

Introduction

(En)Visioning Central American Migration: Views from the Diaspora

By Mauricio Espinoza and Ignacio Sarmiento

Caravans, unaccompanied minors, transnational gangs, human and drug trafficking, political persecution. During the past few years, Central America has been portrayed in the media and the public sphere, especially in the United States, as a region profoundly marked by the movement of people, illegal goods and criminal activities. The attention shift from Mexican migration to Central American began to occur in 2012, when the Pew Research Center announced that Mexican migration flows had reached a net rate of zero—meaning more Mexican nationals left the United States than those who entered the country (Passel, Cohn and González-Barrera). In the meantime, Central American migration to the United States was on the rise, quickly outpacing Mexican migration in net-rate terms. Without a doubt, migration (and the violence that underlies it) has been one of the defining features of Central America’s sociopolitical and demographic horizons during the 21st century, as well as a vivid and painful expression of its “crisis histórica” (Turcios 19).

However, this phenomenon is not new in the isthmus. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, labor migration was the predominant trend, establishing solid connections between Central America, the Caribbean, and the United States. In the 1970s and 1980s, the revolutionary processes in the region triggered a new kind of immigration as thousands of people fled their countries to escape political violence and state terrorism. While the end of the civil wars and the Sandinista Revolution in the 1990s enabled the return of many refugees, the new social, economic, and political conditions ultimately facilitated a new large wave of migration, especially toward the United States. Census statistics give us a clear picture of this unprecedented growth: in 1980, there were 354,000 Central American migrants in the U.S; in 2000, that number grew to 2 million; and today, the U.S. Central American diaspora (immigrants plus U.S.-born citizens with Central American roots) is comprised of 7 million individuals, making it the largest Latinx group by origin after Mexicans (Babich and Batalova; “Key facts”). Roughly 10%-12% of all Central Americans now live outside their countries of birth, which is four times the average global migration rate; in the case of Salvadorans, the percentage of migrants is a staggering 25% (Sandoval García xvi).

The history and contemporary realities of Central American migrations are broad, diverse, multidirectional, uncertain, full of sadness and despair; but they also display hope, resistance, rage, affection, solidarity, and a sense of community. Central American migrations do not follow one single pattern or specific mobility strategy. People are forced to leave their home countries, among other reasons, as a consequence of extreme poverty, lack of economic opportunities, gang violence, family abandonment and abuse, political persecution, gender violence, natural disasters, climate change, or a combination of all of these factors. Regardless of their reasons to flee or their final destination, the diaspora is an experience of loss shared by millions of people in Central America. An experience that, far

from decreasing, is constantly expanding across the social tissue. This special issue of *Label Me Latina/o* focuses on Central American migration to the United States as it is portrayed in a variety of recent cultural representations that range from original poetry to articles analyzing literature and film. Just like human mobilities in and out of the isthmus, cultural representations of Central American migration are not a new phenomenon. In 1947, Miguel Ángel Espino published *Hombres contra la Muerte*, a novel that tells the life and perils of Central American and Caribbean migrants in Belize. Roque Dalton's famous "Poema de amor" expresses the grief for his fellow Salvadorans who have migrated throughout the 20th century.

While the visibility of the Central American migration to the United States rose during the 21st century, we must acknowledge that numerous creators have addressed this phenomenon before the change of the millennium. In 1983, Óscar Benítez Martínez, a Salvadoran living in Los Angeles published *Los inmortales*, which is considered the first novel of the Central American diaspora in the United States. This book remains today as one of the few novels written and published in Spanish by Central American migrants (or their descendants) on U.S. soil. In 1984, English-speaking audience learned about the Guatemalan internal conflict and the forced migration it triggered through films like Gregory Nava's *El Norte*. The 1990s witnessed the publication of other literary works that explored in different ways the Central American migration to the north. Examples of this are Héctor Tobar's *The Tattooed Soldier* (1998), Roberto Quesada's *Big Banana* (1998), and Mario Bencastro's *Odisea del norte* (1999).

During the 21st century, a solid body of cultural productions has explored the causes and hardships of the Central American migration experience. A noteworthy feature of these works is that they have been produced by creators of diverse nationalities, including Central Americans, Mexicans, and US Americans. Some literary works that must be mentioned as examples of this are Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied* (2017), Silvio Sirias' *Bernardo and the Virgin* (2007), Rafael Ramírez Heredia's *La mara* (2009), Emiliano Monge's *Las tierras arrasadas* (2015), Antonio Ortuño's *La fila india* (2013), Claudia Hernández' *Olvida uno* (2005) and *El verbo J* (2018), Balam Rodrigo's *El libro centroamericano de los muertos* (2018) and *Marabunta* (2018), Noé Lima's *Gula* (2020), Alejandro Hernández's *Amarás a dios sobre todas las cosas* (2013), José Serrano's *Central América* (2014), Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How it Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017) and *Lost Children Archive* (2019), and Dennis Ávila's *Ropa americana* (2017), to name a few. Literary creations of Central American authors in the diaspora have also been included in collective volumes such as Tania P. Vela, Alexandra L. Regalado, and Lucía de Sola's *Vanishing Ponto/Puntos de Fuga: Contemporary Salvadoran Prose* (2017) and Leticia Hernández Linares, Rubén Martínez, and Héctor Tobar's *The Wandering Song* (2017). Also, numerous films have addressed the Central American diaspora. Some of them are Marcela Zamora's *María en tierra de nadie* (2011), Diego Quemada-Díez' *La jaula de oro* (2013), Yasin's *El camino* (2008), Cari Fukunaga's *Sin nombre* (2009), and Rebecca Cammisa's *Which Way Home* (2009), among others. These expressions, in many cases, have helped to humanize and give a face to migrants beyond statistics and official reports. Individual stories demonstrate that behind the numbers there are lives deserving dignity, there are fears, and there is resilience.

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Central Americans to the United States over the last few decades has challenged the hegemony and visibility of other Latinx groups, and

has also opened a new discussion within Latinx studies. This change has not always been welcomed with open arms. We must not forget the discussion triggered by the decision of UCLA's Department of Chicano/a Studies of becoming the César E. Chávez Department of Chicana/o and Central American Studies.¹ Besides any resistance, Central American studies is today a growing field. The massive arrival of Salvadorans, Guatemalans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans citizens to the United States, in addition to the growing corpus of literary and cultural works mentioned above, is strengthening the presence of Central Americanists throughout U.S. universities. The present issue of *Label Me Latina/o* is another proof of the new directions in the Central American studies field. But we are not building castles in the air. The research presented here owes considerably to the pioneering work done in the previous years by other scholars. While we will not discuss them here in length, we must acknowledge the contribution of foundational books in the study of the Central American diaspora from the field of cultural studies, such as Arturo Arias' *Taking Their Word. Literature and The Signs of Central American* (2007), Yajaira Padilla's *Changing Women, Changing Nation. Female Agency, Nationhood, and Identity in Trans-Salvadoran Narratives* (2012), Maritza Cárdenas' *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation* (2018), and *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* (2017), edited by Karina Alvarado, Alicia Estrada, and Ester Hernández. We must also mention the relevance of other special issues in other academic journals such as Sophie Esch's work on *Revista de Estudios Hispánicos*, entitled "Passages: Routes of Migration and Memory in Central American Literature" (2020); and Tania Pleitez's and Elena Ritondale's dossier "¿Herida o abrigo? Niñez, juventud y frontera en las literaturas contemporáneas publicadas en México, Centroamérica y Estados Unidos (1990-2019)" (2021), published in *Istmo. Revista virtual de estudios literarios y culturales centroamericanos*.

This special issue of *Label Me Latina/o* seeks to contribute to the growing conversation about Central American migration and the ways in which it has been portrayed in recent cultural productions from inside and outside the isthmus. It includes three articles that discuss representative works of literature and visual arts from various methodological perspectives, as well as the poetic work of four authors who reflect on the themes of human mobilities and identities. In "Tránsito bidireccional: una propuesta para el estudio de la representación de la 'niñez narrable' desde la experiencia migrante centroamericana," Tania Pleitez Vela analyzes how filmmaker Ishtar Yasin, photographer Donna de Cesare, and poet Javier Zamora approach and challenge the dichotomy childhood-adulthood in their works about migrants from the isthmus as well as victims of violence from the civil wars and gang activity. Meanwhile, in "*Aunque la jaula sea de oro: Representations of the United States as a Jaula de Oro in Cultural Productions about Immigrants*," Patricia Reagan explores how Latin American popular music and a handful of films dealing with migration employ the image of a "golden cage" to portray the United States as a place that, while sought for as a land of opportunity, ends up trapping immigrants or denying them the chance of achieving the "American Dream." Next, Tatiana Argüello and Andrew Ryder study the 2017 poetry collection *Unaccompanied*, by Salvadoran-born author and child migrant Javier Zamora. The authors claim that Zamora's work follows the tradition of politicized Central American poetry, thus seeking to bring us toward greater awareness of the obstacles and violence that shape migrant lives. In addition to the scholarly work included here, we want to contribute

to the growing presence of literary works that address the Central American diaspora. With that in mind, this issue closes with original poetry in English and Spanish by Karina Alma, Zacamil | *Brown* (Diego Murcia's pen name), Diego Mora, and Sonia Ticas.

Notes

¹ One week after the Department's decision of adding "Central American Studies" to its name, Brandon Loral Maxwell penned an op-ed called "No, You Aren't Entitled to the Chicano Experience." His words were contested by several voices, including Ester Trujillo's "Central Americans Aren't Co-Opting Chicano Studies. They Are Building on Their Shared History."

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