombre*, Sirias's novel, *Bernardo and the Virgin*, and the autobiographical account, *December Sky: Beyond My Undocumented Life* by Cortez-Davis. Drawing on José Saldivar's conceptualization of a "transnational imaginary," I contend that these cultural works contribute to the formation and continuous redefinition of an emergent Central American transnational imaginary. In so doing, they provide insight into the identities and multiple subject positions taking shape among Central American immigrants in the United States. Moreover, because in all of these texts women play a central role, these works also call attention to the gendered dimensions and implications of such processes.
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Within the span of the last decade, there has been a steady increase in cultural production focused on the experiences of Central American migration and immigrant life in the United States. Notable examples of these works include feature films such as Fukunaga's *Sin nombre* (2009), which portrays the

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harrowing experiences of Central American youth as they journey through Mexico, as well as literary texts penned by US Central American authors, including Tanya María Barrientos, Mario Bencastro, Evelyn Cortez-Davis, Francisco Goldman, Marcos McPeek Villatoro, Leticia Hernández-Linares, Roberto Quesada, Héctor Tobar and Silvio Sirias. Many of these works dialogue with the current reality of Central American migration to the North – one spurred primarily by economic instability – while also engaging with a legacy of political strife and social change that likewise characterizes the transmigrant lives of hundreds of thousands of Central Americans.

Together, these works attest to the growing visibility of Central Americans in the US mainstream – itself, a broader reflection of how the Central American presence is transforming the country's multicultural milieu. They are also, however, suggestive of the ways in which northbound migration and transnationalism have impacted notions of Central American collective identity and immigrant integration into the United States. As I contend, such works signal and are instrumental to the existence of a "Central American transnational imaginary," one marked by memories of war, settlement in the United States, and crossings through Mexico, and in which individual and communal identities are being continuously defined and renegotiated. These works facilitate the transnational imaginings of Central Americans abroad and at home, and in so doing, also provide insight into the complexities of related processes shaped by this same transnational reality such as Central American immigrant subject formation and adaptation to US society.

Here I analyze three works from this growing corpus of US-based Central American representations that as of yet have not received critical attention within the broader fields of Latina/o literary and cultural studies: Sirias's novel *Bernardo and the Virgin* (2005); the autobiographical account *December Sky: Beyond My Undocumented Life* (2003) by Cortez-Davis; and Fukunaga's independent film, *Sin nombre* (2009).[1] Each engages with a different moment of Central American migratory history, allowing for an expansive view of the diverse experiences and salient issues that characterize the Central American immigrant reality and, by the same token, the Central American transnational imaginary. Moreover, in all of these texts women are prominent figures. This fact underscores the need to consider gender as an inherent aspect of Central American international migration and of the collective imaginings and subject formations of Central Americans that have resulted from such migration. Thus, through these works we can garner a better understanding of the transnational and gendered aspects of Central American immigrant lives in the United States.

Central American Transnational Migration and Imagining

Since the 1990s, Central American international migration has been largely conditioned by the implementation of free trade policies and initiatives in

1 Of these three works, *Sin nombre* is perhaps the text that has received the most attention given its relative success as a film. Still, to my knowledge, there are currently no scholarly articles in print written about the film and its focus on the representation of Central Americans. Despite its inclusion as part of the Latino Voices

various countries throughout the region, resulting in the displacement of populations, increased economic disparity and bleak prospects for employment and competitive wages. It has, likewise, been influenced by the devastating effects of tropical weather storms and natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch, which heavily impacted many countries in 1998.[2] Before these more recent waves, however, international migratory flows from Central America to the United States were primarily motivated by the civil conflict and armed warfare in El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua during the 1970s and 1980s. Massive amounts of Guatemalans, Nicaraguans and Salvadorans fled their countries hoping to escape the violence and dire economic circumstances.[3]

Upon arriving to the United States, many Central Americans – namely Salvadorans and Guatemalans – became subject to exclusionary immigration policies owing to US intervention in their countries.[4] Despite these obstacles, Central Americans established thriving immigrant communities and have continued to migrate to the United States, a fact that has had a noteworthy impact on the US Latino demographic and on Central American sending countries. According to the recent census data reported by the Pew Hispanic Center, after Mexican immigrants, Central Americans constitute the largest foreign-born group from Latin America; and of this constituency, Salvadorans are the majority, followed by Guatemalans and Hondurans.[5] All of these immigrant communities have fostered and maintained strong economic, political and cultural ties to their countries of origin that have taken the form of transnational practices and enterprises.[6] Remittances, which have become an integral part of the national economies of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, are a key example.[7]

The involvement of Central American immigrants in these transnational activities, as well as the subsequent forging of more complex transnational social networks or collectivities, has destabilized the notion of "nation" as a territorial space and imagined community demarcated by fixed geographic boundaries and citizenry, be it in reference to the United States or to the sending countries from which these immigrants hail. Indeed, as Concannon *et al* argue, "for many migrants, a sense of home is no longer neat or easy to define as they live or interact with more than one spatial and cultural location" (2009, 5). Such processes are also indicative of an alternate form of adaptation to the United States that contests dominant discourses of assimilation and acculturation (Portes *et al*, 1999, 229). Implicit in both of these postulations is the fact that the different waves of Central American migration to the United States and the transnational exchanges they have given way to has prompted a rethinking of how Central Americans imagine themselves as part of a greater collectivity that transcends regional and national borders, and of how they construct immigrant subjectivities and assert belonging in the United States.

In his exploration of the scholarly works by the Mexican-American intellectual Américo Paredes, in particular the methodology developed by

Series published by Northwestern University Press, *Bernardo and the Virgin* has likewise been overlooked, as has *December Sky*, a grassroots publication with relatively no exposure to mainstream audiences.

2 According to the Epidemiological Bulletin of the Pan American Health Organization (1998), Honduras suffered the biggest losses, having an estimated 1.4 million people reported as either dead, disappeared or wounded.

3 As Repak (1995) details, Central American migration to the United States did exist before the period of civil conflict, though not to the same degree.

4 During the 1980s, asylum policy for Central American refugees was heavily dictated by the Reagan administration's foreign policy, including its financial and military support of "democratic" governments in El Salvador and Guatemala. Unlike Nicaraguan

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Paredes for his ethnographic research and analysis of folklore in the US-Mexico borderlands, Saldívar argues that Paredes's notion of Greater Mexico represents another form of social imaginary, what he terms "the transnational imaginary" (2006, 59). Fundamental to Saldívar's conceptualization of the transnational imaginary is Taylor's discussion of the "social imaginary," defined as "the ways people imagine their social existence," and a process achieved by and expressed through "images, stories, and legends" (Saldívar, 2006, 61–62). According to Saldívar, the transnational context is also imaginary as it, too, focuses on how people conceive of themselves and their surroundings and is characterized by "claims of belonging, community, and rights [that] are formulated and expressed as a discourse of citizenship" (2006, 62). Paredes's notion of Greater Mexico speaks to these very practices as it not only constitutes "an imaginary social space consisting in transnational communities of shared fates" but also one that allows for the "emergence of new citizen-subjects and the construction of new spaces for the enactment of their politics outside the realm of the purely national" (Saldívar, 2006, 59).

Drawing on Saldívar's theory of a "transnational imaginary," I propose that it is also possible to speak of a Central American transnational imaginary that, likewise, constitutes an "imaginary social space consisting in transnational communities of shared fates" in which the politics of identity and questions of subjectivity are at play in diverse ways and at various levels. The transnational communities in question include those established by Guatemalan, Nicaraguan and Salvadoran immigrants whose "shared fates" have been heavily influenced by the experience of civil war and US intervention, by differing contexts of reception and immigrant integration into US society, and by precarious crossings through Mexico. They are also communities that are being constituted not only in relation to the specific nations of origin from which their members emigrate, for indeed national affiliations continue to play a pivotal role in Guatemalan-American, Salvadoran-American and Nicaraguan-American claims of identity, but also their geographic grouping as Central American countries.

Conceiving of Central America as a unifying social space is, of course, not a novel undertaking if we consider historical and economic enterprises based on the same. Take for instance, the short-lived "Central American Federation," which lasted from 1824 to 1839,[8] and financially driven efforts such as the Central American Common Market of the 1950s and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) initiated in the early 2000s.[9] We can also note recent works of cultural analysis such as Arias's *Taking Their Word: Literature and the Signs of Central America* (2007) and Rodríguez's *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (2009) in which the "grand myth" of a unified Central America is likewise critically debated and employed in illuminating explorations of the links between Central American literatures, material processes and identities.[10]

refugees who fled the socialist-based government of the Sandinistas, Salvadorans and Guatemalans were denied the same political status and were categorized as economic immigrants subject to deportation.

5 In keeping with the figures reported in *Statistical Portrait of the Foreign-Born Population in the United States, 2008*, Table 5 "Country of Birth: 2008," the Salvadoran foreign-born population in the United States numbers well over a million, while the number of Guatemalan and Hondurans is 700,000 and 450,000, respectively.

6 Social scientist Portes discusses the "phenomenon" of transnationalism in terms of "transnational activities defined as those that take place on a recurrent basis across national borders and that require a regular and significant commitment of time by participants. Such activities may be conducted by

relatively powerful actors, such as representatives of national governments and multinational corporations or may be initiated by more modest individuals, such as immigrants and their home country kin and relations. These activities are not limited to economic enterprises, but include political, cultural, and religious initiatives as well" (1999, 464). For further reading on transnational practices among Guatemalan, Nicaraguan and Salvadoran immigrant communities, see Popkin (1999), Landolt *et al* (1999) and Cervantes-Rodríguez (2006).

7 The statistical information provided in "Remittance Trends in Central America" (Agunias, 2006) reveals that in 2004 remittances accounted for at least 10 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in the majority of the countries in the region. In El Salvador,

Thus, in speaking of a Central American transnational imaginary I am in dialogue with a pre-existing repertoire of historic, economic and theoretical models that are suggestive of the particular relevance of this regional signifier. However, my intention is not to suggest that the Central American transnational imaginary be understood as a mere reiteration of these models. As I have been arguing, the Central American transnational imaginary is a new articulation that has been engendered precisely by the international migration of scores of Central Americans to the United States and their transnational undertakings in the latter half of the twentieth century. It needs to be understood in this specific context. It is an emerging site that includes Central Americans both in and outside of the region, recalling what Homi Bhabha denotes as a "third space" in which hegemonic structures are reaffirmed and reproduced, but also challenged, and identities and strategies of selfhood are claimed and redefined at both the individual and communal level (Rutherford, 1990).

Affective Representations and Gendered Visions

Works about and by Central Americans in the United States such as *Bernardo and the Virgin*, *December Sky* and *Sin nombre* evince, but are also instrumental in the creation of the Central American transnational imaginary. In keeping with Appadurai's (1996, 31) discussion of the labor of imagination in a globalized world, such narratives enact a form of a "social practice" by providing images and stories about the civil wars, migrations through Mexico, and US integration with which Central Americans at home and abroad relate and through which they can imagine themselves part of a greater collectivity. The ability of Central Americans to engage in such forms of transnational imagining does not only rest, however, on a mutual recognition of the shared experiences recounted through these images and stories, but also on the registry of emotions such images and stories likewise evoke. As Arias notes, "[g]rief, fear, hope, nostalgia, and compassion are among the many affections that inform Central American subjectivity, whether an individual is located on the isthmus itself or outside of it" (2007, xix). It is precisely by reactivating these emotions through the aesthetic (in this case literature and cinema) or, in other words, by functioning as what Deleuze and Guattari (1994) would call a "bloc of sensations," that these US-based cultural works help to inspire a transnational and transregional sense of community among Central Americans.

In what concerns the three works that are the focus of this article, other forms of social practice are also at play. Elsewhere, I have argued that in the case of US Salvadoran narratives, the allegorical representations of women as either the Salvadoran (trans)nation left behind or as "republican mothers" constitute an optic through which to explore female participation in transnational processes such as migration and immigrant community building. Such depictions also

reveal the patriarchal underpinnings of these same endeavors, which have traditionally been perceived as the domain of men.[11] Although here I forego an examination of the symbolic dimensions of women's representations, I nevertheless situate my analysis of the woman-centered immigrant reality brought to bear in *Bernardo and the Virgin*, *December Sky* and *Sin nombre* within the context of this related discussion. For, as I contend, the female portrayals in these written and visual narratives perform a similar critical role in that they too call attention to the gendered tensions and aspects that characterize the Central American immigrant experience.

Through its contemplation of a relatively obscured epoch in US-bound Central American migration in the 1950s, one not characterized by civil conflict or the fear of being undocumented, Sirias's *Bernardo and the Virgin* highlights both women's centrality and the gendered nature of this movement. It likewise showcases the multifaceted process of identity formation among Nicaraguan immigrants. In *December Sky*, Cortez-Davis recounts her quest as a Salvadoran youth struggling to define herself and succeed in the United States during the 1980s despite her undocumented status and her family's war-torn past. Her autobiographical account, a narrative that simultaneously challenges and reaffirms assimilationist paradigms of immigration and the "American Dream," stresses the fact that despite its transnational dimensions, the Central American immigrant experience still remains heavily influenced by dominant "American" ideals. Finally, with *Sin nombre*, we see the current reality of Central American migration. By way of Sayra, the film's lead protagonist, Fukunaga makes pivotal the geopolitics that drive many Central Americans to migrate without documents and the life-threatening hardships they face on the journey through Mexico, both gendered realities that also impact how Central American immigrants construct their sense of self and identity.[12]

In the complex portrait rendered by these texts, one spanning more than 60 years, women emerge as agents and as an essential element of the Central American immigrant reality. Such an understanding of women's participation contrasts with the continued privileging of male experiences in the few comparable works by US Central American authors that have garnered a modicum of critical attention,[13] and is a needed acknowledgment of the fact that since 1980 females have accounted for roughly 45–50 per cent of the legal and unauthorized migrant population residing in the United States (Fry, 2006). Like their male counterparts, women are vital economic mainstays for their families here and abroad. Along with migration, transnational imaginings and the construction of identities are likewise shown to be gendered processes in all three of these cultural works. As these texts ultimately suggest, then, at stake within the Central American transnational imaginary is not only the "emergence of new citizen-subjects and the construction of new spaces for the enactment of their politics outside the realm of the purely national" (Saldívar, 2006, 59), but also how these developments intersect with and are

Nicaragua and Honduras, the figures reported were especially high. Remittances constituted over 15 per cent of Honduras' GDP, 16 per cent of El Salvador's GDP, and in Nicaragua they comprised over 17 per cent of the GDP. With the exception of Panama and Costa Rica, remittances also outweighed private capital flows and official development assistance. As the study also noted, these percentages do not account for remittances that flow through alternate channels such as by way of couriers, which would make these figures rise significantly.

8 The Central American Federation was established following the independence of Central America from Mexico in 1823 and included the following countries: Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

9 The five original countries that agreed to

shaped by other factors such as ethnicity, citizenship status, class, and most notably, gender.

Nicaraguan Immigrants Before and After the Wars

Despite being a novel that is primarily situated in Nicaragua and one in which the history of revolution is central, Sirias's *Bernardo and the Virgin* affords a dynamic depiction of Central American international migration and of the different processes of identity formation taking place among Nicaraguan immigrants in the United States. Based on actual historical events, the novel tells the story of Bernardo Martínez, a humble sacristan from the small town of Cuapa, who witnesses the apparition of the Virgin Mary. Interwoven with Bernardo's account is that of other characters whose experiences encompass those of Sandinistas, corrupt Church officials working for the US government, journalists and Nicaraguans living abroad – to name a few. The end result is a historical portrait that references the Somoza dictatorial regime of the 1930s through the 1970s, the Sandinista-led armed uprising of the latter half of the 1970s, the Contra-War of the 1980s and its aftermath.

One of the many experiences recounted in the novel is that of Paulina Thompson, formerly Paulina Vigil. Paulina left Nicaragua in the early 1950s in an effort to escape the disgrace she had brought upon her family by having a sexual affair with Ramón Arévalo, a member of a well-to-do family who refused to marry her once their liaison became public knowledge. Because Paulina had "been soiled forever," as her mother informs her, Paulina is sent to live with her Tía Antonieta in Los Angeles where she might have a chance at a new start (Sirias, 2005, 292). In emphasizing the personal dimensions of Paulina's expulsion from a Nicaraguan "paradise," Sirias exposes an often-overlooked period of Central American migratory history while also underscoring the gendered dynamics of this process. Before the conflicts of the 1980s, Nicaraguans had already established a minor presence in the United States, of which women were a significant portion, having predominated in migratory flows during the 1960s (Orlov and Reed, 1980).[14] Although Paulina's narrative predates this decade, it nevertheless forms part of this history of Nicaraguan migration, and speaks to the participation of women as pioneers. It also highlights how gender relations and hierarchies, particularly those defined within the family context, as well as social norms and cultural values, greatly impact the migration of women (Boyd and Grieco, 2003). In Paulina's case, it is her family, a traditional patriarchal unit beholden to certain societal standards, that determines that she must leave Nicaragua in order to avoid bringing any further embarrassment and dishonor upon them.[15]

Paulina's eventual settlement in the United States and the ties she establishes with Bernardo also draw attention to other key aspects of the Nicaraguan

participate in CAFTA were Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. They were joined by the Dominican Republic in 2004, prompting a change in the name to CAFTA-DR.

10 Rodríguez, for example, proposes a "transisthmian" model that posits Central America as an "in-between discursive space linking regions, peoples, cultures, and material goods" (2009, 2).

11 See Padilla (2012).

12 Arias (2007) offers a preliminary discussion of the historical relationship between Mexico and Central America and how it has impacted Central American-American identity construction in the United States.

13 Here, I am referring to Mario Bencastro's *Odyssey to the North* (1998), Francisco Goldman's *The Ordinary Seaman* (1997), and Héctor Tobar's

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migratory experience, namely the complex relationships Nicaraguans maintain with their country of origin, including the establishment of transnational networks, and how these bear upon the construction of ethnic-based individual and collective identities. For Paulina, life in the United States was a welcome escape from her shame and a chance to start over again as an "American." Aside from learning English quickly, Paulina married Jake Thompson, a neurophysiologist originally from Iowa, who provided her with a prosperous lifestyle. Still, despite these accomplishments and the fact that upon arriving in Los Angeles she had severed most of her connections to Nicaragua, Paulina "had, very quietly, kept her patria close to her heart" (Sirias, 2005, 300).

Paulina's bittersweet relationship to her *patria* is made all the more complicated by her interactions with Bernardo, whom Paulina enthusiastically agrees to host in her home while he attends the Convention of the Seers of the Blessed Mary in Los Angeles. On the last night of his stay, Paulina accompanies Bernardo "to the home of 'la reina de los nicaragüenses en Los Angeles'," otherwise known as Doña Esmeralda Saavedra, a woman who like Paulina also emigrated to the United States in the 1950s (Sirias, 2005, 309). Esmeralda's representation is striking in that it provides a drastic contrast to that of Paulina, whose upper middle-class status in the United States and immigrant trajectory epitomizes the traditional narrative of assimilation and the fulfillment of the "American dream." Aside from living in the "heart of the Pico District," an area of Los Angeles with the highest concentration of Central Americans – and one that Paulina had never visited – Esmeralda has made it a point to help her fellow *compatriotas* settle in the United States while fostering their sense of Nicaraguan pride and culture (Sirias, 2005, 309).

When Paulina comes into contact with Esmeralda's overtly Nicaraguan-based identity and the community she seems to represent, Paulina is prompted to reflect on her own sense of ethnic individuation. For instance, when Paulina hears Esmeralda address Bernardo with the familiar and specifically Nicaraguan idiom, *ideay*, she becomes cognizant of the degree to which she has become "Americanized." Not only does she realize that she had forgotten that the term *ideay* existed but also that the Spanish she now spoke was a "listless form of textbook Spanish" that was devoid of any Nicaraguan cultural markers (Sirias, 2005, 310).

The juxtaposition between Paulina's sense of being Nicaraguan and that of Esmeralda's brings to light issues that extend beyond the notion of an individual process of ethnic self-identification that is taking place within a US context. Although Paulina has chosen to distance herself from her *compatriotas* and Nicaragua, it is notable that this is not the case for the Nicaraguan immigrant community that thrives in Los Angeles and that has gathered in Esmeralda's house to pay homage to Bernardo. This community has developed and maintained transnational practices, including the re-appropriation of

The Tattooed Soldier (2000).

14 According to the 1970 US Census, close to 30,000 Nicaraguans resided in the United States.

15 The gendered order and subordination of women to men upheld by Paulina's familial structure follows with the designation and expectation of women's roles in Nicaraguan society upheld by the Somoza regime and the Catholic Church during the 1950s and 60s. For further reading on this topic, see David Whisnant's *Rascally Signs in Sacred Places* (1995).

Nicaraguan cultural rituals and ceremonies and the sending of remittances and goods. One of the activities organized by Esmeralda as a tribute to Bernardo is a procession around the block with a "three-foot-tall statue of la Virgen de Cuapa" (Sirias, 2005, 311). Although the apparition of the Virgin occurred in Nicaragua, the celebration of the seer, Bernardo, as well as the procession, reveal it to be an experience that has been exported and recreated in the United States. One can argue, as Cadaval (1998) does, that this procession or display of Nicaraguaness functions as a means of fomenting a Nicaraguan Latino identity.

However, this cultural practice can also be seen as another way in which Nicaraguan immigrants imagine themselves as part of a broader transnational collective and remain connected to their homeland – a process that is anything but straightforward. At the end of the evening Esmeralda makes a pledge to Bernardo to raise enough money to send two pick-up trucks back to Nicaragua to help him with his cause, an act that only helps solidify Esmeralda's popularity and position as the *reina* of Los Angeles's Nicaraguans. Bernardo's response to Esmeralda's "grand gesture" is revealing for, as he explains to Paulina, "[i]n every community there's a doña Esmeralda. They make big promises before an adoring public. But afterward … nothing" (Sirias, 2005, 313). Although Bernardo's skepticism is, in part, a result of the oppression he has suffered at the hands of the Sandinistas and those who do not believe in the Virgin's apparition, in this instance his disillusionment also betrays a critical view regarding the altruistic measures of immigrant communities toward their fellow Nicaraguans back home and the complexities of such transnational relationships. Ultimately, by incorporating the different perspectives of these two Nicaraguan women, Sirias renders an immigrant experience that is not solely tied to political conflict, in which women factor considerably, and that has given way to many forms of self and communal identification.

Salvadorans living the "American Dream"?

As the title suggests, Cortez-Davis's autobiographical account *December Sky: Beyond My Undocumented Life* is more than just a retelling of her family's migrant journey to the United States. It is a chronicle of the author's quest to move beyond her undocumented status via a university education and thus become "American." As the blurb on the book's back cover claims, Cortez-Davis's account is meant to be understood as "one of the thousands of unspoken success stories made possible by the Immigration Reform and Control Act (Amnesty) of 1986." Echoing Paulina's own trajectory, Cortez-Davis's experience and that of her family is subsumed within the saga of the "American Dream," an ideal she challenges, but also reaffirms in her narrative. In this sense, Cortez-Davis's text and its portrayal of Central American immigrant struggles and incorporation into the United States recalls Schmidt Camacho's

assertion that migrant narratives constitute "political acts" that, on the one hand, "narrate a condition of alterity to, or exclusion from, the nation," and on the other, "enunciate a collective desire for a different order of space and belonging" (2008, 5).

Cortez-Davis began her journey at the age of 12 when her parents decided that she, along with her mother and three sisters, would migrate to the United States, to be joined later by their father, in the hopes of having a better life. Although her mother's prior knowledge of the economic possibilities available in the United States played a significant role in the family's decision to leave El Salvador, it was not the only motivating factor. Another impetus was the civil war that irrupted in El Salvador in 1980 and which lasted until 1992. Among the many memories Cortez-Davis shares are those of her uncle's imprisonment and torture by the National Guard, as well as numerous shootings and disruptions by *guerrilla* forces and petty thieves at her school. Marking these memories is the author's loss of innocence, the fact that her "happy and carefree childhood ended up in the hasty maturity shared by many Central American children [her] age" (Cortez-Davis, 2003, 27). Rather than simply stating the "facts" of her family's history, Cortez-Davis relates a difficult transition to adulthood, characterized first by war and later by her and her family's uncertain immigrant status.

After a difficult, yet ultimately successful crossing of the US-Mexico border, the family settles in Los Angeles with the aid of other relatives. It is here that Cortez-Davis initiates the second phase of her journey: her integration into the United States. Her narration of this process recalls the traditional script of immigrant assimilation whose end goal is the achievement of the "American dream." Such notions had been inculcated in Cortez-Davis at an early age by her parents, especially her mother whose stories of laboring in the United States, as well as gifts and clothing, had been a source of hope for Cortez-Davis and her siblings amidst the violence in El Salvador. As she explains, "[t]he image I held as a young child of a life in the United States was so different, so peaceful, and so perfect. Since we were young, we had seen this different world through the eyes of my mother, who had worked there for many years" (Cortez-Davis, 2003, 31). These expectations, however, are called into question by Cortez-Davis's memories of being marginalized and the obstacles the family confronts as undocumented immigrants.

Cortez-Davis's experience and that of her older sister are especially noteworthy as they are those of two undocumented teenagers whose transition into adulthood is not only affected by their families' overall legal standing but also their age and gender. Rather than live the life of a "normal" high school teenager, Cortez-Davis's older sister, Sonia, is forced to take physically and emotionally taxing jobs instead of pursuing a degree that will allow her some form of upward mobility. As Cortez-Davis states, "[d]espite her ambition and academic talent, Sonia's age confined her to a job as a live-in housekeeper to

start" (Cortez-Davis, 2003, 112). This gendered position as a *doméstica* leads to a series of others, including Sonia's eventual job working outside of the private sector in an electronics manufacturing company. Cortez-Davis's account of her sister's individual struggles clearly underscores that Sonia's potential and possibilities for a better life were forever thwarted by her lack of access to higher education – which is not the case for the author.

Having been significantly younger than her sister, Cortez-Davis does not endure the same harsh reality of having to labor under forced circumstances. She is plagued, though, by similar feelings of alienation that are initially due to her inability to speak English and her placement in ESL classes at the junior high-level and later, by the realization that unlike the majority of her high school classmates, her undocumented status could prevent her from attending college. According to Cortez-Davis, the most difficult question to answer on the application for admission to the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) was whether or not she was a permanent resident. To answer truthfully meant possibly putting her whole family in jeopardy if someone were to report her to immigration services. Once accepted by UCLA, the same fear continues to plague Cortez-Davis. However, rather than succumb to it, she adopts a political stance as an advocate for undocumented student rights.

On one occasion, Cortez-Davis writes a letter to the *Daily Bruin*, the university newspaper, in response to the Supreme Court's decision in 1990 to overturn the Leticia A. Ruling, which prevented college campuses from denying financial aid to students based on legal status and forcing undocumented students to pay out-of-state tuition. In the letter, Cortez-Davis drew a direct correlation between her childhood in El Salvador, "growing up amidst a war that had nothing to do with [her]" and "the war being waged against undocumented students, whose only 'crime' was lacking a piece of government-issued paper. A war waged against a people who can't speak up, much less fight back" (Cortez-Davis, 2003, 150). By way of this public statement, Cortez-Davis became, as she states, a "self-proclaimed symbol" and a "champion for the underdog in [her] community" (Cortez-Davis, 2003, 150). Her graduation speech to her engineering peers, professors and family provided yet another opportunity for advocating for her cause.

Despite the limitations that are recounted in the narrative, *December Sky* ends on a triumphant note. In addition to earning a degree from UCLA in civil engineering and marrying one of her fellow classmates, Cortez-Davis and the rest of her family are granted their residency due to the Immigration Reform and Control Act (Amnesty) of 1986. The last pages of the narrative depict Cortez-Davis taking her oath to become a US citizen, marking the end of her undocumented life. As such, the text gives way to a story of struggle, and one that is critical, at times, of the unjust treatment of undocumented students. Yet these aspects of Cortez-Davis's account are, in the end, subsumed by the grand narrative of an immigrant who "triumphs over adversity." Moreover,

for Cortez-Davis, there is no real moment of self-reflection regarding how "American" one can become or the sense of cultural loss that such identification can lead to as takes place with Paulina in *Bernardo and the Virgin*. It is precisely this emphasis on the "American Dream" in Cortez-Davis's account and the adversity she overcomes that deepens our understanding of the Central American immigrant reality.

A Modern Tale of Migration

The first feature film directed by Fukunaga, *Sin nombre*, garnered a series of nominations for prestigious awards, including the "Grand Jury Prize" at the Sundance Film Festival in 2009, and a 2010 "Critics Choice Award" for Best Foreign Film. Crucial to the storyline are two key characters, Sayra, a teenage girl from Honduras who is migrating to the United States with her uncle and father, and Willy (a.k.a. *el Casper*), a Mexican teenager and member of the infamous transnational gang, the Mara Salvatrucha. Sayra and Willy's paths cross in an unexpected manner when Willy defends Sayra from being raped by one of the gang leaders, Lil' Mago. The encounter between these two adolescents, which takes place on the trains, significantly alters not only Sayra's migrant journey but also initiates Willy's own voyage, one that will lead him to personal redemption. It also constitutes an important foundation for the bond that these two outsiders forge as they travel together and attempt to survive in Mexico, a country characterized in the film by violence, increased militarization and a complete disregard for human rights.

Although the subplot of the Mara Salvatrucha is significant in the film, as is Willy's eventual attempt to escape from his gang life, it is Sayra's representation as an undocumented Honduran female that is of most relevance to this analysis. Sayra's decision to migrate under such precarious conditions alludes to the reality of many Central Americans who due to economic restructuring and measures such as NAFTA and CAFTA have little prospects for sustainable employment and upward mobility in their native countries. Her journey, similarly, calls attention to the fact that for Central Americans, all of Mexico is an extended border zone that puts them at risk of violence, exploitation and death at the hands of transnational gangs as well as corrupt Mexican officials and paramilitary groups linked to the drug trade. This is a notion the film also stresses by de-emphasizing the actual physical "crossings" of the characters from Guatemala to Mexico and from Mexico to the United States.

The initial scenes in which Sayra's character is first introduced provide the backdrop for her individual storyline while also portraying the disenfranchisement of Hondurans, which continues to propel migratory flows to the North. When Sayra first appears on screen she is sitting on the rooftop of her home in Tegucigalpa, the capital of Honduras, staring out in the distance. Her uncle,

Orlando, interrupts her quiet reflection to let her know that her father, whom she has not seen since she was 3 years of age, is waiting for her down below. As he approaches Sayra, the camera zooms-out away from Sayra and switches to a high-angle shot so as to allow the viewer to see what Sayra has been looking at all along, a vast expanse of crowded homes made of rudimentary materials. In his attempt to convince Sayra that she should migrate to the United States along with him and her father, Orlando tells her, "Aquí no hay nada para vos, Sayra. Nada" ["There is nothing here for you Sayra. Nothing"]. The previous shot of the landscape, coupled with Sayra's silence, serves to confirm this fact. If she were to stay, the future for Sayra would be bleak.

The unexpected reappearance of Sayra's father in her life adds another layer to her precarious situation, bringing into focus the potential risks and impacts of undocumented migration. Although it is not explicitly stated in the film, her father's return to Honduras is not voluntary, rather a consequence of his deportation. His status as a deportee is not that surprising when one considers the fact that despite being the third largest Central American immigrant group in the United States, Hondurans comprise the leading group of Central American deportees.[16] By way of Sayra's father, the film thus underscores the reality of deportation for the undocumented as well as the undesirability of Honduran immigrants as citizen-subjects of the United States and, by extension, of Mexico, which enforces the same discriminatory immigration policies.

16 Department of Homeland Security, "Immigration Enforcement Actions: 2008."

It is Sayra's transit through Mexico, however, that most clearly evokes the notion of Honduran marginality and the dangerous passage of Central Americans through Mexico. In addition to being "seen as inferior" because of her Central American origins (Nazario, 2007, 98), Sayra's youth and gender mark her all the more expendable and vulnerable. As Rodríguez observes, because Central American migrants traveling through Mexico move across more than just political boundaries, meaning they also "traverse social planes of race, class, and gender relations," certain groups such as women, who are often the victims of violent sexual assault, become more susceptible than others (2007, 83). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the pivotal scene in which Sayra is almost raped by the gang leader, Lil' Mago.

Lil' Mago discovers Sayra huddled under a tarp with her father and uncle while he, Willy, and Willy's younger cousin, Smiley, conduct one of the gang's routine operations – to steal from and harass the undocumented migrants who ride atop the cargo trains. Upon seeing Sayra, Lil'Mago remarks to Willy that he has found himself a "Salma Hayek" and proceeds to wrestle her away from her father's arms. During this scene, high-angle shots are used to mark the gendered relations of power between Lil'Mago and Sayra, and by extension, the other terrorized undocumented migrants that surround her as they too are prey for the Mara Salvatrucha. Sayra's father and uncle, who fear for their own lives, provide little protection, further underscoring Sayra's lack of agency and vulnerability. If not for the intervention of Willy, who kills Lil'Mago in an act of

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revenge for another crime, Sayra would have been subjected to the same fate that countless other female migrants have suffered: rape and even death.

Even though the relationship between Sayra and Willy provides a sense of hope and respite from this larger narrative of Honduran disempowerment and exclusion, the film's ending does not allow viewers to forget this reality. As Sayra learns from a fellow traveler during a quick stay at a migrant safe house, her father fell to his death while trying to outrun Mexican immigration officials on top of a moving train, and her uncle was deported back to Honduras. Thus, following Willy's tragic and brutal death at the hands of his cousin Smiley, Sayra finds herself alone in an unknown world on the other side of the Rio Grande. The last scene shows her walking across the desolate parking lot of a Sam's Club toward a pay phone from which she calls her father's wife in New Jersey. Far from being a "happy ending," this somber moment signals the beginning of yet another precarious existence for Sayra, that of being an undocumented immigrant in the United States.

Although this is an episode in Sayra's life that viewers will not see, we are not completely left in the dark. Among the last things that Willy tells Sayra is that she needs to go to New Jersey and help to financially support her father's family, especially given his death. As Sayra moves forward and, perhaps, becomes trapped in the same cycle of undocumented labor and exploitation as her father, the only thing for certain is that her crossing through Mexico's border zone will play a key role in the type of life she leads in the United States and the struggles she will face as she tries to acquire a new sense of belonging and identity as a Central American, an immigrant, and as a woman.

Expanding the Discussion: From Immigrants to Central American-Americans

All three of the cultural works explored in this article – *Bernardo and the Virgin*, *December Sky: Beyond My Undocumented Life* and *Sin nombre* – are fundamental to the construction and continuous redefinition of the Central American transnational imaginary, a product of contemporary migratory flows from the isthmus to the United States as well as the bi-national endeavors undertaken by immigrants. All three of these narratives portray key experiences – civil conflict and violence, dangerous crossings through Mexico's border zone and the multidimensional process of integration into US society – that characterize the Central American transnational imaginary. As such, they act as conduits of stories, images and emotions that allow Central Americans in different geographic settings to conceive of themselves as part of a greater collectivity or community. Moreover, their female-centered representations make discernible the fact that gender, along with ethnicity, citizenship status and class, is also a crucial aspect of the transnational imaginings, subjectivities

and emergent ethnic identities of Central American immigrants in the United States.

Sirias's *Bernardo and the Virgin* affords a unique look at pre-1980s Central American migration and the diverse ways in which Central Americans in the United States understand and define both their individual and communal identities. A contemplation of Paulina's experience in relation to that of Esmeralda and more recent Nicaraguan arrivals showcases how Central Americans have both assimilated to "American" society in the traditional sense and also resisted that same process through the establishment of transnational financial and cultural ties with their homeland. *December Sky* by Cortez-Davis engages similar discourses of assimilation and "American Dreaming," yet complicates these by revealing the difficulties faced by undocumented youth and their need to belong. In *Sin nombre*, we see a modern tale of Central American migration and disenfranchisement in which the reality of crossing through Mexico is paramount. Through the perspective of Sayra, this film documents the experience of the "in-between" in more ways than one; the notion of being caught between leaving the life you have known as a Honduran and becoming an "American" without any guarantee of the latter.

While it is the immigrant newcomers and their stories that take precedence in these texts and in my analysis of them, we also need to take into account the role and struggles of one-and-a-half, second, and third generations of Central Americans in the United States who are also contributing to and participating in different ways in the formation of the Central American transnational imaginary. Many are struggling with how to define and identify themselves in reference to the United States and the Central American countries from which their parents and, in some cases, they also hail. By exposing the varied transnational and gendered historical, political and social aspects that define the Central American immigrant experience, authors such as Sirias and Cortez-Davis, themselves part of these newer generations, have laid the foundation for future and needed inquiries, including the notion of Central American Latino lives. Such issues and debates will, undoubtedly, be of importance in the near future and lead to the further expansion and transformation of the Central American transnational imaginary.

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