The Emotions of Immigrant Identity Processing in Cristina Henríquez's *The Book of Unknown Americans*

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Cristina Henríquez's 2014 novel, *The Book of Unknown Americans*, explores the repercussions of disillusionment with a traditional concept of national identity in the context of Latin American migration. The text forms part of a significant literary corpus that uncovers patterns of long-term socioeconomic and sociopolitical marginalization in both Latin America and the United States, depicting migrants from diverse origins as culturally disenfranchised citizens that struggle to belong on either side of the border. In this context, migration is not simply a necessary choice to improve quality of life. Instead, migration serves in Henríquez's novel as the hallmark for emigrants' lack of trust in their nations' ability or desire to create a more inclusive national politics and, therefore, their hopelessness that conditions will improve there. In other words, the act of migration reveals the ultimate consequences of marginalization and institutionalized violence across Latin America. Meanwhile, the perpetuation of ostracism in the so-called Promised Land of the United States, coupled with crises ranging from unemployment to death by gun violence, speaks to the migrant characters' inability to find a better quality of life in yet another context in which they are viewed as inferior. Disenchantment with migrant identity is reflected in the characters' struggle, alternatively, to accept or attain alternative modes of self-definition, and concurrent trends of negative emotions. Via this narrative focal point, the novel aligns with much of diasporic literature: as critic Susan Kenney explains, "These writers provide counternarratives to traditional, embedded notions of nation and belonging" (183). This article analyzes how through its depiction of emotional turmoil, *The Book of Unknown Americans* exposes trends of marginalization surrounding migration and explores the impact of trauma and long-term insecurity on migrants' perception of identity.

The Book of Unknown Americans recounts the anxieties and hopes of a large group of immigrants who live in the same apartment complex in Delaware to depict a similar search for a sense of belonging, a community, and an identity in the face of alienation from one's nation of origin.[i] The novel incorporates memory, switching back and forth between the narrative past and present, and covers roughly twenty years, from the U.S. invasion of Panama in 1989 until sometime after President Obama's 2008 election. Over the course of Henríquez's novel, a cacophony of voices revisits Latin America through brief flashbacks to tell the story of why people emigrate; the text features immigrant characters from Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, and Venezuela, as well as U.S citizens from Puerto Rico, to offer a multifaceted perspective on the motives for emigration. About this point, all the characters' testimonies are in accord – people emigrate because they feel they have no other choice. Although the novel features several different characters, the use of one central plotline – told from two characters' perspectives (a Mexican mother and a Panamanian teenager) – serves to integrate the narration of nine Latin American families' immigration experiences. The quantity of immigrants' stories that the novel tells, and the emphasis across the text on immigrant characters' comparable emotional responses to their experiences, cultivate the narrative conceptualization of a predominant immigrant experience of insecurity. Meanwhile, the use of specific and repeated settings to centralize narrative action throughout *The Book of Unknown Americans* (such as the apartment complex and the Toro family's new car) filters the novel's messages about the contemporary migration experience and localizes trends of cultural

stratification and marginalization, as well as processes of identity exploration. Henríquez's text is, by and large, a study of how immigrants and their children struggle to negotiate an identity that balances their complicated pasts in their countries of origin and the uncertainty that characterizes their lives in the U.S. In this sense, the novel represents part of a larger corpus of diasporic literature that "reflect[s] the binaries of belonging and displacement that disrupt identity and undermine self-worth and self-determination" (Kenney 180).

An examination of the novel's narration of immigrants' emotions, and specifically of their reactions to social norms and stereotypes of identity, functions to investigate immigrants' struggle to negotiate disenfranchisement from their homelands and assimilation of a new cultural identity within the U.S. In this way, *The Book of Unknown Americans* dialogues with both the history and contemporary reality of the trauma with which immigrants often contend. Guatemalan scholar Arturo Arias highlights the lasting impact of trauma on Central American migrants in the U.S., who he suggests do not know how to cope with their national history of war and violence and therefore attempt to emotionally distance themselves from this past when they settle in the U.S. (189). In narrative about migration, from either Central America or any place where someone faces a challenging life circumstance, this process of emotional distancing can manifest as a generalized confusion about how to feel about one's relationship to either their country of origin or of residence, or more broadly, about how to define one's own identity. This perpetual bewilderment (and consequent frustration, despair, and/or denial) aligns with what Kenney calls a "fundamental insecurity in not knowing how to interpret the gaze of the mainstream culture and where one fits or does not fit in, particularly for the brown-skinned Latino" (169). Both the manifestation and geographical and cultural context of these waves of emotion also intersect with what Homi Bhabha characterizes as a trend of identity renegotiation (be it national, or personal) in the interstitial third space between dominant cultures: "It is in the emergence of the interstices – the overlap and displacement of domains of difference – that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*… are negotiated" (2). Across *The Book of Unknown Americans*, points of emotional intensity mirror conflicts of identity, which unfold uniquely according to diverse factors, such as social class, ethnicity, and legal status.[ii] The novel's regular recurrence to immigrant characters' emotional experiences thus lays bare the strain and weight of this sort of cultural shift on one's perception of self. It also makes the immigrant characters' cultural identity negotiation process more comprehensible and relatable for the reader, because it provides avenues for the reader to empathize with the characters. Through this strategic framing, the text critically responds to U.S. involvement on either side of the migration process, and "contribute[s] to and revise[s] imagined communities within the United States and Central America as an ontological recuperation of memory from [a] counterhegemonic culture-making space" (Oliva Alvarado 477). As a work of socially-critical literature that emphasizes immigrant characters' feelings about their migration experience, the novel serves to refute tenets of anti-immigrant discrimination in the U.S. and offers an emotionally-based portrayal of immigration that can appeal the reader's sense of empathy.

The Book of Unknown Americans consolidates the experiences of Latin American immigrant characters of a wide range of nationalities, and in so doing, crafts an impression of a collective struggle faced by this population. Characters' places of origin in the novel span Latin America and the Spanish-speaking U.S. to include Guatemala, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Puerto Rico, and Venezuela. Literary scholar Marta Caminero-Santangelo indicates that, "In U.S. Latino/a literary history, authors have tended to write almost exclusively about their own national-origin groups" ("Central Americans" 173). Furthermore, critics argue, Latinx

literature has historically overlooked Central America, instead favoring analysis of Cuban, Dominican, Mexican, and Puerto Rican migration (Arias, Carminero-Santangelo).[iii] Both trends begin to shift in the 1980s and 90s, in part due to the emergence of solidarity literature in the U.S. in response to the civil wars that ravaged the region during the latter portion of the twentieth century (Rodríguez). Latinx literature from the late twentieth century and the first part of the twenty-first century is more apt both to feature migrant characters of diverse origins and to examine Central American migration – as Henríquez's novel does, through the plotlines related to its Guatemalan, Nicaraguan, and Panamanian characters.[iv] Critics such as Arias, Caminero-Santangelo, and Ana Patricia Rodríguez attest to the unique complexities of representing the Central American migration experience in literature, due to the region's violent history. These critics' theorization of the "Central American-American" alludes to Central American migrants' frequent sensation of interstiality, in which they struggle to connect to their homeland as well as to their nation of residence. Rodríguez, in turn, acknowledges the lasting impact of institutionalized violence and related trauma – on both individual and society-wide levels – by connecting literature about Central America to the genre of "post-traumatic narrative" or "traumatic realism" (104). While *The Book of Unknown Americans* does not explore traumatic events commonly featured in other contemporary novels about migration (such as rape or loss of limbs) it still exposes various risk factors for trauma, and implicitly references its consequences via tumultuous emotions. The novel is perhaps in this sense influenced by what Deborah Shaw calls the "US treatment in terms of storytelling approaches" (236), in which "Migrant experience […] has to conform to the demands of the US […] market rather than any political or social imperative" (237). However, *The Book of Unknown Americans* nonetheless intersects with the aforementioned trends in contemporary literature of collective voice and references to traumatic events, exploring the nuances of the relationship of Latin American immigrants with their diverse countries of origin, while also problematizing the broader notion of [trans]national identity in the context of Latin American immigration at large.

The novel's record of immigrant characters' emotions about their relocation to the United States intimates an identity-reformation process influenced on some level by trauma, but also strategically counters a key facet of the anti-immigrant prejudice that emerges against Latin Americans in various corners of U.S. majority/white society: namely, that these persons migrate with criminal or destructive intentions. The immigrant characters all have different justifications to migrate, and the exposition of their motives across Henríquez's novel exemplifies a "collective memory of nonhegemonic communities [which] becomes a form of speaking back and of refusing erasure" (Oliva Alvarado 478). The Mexican Rivera family seeks a special school for their daughter, who suffered brain damage in an accident. The middle-aged Guatemalan Gustavo Milhojas flees Guatemala for Mexico during the civil war, but eventually decides to move further northward due to discrimination and economic struggles in Mexico. Benny Quinto leaves Nicaragua at twenty due to immense poverty and lack of opportunity. References to institutionalized violence (as in the civil wars that besieged El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua in the latter part of the twentieth century) serve to acknowledge the unique circumstances of Central American migrants, who "are neither strictly economic migrants nor accepted as refugees, but have the characteristics of both" (Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla 2). Yet, the common thread across these characters' experiences is immigrants' intense emotional response to the feeling that they have no option but to migrate due to poor living conditions in their country of origin. The Panamanian teenager Mayor Toro describes his family's reluctant decision to emigrate:

> The first time I heard my parents tell the story about leaving Panamá, my mom said, "Our hearts kept breaking each time we walked out the door." They tried to give it time. They assumed that conditions would improve. But the country was so ravaged that their hearts never stopped breaking. Eventually they sold everything they owned and used the money to buy plane tickets to somewhere else, somewhere better, which to them had always meant the United States. (78)

The Toros' story recognizes historical fact – the ravaged country, the conditions that were slow to improve – but the repeated mentions of Mayor's parents' broken hearts emphasize their despair and hesitation during the decision. The novel's representation of immigrants' sadness, doubt, and frustration at the idea of relocating to the U.S. juxtaposes one popular portrayal of Latin American immigrants, which some media outlets and discriminatory cultural thought propagate, as selfish, opportunistic, scheming, or dishonest.[v] The character Micho Alvarez, who is a naturalized U.S. citizen that emigrated from Mexico and who stands out in the novel as a passionate voice against discrimination, asserts: "[Does] anyone ever talk about *why* people are crossing? I can promise you it's not with some grand ambition to come here and ruin everything for the gringo chingaos. People are desperate, man" (237). Micho's declaration summarizes the novel's message about Latin Americans' choice to emigrate to the U.S. Parallel to many other contemporary texts about migration, Henríquez's novel does not idealize migration, but instead paints it as a product of unfit living conditions and consequent desperation.

The Book of Unknown Americans details immigrant characters' emotional responses to similar struggles – including community building, homesickness and nostalgia, and anxiety about legal status and employment – to explore the concept of an overarching immigrant experience of cultural disenfranchisement and struggle to assimilate. Through the comparison of diverse characters' experiences, the novel acknowledges how factors such as legal status and social class put some immigrants at a more marked disadvantage than others, while also recognizing some challenges that are common to all immigrants, although they differ in their manifestation and gravity. The novel's orientation around an apartment complex in Delaware, where multiple immigrant families live, simultaneously alludes to an increase in push factors for Latin American emigration, to the importance of community in immigrants' lives, and to the socioeconomic marginalization that immigrants face in the U.S.[vi] The complex is in a poor area of town, surrounded by dodgy businesses, and the building is dirty, old, and smelly. Upon arrival there, the Mexican mother Alma Rivera notes: "I had expected it to be nicer […] The way American houses looked in the movies. This was the only option Arturo's new job had given us, though, and I told myself we were lucky to have it" (4). Alma Rivera's first impression of the family's new residence is an obvious example of foreshadowing about the fragility of the so-called American Dream, and the difficulty for many in achieving it.[vii] Alma's thinly veiled disappointment and determinedly plucky attitude introduces the conflict of expectations-versus-reality that traverses the entire novel. Meanwhile, the indication that Arturo Rivera's employers offered the family one choice of residence, and a rundown one at that, can be considered symbolic of the U.S.'s reluctance to incorporate immigrants into the country's social web, which manifests in the allocation of inferior goods and products to immigrants.

The grimy physical appearance of the apartment complex reflects, to some extent, the emotions surrounding the process of community building that takes place there. All of the immigrant families in the apartment building are eager to form relationships with one another in order to create a community. For example, after the Rivera family moves to the city, their

Hispanic neighbors come to introduce themselves one by one. Mayor Toro observes that, "[My] mom craved friends – any friends – as a way to keep her from feeling lonely here" (74). The emotional motive that Mayor assigns to his mother's desire for relationships, i.e. to avoid loneliness, parallels the make-the-best-of-it approach that Alma Rivera has to her disappointing new residence. In contrast, the novel portrays immigrant characters' connections with relatives and friends back home as more readily deep and meaningful, since they correlate with a longer-term and more intense influence on immigrants' emotional states. Mayor describes his mother's mood after phone calls with her sister: "by the time the receiver was back on the latch, my mom was on a high […] talking to her sister […] always cheered her at least for the short term until the cheer was displaced by missing her again" (138). The comparison implies that immigrants' new friendships stand in the shadow of their relationships to people in their home countries. The juxtaposition between how new and old friendships are weighed also elucidates another facet of immigrants' struggle to define themselves on either side of the border. Their anxiety to develop new relationships speaks to their sense of insecurity and fear of isolation in the unfamiliar host country. In turn, the comfort they feel when engaging with relationships from their home country, in the context of their physical distance from them, emphasizes the tragic reality of their displacement from the *patria*.

Another area of life in the U.S. that is a frequent source of anxiety for Henríquez's immigrant characters is employment, which underscores immigrants' economic vulnerability. In the novel, both Mexican family man Arturo Rivera and Panamanian father Rafael Toro see their ability to provide for their families financially as a key component of their identities. The men guard their jobs zealously, and the loss of employment comes as a severe blow that alternatively provokes anger and extreme angst. Although Rafael is a naturalized citizen who cooks at a restaurant, while Arturo has a work visa and works at a mushroom farm, the men's emotional attachment to their jobs and sense of identity crisis upon losing them is similar. The commonalities between the men's experiences, which override the differences, underline immigrants' vulnerable standing in the U.S.'s economic framework.[viii] Overall, the narrative identification of common points of emotional fragility and strain for the immigrant characters highlights the areas that complicate their process of negotiating a new national identity as immigrants. That both documented and undocumented immigrant characters (and even those who are naturalized U.S. citizens, like Rafael Toro) find comparable things challenging, without regard for how long they have lived in the U.S., uncovers the common struggle to feel at peace within one's identity as an immigrant. Through the suggestion that immigrants suffer in kind despite different conditions and circumstances (which one could perceive as favorable or unfavorable), the novel condemns discriminatory practices that judge immigrants according to ethnicity, legal status, profession, etc., and proposes a response of compassion instead.

In addition to the novel's exploration of common trends in its Latin American characters' negotiation of identity and their role as immigrants, the text also facilitates the study of the nature of Central American-American identity and of generational differences in the self-identification process through its representation of the Panamanian Toro family.[ix] The description of the emotions of three family members – Rafael, Celia, and their teenage son, Mayor (who was born in Panama, but grew up in the U.S.) – enables a direct comparison between the unique concerns of immigrants of different generations and provides a more complete and specific picture of Central American immigrants' complicated feelings about national identity. Arias highlights the ongoing influence of civil conflict in the isthmus on immigrants from the region, and proposes that Central American immigrants, who struggle to

cope with their nations' violent histories, attempt to emotionally distance themselves from this past (188-89). This process of detachment contributes to identity crisis, since immigrants are unable to relate to their past in a healthy or straightforward way, and also approach their present circumstances and setting with uncertainty. As a result, Arias argues, "Central American-Americans end up living not only between borders, but also between identities" (189). In Henríquez's novel, Central America's violent past looms in the form of memories of the U.S. invasion of Panama from 1989-1990. The invasion's aftermath eventually leads to the Toros' choice to emigrate, but this violence does not remain in the narrative past; rather, it continues to influence the entire family's perception of Panama over a decade after their departure.

The Panamanian father Rafael Toro's mixture of nostalgia and hesitation when he thinks of his homeland captures the Central American-American sensation of emotional and identitiary interstitiality. For example, he explains: "Of course, we still miss Panamá. Celia is desperate to go back and visit. But I worry what it would be like after all this time. We thought it was unrecognizable when we left, but I have a feeling it would be even more unrecognizable now. Sometimes I think I would rather just remember it in my head, all those streets and places I loved" (23). The notion of unrecognizability references the impact of the U.S. invasion of Panama, while also acknowledging the time that has passed ("all this time"). Emotionally-based language unveils Rafael's confusion about how he should feel about his nation of origin. The expression of ongoing yearning ("we still miss") couples with Celia's "desperation" to convey ongoing nostalgia and emotional investment in Panama. Yet, the past tense "I loved" creates some emotional distance, particularly in tandem with the reference to memory. Affective terminology between these two time zones of emotion – first, the present tense "still miss" and "is desperate," and later, the preterit "I loved" – introduces the uncertainty that muddles Rafael's feelings about his country. The "But" in "But I worry" announces misgivings about whether his and his wife's nostalgia and desperation are valid emotions in response to Panama, while "worry" implies ongoing rumination and anxiety. The allocation of the remembering process to "my head" hints at the possibility for inaccuracy of memory, while Rafael's uneasy "I have a feeling" also connotes self-doubt. Both expressions allude to Rafael's inability to know for sure, to confirm or verify his recollections or impressions, which relates in turn to a larger sense of insecurity about his ability to successfully navigate either life in the United States or a visit back to Panama. Overall, Rafael's mixed emotions function to connect the crisis of identity that Panama itself underwent as a nation during the U.S. invasion to the crisis of identity that Rafael now experiences. Concurrent to the fragmentation of the concept of nation, the notion of national identity collapses, and migrants that figuratively straddle two nations must find their own path forward (Caminero-Santangelo, "Central Americans" 185-86).

The conflicted perspective that Rafael has of Panama also has important ramifications for his son Mayor's understanding of his Panamanian heritage. Of Henríquez's earlier novel, *The World in Half*, published in 2009, Karina Oliva Alvarado professes: "Since the novel situates memory and silences by way of the protagonist's parents, it allows a metaphorical look at the type of historical erasures US Central Americans may maintain as children from North America, who nonetheless desire and yearn to know, return, and reclaim their identifications with Central American countries and memory" (490). The concept of "erasure" can apply in the context of *The Book of Unknown Americans* as a reference to the possibility of generational trauma, or the influence of the psychological consequences that Rafael and Celia Toro endure due to the invasion of Panama on their son, Mayor. Given Mayor's relocation to the United States at an early age, his perception of Panama is filtered through his parents' memories, and he thus

confronts another layer of confusion in his own process of navigating a binational or bicultural identity.

Rafael and Mayor's emotions surrounding the use of Spanish and English reveal further uncertainty on the part of both father and son about their identities and problematize the connection between language skill and immigrants' identity negotiation process. Kenney attests to the importance of language in particular in the evaluation of immigrant persons' identities, suggesting that "language can convey cultural messages, make political choices, define relationships between characters, and clarify or obfuscate the relationship between a character and his or her new or old country" (178). Mayor Toro's comparison of his and his father's differing linguistic abilities reflects the challenges this factor can create both for their relationship with each other and their perception of their own cultural identities. Mayor reflects: "In Spanish [his dad] knew all the languages, but for as long as he'd been speaking English, he believed he knew it only in certain realms. […] To him, I knew all the languages of English the way he did those of Spanish. And as proud as he was that I was so good at one, I think he was also ashamed that I wasn't better at the other" (161). The juxtaposition of such contrary emotions, "proud" and "ashamed," alludes to the emotional extremes that immigrants undergo as they navigate their new environment. The manner in which the father and son think about language use also demonstrates that each of the two characters have in mind strict expectations for the successful Latinx immigrant and judge themselves harshly in light of these standards. The expression "he believed" uncovers Rafael's continued self-doubt about his ability to speak English well enough to effectively navigate certain elements of life in the U.S. In turn, Mayor's assumption that his father is ashamed of him due to his imperfect knowledge of Spanish exposes his own insecurity that he will not be able to measure up to his father's expectations, and more generally, to society's. Relevantly, Gloria Anzaldúa writes in her canonical essay "How to Tame a Wild Tongue" that "because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other," explaining that doubt about one's language skills correlates to "*Pena.* Shame. Low estimation of self" (80). Language becomes in this story, as is common in narrative about migration, a key marker that "can be used to remind a person that he or she does not belong to the culture in which he or she lives" (Kenney 170). The representation of Rafael and Mayor's mutual diffidence – albeit from different sides of the language question – points, then, to cultural pressure put on immigrants to be "fully" bilingual in order to earn the right to engage unapologetically with both their nation of origin and their country of residence without facing discrimination in either context.

The novel narrates Mayor's feelings of shame about his lack of skill at soccer to again announce (and denounce) the influence of cultural pressure on immigrants' perception of their own national identity. "The only reason I'd gone out for the team in the first place is because my dad had forced me into it. For him, the logic went something like: I was Latino and male and not a cripple, therefore I should play soccer. Soccer was for Latinos" (16). The repetition of the direct correlation between *latinidad* and soccer, coupled with the confession that his dad obligated him to try out (rather than it being Mayor's own choice), symbolizes the manner in which cultural norms pigeonhole Latinx identity, limiting its manifestation to certain recognizable standards (read: stereotypes). On the soccer field, Mayor's self-deprecation – "I felt like a loser, hanging around the sidelines all the time" – reveals his internalization of these stereotypes and frustration at his inability to meet these cultural expectations (17). His hyper-awareness of how others, his father included, see him functions as an example of immigrants' alertness to their vulnerability to judgment: "Whenever the girls broke out in laughter, I was sure

that they were laughing at me" (17). Mayor's unsubstantiated certainty that the girls are mocking him puts on display his fear that his failure to conform to a stereotypical ideal immediately makes him vulnerable to marginalization. In order to avoid his father's gaze, he quits the sport but lies to his parents about it, telling them that he is still participating in tryouts and games. His conversations with his father about soccer thereafter are marked with negative emotions: "I struggled to nod through the rush of guilt I felt about lying to him and the humiliation I felt about sucking so bad" (68). Both Mayor's guilt and humiliation signify the weight of cultural expectations surrounding Latinx identity; his reluctance to tell the truth illustrates his hesitation to separate himself from what he perceives to be a hallmark of Latinness and thus disappoint his father. The tension between father and son in this case reveals the generational differences in the process of navigating one's cultural identity. In his study of Henríquez's novel, Zac Tabler calls this sort of conundrum a "cultural disjoint," "wherein the parents as members of the home culture are unsure of their actions in regards to a child who has grown up entirely in the context of the new culture" (118). On a broader level, the gravity that Mayor grants to soccer – and to the identitary consequences of his modest athletic ability – exemplifies immigrants' strenuous and often misguided efforts to negotiate their identity in the U.S., through which the novel criticizes the emphasis on restrictive stereotypes surrounding immigrant identity in the media and popular culture.

The Book of Unknown Americans consolidates countless approaches to immigrants' identity. For some, at least some of the time, identity is stamped in a person's DNA, memories, family; identity is blood and birthplace. For example, Rafael Toro comforts his son Mayor on one occasion by saying, "It's in you […] You were born in Panamá. It's in your bones'" (78). For others, identity is a person's citizenship, residence, community, workplace: the teenager Mayor Toro explains, "[We] took an oath [and we] became Americans. We never went back to Panamá, not even for a visit […] my dad never wanted to take time off from his job" (79). For still others, all that matters in a person's identity is their weakness or vulnerabilities. For instance, a bully (whose father murders Arturo Rivera later in the novel) mocks a teenage immigrant by tauntingly incorporating a reference to her lack of English knowledge into an insult: "You're some kind of retard. How do you say 'retard' in Spanish?" (70). For the media, identity boils down to a list of crimes and clickbait: "You listen to the media, you'll learn that we're all gangbangers, we're all drug dealers […] we're lazy, we're stupid, we're all wetbacks who crossed the border illegally" (236). Henríquez presents a wide array of avenues through which to perceive immigrants' identity alongside a broad cast of unique immigrant characters to suggest that the question of identity is not so readily solved – either by immigrants themselves or by those who observe them.

The versions of immigrant identity that emerge in *The Book of Unknown Americans*' myriad plotlines and voices unveil love of country, fear and uncertainty, nostalgia, and hope. They explore the impact – and sometimes the relative lack thereof – of legal status and expose trends of marginalization and of hatred. More often than not, they reveal insecurity and anxiety that regularly prove crippling. The text's recurrence to negative emotional experiences speaks to the influence that trauma and the destabilization of one's connection to a nation-space – be it *la patria* or one's host country – inevitably has on one's identity formation. As Caminero-Santangelo explains, "trauma is paradoxically both destructive and constitutive, a threat to communal identity and a symbolic element of communal identity that makes powerful social justice claims, underscoring yet again the ways in which the stories we tell about ourselves continue to define–and in the process to construct–who we are" ("The Lost Ones" 323).

Henríquez's novel does not resolve the question of national or cultural identity for its immigrant characters. It does not perfectly align its characters with a panethnic identity or a transnational one. As the novel progresses, Mayor does not come to any clearer certainty about his identity than the confused perception he has at the text's beginning:

> I spent a lot of time trying to find [Panamá] in me, but usually I couldn't. I felt more American than anything, but even that was up for debate according to the kids at school who'd taunted me over the years […] The truth was that I didn't know which I was. I wasn't allowed to claim the thing I felt and I didn't feel the thing I was supposed to claim. (78)

Ultimately, the narrative portrayal of immigrants' intense, cyclical, and often-muddled emotions across *The Book of Unknown Americans* puts on display the perpetual uncertainty inherent in immigrant identity.

Central to the plot in *The Book of Unknown Americans* is the representation of immigrants' troubled relationships with both their nation of origin and their country of residence. The text's protagonists struggle to feel included within national identity imagery, and in lieu of inclusion in the national framework, create their own communities. Lasting uncertainty emerges as a response to disenfranchisement, and the novel does not subscribe to an idealized American Dream type vision of immigration as an option that solves all of the immigrants' problems. Instead, Henríquez's novel uncovers the marginalization and violence that causes emigration, and also continues to be prominent in immigrant persons' life in the United States. Essential to the text is its critical message critiquing – through an exposition of its impact – the normalization of marginalization across all the spheres that Latin American immigrants traverse, on either side of the border dividing Latin America and the United States. The problematization of immigrants' sense of national identity and of their relationships with *la patria* is timely in the face of ongoing legal debate over the fate of undocumented immigrants in the U.S. Due to the current limitations on who can obtain documentation, many Latin American immigrants have lived in the U.S. for decades without ever returning to their nation of origin. They, like Celia Toro in *The Book of Unknown Americans*, miss their families, friends, and familiar haunts every day. Narratives such as the one studied in this article offer insight into the complexities of migration and of identity in connection with the nation from whence one comes and the nation in which one settles.

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NOTES

[i] Critics offer differing rationale for Henríquez's use of such a large cast of characters. Nathaniel Rich, who wrote an article in *Daily Beast* proclaiming the text as the "2014 Novel of the Year" suggests that this strategy "serves no urgent narrative purpose, apart from creating a sense of a vast multitude, each character standing for many, as if to show how many varied forms immigrant life can take." Meanwhile, Cara Forbes attests in her Senior Thesis that the broad range of characters is actually essential to the author's goals, with the connecting thread being "the characters' experiences in pursuing their American Dreams and the ambivalent reader response that their stories cause" (Forbes 3-4).

[ii] Homi Bhabha asks in his canonical analysis of the border, "How are subjects formed 'in-between,' or in excess of, the sum of the parts of difference (usually intoned as race/class/gender, etc.)?" (2). According to Bhabha, it is when society opens itself to these interstitial fissures between fixed identifications, what

he labels as the "third space," that society accepts the possibility of cultural hybridity (36-39). These new hybrid identities offer a sense of self and belonging that is distinct from the national standard of homogeneity. Traditionally, as suggested by Benedict Anderson's theory of "imagined communities," the world (influenced by the European mindset) has identified peoples in relation to their nation, to which they are connected by their similarity to others of this nation, or in other words, by sharing certain physical and cultural traits. However, Bhabha proposes an alternative identity that separates itself from "nation" in favor of the "interstice." In turn, Henríquez does not offer a clear answer to the question of how an alternative identity shall manifest, and her text does not lean fully into a development of hybrid identities for its main characters. Instead, the novel focuses on the exposition and problematization of this identity renegotiation process, emphasizing the questions that arise, rather than concrete answers.

[iii] Arias explains that "Central American narrative textuality has been labeled an 'invisible literature,' one that few people read outside of its area of origin due to techniques of market domination" (49).

[iv] Caminero-Santangelo suggests that Guatemalan American authors Héctor Tobar and Francisco Goldman are thus notable for their "explicit and dramatic representation of the multiplicity and cross-pollination of different Latino groups" ("Central Americans" 173). Another example of a contemporary novel that incorporates migrant characters of diverse nations is Graciela Limón's *The River Flows North* (2009).

[v] Representations of immigrants as dishonest abound in particular in debate over immigrants' right to sanctuary and asylum. There are many examples of texts that explore the nature of these asylum cases, which juxtapose the immigrants' testament of their lived experiences with the judge's skepticism. Consider, for example, Mario Bencastro's *Odisea del norte* (1999), which details an asylum case of a woman who is eventually deported to El Salvador, where she is murdered, after her petition is rejected due to insufficient evidence of risk. Valeria Luiselli's *Tell Me How It Ends: An Essay in 40 Questions* (2017), which explores the experiences of immigrant children within the court system, updates and supplements the idea of a skeptical approach to immigrants' testimonies about motives for migration.

[vi] Regarding the development of Hispanic communities in response to increased rates of Central American immigration to the U.S., particularly during the 1980s and 90s, see Abrego (2014), Hamilton and Stoltz Chinchilla, and Rodríguez (*Dividing*, chapter six).

[vii]For analysis about the representation of the American Dream in *The Book of Unknown Americans*, see Forbes (2018), Kumar Rana (2020), and Sandjojo et. al (2022).

[viii] In her comparison of how Latinx literature portrays a panethnic Latinx identity versus a transnational one, Caminero-Santangelo indicates that similarities in financial and social situations can serve in literature to create connections between Latinx persons of differing national origins, thus fostering a panethnic identity ("Central Americans" 184). In contrast, it is important to also consider that differences in social class can impede the formation of a panethnic identity, since social class often translates to certain privileges or disadvantages, even amongst immigrants.

[ix] The term "Central American-American" surfaces in criticism across the first two decades of the twenty-first century (Arias, Cárdenas, Rodríguez), and serves as a useful lens for the analysis of literature that examines Central American migration and Central American identity. Arias uses this term to expose what he calls Central Americans' experience of double marginalization, manifest in the exclusion of Central Americans from the general vision in U.S. popular culture of what "Latin American" means (186). Arias connects this particular brand of marginalization, in part, to Central Americans' indigenous background, and the traditional and systematic invisibilization of indigenous communities and cultures across the Americas (187-88). In consideration of literature about Central American migration, the term Central American-American works as a filter that fosters reflection on a long history of ethnically-based marginalization and the relevance of discrimination in modern day Central American migration and

identity politics, and announces the plurality of the Central American migration experience and of identity negotiation.