RE/MEMBERING THE SILENCES: AFFECTIVE BELONGING AND THE BEAUTY OF CENTRAL AMERICAN STORYTELLING

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I examine the individual and collective subject positions of U.S. Central Americans by analyzing both their representation and exclusion in cultural texts, which include a wide variety of poetry, film, zines, memoir, and social media platforms. Writing about Central Americans in the U.S. has led me to consider key characteristics of transnational identity-building: dislocation, affective (non)belonging, migration barriers, cultural negotiation, and diasporic storytelling as resistance. Through this analysis, I engage with storytelling as a survival tactic and an everyday practice that U.S. Central Americans use to negotiate their cultural and material (non)belonging within dominant narratives that dehumanize them. I draw from a range of interdisciplinary approaches, especially cultural rhetorics, rhetorical theory, writing studies, film theory, Central American Studies, and queer theory. This project works to broaden the category of Latinx Rhetoric as it's currently theorized in Rhetoric and Composition Studies. By unpacking how U.S. Central Americans compose identity through specific rhetorical strategies, I suggest how the specificities of one's individual and collective identity must be attended to in order to truly make space for marginalized voices/bodies within our discipline.

This is dedicated to a lot of people and to my cat.

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You know who you are.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: A MANIFESTO—STORYTELLING AS RESISTANCE TO ACADEMIC ENCULTURATION 1
Positioning Myself in the Academy 4
Story, Counterstory, Testimonies of Injury 12
Affective Economies 15
Embodied Reflexivity 19
Diasporic Storytelling 22

CHAPTER 2: STORYTELLING WITHIN AND AGAINST THE LIMITS OF MESTIZA CONSCIOUSNESS 28
The Limits of the Mestiza Consciousness 30
Latin American Cultural Differences 32
Storytelling in Rhetoric and Composition 34
Language Sticks to Bodies 36
Embodied Storytelling 39
Central American Possibilities 41

CHAPTER 3: RE/MEMBERING FRAGMENTED STORIES AS DISRUPTION THROUGH LOVATO'S *UNFORGETTING* 43
In Case You Forgot… 44
Central American Historical Context 47
Memory, Re-Memory, and Unforgetting 53
Contextualizing Resilience when Lacking Context 61
Activism Through Family Stories 64

CHAPTER 4: CULTURING *ANHELO* AND VISIBILIZING ERASURE THROUGH ART AND SOCIAL MEDIA 69
Surviving the Pandemic through Art and Social Media 70
La Horchata Zine 77
Visualizing the Pain of Erasure 87

CHAPTER 5: MAKING CENTRAL AMERICAN RHETORIC 94
Central American Rhetoric 96
Where Are They Now? 99
There's Beauty in Our Stories 102

REFERENCES 104

CHAPTER 1: A MANIFESTO—STORYTELLING AS RESISTANCE TO ACADEMIC ENCULTURATION

This research project is un *desahogo*[1]. A literal undrowning while I'm still under academic waters or maybe I've just developed gills down here. I began my graduate studies[2] with my master's program the year I suffered a lot of personal loss. I showed up to a new state and a school I'd only seen in pictures and was thousands of miles away from my community. I was offered employment and some benefits, but I still needed to take out student loans to make up the cost of living. I was the only Latinx person and one of three people of color in a cohort of fourteen. And my community had either died or was a thousand miles away. I was a Salvadorian or Salvador*ea*n, but never Salvadoran—unless I was acknowledging the other half of hyphen and saying Salvadoran-American. Although, most times just saying American or Latinx felt easier.

I was feeling homesick. I'm always homesick. I write when I'm homesick hoping that somewhere along the lines I find the embrace of my grandmother's arms. *I came to the worst place to find belonging*. I think I've had this thought all throughout grad school.

Looking back, I just wanted to understand our culture. Why are we here? Why are we different? Why is there suffering? That deep desire for understanding has driven me insane, distorted me beyond recognition as I anchored myself in the past trying to make sense of the present. How can I articulate what it feels like to be a Salvadoran-American when asking the question itself makes me question what I am not? Where are the words? In what language? In what dialect? How can I express those things I was taught not to talk about?

[1] Spanish for "relief" or "alleviation" but a wordplay on "ahogar" which means to drown.
[2] When I talk about my graduate studies all throughout this dissertation, I'm referring to both Master's program and PhD.

"*Ver, Oír, y Callar*," is a phrase I would hear my family say all the time— "See, Hear, and Keep Quiet." Even as I write it, I hear the phrase as a whisper, and I want to drown it with academic language. Gimme distance from the personal and let me sink to the bottom again. I don't wanna tell you about my life anymore.

In this dissertation, I examine the individual and collective subject positions of U.S. Central Americans by analyzing both their representation and exclusion in cultural texts, which include a wide variety of zines, memoir, and social media platforms. Writing about Central Americans in the U.S. has led me to consider key characteristics of transnational identity-building: dislocation, (non)belonging, migration barriers, diasporic cultural negotiation, and storytelling as resistance. Through this analysis, I engage with storytelling as a survival tactic and an everyday practice that U.S. Central Americans use to negotiate their cultural and material (non)belonging within dominant narratives that dehumanize them. I draw from a range of interdisciplinary approaches, especially cultural rhetorics, rhetorical theory, writing studies, film theory, Central American studies, and queer theory. This project works to broaden the category of Latinx Rhetoric as it's currently theorized in Rhetoric and Composition Studies. By unpacking how U.S. Central Americans compose identity through specific rhetorical strategies, I suggest how the specificities of one's individual and collective identity must be attended to in order to truly make space for marginalized voices/bodies within our discipline.

This dissertation is also an academic story that is full of incomplete memories of my time navigating higher education as a grad student and writing teacher. Writing my reflections of these memories is how I remember my cultural identity—it's how I've stayed alive. No one in my family made it this far in academic education. My grandma didn't go to school and my mother

didn't graduate high school, but I draw from this range of intellectual women who taught me how to navigate the U.S. multicultural landscape through their stories. Despite them never setting foot in the ivory tower, their views on education or on being political allowed me find belonging in a place that never imagined us. I have constellated the academic knowledges I've studied these last seven years with the meaningful relationships that honor the lived experiences making up my reality (Powell et. al, 2014, Act 1).

Malea Powell, et. al (2014), describe that "the project of cultural rhetorics is, generally, to emphasize rhetorics as always-already cultural and cultures as persistently rhetorical. In practice, cultural rhetorics scholars investigate and understand meaning-making as it is situated in specific cultural communities" (Act I). Their definition doesn't disallow the notion of a diasporic community, however in many ways diasporic communities disrupt specificity, making them difficult to pin down and fix into a single story. Because the Salvadoran-American community I am part of is diasporic, it is important for me to account for multiply situated subjects. As such, I find myself constellating stories, which Powell, et. al (2014), describe as allowing for "all the meaning-making practices and their relationships to matter. It allows for multiply-situated subjects to connect to multiple discourses at the same time, as well as for those relationships (among subjects, among discourses, among kinds of connections) to shift and change without holding a subject captive" (Act I). So, to account for a range of meaning-making practices from multiply-situated subjects, including myself, you will see both in my own writing and in the objects of my textual analysis, non-linear storying.

Positioning Myself in the Academy

I'm Salvadorian[3] in Los Angeles and sometime when I lived in rural Utah I started to use Salvadoran-American. Now, because of grad school I say Salvadoran and U.S. Central American[4] but in this project, for the most part, I will be using the latter to situate the Salvadoran diaspora in the United States. Central American scholar Maritza Cardenas writes that "to be Salvadoran is to understand oneself as being inherently Central American; both are mutually defining as one enables the other" (2017, p. 72). While my academic story will demonstrate these terms mutually defining one another, one of the limitations to this approach is that not all Central Americans describe their experiences through dislocation or dispersal. My use of the term also centers perspectives from the Northern Triangle, which include Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador. I will provide more context about the region as I unpack the various ways in which storytelling emerges but now, I turn your attention back to some historical context on El Salvador.

My family migrated from El Salvador to the U.S. in the 1970's and 80's because of economic inequality and the ensuing U.S. backed Civil War that lasted twelve years (1979-1992). Personally, I don't know many details about my family during those years. My grandma told me only one time a story of the things she saw, and my mother told her to stop telling me such violent things. I wanted to know more but my grandma never spoke of it again and to be honest, I've never forgotten the images she described that one time. This was a war between the

[3] Salvadorian or Salvadorean are colloquial whereas Salvadoran is more common in academic discourse.
[4] I use U.S. Central American throughout this dissertation to indicate a particular generation of Central Americans, namely those who are 1.5 generation (migrated as children), or second generation (born in the U.S. with Central American ancestry) (Cardenas, 2017, p. 8).

Marxist-Leninist guerilla group Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN) and the right-wing Salvadoran government that had consisted of military dictatorships since the 1930's. It is regarded as one of the most violent wars of the 20th century, and it received over a million U.S. dollars a day in military aid (Lovato, 2016). Approximately 75,000 people died, 8,000 disappeared, 550,000 internally displaced, and 500,000 refugees dispersed across the globe.

Central American Studies scholar Yajaira Padilla (2022) explains that during this time in 1984**,** the Reagan administration used the Salvadoran war in his presidential address to support a hemispheric national security policy in the fight against communism (p. 2). President Reagan used Nicaragua's Sandinista government to claim that El Salvador was a target of the communist agenda and needed U.S. intervention. Padilla (2022) highlights Reagan's role in both framing Central America as "a region teeming with unhinged subversives and […] as on the cusp of democracy, with a general population desperately yearning for and deserving of it" (p. 2). Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador were experiencing civil or counterrevolutionary wars which led to a tripled U.S. Central American population with Nicaraguans being granted asylum for escaping communism, while Salvadorans and Guatemalans were not granted refugee status because they were leaving "democratic states" and less than 3% of asylum claims were approved (p. 3). I come from a family of mainly women and all of the ones that migrated were within this 3% approved for asylum status. It wasn't until grad school that I learned this statistic and, being the first in my family to get a PhD, I've learned to sit with the privilege of having access to an education and feeling ashamed of not knowing so much context.

By the time I was born, my family had already been in the States for thirteen years. I grew up around Mexicans, Chicanxs[5], and U.S. Central Americans whose families had also migrated around the same time or later. Following Reagan's 1984 address, Central Americans in the media were rendered as a violent backwards people which Padilla (2022) asserts is intimately tied to their exclusion from U.S. society and from the option of being accepted as "real Americans" (p. 4). The U.S. Central American experience so far has been hypervisible through violent narratives that obscure U.S. Central American lived experiences. This research project is my attempt at visibilizing U.S. Central American lived experiences and emphasizing an articulation of their diasporic cultural practices, as they offer much insight to transnational identity building.

By the time I had started grad school, I had scanned every syllabus I'd received in higher education for Spanish[6] names wondering how long I'd have to wait to read about Latinx[7] stories, theories, and concepts. So, I was excited when I saw Gloria Anzaldúa's name in a course syllabus during my first quarter of grad school. I'd never heard of her before, much less read her work, but here she was in this course towards the end of the quarter schedule, where most POC scholars tend to be placed.

I'd never really read work that integrated both Spanish and English, the two languages I know and that I'd always kept separate in my mind. English was for the public and Spanish was for home. *Why is home showing up in the classroom?* Anzaldúa's work allowed me to think of my

[5] A gender-neutral term for Mexican-American that is self-defined but also has a rich history through the Chicano Movement (El Movimiento) which visibilized the Chicano identity in political and cultural discourse back in the 60s and 70s.

[6] Not all folks from Latin America will have Spanish names but the presupposition for Spanish surnames allowed me to narrow down scholarship that *might* be culturally similar to my own.

[7] I use the gender-neutral term "Latinx" because it's what I use to self-identify but Latine has also gained more visibility in recent years. You'll mainly read the term Latinx if I'm making a broader ideological claim on Latinidad.

identity through a shared language in a space that had either not allowed or invited it before. It was like someone turned up the volume to a voice I thought I couldn't use in school.

Anzaldúa, in *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987), was talking about a woman's voice, her poet's voice, her sexual voice, and saying that if she could not speak in all of her languages—English, Spanish, Spanglish, Chicano, Tex-Mex—she would not be free. She has said in other works of hers that until she can speak in all of her languages and dialects, she cannot see the legitimacy of herself and so, for me, it helped me look at the languages that I knew in a different way. They were something I could use in a tactful way in the classroom to speak for parts of myself.

And so, in those grad school seminar essays you're asked to do where you pick a theory or a framework from the course and a topic of your choice to fit the framework or theory, I chose to research the Salvadoran identity. I wanted to understand the Salvadoran Spanish dialect but somehow fit it through the mestiza consciousness that Anzaldúa lays out because I wanted to know: how can I legitimize this this already-meaningful language to myself? Specifically, while doing it through an academic story? In this moment, I'm a new grad student and I'm feeling all pumped now with my research idea. I was going to write in Spanish and not do translations. I'm submitting this to professional researchers, I thought, so if they want to know what I have to say in Spanish, they can research and translate it themselves.

Along with feeling excited about my linguistic choices, or what at the time felt like an available choice, I was also very excited to research El Salvador for an academic essay because I'd never been given the chance. I had been writing essays about what other people have to say and rarely the stories that mattered to me. So, I start to research anything I can find in the library

databases and all I'm coming across are civil wars, maras (gangs), earthquakes, and not much else. Wars and gangs. To be Central American in the U.S is to be a "mythical creature that is only mentioned if at all in relation to war, trauma, maras, revolutions, [and] earthquakes," writes Guatemalan poet Maya Chinchilla (2014). *Puchica*[8], I thought I was real. But to be honest, I didn't know Chinchilla even existed around this time. I didn't read her poem until 2020 in the anthology *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States* (2017), that was the first anthology of its kind centering U.S. Central American nonfiction, fiction, and poetry. Despite completing an undergraduate degree in Creative Writing, I hadn't been taught much literature that was Latinx, much less Central American. I had my history, an admiration for my family's stories, and a curiosity for the silences within them. So, in my first year of my MA in this project that I'm excitedly working on, I turned this curiosity into a research question and here we are, seven years later, in dissertation/research writing, perhaps the worst place to find belonging.

As I worked on this paper during that first year in grad school, I continued searching for El Salvador, but kept coming across scholarship from the 1990s, mainly from anthropology scholars, and mainly about wars and gangs. Not much was being said about what I was looking for: information about the Salvadoran language and its specific dialect, Caliche[9]. Instead, wars and gangs. I also couldn't really find contemporary books about Central American issues. Matter of fact, most of the books I used in this research project were published between my first year of grad school to 2023. It's almost as though we didn't exist in the academic imagination. I was

[8] A Central American colloquial term to express surprise and/or anger. More common in the Northern Triangle of the region which includes Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador.

[9] Caliche is another word for Salvadoran Spanish which includes the use of "voseo" (tú=you) to address someone informally. Voseo is common in Central American Spanish but Caliche refers to the Nahúat influence on Spanish in the region.

learning how to develop my research skills while trying to research something important to me, but not really knowing if I can't find material because it's not available or because I wasn't asking the right questions.

So, I pivoted, and began to research keywords in Spanish from "dialecto Salvadoreño," "Caliche," or "identidad Salvadoreña." This worked, to a point, as I found articles that were more informative, but I stressed out about translating the quotes I used correctly into English. I kept having that familiar childhood anxiety, where I had to translate for a family member and the responsibility is on me at a very young age to understand what the situation calls for. How do I communicate these things to English? I kept thinking, *I know how to do this, I've done this all my life*, but writing for an essay just felt like it mimicked that enormous responsibility of being bilingual and trying to say, "Here are the parts of me you need to understand." Am I even legible?

Yes—in many languages. I ask the prof if I can write a lyrical seminar paper, which meant I wanted to play with the academic genre, add creative writing to the academic essay, and play around with Spanish. The idea that you even could was new to me but approaching the academic essay as just another form of creative writing[10] helped me feel not so intimidated by this rigid form. And so, I end up writing this essay with story and poetic sections that included Spanish phrases squished in the middle of historical context. The professor's main feedback was on the Spanish rather than the mestiza framework. *Where are the English translations? Well, you can write in Spanish but if you want to submit this somewhere for other people to read, you're gonna have to translate it, and the translations are key. I know it's not work you want to do but you*

[10] I cherish the friends I met through graduate school whose kind and thoughtful insights about life and writing helped me get to this point.

kinda have to. And I'm thinking, why am I being assigned someone like Anzaldúa who broke these rules, but then somehow there are these rules for a seminar essay for a first-year grad student. It's not being made into anything. It's just for a grade.

Why assign something that would encourage a language that I use just to put a lot of constraints around it? Were we reading diverse perspectives just to read? Or to learn lenses from which to position our research? What was the point? I learned then that sometimes authors are assigned because they provide lenses for students from which to see things differently. And the cultural and linguistic proximity I had to the subject matter meant nothing because now I could be talked at with academic language. I felt frustrated because I put so much emotional labor in just translating Spanish scholarship to English that maybe a bit of translation reciprocity could help? I just wanted to know if my understanding of mestiza consciousness or the Salvadoran identity was coming through.

While I found myself incredibly frustrated with my in-class experience and what I was being asked to change, I also found myself confused as to what to make of Anzaldúa's framing of the Borderlands and mestizaje as a possible theoretical space for researching a Salvadoran cultural identity. Anzaldúa writes about being Mexican-American, an identity I often get mistaken for. And yet, we don't have many similarities besides sharing the Latinx umbrella, knowing Spanish, and a family story that involves the U.S. Mexico border. In spite of my original excitement over Anzaldúa's words, I came to realize that perhaps mestizaje was not going to help me. In fact, as I'll explain further in Chapter 2, the concept alone is what flattened my cultural identity from the rhet/comp imaginary.

On the one hand, I was so excited to find Anzaldúa in my syllabus (only to be met with resistance on modeling her multilingual writing) and on the other hand, in really paying attention to her, I realized that her story was not the story I was hoping to find. I share this story of encountering Anzaldúa as it taught me how to position myself in academia, as caught between being Salvadoran, being perceived as Mexican, finding mostly only narratives that either don't fit my experience or essentialize my experience into wars and gangs. This story illuminates the various layers of illegibility that emerged when trying to humanize a perspective that is marked by its exclusion. What I mean to say is that, researching Central American narratives is to come across many dehumanizing narratives about wars and gangs with no Central American humanity present in them. Looking at Central Americans in the U.S. in terms of where they belong and in what ways they are legible, or invisible, helps disclose how diasporic groups build identity even while identifying with recognizable labels like Latine or Latinx or identifying with dominant narratives present in Latinx cultural production such as the prevalence of mestizaje and how it relates to affinity for nationality.

My stories from my personal life, from the classroom, and from the pages of research I encountered made clear for me that complicating and revising an understanding of mestizaje can help contextualize white supremacist narratives. Specifically, it can help us see who is considered human and a citizen, not only as defined by U.S. nativist logic, but also within the colonial legacies the Latinx community must contend with. It also perhaps discloses some blind spots in Latinx rhet/comp scholarship that could use some reconsideration and revision.

Story, Counterstory, Testimonies of Injury

During the first year of my master's program, President Trump increased his fixation on the Central American "caravans"—large groups of migrants seeking asylum—that he considered a threat to U.S. national security. Wars and gangs, and now caravans. I sit in my classes, learning the theoretical language of Self and Other while simultaneously (un)learning what it feels like to be Salvadorian and Latinx away from anybody who'd identify as such. The hypervisibility of Central Americans in the media and their absence from the scholarship I was assigned left me relying on family stories to ground the isolation I felt through my cultural differences in the academy. The guilt of having access to education and the echoes of duty and responsibility of doing something for my deceased family pressured me to do well in school. I was homesick, missing my language, and trying to stay afloat amidst the grief of having recently lost my mother. Coming up with research questions about my culture and insisting to explore the research in Spanish was a way to survive. Looking for community both in person and in online spaces was also a way to survive. What you read here are my own cultural negotiations, the gears of my resistance as I genre-blend story and research to make sense of a Central American rhetoric mostly known for its exclusion.

I share my story for many reasons; it is a method, a way of re/membering, of healing, and serves in the hopes of connecting with others. It's a story that lacks a lot of context, and yet the gaps within it also play an important role in us possibly connecting. Behind these words exist many stories woven from the memories of different people trying not to forget their past. I have stories of my family's life in El Salvador, humorous stories about their daily antics that always led to a lesson about gratitude and humility. Stories of their journey to America where they didn't

know the culture or the language, stories of the struggle to make it in Los Angeles that were at times bridged with stories of life back down south. The wars and gangs were in the background and if Los Angeles was on fire from riots and earthquakes, you could at least stretch a dollar here. Oral storytelling is how I learned my family's wisdom and writing about it is how I try to remember them. Telling you my academic story that's about one community's way of making culture is how I remember because "forgetting would be a repetition of the violence or injury" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 33). What I'm trying to say to you is that sharing a story full of incomplete memories and restructured to introduce a different type of injury, another *herida abierta*[11] so to speak into the political realm is very much a Central American cultural practice.

Central American scholars have explored the ways in which memories and oral storytelling allow U.S. Central Americans to shape their sense of belonging and exclusion through sharing their experiences with subsequent generations. Ester Trujillo (2021), for example, has researched the effects of state violence on narratives, or necronarratives, which she describes as "stories pieced together from memories that are interpreted through a lens of survival, resilience, and healing, and function as a response to U.S. necropolitics and state-sponsored terror" (p. 76). Trujillo argues that Salvadorans "rupture the silence" to teach lessons from their wartime memories and rationalize "why their children should do well in school; why political activity participation is welcome, required, or forbidden; and, most importantly, why they migrated to the U.S. at all" (p. 76). Second generation Salvadorans described narratives in which they retrofit their parents' past memories to determine their own political subjectivities in the present. Steven Osuna (2017) calls these histories "obstinate transnational memories" which

[11] Open wound; *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987)

shape how second generations "embody their parents' migration experiences into their evolving praxis" (p. 88). In this way, memories become an integral part in sharing embodied knowledge that is shaped by a sense of violence, (non) belonging, and exclusion but points to developing cultural awareness and a political subjectivity.

Given U.S. Central American research on memory and oral histories, story is important to a methodology that aims to highlight Central American lived experiences and cultural practices. As a method, story privileges intergenerational embodied knowledge that challenges the dehumanizing narratives that continue to systematically silence and misrepresent Central Americans. Centering these fragmented stories demonstrates how embodied knowledge is re/membered and renegotiated between generations to construct an understanding of their sociopolitical positions in the U.S. By examining my sociopolitical position in the U.S., storytelling becomes a process of healing that enables me to make meaning out of the memories that disrupt intergenerational silencing. Story, as method for re/membering, allows me to show you an embodied way of healing by sewing together memories with the silent gaps surrounding them through the lens of affect, dispersal, "survival, resilience, and healing" (Trujillo, 2021, p. 76). In other words, an embodied approach to a story of healing is also a testimony of injury that acknowledges violence and pain within the "bodily history of harm" between the U.S. and Central America (Ahmed, 2014, p. 34). As a researcher and storyteller, I'm resisting generational silence by positioning myself through a decolonial research method such as story and contextualizing the violence in dehumanizing narratives about U.S. Central Americans.

For example, the Central American narratives you read in this dissertation, as well as my own embodied storytelling, show the various meaning-making practices that multiply situated

subjects use to account for multiple discourses. Constellating embodied knowledge with dehumanizing narratives, storytelling with scholarship, or memories and their surrounding silence help shape how "making culture occurs through everyday practices" in the diasporic Central American community (Powell, et al., 2014) This academic story, for instance, contains the relationships in my life from family members, to friends, and colleagues as I try to understand my own cultural practices through scholarship that both represents and excludes Central Americans. In other words, story allows me to make meaning from my cultural practices and these shifting relationships that constitute my views as a researcher without having to privilege one discourse over another.

Having described how I got to this place, researching how my own subjectivity is understood and rhetorically expressed both by insiders and outsiders, I now move into some key theoretical frameworks that help gird my analysis moving forward: affective economies, embodied reflexivity, and diasporic storytelling.

Affective Economies

The past is living rather than dead; the past lives in the very wounds that remain open in the present (Ahmed, 2014, p. 33).

There's a lot of pus in this story[12].

My Tia and Uncle drove us through mango tree fields in her tan pick-up truck as my Mom, Dad, and I sat in the truck bed; the hot wind blowing dirt on our faces. We were driving back from Zacatecoluca, my mother's hometown that she hadn't seen in twelve years. I asked her if

[12] Esther Ohito writes on the academy as a place that wounds people of color, in part, by its labor demands. Ohito writes: "Scars form post-injury, and stories are the pus in the lesions beneath these fibrous tissues" (2021, p. 519).

she wanted to visit her brother and grandmother at the cemetery, she looked at me and nodded no.

"Para que? Los muertos ya no saben nada[13]." She shaded her eyes with her hand and draped her other arm around the edge of the truck bed. "They can't hear us."

There was a whistle in the distance and at first I thought it was the wind. Perhaps the dead were talking back today.

My mother had spoken about her brother once or twice in my life. She didn't have any pictures of him, but he was tall, very tall with dark hair, his eyes honey-colored. He was the last surviving son my Abuelita had out of three boys. In a family full of women, I always wondered if our family dynamic would have been different if he hadn't died. My mom was ten, twelve, or something like that when he died of a heart attack. He had a heart defect and no doctor in town could treat his condition. My Abuelita had found a doctor in Texas that was willing to see him but she had to work to save money for the trip North. He died instantly after his heart attack, and they found his body swaying in the patio hammock two months before the scheduled trip. He was seventeen. All my mom really remembered about his death were the wails of her mother.

"Death is the only time life allows us to be sad," my mom said once. "Every other time is a luxury."

It costs money to feel sad and if you're sad then you can't work. And in this life, you have to work. The capacity to feel became associated with capital early on as my mom would list the various jobs she held and how much she sacrificed for her kids. Her sacrifice meant opportunity for us. But as a poser emo kid growing up in the States, capitalism was for conformists, and I was

[13] Why? The dead don't know anything anymore.

gonna complain about it. On the inside. The truth was that many of her various jobs during my early childhood were housekeeping for the rich and I felt embarrassed. She worked and didn't stop to feel sadness while I deflected to hide my shame around her stereotypical work. We were both right. These days, I'm anxious and full of guilt when I feel too burnt out to work. *In this life, you have to work.* My work is to remember.

Examining past wounds in the bodily history of harm between the U.S. and Central America allows me to explore systemic oppression as a matter of affective relationships across unequal power dynamics. When I used the term "affective" in my work, I am referring to the range of emotions or feelings that are experienced by individuals as they navigate systems of oppression. The stories you read in this dissertation describe an affective response to colonial wounds, such as the "colonial fog of erasure" and their effects as they circulate simultaneously through dehumanizing narratives *and* as shared embodied knowledge (Rodriguez & Cuevas, 2017). These dehumanizing narratives and embodied knowledge pass through generational storytelling and function as a testament to the fact that intergenerational silencing hasn't worked. To further illustrate how story as a method for remembering allows for U.S. Central Americans to share embodied knowledge, I turn to Sara Ahmed's work on the circulation of emotions.

Ahmed (2014), in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, examines racism as a politic of hatred that has affective value as it circulates through social spheres. For Ahmed, hatred as an emotion functions as a negotiation of boundaries between people (and communities) when an Other is introduced as a threat to my (our) existence (p. 51). For example, if a U.S. nativist rhetoric[14]

[14] I'll discuss more in Chapter 2.

(Chavez, 2009) is unified by its hatred for an invading other (Central Americans), then the circulation of hatred (against migrants) produces an affective value—as it amplifies or lulls—that both unifies one community while displacing another. To examine how hatred circulates, Ahmed (2014) employs the term "affective economies" where emotions can be read "*as involving relationships of difference and displacement without positive value*" (p. 45). I understand this quote in the same way the late great Omar Little from *The Wire* (2002) explains capital: "Man, money ain't got no owners. Only spenders." Ahmed theorizes that the structural circulation (economy) of emotions (affect) can help disclose the various ways in which affect is produced as an effect of its circulation and distribution across society. She emphasizes some key points about affective economies: 1) emotions operate on an unconscious level, 2) emotions work as a form of capital, 3) emotions don't inhabit subjects, rather, the subject is a "nodal point" through which emotions circulate. An affective economy then, allows me as a researcher and storyteller to explore the affective entanglements associated and circulated within the U.S. Central American experience.

An affective economy for U.S. Central Americans, for example, circulates dehumanizing narratives for border security, for protecting the U.S. from that fearful American other below the border, and for immigration reform. In this way, dominant narratives circulate through various social spheres and the affect associated with them becomes the effect of the narrative's circulation. In other words, the more these narratives of wars and gangs circulate, the more this language can materially affect collective bodies and their acceptance or rejection, belonging or non-belonging, by the unified social body. What I'm suggesting, however, is that story as a method for sharing embodied knowledge also circulates across relationships of difference and

displacement. This academic story, for example, is full of affective bonds that circulate in temporal ways through generations of past reflections and between the cultural displacement where belonging and non-belonging are both possible.

Affective economies, then, can have surplus value in the sense that fearing a migrating other is one form of capital that is driven by passion for accumulating wealth socially, materially, and affectively. Think of it this way, the surplus value for fear and hatred of the migrating other resurfaces every election cycle where migration is described as a crisis, an invasion, a security threat, etc. Ahmed (2014) analyzes how emotions like hate, disgust, or fear, are utilized in the constructions of a nation as a feeling subject. As such, the national body can circulate and maintain affective economies that render collective bodies as subjects without positive value where disgust, hatred, and fear are emotions attributed to those perceived as a threat.

These emotions, for Ahmed (2014), can have a stickiness through the cohesion or adhesion towards relations of othering or rather "through the attribution of feelings to others, or by transforming others into objects of feeling" (p. 16, fnt.3). An affective economy, then, can be used to understand why stories of the embodied experiences of marginalized communities emerge and in turn, offer insight to the circulation of various structures of feelings.

Embodied Reflexivity

I feel, therefore I can be free. -Audre Lorde[15]

Being a grad student takes up a lot of emotional space. I feel different at the end of every semester as I swing through memories back and forth, watching them blur into each other and change the landscape of how I loved and how I hurt. I have a deep desire to write out the shape

[15] "Poetry is Not a Luxury" from *Sister Outsider* (1984) by Audre Lorde

of whatever feels like home and in any of the languages I know. While affective economies help me look at the structural circulation of emotions in dominant narratives, I now turn my inquiry inward to explore how the circulation of such language can stick to the researcher's body**.** Or rather, how the language stuck to me informs my inquiry. To understand how story as a method for remembering affects me as a researcher, I draw from Esther Ohito (2021) and Jeong-eun Rhee's (2021) work on embodied reflexivity and rememory. Both Ohito and Rhee draw from Toni Morrison's concept of rememory "as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past" (http://theguardian.com). Rememory then, is a method of piecing together, or constituting, a usable history from an unforgotten past. In a personal essay about using memory as a narrative device, Morrison wrote about the battle between remembering and forgetting as the "effort to both remember and not know." This battle between remembering and wanting to not know was one of my major driving forces while writing this research project.

I was drawn to this memory work as I continued to develop my research because it enabled me to fill the spooky silent gaps that are unexplained by violent context and hard to articulate with logic. Rhee (2021) describes the link between past and present as a haunting that "demands you to remember those parts of the past disappeared and dis(re)membered from what (you think) you remember into a new past that you must now imagine" (p. 20). In other words, thinking about the past changes how you think about it. I've remembered in pieces, and at times I've gathered the pieces through my research questions. I feel culturally dismembered, "skewered by multiple discourses" (Powell, et al., 2014), recollecting my "ghostly connections" (Rhee, 2021, p. 20), and trying to "mak[e] meaning of how my memories were molding my

knowledge" (Ohito, 2021, p. 522). Learning how to position myself as a researcher amidst my grief only created a body in pieces. Telling you a fragmented story is the only way I know how.

Expanding on Black feminist memory work, Ohito (2021) employs "embodied reflexivity" to purposefully examine her positionality as a researcher while surviving bereavement and decay in the neoliberal academy. Ohito describes that memory work can elicit a deeper understanding to "how our positionalities and intersecting identities intertwine with our particular bodies and particular memories that we carry within those bodies" (p. 521). Ohito emphasizes that creative engagement with memories, via one's own personal archive, can help orient a researcher's inquiry to their thoughts, feelings, actions and experiences to further explore who we are in the world. In this project I also employ moments of "embodied reflexivity" to make meaning of how my memories are stirred by the narratives I research and how they shift my relationship to the social constructs I engage with. Embodied reflexivity, then, is how I account for what I have felt throughout this writing process.

Anguish—a word that spits itself back out before it's swallowed. I inhaled the ash-green ocean once. The salt crystallized, güishtes[16] in my mouth, slicing the walls of my throat as the waves tumbled me.

I write to expand on what counts as knowledge while recognizing that grieving in the academy inevitably shaped my way of understanding research. Dwelling in my memories and surviving grief through this work has led to many asked extensions on assignments, missed opportunities, missed deadlines, an array of mental and physical health problems. This is why I

[16] Shards of glass; I know this word from Caliche, but it could be used in other Spanish dialects. From the nahua huitztli, *thorn* and tet, for *stone*.

offer my introspection as I reflect on these narratives of belonging and people voicing their understanding of that which is hard to articulate. The attempt at finding the humane in myself is a way of resisting the numbing of forgetting. Ohito (2021) in mourning her father writes, "Devasted, depressed, or desperate, downtrodden or doused in despair—resist the lull of disillusionment" (p. 530). I've resisted; but sometimes the time spent looking through photographs, remembering joyous moments with my family, and trying to read between their secrets cost too much. Remembering or unforgetting, as you'll read in this project, is a creative process of surviving, sharing embodied knowledge, and healing.

Diasporic Storytelling

The Salvadoran Civil War was close to ending by the time I was born, but it was always there in the background of the humorous stories exchanged between my mom and her sister who stayed in El Salvador. Home in the U.S. began for my mom at the age of twenty-two and she had already lived in different parts of Los Angeles by the time I came around. We'd be driving to visit my other Aunt in Pico Rivera, a city in L.A. County, and my mom would point out random areas: "Todo esto se quemo[17]."

"From the earthquake? Dónde?[18]" I asked. The L.A. riots happened in '92 and the Northridge Earthquake in '93. Different parts of the city are always on fire. I never knew which fire she was referring to.

[17] All of this burned.
[18] Where?

"No. Estamos lejos del valle[19]." Oh, the riots then. Her memories of past fires took us from a rant about *cuilios*[20] in L.A., to how I'm too old to not know the L.A. freeways, to the *cuilios* back in El Salvador. "Solo fregando con la gente se la pasan[21]."

She didn't trust authority. They were all corrupt, here and there. Batons or machetes. If there was violence here, her understanding of it was always intertwined with her memories of home. Civil unrest in the States could at times be followed with a cryptic line from her: "This is how things start." The war. *What if there's a war here*? I'd have floating images in my mind of violence I'd never seen in multiple locations connected through time and space with my mother's worry.

One of the dominant narratives about U.S. Central Americans that I continually return to, are the civil wars, gangs, and caravans. The Central American diaspora, however, is much larger than just the U.S. population and the Salvadoran experience. It also extends beyond cities such as Los Angeles and Washington D.C. and it contains various articulations on what it means to be a U.S. Central American. My own perspective is informed by growing up in a Central American community in L.A. and in rural Utah where there was a small Mexican-American community. When I write of affective belonging, I draw from both experiences that could not be more dissimilar from each other.

I follow the tradition of other Central American scholars of placing "U.S." before Central American to emphasize a shared isthmian identity that acknowledges the cultural, social, national, and political ways that diasporic identities and histories are constructed in the U.S.

[19] No. We're far from the Valley.
[20] Nawat for thief; pejorative for cop.
[21] They just spend their time messing with people.

Using the term U.S. Central American signifies a particular generational experience (Cardenas, 2017, p. 9) and it allows me to examine a particular Central American experience that begins with the refugee crisis in the 70s and 80s and offers another perspective to the sociopolitical positions of migrants in the U.S. Additionally, situating the Central American population in the U.S. disrupts our understandings of a static North America/South America divide that excludes the Central American region from Latinx discourses around cultural belonging and identity-building. While I initially began my research questions around El Salvador, it was the term Central American that helped me find community while in grad school. It was through "Central American" that I was able to find the narratives and CentAm scholarship you read in this dissertation. Cardenas describes: "By symbolically and culturally inhabiting multiple locations, the boundaries of Central America expand creating a transnation—an imaginary space utilized in the diaspora as a site of belonging and cultural identity" (p. 80).

The U.S. Central American diaspora as a site for belonging and cultural identity is what I aim to examine through the use of storytelling. Diaspora allows for storying from multiple locations, temporalities, and affective entanglements between multiply situated subjects. As Horacio Roque Ramirez (2006) emphasizes, the notion of diaspora, "a people's historical, often ongoing dispersal from their original homeland—offers […] the opportunity to consider how particular racial and ethnic groups continue to have historical, affective ties that extend beyond national borders" (p. 40). These affective ties in a diaspora can help disclose the ways in which U.S. Central American cultural production circulates and disrupts nationalistic ideologies as their arrival shifts the multicultural landscape. On the other hand, Kim Butler (2011) describes diasporas as multigenerational: "they combine the individual migration experience with the

collective history of group dispersal and regenensis of communities abroad" (p. 192). Understanding the U.S. Central American experience through intergenerational embodied knowledge then, can offer insight into a diasporic isthmian identity within the Latinx cultural matrix.

To examine diaspora as a site for belonging and cultural identity**,** I analyze narratives that show the rhetorical moves U.S. Central Americans make to negotiate and transform their identities. I explore this cultural negotiation as an affective one that shifts relationships between people and their imagined homeland. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006) expands on the notion that emotions can function as orientations towards objects and others to consider how bodies can make impressions on a feeling social body (U.S. multicultural landscape). Ahmed considers migration to be a form of disorientation and reorientation of bodies inhabiting new spaces as "home" (p. 9). "Homes," Ahmed writes, "are the effects of the histories of arrival" (p. 9).

The history of the Central American arrival is one that introduced the war-migrant experience to Latinx border discourse. As displaced bodies reorient themselves in this new home, their arrival signifies a disorientation to those who already inhabit the space. As such, diasporic spaces are also theorized through relationships of displacement and dispersal within the context of those who remain in place or "stay put." Diasporic storytelling then, can also disclose how groups of people form communities through dislocation within the context and in relation to border discourse. Queer studies scholar Horacio Roque Ramirez suggested that while the borderlands metaphor offers insight on Chicanx cultural negotiation, "for those not crossing (just)

Mexican-U.S. national and ethnic boundaries, the distances are not of a boundary dividing two nation states, but of other passages" (p. 40).

Migrating from Central America to the U.S. emphasizes a couple of cultural particularities from the borderlands which are: a) U.S. Central American scholars contextualize their migration as transnational and diasporic, and b) their migration consists of crossing multiple borders which scholars like Padilla call a "border passage" (p. 90). Border passage considers the active role that the Mexican immigration enforcement plays in the criminalizing of Central American migrants before they've even crossed the U.S.-Mexico border. Diasporic storytelling then can point to the multilayered ways individuals culturally negotiate their sense of belonging and cultural identity in a transnational way that links them across multiple locations, passages, and discourses.

Nation-bound and diasporic identities are both disorienting and reorienting bodies to various homes and dominant ideologies. Queer Studies scholar Gayatri Gopinath (2005) describes that using diaspora as a framework can "track the mutual dependency and intersections between these different modes of domination, as well as the particular forms of accommodation and resistance to which they give rise" (p. 19). Diasporic storytelling is one method that can help disclose the contradictory process of acculturation that is both accommodated and resisted as diasporic individuals make meaning of their social positions in the U.S. Through this method, I share lived experiences in fragments, with moments that allow confusion, a lack of context and disorientation in the expression of one's lived experience.

By now, readers should have a brief understanding of U.S. Central Americans and why their cultural practices disrupt assumptions of migrant experiences in the Latinx discourse community. My explanation of affective economies and embodied reflexivity demonstrate how

dehumanizing narratives can stick to the body, be incorporated, and affect the stories we tell as we negotiate our cultural identities. In this dissertation, as you can already see, I use storytelling in order to simultaneously represent and unpack the ways affective economies, embodied reflexivity, and diasporic belonging play out in Central American identity. Specifically, I analyze narratives that show the rhetorical moves U.S. Central Americans make to negotiate and transform their identities. In Chapter 2, I turn to one area of Central American exclusion and examine the various narrative theoretical positions that Latinx scholars have introduced in rhet/comp to understand assimilation and resistance in pedagogy and curricula, the public art scene, publishing in the academy, and rhetorical theory. In Chapter 3, I analyze U.S. Central American stories (and my own) that show how intergenerational storytelling can lead towards transnational activism. In Chapter 4, I turn to the artistic performance of diaspora and social media as I rhetorically analyze the visual and aesthetic expressions U.S. Central Americans use to visibilize their experiences. Throughout, you'll see fragments of my own story as a Salvadoran-American scholar who is trying to make sense of my family's history through my memories and the historical context I've learned.

CHAPTER 2: STORYTELLING WITHIN AND AGAINST THE LIMITS OF MESTIZA CONSCIOUSNESS

In the previous chapter, I introduced the emergence of the Central American diaspora and the ways in which it marked a change in the U.S. multicultural landscape and Latinx identity politics. It is a group whose arrival shifted the U.S. relationship with Latin America, and it also introduced the Central American region in a globalized context. Central Americans in the U.S. are spoken about, but their perspectives remain systematically excluded. What I keep trying to highlight through my own storytelling, in my own life and in this dissertation, is that U.S. Central Americans are still in the process of defining their own hyphenated identity. For example, Central American history and contemporary politics are rarely, if ever, mentioned in school—they haven't made it to the U.S. history books yet or Latin American anthologies. As U.S. Central American scholars have pointed out, U.S. Central Americans are a group that live in the in the "murky margins of those hyphenated others" (Arias, 1999, p. 48) and who are still trying to define their own identity (Cardenas, 2018, p. 10) in the U.S. multicultural landscape. It is a group that is doubly marginalized and therefore remains invisible from many social spheres, not just academic ones. That being said, it was the exclusion of Central American scholarship in Latinx-focused rhetoric and composition that led me to search for Salvadoran, and subsequently, Central American perspectives inside and outside of the field.

The Latinx rhet/comp scholarship that I was taught during my graduate studies was mostly framed by Chicanx scholar's topic of interests, such as Anzaldúa's borderlands and decolonial theory. I was introduced to many narrative theoretical positions from which to understand assimilation and resistance in pedagogy and curricula, the public art scene, publishing in the academy, and rhetorical theory. Learning Chicanx scholarship was helpful in that some of

their cultural practices and expressions of acculturation are not too dissimilar from my own Salvadoran American ones. The socialization graduate students experience, or rather, the way we are taught how to research and who's doing the teaching can reveal a lot about the conversations we are trained to prioritize, choose to join, or ignore through our research. However, while perhaps a simplified generalization, what I am trying to point out is that in the knowledge-making traditions of this field, what is considered to be the Latinx perspective, is situated by Chicanx scholars in the U.S and while Mexico *is* a part of Latin America, it should not be a stand-in for Latinx perspectives. That being said, in this chapter I will show how the Chicanx perspective is an important lens to consider because it provides ways of understanding migration, border subjectivities, and cultural negotiations that disclose, for example, what citizenship means to the national social body (Chavez, 2009). Border rhetorics in the field, however, tend to consider the passage of one border (the U.S./Mexico border). To make a theoretical conceptualization about Central America, multiple borders must be included to expand the conversation around migration and cultural assimilation.

In this chapter, however, I review some of the Latinx rhet/comp scholarship that offers diverse perspectives on the contradictions of acculturation within the multicultural landscape of the United States. As the Latinx population in the U.S. shifts, so do their rhetorical expressions and representations of a Latinx identity. Much of the scholarship discussed here examines the different ways that embodied storytelling is used as method throughout this cultural negotiation. Additionally, I also explore some of the dominant narratives in the Latinx discursive community, like mestizaje, that undergird some of these storytelling approaches as they can offer valuable insights to white supremacist narratives within Latin American sociocultural hierarchies.

The Limits of the Mestiza Consciousness

Researching the Latinx perspective in the rhet/comp field led me to a lot of decolonial scholarship that emphasized Anzaldúa's borderlands, and the relevance of mestizaje, as a theoretical space from which to critique Western hegemonic histories and ideals. For example, Rhetoric and Composition has traditionally prioritized a Eurocentric hierarchical model for understanding language and persuasion that privilege Greco-Roman histories of writing. To complicate these Eurocentric histories, Damian Baca uses Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness as an example for providing a "corrective history" for dominant historical narratives. This corrective history is one that centers a mestiza, Mesomerican/European or mixed/hybrid identity, that can be read alongside European models to help provide a closer look at the colonial relations of power in the Americas. Mestiza consciousness, as imagined by Anzaldúa, has transcendental capabilities that can "uproot dualistic thinking" and provide solutions for systemic oppressions (1987, p. 80). In *Mestiz@ Scripts*, Baca (2008) draws from this epistemic metaphor to point towards mestiza rhetoric as an expression that stands in for the ''larger milieu of Latinidad across the Americas and Caribbean at large'' (p. 2). Mestiza rhetoric, then, functions as a broad generalization of what it means to be Latinx throughout the Americas and as such can "subvert, adapt, and revise historical narratives of assimilation" (p. 2). In *Rhetorics Elsewhere and Otherwise* Baca and Garcia (2019) describe that "Anzaldua's advancement of a new mestiza consciousness, the foregrounding of an-other episteme and ontology, as well as theorizing of the border as an epistemic metaphor, connects all those who experience who experience the imperial and/or colonial wound" (p. 18). This mestiza rhetorical analytic presumably has the

symbolic ability of theorizing from within an intersection of Mesoamerican and European perspectives and can in turn supplement an alternative history of writing for the Americas.

Mestizaje and Latinidad, while conflated in Baca's text, are not the same concept but the interchangeable use of these expressions does reveal insight into the colonial relations of power in the Americas and their representations in academic knowledge production. Latinidad, for instance, is a pan-ethnic term that is used to signify shared cultural, ethnic, linguistic attributes between Latinx individuals. On the other hand, mestizaje, is a term that refers to a racial mixture that belongs to the caste system Spain established in the Americas. Central American Studies scholar Yajaira M. Padilla (2022) offers a definition for mestizaje as a racist colonial project that "romanticized Indigenous and Afro-descendant populations as relics of the past while promoting their 'whitening' as a means of achieving racial homogeneity and modernizing nation-states" (p. 7*)*. The project aimed to transcend what were considered primitive and racially impure elements to create national identities based on a mestizo or "brown" subject. However, mestizaje does not allow for the representation of Blackness in the Americas because its primary goal, from conception, was the assimilation of Indigenous peoples into European societal standards and the dehumanization of the enslaved Black population for the purpose of land accumulation and its cultivation (p. 22). Keeping this definition in mind, mestizaje loses its metaphorical weight when challenging dominant narratives as its foundation was to establish proximity to whiteness, exalt the mestizo or brown body, and subsequently became one of the dominant narratives that flattened and erased the voices experiences of those who were Black or Indigenous.

Providing corrective histories to Eurocentric dominant narratives of meaning-making is an ambitious task, but Anzaldúa's new mestiza consciousness is limiting when applied to all Latinx

individuals as these scholars posit. Using terms like mestizaje or border consciousness (Ruiz and Baca, 2016; Baca and Garcia, 2019; Ramirez, 2009) as a decolonial tool that can delink and dismantle Eurocentric hierarchies could use closer examination of its histories. I'm not trying to diminish or negate the existence of a mestizo or hybrid identity, rather, I'm suggesting that the usage and conflation of mestizaje and Latinidad needs a reconsideration and re-analysis of its white supremacist implications which could expand rhet/comp's understanding of coloniality from a transnational perspective. Centering mestiza consciousness or rhetoric as a symbolic space where both Mesoamerican and European collective memories emerge and subsequently, correct history, inadvertently elides Mestizaje's eugenicist origin and its limitations for understanding a Latinidad that is inclusive of contemporary Indigenous and Black experiences. Mestiza rhetoric encourages an engagement with multiple subjectivities and the practice of utilizing the past to situate oneself in the present for social justice causes. However, one of the pitfalls of this rhetorical move is that it perpetuates the essentialist notion that mestizaje can speak for all Latin America and that social justice is the same as decolonization (Itchuaqiyaq & Matheson, 2021). When I look across the landscape of the Latinx rhet/comp scholarship, I notice a few trends around storytelling that complicate Latinx cultural differences. Below, I break these differences down into various approaches to embodied storytelling and introduce U.S Central American possibilities.

Latin American Cultural Differences

Researching the dominant narratives in the Latinx discursive community, particularly mestizaje, naturally led me to the limits of the mestiza consciousness, and its relevance in challenging white supremacist narratives in Latin America. Latin America as a subject tends to be

theorized by Latinx scholars as the cultural exception and/or difference to European discourse which José Cortez (2018) explains, is "used to ground the critical practice of locating counterhegemonic alternatives to Western thought and subjectivity, and in turn, to establish the claim that geopolitically local subalternized rhetorical practices form an exceptionally unique way to undermine and resist the West" (p. 125). In other words, by examining local and subalternized rhetorical practices in Latin America scholars can identify ways of resisting Western dominance. In the article "Of Exterior and Exception: Latin American Rhetoric and the Politics of Cultural Difference," however, Cortez argues that Latin American rhetorics is at an impasse at answering the question about what non-Western cultural difference is within a globalized context and what exactly it's trying to resist. The debate around these resistance alternatives involves claims of indigeneity, hybridity, mestizaje, and testimonio that are thought to challenge Western hegemony but can also perpetuate the cultural essentialism they aim to dismantle.

Latinx identity categories are full of contradictions which showcase how assimilation and resistance have functioned as avenues for Latinx scholars to discuss other theoretical positions such as "community listening" for understanding *brown(ed)* bodies in archival work (Garcia 2019); the translatability of migrant bodies (Chavez 2009; Ramirez and Zecena 2019; Gonzales 2018; Rios 2016); and the racialization and marketability of Latinidad through the Chicanx lens of testimonio (Roncero-Bedillo 2018). Other avenues for theorizing the Latinx subject position have included an epistemological shift towards constructing historiographies that explore the traces of rhetorical traditions in archival texts and what they reveal about the value of orality (Romano 2015; Baca and Villanueva 2010). Latinx scholars have also researched the influence of Aristotelean rhetoric on the representations of Mesoamerican history and have also employed

Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness as a lens for providing "corrective histories" (Baca 2010; Enoch 201; Ramirez 2009) that disrupt the lineage of a Eurocentric influence on rhetorical debates around literacy and orality. Most of these approaches complicate understandings of Latinx cultural negotiation that centers Chicanx perspectives but U.S. Central American experiences have remained in the periphery.

Cortez suggests subalternity as a decolonial method that could interrogate the notion that Latin American difference has the capability of acting as a transcendental signifier and or rather, that difference is the "minimal gap of politics where hegemony cannot be mobilized and that therefore points to the structural incompletion of hegemony itself" (p. 146). Latin American cultural differences haven't transcended the ideologies they critique, but they can disclose the process of politics changing and rearranging social groups, even when these differences are proposed as new onto-epistemological structures. The limits of Anzaldúa's mestiza consciousness, for example, shows a storytelling approach to resisting Eurocentrism with many contradictions present that can also disclose how identity is negotiated in the U.S. multicultural landscape. After three decades, the Latinx perspective in the rhet/comp field has utilized narrative or storytelling as a method to resist Eurocentrism as well. Many of the articles cited in this chapter are drawn from prominent journals in the field that contribute much of the Latinx knowledge-making in the rhet/comp discipline.

Storytelling in Rhetoric and Composition

Over the past 30 years, arguably since the 1993 publication of Victor Villanueva's *Bootstraps* and composition's taking up of Gloria Anzaldúa's 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera*, the Latinx perspective has been a part, albeit a small one, of what we know as The Field of Rhetoric

and Composition (or, rhet/comp as I've calling it for short). These literary works by Anzaldúa and Villanueva are significant for their use of storytelling as a practice that expanded conversations among Latinx scholars around race, language, and assimilation in the U.S. multicultural landscape. Utilizing storytelling as a tactical strategy for blurring the personal and the academic voice has also shifted the ways in which rhet/comp scholars could emphasize the intersections and nuances of their lived experiences (Powell, et al., 2014; Cobos et al., 2019; Ono, 1997), the communities we care for and the ways we represent them in scholarship. In this regard, I draw from Jacqueline Jones Royster's words in "When the First Voice You Hear is Not Your Own": "Those of us who love our own communities, we think, most deeply, most uncompromisingly, without reservation for what they are and also are not, must set aside our misgivings about strangers in the interest of the possibility of deeper understanding" (1996, p. 33). I was telling you earlier in Chapter 1 that reading Anzaldúa during my Master's helped me to finally start asking the questions that mattered to me. I'd always been interested in asking questions about language, culture, and identity which is how I ended up studying storytelling in rhet/comp. However, the academic enculturation I immersed myself in as a rhet/comp student exposed me to many scholarly voices that both showed the ways U.S. Central Americans, the community I love and think of most deeply, are both represented and excluded from the Latinx rhet/comp perspective. These next few sections will show you the different approaches to resisting dominant narratives that I noticed during my research, including a focus on embodiment and storytelling.

Language Sticks to Bodies

The stories we tell through the theories we use are both constitutive of, and a process of, valuing certain bodies. Rhet/comp scholars from a range of subdisciplines have looked at whose bodies come to matter, how those bodies come to matter, and how these bodies can be materially and discursively erased through claims of historical objectivity. Karma Chavez (2018), for example, provides a literature review for bodies and embodiment as written by rhet/comp scholars. She poses the question that has shown up in a lot of texts about bodies which is, "Which bodies matter? And how do they matter?" She then traces a brief history of scholars who have addressed bodies and how they matter in different spaces whether they're a site of rhetorical invention, a site of judgment, or modified by technology to produce different meanings (p. 243). Rhetoricians invoke Aristotelian thought and while he's discussed in relation to the rhetorical canon, Chavez offers a brief reminder that the canon relied on the human body as a vehicle for rhetorical performance. In other words, bodies are also an important component for making persuasion happen, but we lost that during the Enlightenment era when philosophers like Descartes claimed that the body was separate from the mind—a binary ancient philosophers did not endorse. Chavez explores the mind/body dualism through a Burkean perspective, then material rhetorics, and finally, new materialist rhetorics. She also points us to feminist materialism and disability studies to conclude that "with rare exception, only when actual bodies are not white, cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male do they come into view as sites of inquiry" (p. 246). In other words, the desire for objectivity allows mainly white abled bodies to remain invisible from the material consequences of their work and Chavez argues that rhetoric is a much more embodied process that scholars don't often acknowledge. Centering embodied

storytelling then asserts knowledge-making ways of understanding the body and language as intersectional sites of inquiry.

Analyzing the embodied processes of migrant and Chicanx subjectivities, for example, offers insight to how metaphorical language can discursively and materially attach to migrant bodies. In her work “Embodied Translation,” Chavez (2009) emphasizes the important contributions that intercultural communicators make towards challenging dominant discourses on migrants and migration issues. She highlights translation frameworks as an approach that interrogates how bodies are translated and provides an analysis of what these translations say about migrant bodies. In order to demonstrate how translation theory is applicable to migrant bodies, she uses the “Chandler round-up"—one of the largest ethnic profiling cases where hundreds of suspected illegal immigrants were arrested—as an example of how law enforcement plays an active role in “representing and enacting dominant discursive meanings,” which is to say that the metaphorical language they use to describe migrant bodies is also acting on the body (p. 19). Metaphors are representative of how people make meaning and how such meaning contributes to the social national imaginary with words like “alien, criminal, and parasite” that display how migrant bodies are translated as subhuman by law enforcement officials. These words not only describe how migrant bodies are perceived as threatening but they showcase the dehumanizing language that has discursive and material consequences.

When I talk about social or national imaginaries, I’m pointing towards the “what” and “who” which enables society’s practices; that is to say, an imaginary that is made of complex social structures and the powerful actors who enforce them. And these practices, in many ways as you’ll keep seeing in this project, provide the available means for being/doing/theorizing the

world. One way to examine national imaginaries is to analyze the dominant metaphors used to place migrant bodies "outside of belonging to the national social body" (20). The dominant metaphors used for Central American migrant bodies emerge from within and in relation to metaphors used to describe migrant bodies that are seen as Mexican. The positioning of bodies that are seemingly Mexican and therefore, seen as undesirable migrants, discloses how belonging is constructed by the rhetoric of (il)legality. As Chavez mentions, the framing of "bodies-as-texts by actors who represent and enact the dominant discourse on immigration, provides a way to unpack the manner in which communication happens" (Chavez 19).

In this dissertation, you will come across different conceptualizations of national imaginaries, a U.S national imaginary, and a Central American national imaginary. Drawing from Chavez, the U.S national imaginary I'm referring to is the social structure of (il)legality; that is to say, how non-White migrant bodies are materially and discursively determined to be desirable and undesirable based on their "legal" status (20). National imaginaries, however, run the risk of homogenizing heterogenous communities.

Social imaginaries are ones that can distract from the infrastructures of oppression but it's important to reframe the Central American identity within globalized capitalist context. Especially when migrant labor is simultaneously desired and criminalized by the U.S national social body. To expand on Chavez' framing of migrant as criminal, I propose we add "marero" to the metaphors used to dehumanized migrant bodies. A "marero" comes from the word "mara" which originally meant a group of friends and then became known as the word for "gang." These days, the term mara is mostly recognized from the "mara salvatrucha" or MS-13 which were labeled as the "world's most dangerous gang" by National Geographic and CNN (Osuna, 2020).

The gang's history is one that cannot be separated from the context of the Salvadoran Civil War, the socially oppressive tactics that were on the rise in Los Angeles in the 80s, and the impact these social factors have had in how the U.S sees criminality in the racialized brown subject.

Oppressive discourses can render certain bodies meaningful as well as influence how people in power communicate with each other (Chavez, 2009, p. 33). Migrant bodies are one example that can be used to interrogate how people who are perceived as different from the national imaginary are translated as threats to national and local policy. In the next section, I will delve into the ways in which Chicana feminists particularly have written about embodied ways of storytelling that describe their cultural and linguistic interactions with spaces that exclude them.

Embodied Storytelling

One of the storytelling practices introduced in rhetorical studies that provides a decolonial reconsideration is the practice of testimonio. Ana Roncero-Bedillo (2018), for example, combines the use of testimonio, spatial rhetorics, and multimodal design to suggest that grocery aisles are places where meaningful transborder connections happen. She claims that these ethnic aisles present culinary diversity in attempts to be inclusive for diverse consumers, but the design and placement of these products are for Americans to be culinary tourists and participate in cultural imperialism. While it's not her main claim, Roncero-Bedillo posits the idea of the "untranslatability of space" when bilingual people perceive space and place differently because of the languages they speak. Differing understandings of space means that there will be differences in how space is "conceived, narrated, and theorized" (p. 26). One of the narrative techniques she employs is that of "testimonio" which turns personal experience into a "source of knowledge, testimonio breaks the constraining object/subject, theory/experience, mind/body

binary systems that govern academia, and it exposes and censures the close relationship between the shaping of hegemonic knowledges, power, and colonialism" (p. 27). In other words, testimonio is an embodied storytelling practice that is a declaration of what one knows, in whatever languages self-knowledge is understood, and directly challenges and deconstructs preconceived binaries about knowledge production that permeate Western scholarship. She uses certain culinary products as artifacts to showcase how Spanish authenticity is used to design products for specific Spanish dishes. A lot of the artifacts, however, are made in U.S factories which makes their design a site of inquiry for understanding regimes of representation and cultural imperialism. Testimonio, in this case, is a storytelling act that reshapes the embodied experience of misrecognition with U.S. consumer products even when there's available representation, either cultural or linguistic.

A different way of considering how embodiment shows up in rhetorical studies is through Chicanx concept of "rhetoric of the flesh." For example, Bernadette Calafell (2010) uses the concept of "theory of the flesh" to exemplify how women of color "theorize about our experiences when we have been denied access to traditional forms of knowledge production" (p. 105). Theorizing about the flesh expands on Chicana feminist Cherrie Moraga's intersectional approach to "bridging the contradictions" in embodied knowledge. In other words, for Calafell, it is about emphasizing the embodied ways in which women of color understand the contradictions between their cultural communities and higher education. Calafell uses her own narrative of navigating her college experience and feeling like an outsider in a space that wasn't meant for her. Theory of the flesh becomes a testimonio of radical imagination towards defying the expectations of which bodies are accepted into institutional spaces and which ones aren't.

Calafell traces the Chicanx theory that helped her maneuver this experience into her graduate studies where questions of positionality made her confront different aspects of her identity and how they influenced her research. By situating their identities through testimonio and theory of the flesh, these scholars demonstrate an understanding of how their identities are shaped by their environments.

Central American Possibilities

Central American knowledge-making and cultural production has also utilized storytelling as a method for resistance, but this perspective remains absent from the field these last three decades. Storytelling, when looked through the lens of diasporic belonging, can provide nuances to the limits of resisting Westernization, especially when Central American diaspora also has a history with U.S. imperialism. Padilla (2022) notes that diasporic meaning-making can still be linked to models of coloniality that replicate Eurocentric social and racial classifications in the modern capitalist system. In other words, European colonization didn't just simultaneously give rise to new racial identities such as mestizo, Indian, and Black inasmuch as European identities were being redefined by Whiteness and racial superiority; rather, these classifications reflect and reinstate social power that binds people, even in a diaspora, to a colonial past and present (p. 22). While Europe was making itself the center of knowledge through juxtapositions of "civilized/savagery," Latin American countries mimicked these European models of racial hierarchies to develop their nation-state identities as "civilized" to the extent that they committed mass genocides and strategic marginalization efforts to culturally and racially "homogenize" their heterogenous populations"—one such violent effort being mestizaje in Latin American nation-state building and its current representations in the U.S through increased

global migration (p. 22). Mestizaje is not just an ideology or singular event of the colonized past that is delinked from notions of modernity; rather, it is one of the dominant white supremacist narratives that pervade Latin American identity politics and cultural production. Shifting the storytelling focus from mestizaje to diasporic belonging, then, can be another way to unsettle binary meaning-making such as north/south or east/west that can expand our understanding of resistance and Latinx sociocultural structures in the US. In the next chapter, I will explore how diasporic belonging functions as a site of resistance that can help Central Americans navigate their representation and exclusion in the U.S multicultural landscape.

As introduced in Chapter 1, affective economies and embodied reflexivity are crucial tools for illustrating how dehumanizing narratives can circulate and adhere to bodies. I also briefly introduced how the significance of story as method for remembering offers insight into how embodied knowledge is shared intergenerationally. Before I expand on the circulation of U.S. Central American stories in Ch. 3, however, I turned in this chapter to rhetoric and composition studies, where Latinx scholars have explored storytelling as an avenue for Latinx cultural negotiation. U.S. Central American cultural practices such as storytelling, then, can also help disrupt assumptions of migrant experiences in the Latinx discourse community. Specifically, analyzing U.S. Central American cultural practices, such as storytelling, can offer a nuanced understanding of how diasporic identities are negotiated within the Latinx discursive community.

CHAPTER 3: RE/MEMBERING FRAGMENTED STORIES AS DISRUPTION THROUGH LOVATO'S *UNFORGETTING*

I have images in my mind of a homeland that wasn't mine and that I barely got to know in person. They've been there for as long as I can remember. My grandmother would share her memories with us—a lifetime of hard work, a desire for education, and dreams of a better life. My mother's response to it all was, "It already happened. Why do you keep making me think of the past?" My interest in storytelling lies somewhere in the space between these two perspectives: the desire to learn in the hopes of doing good within the guardedness of wanting to forget.

My parents kept a small fireproof lockbox next to a dull machete under their bed. You know that writing rule: Don't write about a phone, a gun, or something locked in a scene unless it's gonna ring, go off, or be opened?

Well, forget the lockbox. I never knew what was in it. It was just always there—next to that dull machete. It was in a leather sheath that had carvings on it in the shapes of houses, little stacks on hilltops above the signature "El Salvador C.A." usually seen on artisanal works in tourist shops. One day my Abuelita and I were sitting in the living room, my mom was ironing my dad's work shirts while we watched Caso Cerrado, a Judge Judy type show where a lawyer mediated cases between family disputes.

My little nephew, whom my grandma looked after while my sister was at work, had been zooming around the apartment with his Spider-Man toy, making airplane noises, when all of sudden, we hear a metal "clank CLANK" on the hallway walls.

"¡Mira lo que trae el niño![22]" I remember my grandma's terrified shout cut across the hiss of my mom's ironing steam. My mom rushed to him grabbing the machete out of his little hand. After the two seconds it took for everyone to remember the machete was dull, we couldn't contain our laughter. In his Spider-Man adventures, he'd come across that machete and was swinging it in the hallway.

"A cortar milpa se ha dicho[23]," My mom said as if there were any cornfields nearby. That was the last we saw of that machete though. Sometimes the machete was sheathed in the story and other times it wasn't. Sometimes you wouldn't believe the size of coconuts you can get back home but with a dull machete? Olvidate[24]. They said my uncle was got with machetazos for loving the wrong girl back in the 90s. I barely remember him.

All of these memories and more swirled in my head when I read the line "The machete of memory cuts swiftly and slowly" by Salvadoran-American writer Roberto Lovato (2020; p. xvii). Having never read the machete used as a literary symbol to express forgetting within my own culture, I felt the machetazos of my own mind sting the back of my face.

In Case You Forgot…

In previous chapters, I have argued for diasporic storytelling as a method for sharing embodied knowledge and as a means for disrupting dominant narratives. Drawing from Ahmed 's (2014) concept of affective economies and Ohito's (2021) embodied reflexivity, I posited that storytelling can simultaneously represent and unpack the ways U.S. Central

[22] Look at what the boy is bringing!
[23] It's time to cut the cornfields. Milpas are a multi-crop system that plant beans, squash, avocados, melons, maize, etc.
[24] Forget it.

Americans negotiate their diasporic belonging and cultural identities. Additionally, I asserted that, diasporic storytelling can disrupt U.S.-Mexico border discourse, which overshadows Central American borders/passageways, and discloses how diasporic groups of people form communities within the context and in relation to nation-bound or border discourse. For Central American migrants, assimilating to a new culture and language comes with various contradictions of acculturation, one of which is navigating Latinx sociocultural hierarchies that center Chicanx perspectives on border discourse in the U.S. When your identity as Central American is no longer legible on its own, and instead only understood as Latinx or Chicanx, you find belonging within and in relation to spaces of exclusion. Their migrant experiences, then, offer insight into transnational relationships that extend beyond the U.S.-Mexico border and contextualize the Central American region through the diaspora in the U.S.

So far, I have illustrated how storytelling has been utilized by Chicanx scholars to assert their knowledge-making ways as they navigate spaces that exclude them. Examining embodied storytelling through feminist Chicanx perspectives demonstrates how marginalized individuals share their embodied knowledge, which is otherwise obfuscated in dominant narratives. My own storytelling practices as I experienced them in academia, specifically in rhet/comp however, always seemed excluded by mestizaje and Chicanx discourse which left me wondering what U.S. Central Americans were saying about our particular experiences with cultural negotiation. On the one hand, my storytelling was seemingly included because of linguistic similarities while on the other, my cultural differences were excluded or flattened. This inclusion/exclusion dichotomy of Central America in Latinx rhet/comp expands beyond disciplinary boundaries and is constantly

emerging and transforming how cultural difference is negotiated in the U.S. multicultural landscape.

In this chapter and the next, I present examples from the work of U.S. Central Americans to demonstrate how and why diasporic storytelling emerges as a site of intergenerational cultural negotiation and belonging. These examples showcase the various ways in which Central Americans disrupt over-saturated dehumanizing narratives by circulating their own stories interpersonally, through literary texts, and social media spaces (you'll read about these social media spaces in Ch. 4). In this chapter specifically, I focus on the work of Salvadoran-American writer Roberto Lovato whose work in journalism took him on personal journey to uncover the transnational threads and unforgotten memories of his own family history. I examine multiple aspects of his work, including his memoir, book tour interviews with Central American scholars, and reviews of how his work has been received by the U.S. Central American community. More specifically, he highlights these three themes: a) the significance of fragmented memories, b) contextualizing one's fragmented story when lacking context, and c) the function of family stories as a rhetorical vehicle for activism on the interpersonal, and intergenerational level. I constellate his narrative to my own journey with memory work and storytelling in graduate school, and the Central American scholarship that explores the possibilities of this method in storytelling. By doing so, we can see how understanding the Salvadoran-American identity in more expansive ways—through fragmented memories, context, history, and not just the stories told about us—can help not just the U.S. Central American community but other multiply-situated people struggling to claim their stories. As such, I work to illustrate a model for rhetorically being/representing Central American knowledge-making in the U.S.

Central American Historical Context

Within the peripheral gaps of Latinidad exists a hypervisible presence of Central Americans that is marked by the wars of the eighties, the rise of the maras (gangs) in the nineties, increased migration and border patrol in the 2000s, and the detention of Central American migrant children at the border in the 2010s. This hypervisibility invokes a lot of past and present violence with no mention of Central American humanity, making it a challenging subject-position to find possibilities for belonging while revealing sites of non-belonging. Vocalizing Central American stories that ground affective relationships to the material conditions of systemic oppression can help visibilize the humanity that's been historically forgotten. In the most straightforward way I can say this: Yeah, the wars and gangs have affected my family and sense of identity too but that's never been the whole story. And when I do tell you moments of the story that contain violence, know that I do so with an immense respect, and admiration for those Central Americans in my life who made sure I saw the humorous side of these tellings. That's the whole point: there's humor in telling stories about death and resilience in case you haven't picked up on it.

Anyways, back to the story of Salvadoran exclusion, which begins in same way as many Central American countries where, according to Central American critic Arturo Arias (2003), their own "stabilizing structures […] tried to protect themselves by labeling them as an unpresentable, and thus, disposable population" (p. 181). The socioeconomic inequality that caused the Civil War of the 1980s, for example, was the result of decades of military dictatorships known for death squads, which began with Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, who ordered La Matanza of 1932. My desire to learn from the story fragments I personally carried led me to Roberto

Lovato's work during early pandemic days when I found a social media post announcing an interview he did with the L.A. Times (2020) promoting his book. His work as a writer contextualizes the affective relationships that emerge in three of the main themes that I've explored throughout this project: memory work, lacking historical context, and turning towards activism with the historical context one does have. Before I dive into his work as a memoirist, however, I want to first provide some historical context to help ground the importance of his writing which illustrated how his family is coming to terms with the systemic silencing they experienced—starting with his father's story of witnessing La Matanza (The Massacre) in 1932. I will briefly explain the historical context of this event in Salvadoran history because it's the central unforgotten memory Lovato uses in his memoir.

La Matanza (The Massacre) of 1932 refers to the state-sanctioned mass killing of an estimated 10,000-40,000 individuals, mostly communist and Indigenous peasants led by Farabundo Martí[25] and Feliciano Ama, respectively, who were revolting against economic inequality and systemic oppression. Historian Robin Delugan (2014) explains that Cold War Anti-Communist discourse of the 1970s and 1980s emphasized the communist presence of the 1930s in El Salvador, thus obscuring the factors that led to Indigenous mobilization during this revolt even though the Indigenous population had been the most affected (p. 68). The significance of this genocide is that it led to the suppression of Indigenous cultural practices, language, and the myth that there was no longer an Indigenous population in El Salvador[26]. The following decades

[25] The left-wing guerilla group Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) was named after him and is now a Salvadoran political party. The first FMLN president elected in 2010 was the first politician to acknowledge La Matanza and apologize for the government's actions in persecuting Indigenous communities.

[26] There is also a myth that El Salvador had no history with slavery because the country does not have an Atlantic coastline and also claims a mostly mestizo population. This claim is not true as the region was also under the

only saw increased violence through military dictatorships that employed death squads who would profile individuals for carrying machetes, an agricultural tool, used by campesinos in the revolt. The affective and effective power of this event emerges in various ways that both suppress and disrupt historical memory. The systematic silencing and exclusion of Indigenous communities[27] from national history is partly due to "interpretations and memories of the violence" from political parties attempting to establish their vision of a national identity (p. 69). The impact of this genocide is still felt in the nation as decades have passed, my grandmother who was living when it happened never mentioned it, and my mother was taught in Catholic school that Indigenous people were in the distant past.

Silencing narratives that perpetuated fear circulated for decades and the death squads only increased their terrorizing tactics against campesinos or suspected communists. As described in Chapter 1, many people died during this war and others were displaced. Dismemberment is what I remember from the images of my grandma's story before she stopped telling me violent things. Five decades after this genocide, Archbishop Oscar Romero, who was a big advocate of the poor and oppressed, was to be murdered while conducting Mass on March 24, 1980. The Funeral Mass gathered 250,000 mourners which were then attacked by government snipers hiding on rooftops. Ver, Oir, y Callar[28] were too contradictory for the population to contain anymore and the country was in full-blown war.

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mestizaje ideology. This is another example of the colonial fog of erasure mentioned in Chapter 2 that has many of us sifting through layers of misinformation. For more information, read The AfroL@atin Reader (2010), Constituting Central American-Americans (2018), and Blacks and Blackness in Central America (2010).

[27] Approximately 10% of the Salvadoran population is Indigenous. These communities are the Nahua-Pipil, the Lenca, the Cacaopera, and the Maya Chorti (Minority Rights Group, 2023).

[28] See, Hear, and Shut Up

The accumulation of wealth that benefits an oligarchic class is intertwined with the accumulation of misery which Steven Osuna (2020) attributes to "the brutal forms of social control, to regulate and oppress relative surplus populations, rebellion and those simply trying to live" (p. 7). Osuna draws from Marx to link systematic oppression with the accumulation of Salvadoran capital, and subsequently the accumulation of Salvadoran misery, as individuals navigated decades of the sudden transition from national economic inequality to transnational neoliberal capitalism during the Civil War. The post-war period of the 1990's meant restructuring the criminal justice system and economic processes which targeted the "working classes, […] homeless, unemployed, and disenfranchised youth" (p. 12) This was a generation of approximately thousands of youths whose parents had died in the war or had gone missing which was then compounded by the deportation of 54,000 marginalized Salvadoran youths in Los Angeles (Osuna, 2020). This instability of the 90s gave rise to youth gangs who organized to create their own structures (known as MS-13 and 18th Street) as well as the resurgence of death squads tasked with silencing political opposition and targeting these youth gangs with war-level tactics. The emergence of these youth gangs and the social control used to regulate them are intimately connected and cannot be separated. It is well known that the Salvadoran military forces (and about 60,000 other Latin American soldiers) were trained in the School of the Americas (now known as the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation) located in the state of Georgia. Fearing another Vietnam, these forces were trained with "jungle operation techniques" never seen before in the area which only escalated the violence. The very existence of these gangs threatens to reveal what Osuna writes is "the primary contradiction of capital: the accumulation of wealth of one class requires the complete deprivation and misery of another"

(p. 10) I share this history because every election cycle when headlines escalate their dehumanizing language to talk about border control and immigration policy, all I think of is why the U.S. involvement is never addressed. The military training, the daily military aid, the refusal to grant Salvadorans refugee status, and U.S. involvement in other Central American countries—all of this is left out.

This transnational history is significant because, as Osuna describes, examining the material conditions that Central Americans experience in their home countries as they reconstruct their national identities abroad, offers a much more comprehensive perspective on the challenges of identity-building, not only within the diaspora, but within the sociality of emotions, such as fear and misery. So, the home countries want nothing to do with you and demonstrate it in dehumanizing genocidal ways; the U.S. seemingly values your labor but exploits it while exploiting your home country as well; you're learning a new culture and language that is saturated with narratives about the threat you present; and finally, through all these layers of identification and social relations, you are learning to represent yourself in the hyphenated identity that marks your differences as inherently violent in the U.S multicultural landscape. Where in this accumulation of misery does the Central American community find representation and belonging in their own terms? When you consider that groups of immigrants are coming to the U.S. with this oppressive history, it's no wonder that their stories about the cultural assimilation they face remain obfuscated beneath the circulation of the decades-present narrative of violent wars and gangs.

Ahmed's affective economies provide a useful analytic in examining the circulation of emotions, in this case, the accumulation of Central American misery, and their associated

transnational economic processes [29]. The uprising of the 1930's, the dictatorships that followed, the revolution that became a war, and the gangs that emerged are all linked to each other. Osuna, for example, links the existence of MS-13 (transnational gang that originated in Los Angeles as Salvadoran migrants adapted to sociocultural hierarchies) to Salvadoran history and to the "transnational moral panic" that exists around Central American migrants. Trump's Executive Order 13773[30] was used to target "transnational criminal organizations" and actively continues the narrative of Central America and their associated gangs as the "drivers of crime, corruption, violence, and misery" (Osuna, 2020, p. 4). The policymaking language used by the Trump administration acknowledges the transnational U.S./Central America link and the dominant narratives that through which they circulate is then used to translate migrant bodies as criminals suspected of fitting "racialized markers" associated with gangs (p. 5). Wars and gangs. Osuna stresses that the mention of these gangs cannot be separated from the history of El Salvador and the U.S. sponsored policies used to regulate social control.

Now, given a brief constellation of the violence and the geopolitical context between El Salvador the U.S., I will turn to the work of Roberto Lovato and eventually bring some lightness into this history. In other words, being Central American is a lot more than wars and gangs and as a journalist, educator, activist, and former guerilla, Lovato's own story demonstrates the rhetorical moves that come with piecing together fragments of a diasporic identity. Lovato wrote his memoir in 2020 titled Unforgetting: A Memoir of Family, Migration, Gangs, and the

[29] An estimated 25% of the Salvadoran economy is sustained by remittances, or money sent back from working Salvadorans in the States.

[30] Executive Order 13773—Enforcing Federal Law With Respect to Transnational Criminal Organizations and Preventing International Trafficking (ordered Feb. 9, 2017). The "drivers of crime, corruption, violence, and misery" is language used in the order directly.

Revolution in the Americas, which explores the importance of memory and storytelling as a method that addresses the complexities of diasporic belonging as they emerge between family dynamics, friendships, and academic settings.

These narratives detail the structures of belonging by showcasing the complex emotions that emerge with the desire to be accepted by a social group through multiple forms of exclusion. Additionally, these narratives display some of the fragments of identity-building that become compounded by the trauma of assimilation. Lovato, through his writing and interviews, demonstrates that knowledge-making can be fragmented and non-linear, it can re/member the cultural dismemberment of systemic silencing, and it can offer opportunities for interpersonal healing. Specifically, he illustrates how storytelling can be collaborative when lacking historical context and thereby, liberatory. This is because recognizing the legitimacy of diverse migration narratives and the acculturation processes is a step towards disrupting oppressive systems and the dominant narratives that bind them.

Memory, Re-Memory, and Unforgetting

The machete of memory cuts swiftly and slowly. (Lovato, 2020, p. iv)

Roberto Lovato (b. 1963) is a Salvadoran-American journalist, educator, and activist who has been reporting on Central American issues for decades ranging from the War on Drugs, immigration, climate change, and terrorism. Drawing from his love of sci-fi, he seeks to unearth the pieces of "devalued life" and understand what these fragments say about humanity (https://robertolovato.com). Lovato's life story and work is one that showcases the journey and complexities of negotiating the multilayered facets of a diasporic cultural identity in the U.S. In addition to his work as a journalist, he has been a major advocate of education as a way to

combat dominant narratives about Central Americans and is also known for co-founding the first Central American Studies program that eventually became a department in Cal State-Northridge. I turn to Lovato in detail in this chapter as an exemplar, and his writing as an object of analysis, so as to highlight how dehumanizing narratives are circulated transnationally and to illustrate the importance of sharing embodied knowledge.

Take for example, Lovato recounts investigating the 1981 El Mozote massacre, which was led by the U.S. trained counterinsurgency Atlacatl battalion and resulted in the mass killing of 1000 civilians —half of them children under the age of twelve. Half of those children under the age of six. This massacre was not acknowledged by the Salvadoran government until 2012 and the burial site is still being excavated today. In his journalist storying for the Boston Globe, Lovato (2016) wrote a piece called "EL Salvador's Archive of Death," where he constellates the fragmentation of bones to the reconstruction of El Salvador:

> BONE FRAGMENTS MAY be the best symbol of El Salvador's history, its present, and its future. Fragmentation within Salvadoran civil society keeps thousands of graves full of bone fragments and bodies. Fragmentation in the political arena enables impunity. Only about a dozen or so low-level soldiers have been held responsible for the deaths of 80,000 civilians during the war. Fragmentation in the justice system prevents identification and investigation — only 3 percent of all violent crimes today are investigated. The fragmented hearts of some Salvadorans move them to violence, while others are left psychically tortured, waiting years, sometimes decades, for closure. The only way to find closure is to become a student of death. (Lovato, 2016)

Through his reporting, Lovato confronts the violence head-on and humanizes the "prolonged mourning" that comes with waiting for answers. In this particular archive he's visiting, El Salvador's Institute of Legal Medicine, Lovato describes being surrounded by bone fragments from both past and present violence, with bone fragments being excavated from the War but also from the current gang violence. However, rather than just focus on just the wars and gangs, he connects the bone fragments to systematic oppression followed by humanizing the "fragmented hearts" of the Salvadoran people, whose fragmentation leads them to violence or continue to wait for closure. Lovato constellates the bone fragments of this archive he's investigating to the larger societal and historical context that has collected and itemized fragments of Salvadoran bodies. In researching the archive, Lovato reads through and across fragmented pieces of history and by doing so, he demonstrates that, as Malea Powell describes, "history isn't a dead and remembered object; it is alive and it speaks to us (2008, p. 121). Lovato's storying in this archive of death humanizes the Salvadoran people who have passed, and the ones left, like him, who are trying to make sense of the excluded fragments from historical memory.

Lovato's investigative writing voice is one that shows the material bone fragments he's observing and the connections he makes through the fragments as a symbol for Salvadoran violence across different times. However, as a reporter, his voice has to maintain that investigative distance from the material he examines and find a balance between reporting factual information about violent events and connecting it across various times and through the space of his work for the article, this IML archive. Like Powell, he's asking the question of what he's supposed to learn and settles on "becoming a student of death" which means learning

within and through the spaces we inhabit that are saturated with narratives that either dehumanize you and yours with the "practice of history" that also contain the seductive power of imperial discourse (p. 121). Being a student of death means learning from memories, the fragments that emerge from his experience as a former guerilla, now journalist, which uniquely positions his perspective across multiple locations and discourses, allowing him to address the violence through his personal life and professionally. Lovato has indeed become a "student of death" in El Salvador's archives using the spaces he reports on to learn about his own embodied knowledge and utilizing it as a call to action for systemic justice.

Beyond his written work in journalism, he reflects on the same trip at the Institute de Medicinal Legal in his memoir but this time he emphasizes the importance of connecting his fragmented memories to the nation's collective history that is continually suppressed. When accompanying forensic biologists who were excavating the mass burial site of El Mozote massacre, Lovato writes:

> Watching their rituals of forensic recovery led me to believe that unforgetting is a critical way to start the process of individual, familial, and national healing. The same applies to reconstructing the bones of our personal and national memories, including the memory of what it is to be American, the identity that has caused so much devastation to those of us who identify as Salvadoran (p. 298).

The bone fragments symbolizing a fragmented society run parallel with the restructuring of personal memories, as if they'll never find connective tissue. Lovato, however, points to thinking critically about the memory of being from the U.S. as a connection worth considering for finding healing within identity building.

Within the displaced pieces of the puzzle, there's a desire for an interconnectedness between self, family, and cultural belonging that is complex to visibilize and becomes even more distorted when seen through the American side of a diasporic identity. For Arias, the Central American critic mentioned earlier, the irony present in the contradiction between desiring both visibility/invisibility is that it shows a Central American population that is "disconnected emotionally from the source of its identity, and whose forced exile is built on anguish" (p. 51). While Arias points to the disconnection from the Central American identity, Lovato suggests that the duality of (un)forgetting can also privilege the Central American identity at the cost of forgetting America's own imperialist violent history. Lovato is positioned between the contradictions of his identity as a Salvadoran-American journalist reporting in El Salvador while also having a background in being a former guerilla. Unforgetting, then, means excavating the various layers of knowledge that he's articulating as he connects America's role in supporting, denying, and stonewalling their role in much of the violence he was fighting against. A national memory for Lovato includes the "memory of what it is to be American" that is forgotten if/when the devastation of the Salvadoran side is accepted.

Growing in me for some time had been the realization that being half dead[31] was not limited solely to being Salvadoran. Since childhood, I'd assumed that my American identity protected me from the chaos and pain I associated, in my ignorance, only with being Salvadoran. As a result, the awkward, sometimes awful sense of what it meant to call myself American

[31] Refers to Salvadoran poet warrior Roqu (Machado, Zaira Miluska Funes, 2023) (Machado, Janel Pineda, 2023)e Dalton who was executed during the Civil War at the age of 39. His poem "Todos" opens with the stanza: "We were all born half dead in 1932, alive but half alive, each one of us with a bank account of thirty thousand fully dead." The poem uses La Matanza of 1932 as the cause for Salvadoran half-life that hasn't recovered from the cultural genocide.

intensified to the point of bursting the bubble of illusion to give me an insight: that far from protecting me from being half-dead, being American actually also had a numbing, painful zombie-like quality about it, because being American meant I belonged to the country that overtly and covertly supported the governments, militaries, and death squads most responsible for our half death (p. 187).

This half death he refers to directly links to La Matanza of 1932 as the catalyst for the historical amnesia he's up against. Both Lovato and the poet he cites, Dalton, resist forgetting a mass genocide that wasn't acknowledged by the Salvadoran government until eighty years later. The ambiguous loss of not knowing where the disappeared are, coupled with the cultural loss of burying the past, implies a twofold numbing that makes it challenging to articulate how culture is negotiated when one's sense of belonging is disrupted and reoriented toward unforgotten knowledge demanding to be remembered. The tactic of articulating these contradictory memories is a theme Central American scholars have researched in the past but how they emerge in the diaspora. Ester Hernandez (2017, p. 144) , for example, employs "working memory" to examine how Central Americans in Los Angeles used public spaces to "revisit painful histories of migrations and war, often through complex and contradictory narratives" (p. 144) Hernandez expands on Ann Rigney's (2005) theory of working memory which considers the "selective acts of recollection that are actually performed in a society, and that together provide a common frame of reference for its members" (p. 17). For both Rigney and Hernandez, these acts of remembrance inform how cultural memory is shaped, circulated, and exchanged as a way to construct subjective and collective identities. In other words, examining how U.S. Central Americans share recollections with each other can reveal why certain memories are prioritized

and others are effectively forgotten (p. 18). The common frame of reference for the U.S. Central Americans in this chapter is one that explores the exchange of remembering and unforgetting; that is to say, the cultural negotiation that emerges and circulates in the spaces these diasporic storytellers inhabit.

Many of the U.S. Central American scholars I've mentioned so far, like Hernandez, Osuna, and Cardenas explore intergenerational memories drawing from sociologist Avery Gordon's "ghostly matters" in social constructs that haunt and can seem inarticulable, both present and absent, remembered and unforgotten (p. 7). As you've read in this dissertation so far, I have quite a few ghostly matters that emerged when I entered graduate school. The ineffable presence of my past erupted the cultural silence I was used to as I learned to position myself in the academy. I reoriented my dislocated self to this academic setting by advocating for the use of Spanish in my writing. I remember how much I didn't want to forget my language now that I didn't have anyone to speak it with. I felt as if all I did with my presence was remind others of loss. However, amidst the layers of loss and without having a Central American community nearby, I just kept sharing fragmented stories with those curious enough to ask what I was about. A Salvadorian American from Utah but also L.A. with a lot of dead relatives writing about dirt, biting into flowers, and ghosts.

I noticed a rose for the first time somewhere around the age of four, maybe five. My mother vacuumed upstairs wishing the intermittent white noise would help her ignore the spirits of the house. I had heard her whispering to my abuelita that the house was haunted— demonios, she'd say. Demonios everywhere, especially the second floor.

It was something about the second floors that bugged her; the sterile rooms circulate air that tasted like metal. I was afraid to go upstairs so I sat down with my grandma in the dining room. The morning breeze filtered in through the window; the curtains billowing like mist as my abuelita stirred her black coffee. There were two roses in the middle of the dining room table, pink and white; their petals had begun to fall. The dining room table was where most of the family gatherings happened, uninterrupted by the ghosts only I never saw or cursed flowers. We would sit around the dining room table once a year, some to tell stories and others to eat and pretend to listen.[32]

Lovato's work is one that for me, a writer who was initially looking for liberation through poetry, resonated deeply because when narratives are connected to the external factors that influence them, then they have the potential not only to reveal sites of resistance but also find ways to heal and recover. He exemplifies embodied reflexibility through his writing because he creatively engages with his memories to find a deeper understanding of the investigative reporting he does on his own community.

Before he was reporting on systemic injustice, Lovato was a born-again Christian who supported Ronald Reagan until he saw the war tactics Reagan implemented in El Salvador, leading him to become disillusioned with identifying as "American." Lovato became involved in the Salvadoran Civil War as a leftist guerrilla and left to be more involved in grassroots activism in Los Angeles. His work in journalism leads him to investigate the fragments of his own history, demonstrating embodied reflexivity through the intertwining of personal experiences with political contexts, especially when his work demands that he excavates his own traumatic

[32] Writing from my first year of grad school.

memories. Instead of solely focusing on the usual trauma-resilience model used to validate multiply marginalized perspectives, Lovato with leads with an emphasis on "resilience, tenderness, and love" (http://lunchticket.org). For him, it's not just about legitimizing undervalued perspectives but also humanizing the complexities of belonging that exist in the Central American diaspora. Finding belonging in a home away from home becomes a personal journey in sorting through trauma. External societal factors will continue to dehumanize people that don't fit the status quo and yet, rely on the emotional labor of social outliers to explain their resilience and legitimize their perspective.

Contextualizing Resilience when Lacking Context

Lovato acknowledges that his story is not his own: it consists of multiple people, and to combat intergenerational trauma of exclusion that continues to happen, one must "excavate the heart lost in the darkness of the past" to reflect on the present (Latin American and Latino Studies, 2020). There's value in recognizing that Central American stories are a cultural negotiation within family dynamics between silence and speaking up but also being willing to listen to what such stories reveal about transnational political oppression.

Throughout his book, Lovato returns to his fragmented memories and those of his family's, specifically his father's, to describe how distorted they feel to his as he attempts to conceptualize his own identity. Lovato writes: "Lacking context, my Salvadoran background and my family felt full of confusion, chaos, crime, and shame, but being American gave me a sense of solidity that many of us absorbed from TV show like The Brady Bunch and Captain America" (p. 57). Lovato juxtaposes his decontextualized Salvadoran identity with the "solidity" of family-oriented tv shows that celebrate American values either through heteronormative families or

the perspective of an underdog turned war hero and icon for liberation. These examples of American media foreground cultural values that are imbued with images of wholesome families, or hard-working people, that all have a chance at life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness or in other words, the American Dream. It's a dream that affectively circulates expressions of desire for being in America, and if individuals are working hard and participating in heteronormative values, then they have a chance of inclusion in America's capitalist society. Without having context around his Salvadoran identity, Lovato recalls "confusion, chaos, crime, and shame" as opposed to the American "solidity." The rhetorical choices with which Lovato frames his understanding of his identity are by presenting the absence first (lacking Salvadoran context), followed by what the absence feels like, and the presence of a solid American identity imagined through family-oriented shows.

Padilla connects this migrant desire for inclusion as one of the nativist cultural narratives because "at the heart of such affective constructions of the immigrant as a desiring subject and by the same token, of America as object of desire, are notions of belonging" (p. 27). For Central Americans specifically, they enter "specific sociopolitical and economic modes of incorporation into the U.S racial regime through the global capitalist system" through competitive agricultural and service industry jobs (Osuna, 2015, p. 237), while confronted with "nativist anxieties about being economically and culturally overrun by foreign Others" (Padilla, 2022, p. 27). Lovato's reflection on what it means to be Salvadoran-American, then, involves notions of both belonging and non-belonging that become a cultural negotiation between what it means to be Salvadoran through the frame of what it means to desire being an American. "If your desire is too great (meaning, there are too many of you)," explains Padilla, "and/or that desire is not reciprocated

(meaning, you are not the right kind of immigrant), then you are rendered a threat to those who do belong" (p. 27). This matrix of belonging shifted when the Central American diaspora became too great in the 1970s and 1980s and was subsumed into census identification categories such as Hispanic and in sanctuary cities like San Francisco and Los Angeles, and cultural forms of determining belonging such as Latinidad, which also conflate Central American perspectives with the Mexican migrant community. Desire for America, or for belonging, comes with forgetting the imperialist gaze through which the U.S inserted itself in Central American politics under the pretense of protecting neoliberal values of democracy against communism.

Lovato uses the Greek myth of Perseus finding the means to slay Medusa as a parallel to facing intergenerational trauma because Perseus was given a near impossible task of beheading the gorgon in order to save his loved ones and his own life. However, Perseus cannot look directly at Medusa without turning into stone and instead, he must rely on his mirrored shield to examine his surroundings, look at her adjacently to behead her, and still live. What I understand about this parallel is that two things are at stake: First, Perseus is political pawn that has been manipulated by the king of Argos who wants him permanently gone to marry Perseus' mother, and second, he's been given a task that will most certainly kill him and has to prioritize his survival without the ability to directly face the immediate threat to his own life. There are varying levels of threat and distance that are intertwined between one's own resilience, how one's survival is connected to loved ones even when they are far away, and how when faced with danger that can paralyze and certainly kill, one can be resourceful to ensure their own survival and get the hell home.

Whether Perseus is prioritizing his own survival or that of his mother's in defeating Medusa suggests that resilience can involve more than the immediate survival at hand. From a storytelling perspective, it's exciting to focus on the moment where a hero can analyze their surroundings and show quick-wit and courage to overcome a danger they can't even see. However, in the case of Perseus and perhaps why Lovato uses the story to examine intergenerational trauma despite its sexist connotations, a hero's quest can always involve external societal factors beyond their control that a moment of triumph has the ability to disclose the interconnectedness between mother and son, citizens and the king who manipulates them, a maiden and the gods who made her a monster out of jealousy, and the resourcefulness of utilizing a reflective shield that can provide an alternative perspective to an imminent threat.

In a book discussion Lovato did with Central American scholar Ester Trujillo, he states that his book is a "rebellion against the silence, the silence imposed in our families, but then you know it becomes political, it's a silence not only imposed just by our fathers but by la patria" (Latin American and Latino Studies, 2020). His call to action for examining the memory fragments with the political among Central Americans, as a journalist and memoirist, proposes that one possibility of combating intergenerational silence is acknowledging it exists in Salvadoran families for starters and taking it a step further towards investigating the connection between silence and state violence.

Activism Through Family Stories

Lovato, through his writing and interviews, demonstrates that knowledge-making is collaborative and liberatory because recognizing the legitimacy of diverse migration narratives

and the acculturation processes that they disclose is a step towards developing political subjectivities, disrupting oppressive systems, and the dominant narratives that bind them. Counterstories or counternarratives are an avenue that Central Americans can utilize to interrogate their colonial legacies in a transnational way. Aja Martinez, for instance, privileges counterstories as a way for marginalized communities to challenge white supremacist assumptions and legitimize their ways of knowing. Martinez emphasizes that "master narratives are generated from a legacy of racial privilege and are stories in which racial privilege seems natural" (p. 404). Questioning that which seems natural, like racial privilege, then, requires that marginalized communities like Central Americans to interrogate not only the master narratives that silence them in the U.S. but also, the master narratives present in Central America. Martinez emphasizes that the "experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate and critical to understanding racism that is often well disguised in the rhetoric of normalized structural values and practices" (p. 404). If one of the prevalent dominant narratives about Central Americans in the U.S are ones about wars and gangs, what then, are the master narratives present in Central America?

The master narratives present in Central America go way beyond the scope of this dissertation so let me keep this short and only focus on one: the Popol Vuh and the search for a pre-conquest origin. Arturo Arias writes that instead of La Malinche and the Borderlands as symbols to understand the colonized self, Central Americans in the Northern Triangle have the Popol Vuh and Rigoberta Menchu. Take the Popol Vuh, for example, which is a text that contains Mayan stories of their creation and is said to have been translated twice with the original text no longer in existence. This text, according to Arias, was a long performance drawn from glyphs that

could alter the story depending on who the storyteller was. The text that exists today, then, is the translation of an interpretation of a text with no origin, "the memory of a hieroglyphic 'text'," and yet, remains a departure point for Central American identity. Arias explains that "'native' works, bifurcated as either timeless or historical, are determined in postimperialist discourse by the search for 'authenticity'" (p. 184). This search for authenticity is one that attempts to disrupt essentialized notions of identity, especially that of the mestizo subject, but also runs the risk of homogenizing a very heterogenous group.

The Central American identity contains intergenerational layers of state silencing that are compounded by the U.S. assimilationist project which marginalizes U.S. Central American stories even further. Speaking out against the silence or giving voice to the fragmented memories through storytelling that emerges intergenerationally can serve as a rhetorical vehicle for political activism. Lovato's memoir, for example, ends with him learning that his father had been a witness to La Matanza of 1932 and had never spoken of it until Lovato made the connection that his father was from the same town where the massacre occurred. His investigative work with the bone fragments of the Civil War era massacres had led him all the way to his father's own unforgotten past, one that was collectively denied to the survivors and witnesses of La Matanza by the Salvadoran government. Throughout the memoir, Lovato describes a strained relationship with his father who had been drinking since the age of twelve. However, hearing the horrendous details his nine-year-old father had witnessed allowed him to experience the "profound ways a compassionate perspective of the past could alter one's view of people and of nations" (p. 272). In these ways, sharing embodied knowledge through storytelling becomes a way to disrupt institutional silencing and provide avenues for healing and connection.

Central American scholar, Ester Trujillo, remarked in a book discussion with Lovato that Central American Studies is currently trying to interrogate the question of what it means for the Central American diasporic community to have intergenerational trauma and silence in general (Latin American and Latino Studies, 2020). This question isn't limited to just academic research; rather, it is a question that is central to understanding Central American transnational identity-building, what it discloses about academic conversations of non-Western difference, and what it suggests about the social experiences of Central Americans in the U.S. The ways I've been positioning myself in this story so far, for example, attempt to analyze this question and demonstrate how this intersecting silence is imbricated by an academic enculturation.

Maritza Cardenas emphasizes that constituting Central Americans "redirects the conversation within academic discourse, which tends to be unidirectional (mostly focusing on how U.S political and economic processes have impacted Central America), to one that highlights the way textual productions from that region actively shape the sociocultural life of the United States" (p. 5). What Cardenas points out is that it's necessary to center the link between Central America and how its cultural production is reflected in the sociocultural life of the diasporic community in the U.S rather than repeating the same violence-centered narratives around U.S imperialism. While Cardenas centers academic discourse as an aspect of identity-building differences, Steven Osuna expands on this cultural difference and asserts that transnational memories present in Mexican-Salvadoran communities in L.A. are oral histories passed from migrant parents to their children that create a "cultural, material, and ideological link beyond city limits" (p. 84). Put simply, the oral histories we share in the community about the political

oppression in our parents' home countries give us a critical understanding on how to foster solidarity in subaltern coalitions to resist political oppression or local injustices in this country.

This chapter has explored Central American storytelling through the themes presented by Lovato's writing through fragmented memory work (unforgetting), contextualizing family stories when lacking context, and utilizing these stories as a way to heal intergenerational trauma and silence. Lovato's background as an activist, journalist, and educator, uniquely position him to provide a nuanced understanding of U.S. Central American identity-building, one that centers diasporic storytelling as a way to enact political and social change. While Lovato uses writing as his method to share his story, this next chapter will look at the ways in which U.S. Central American artists circulate their stories through structures of feelings they portray in various artistic pieces.

CHAPTER 4: CULTURING *ANHELO* AND VISIBILIZING ERASURE THROUGH ART AND SOCIAL MEDIA

"I want us to hold our own narratives to be able to tell our own stories."

Kiara Aileen Machado

This chapter comes out of the desire to find community in early spring of 2020 when all I had was social media, an overactive memory, and a kind roommate willing to listen to my interpretations of these memories. While everyone was learning to bake bread in those early pandemic days, I was teaching myself how to make Salvadoran empanadas. They're made from cooked plantain, which is then mushed and filled with vanilla custard or red bean filling. You fry them and the custard ones are rolled in sugar. I couldn't really remember my grandma's tantéo[33] though.

Fijáte[34]… to be stuck in a house in the center of America while my everyday structures and routines are eroding; and I'm reading myself into convoluted corners about Central America—lacking context. I had too much time on my hands thinking of ways to find home in this location I never visualized myself in. Nothing familiar was nearby. I was missing home and would try looking for it through cooking since I never learned many of my grandmother's recipes. Maybe if I had community around at the time then I would've written about something other than identity. Maybe if my mom hadn't moved us to rural Utah, we could've been around more U.S. Central Americans and representation would matter to me in different ways. Maybe this chapter wouldn't read like a fever dream. The cool thing about a diasporic community though is that there's connection possible within the dispersal. While I identify as Latinx, Salvadoran-

[33] Measurement
[34] Imagine

American, and Central American, finding a sense of belonging that was attached to a nation felt distorted. A diasporic identity, after all, is a rupture to the idea of nation (Gopinath, 2005, p. 4). I started to consider if other Central Americans felt similarly, dislocated and lacking context. In 2021, as I was still doing coursework online, approaching exams, and trying to figure out how to position myself as a researcher, I turned to social media to look for other Central Americans.

Surviving the Pandemic through Art and Social Media

It was peak pandemic and I'm making messes in the kitchen, learning how to cook Salvadoran dishes, something that had made me feel not Salvadoran enough in the past. I kept trying the hashtags #Salvadoranfood and #Salvifood to find recipes until I came across other people on Instagram who were sharing ways to make dishes if you had access to all the necessary ingredients, how to substitute ingredients if the ingredients weren't locally stocked or how to make dishes vegan. These Instagram users were also sharing their own stories about learning to make these dishes for the first time. One of the chefs I found, Karla Tatiana Vasquez,

Figure 1

Karla Tatiana Vasquez*, Ren Fuller*

was in the process of collecting and sharing recipes. She caught my interest on Instagram with her tagline "Donde come uno, comen dos[35]," something I'd hear my family say all the time. Four years after coming across her Instagram, Vasquez is now publishing the first ever mainstream Salvadoran cookbook called The SalviSoul Cookbook (2024), seen in Figure 1, which not only contains recipes but also stories from the women that taught these recipes to Vasquez. My Abuelita was known for her cooking so Vasquez's journey of "longing to bite into a piece of home" resonated with me (p. 5). I only learned one recipe, unfortunately, so all I got are the stories and memories of food you just couldn't believe how good it was. My own longing was for my family that had passed away, and I felt an urgency to remember these women as much as I could but for myself, for them, not for an academic discipline. While I felt my memories of them transforming, I couldn't stop myself and just kept writing about their stories. Over these last seven years, I have felt the tendrils of academic language unfurl in me, hooking at my stories, pulling them into fragile threads as I braided them with my schooling. Ironically, my longing for home only grew the more I wrote about it. I was becoming undone by my own craving for remembering.

This longing or yearning for home is a common trope in Central American storytelling and while my journey began with food, eventually I broadened my search to see what else I'd find. Along with helping me find recipes, the Instagram hashtag #CentralAmerican helped me come across a range of other content. It was in this searching where I came across a group of Central Americans who were promoting zoom events that interviewed Central American scholars and authors sharing their various racialized experiences about what it was like navigating and

[35] "Where one can eat, two can eat," meaning that it's always possible to share what you have.

explaining their identity, both in their personal and academic lives. I attended a couple of these webinars which provided regional and historical context on Central America, its exclusion from Latin American Studies, the exclusion of Indigenous and Black voices from Central American meaning-making, the oversight of Central American migration and climate change,[36] affirmations for those us attending who were isolated in our schooling, and encouragement to keep telling our stories if we could. Many of the scholars and attendees shared similar questions I had about what it meant to be Central American and the frustrations of having to explain the recognizable and unrecognizable facets of their identity. Sharing their stories was an both an act of resistance and a composing of identity that addressed the problematic discourses that involve Central Americans and emphasized the nuances in their histories and experiences. These online platforms provided me with the space that allowed me to think through the question of what it meant to be a Central American, not just for academic positioning, but it also helped shape my understanding of how Central American narratives and storytelling practices could complicate conversations, both public-facing and scholarly, around Latinx identity-building that moved within and in relation to cultural essentialism. By weaving their stories with the problematic discourses of how they are represented or portrayed in the U.S. media, they re-imagine dominant narratives that otherwise exclude them and find a temporary home by sharing stories with others.

I'm not alone in finding meaningful dialogue and community through social media, as it has played a significant role in increasing visibility played a significant role in increasing visibility

[36] In January of 2021, 7,500 migrants crossed from Honduras into Guatemala fleeing the aftermath of two hurricanes and hoping to make it to the U.S.-Mexico border. One of the webinars I attended called attention to the invisibility of Central America in conversations arounds climate change, disaster capitalism, and border discourse.

for Central Americans in the U.S. Through hashtags like #CentAmStudies and #CentralAmericanTwitter, U.S. Central Americans are able to create "communal spaces of knowledge and resistance" (Padilla, 2021, p. 28). The emergence of these hashtags served as "an avenue for its followers and participants to find and grow community, to assert and contest identities (self-defined or imposed 'from above'), and, in the process, to engender counternarratives of what it means to belong as Central Americans" (p.28-p.29). These hashtags create a space for Central Americans to share their embodied knowledge with one another and work within and against dominant narratives and create possibilities for representing their cultural identities on their own terms.

The disruptive and transformative qualities of these hashtags provided me a commonplace for affective belonging that introduced me to some of the art pieces mentioned in this chapter as well as the zines I will highlight. By using Central American hashtags on Instagram, and then Twitter (now X), I found a communal space where many Central Americans could share art, music, recipes, community libraries, scholarly panels, mental health resources, etc. Frankly, I found all of the Central American sources in this project through these hashtags. The artistic pieces I analyze in this chapter, however, such as the zines and institutional art, show a different perspective at expressing Central American belonging as their design content showcases a yearning, a longing or an ahnelo for an imagined homeland within a diaspora and for political visibility in the States. While U.S. Central American storytelling, such as Lovato's work on connecting memory fragments, emphasized the trajectory of memory work towards political activism, these artistic pieces address the Central American exclusion in how they illustrate

longing (yearning) for an understanding and re-imagining of self and the Central American imaginary within the diaspora.

In the rest of this chapter, I'm going to analyze these texts that I came across during my 2020 social media search for belonging. Specifically, I will analyze the affective qualities of yearning or anhelo as a commonplace for U.S. Central American belonging because it's one of prevalent themes in the artistic pieces I talk about in this chapter. To anhelar is to have a deep intense longing for something and in these art pieces I will share with you, one comes across many expressions of longing for presence, whether of someone and some place. Lemme quickly take you back to the first page of this dissertation where I told you that this project was un desahogo[37], a literal undrowning as I try to tell you what I've learned and what I know, and point you to anhelar[38], a deep yearning for understanding U.S. Central American affective relations within the diaspora. Drawing from Kristin Arola's work on embodied design and Jose Esteban Muñoz's work on affect and ephemera, I look at U.S. Central American art to examine the sensate experiences that these artists utilize to portray longing (and nonbelonging) and perform their cultural identity. In other words, vocalizing el anhelo through visual designs is a significant affective connection in the diaspora that undergirds the deep embodied desire for the imagined home, for understanding, and for healing. Don't forget what I said back in the intro that this storying method is also about healing. Healing as in the present, and not healed as in already well. No, healing keeps going and it hurts like a motherfucker. In researching a project like this, I've come across so much historical context I didn't have, and it hurts to read and know it. I'll find

[37] Word for "vent" in Spanish but when I picture venting, I imagine the releasing of steam or hot air. Desahogo gets at the same meaning, but the image is an undrowning, a gasping for the release of a strong emotion.
[38] Word for "yearn" in Spanish but comes from the Latin word "anhelare" which means to "breathe with difficulty."

myself trapped in someone's past but the feeling of wanting to understand that which was hard to articulate always brings me back. It is 2020 and art pieces like these reminded me of our beauty[39] and could pull me back to the present.

I've had two near-drowning experiences in my life, one in a river, and one in the ocean, both before the age of ten. Have you ever coughed up salted water though? Try to inhale the ragged air because you must. It's not pleasant but you must. Slap on the back and cough again—clear the airways. Estás bien?[40] I spent the days after this near-death with aches and a sore throat, but I couldn't wait to be back in the water as soon as I forgot the fear of tumbling beneath the unrolling waves. I remember picking chiquilines[41] from the beach later that same day because que rico sabían en arroz[42] and hearing about the dangerous riptides in the beaches back home. Life went on and we moved forward. For me, I look for the sublime in water and these experiences probably have a lot to do with it. My longing for the weightlessness of floating made me forget my own buoyancy was conditional, and the water was always heavier. I am so far from the ocean here in the Midwest. I'm so far from everyone. The air is icy here when I breathe in. The air scrapes down my throat. Someone please slap my back and so I can cough again—clear the airways. You good? I have work to do. My work is to remember.

The point is this: sensory experiences are intertwined to the memories and cultures we are multiply-situated in, offering a glimpse into the ineffable aspects and ephemeral qualities derived from memory fragments that affectively map connections to an imagined homeland.

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[39] "Our beauty lies in this extended capacity for convolution." I read *The Crying of Lot 49* by Thomas Pynchon the summer before beginning the PhD program. I love this quote. Through the waves of melancholic contradictions and swells of self-doubt, it reminded me at times that there was beauty in my broken heart.
[40] You good?
[41] Sand crabs: although, sometimes we'd call them chakalines (chaqualines) which is Nahúat for "shrimp."
[42] How delicious they tasted in rice.

This process is a cultural negotiation that reveals an example of what José Cortez and Romeo Garcia (2020) describe as an "structural incompletion of hegemony" such as Latinidad and the subjects it has failed to consider or persuade, in this case, U.S. Central Americans. The diasporic storytelling examples in this chapter demonstrate how artistic and visual media that moves within and in relation to cultural matrices like Latinidad, can be persuasive in depicting a U.S. Central American identity; namely, the violence re/membered through images of family, landscapes, and letters that participate in capitalist regimes of representation while simultaneously exposing the tensions and fractures of social control.

The artists in this chapter circulate their art in institutional settings and through social media. Through expressing their desire for visibility within spheres where they are hypervisible and still excluded, the cultural performance of their work can add to conversations about resistance in "dominant systems of aesthetic and institutional classification" (Muñoz, 1996, p. 10). The dominant systems of aesthetic and institutional classification can be a dissertation on its own. However, this chapter does not explore what this U.S. Central American art means but rather what it does. Similarly to the storytelling present in the last chapter, the art pieces featured in this chapter can provide an affective mapping of U.S. Central American cultural production and its ephemeral qualities. What I mean by affective mapping here draws directly from Jose Esteban Muñoz' (2006) approach to affect, which he defines as "descriptive of the receptors we use to hear each other and the frequencies on which certain subalterns speak and are heard or, more importantly, felt" (p. 677). While Spivak (1988) introduced the question of "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Muñoz in his definition of affect, extends the question to "How does the subaltern feel? How might subalterns feel each other?" Affective mapping, then, is a way to

unpack the sociocultural ways in which U.S. Central American art "conveys, translates, and engenders structures of feelings— tropes of emotion and lived experience that are indeed material without necessarily being 'solid'" (Munoz, 1996, p. 10). Muñoz asserts that the ephemeral or "invisible evidence" from the hidden histories of minoritarian subjects can be performatively multifaceted rather than grounded solely in epistemology (1996, p. 6). This invisible evidence is not dissimilar from Gordon's (1997) concept of "ghostly matters" that haunt social constructs and can be grounded in material conditions.

Through this lens, I am interested in examining yearning or ahnelo as one of the structures of feeling that U.S. Central Americans circulate through their art and what cultural particularities of their identity they are emphasizing. One of the other tropes of emotion that is prevalent in U.S. Central American cultural production is the feeling of exclusion and invisibility from within and in relation to U.S. sociocultural hierarchies, specifically the Chicanx presence. While U.S. Central American artists express this trope of invisibility through diverse artistic styles, they convey traces of unforgotten images that document their yearning for diasporic belonging and non-belonging. As Padilla (2021) explains, "the visibility afforded to US Central Americans in the national popular imaginary has largely marked their exclusion" (p. 129). This exclusion is felt in artistic spaces such as zines.

La Horchata Zine

Zines are a robust site for analyzing these structures of feeling that emerge in Central American art is because it is an art form that resists being archived or solidified. Zines can be scanned, itemized, and stored in an archive, sure, but the circulation of zines is emergent and ephemeral; in other words, not in the mainstream. These polyvalent characteristics and their

underground circulation can disclose a snapshot of a U.S. Central American identity, emphasizing the complexities of belonging as a fluid and flexible concept rather than a rigid requirement for being Central American. This belonging is emerging out of material conditions but maintains a fluidity and flexibility with identity or what Muñoz (2000) calls "identity-in-process" (p.68). Similarly, Arola and Arola (2017) write about creative repetition and culturing as attending to the "specificities of current milieu so as to create new ways of thinking and experiencing" (p.212). In other words, while these artistic pieces reveal structures of feelings that map out anhelo for visibility/invisibility or belonging and nonbelonging, they don't concretize themselves as requirements for being Central American. Instead, the visual designs of these zines—which include jungle landscapes to long-distance letters to cityscapes in the U.S.—function more as performative acts of Central American sense of belonging that have the potential to circulate as a shared diasporic structure of feeling while simultaneously holding affective relationships to nationality and the cultural matrix of Latinidad.

La Horchata zine is an arts publication that provides nuance to Latinidad by featuring creatives from the Central American diaspora. It is self-published by Kimberly Benavides and Veronica Melendez who are based in New York and Washington D.C, respectively. The first zine was published in 2017 when the editors responded to a call for submissions at a book fair before they even had a publication ready to submit. Melendez commented to Remezcla.com about the lack of representation for Central Americans in art magazines with the emphasis mainly placed on Chicanx or South American artists: "Central America is forgotten about a lot, but there are so many Central Americans in the country right now, and a lot of us are artists. It's nice to have a place as a Central American where you can relate to the work or see our voices" (Reichard,

2017). The circulation of these zines provides an avenue for Central Americans to find connection with each other through the visual portrayal of their stories. The exclusion/inclusion of U.S. Central Americans in artistic spaces is described by Melendez as forgotten, a theme we visited thoroughly through Lovato's work which showed the various levels of institutional silencing on the region. The zines, however, create a visual and sensory storytelling experience that center Central American artistic voices and images that don't only feature their misery but rather, showcase their desire for cultural visibility.

To further situate the nuanced invisibility of Central American art in the mainstream, I turn to Kristin Arola's work on digital storytelling and land-based rhetoric. In this work, Arola asks how we might understand digital spaces through a land-based rhetoric, one that, as Gabriela Raquel Rìos argues, "recognizes the productive potential of nature and of embodied ways of knowing" (p. 68). Arola offers a three-part structure for a land-based rhetoric:

1) a land-based rhetoric acknowledges how understanding comes from "active participation with the land" (Rios, 2015, p. 64).
2) a land-based rhetoric acknowledges the relationships we have with particular elements in the biosphere (Deloria,1999)
3) a land-based rhetoric acknowledges our sensate experience and our memories of those experiences (Cordova, 2007).

While I appreciate Arola's definition and analysis of this concept, she is coming from the perspective of someone who grew up in their ancestral homelands. In much of my learning about land-based rhetoric, I found myself asking: what are the knowledge relations present or possible when the connection to place is an imaginary homeland for many of us in the Central

American diaspora? Drawing from Indigenous epistemology, the concept of relationality helps me unpack the ways in which U.S. Central American culturing allows for (un)forgotten memories, sensory experiences, and affective connections to land to become significant, whether they are displaced or imagined. Much of my connection to place comes from my family's stories and their descriptions but their physical attachment to that land was disrupted and my attachment to it was denied. At least, that's how it's felt at times, the overwhelming resentment, and at times shame, that if that miserable war never happened then maybe I would have been able to grow up in my own ancestral homeland and be made of different connections. Perhaps that's the cynic talking, though. I quite like the particular connections that make me. The particularity of diasporic relations introduces another culturing through embodied design that is "always intimately connected to the cultures within which we find ourselves living, breathing, and making meaning" (Arola, 2014, p. 201). In other words, U.S. Central American knowledge-making consists of accounting for all of the relations that influence our sensory experiences, past and present, including the memories of sharing stories of the land "back home."

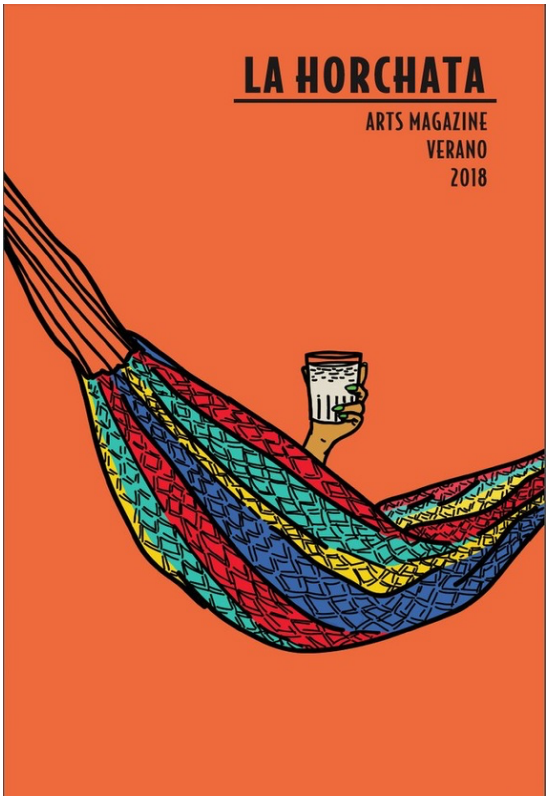
One way of accounting for these relations is through zine making and zine reading. In Figures 2 and 3, you see Issues #8 and #4 of La Horchata printed in 2021 and 2018, respectively. I own a few issues of these zines, with the pandemic edition (#8) being the first one I got in 2021, and then shortly after, a reprinted edition of Issue #4. At that time, flipping through the eighth issue, I came across different visual designs that, up until that point I'd only really seen in our own family photos. I kept showing them to my housemate with the excitement of "Holy shit! Someone finally put our culture out there!" Take for example, the horchata in a plastic bag was something I'd only seen in El Salvador and here I had the image in my hand, a visual reference

that could sparked many memories and storytelling possibilities where I could talk about the nuances present in my cultural identity.

While I found comfort in these visual representations, as they provided me with a sense of belonging and recognition, they also offered different definitions of what it means not just to be Salvadoran, but more specifically what it means to be a U.S. Central American. To be clear, the tropes of longing for home or visibility in social spheres aren't specific to the Salvadoran-American culturing experience; rather, these zines include acts of composing from all Central American countries and as such, reveal a U.S. Central American (and Salvadoran) identity-in-process that enables the mutually defining terms to disrupt their exclusion from dominant narratives (Cardenas, 2018, p. 72) Using "Salvadoran" and "U.S. Central American" allow me to

Figure 2
La Horchata #8

Figure 3
La Horchata #4



visibilize both terms, as what I'm emphasizing in this project are tropes of yearning and invisibility that emerge in these zines but aren't limited to Salvadoran-Americans. Instead, my interchangeable use of U.S. Central American and Salvadoran reveals an articulation for identity-building that works within and in relation to the invisibility and exclusion of this region in Latinx rhet/comp discourse as a larger geographical and historical context that has been forgotten. Both of the artists I mention in this chapter credit family from multiple Central American countries located in the Northern Triangle (Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador), not just El Salvador, which means that the ways I've presented "U.S. Central Americanness" as an identity-in-process, is an emphasis on a few regional tropes, a stylistic choice that enables me to assert and contest understandings of the Latinx umbrella without losing all sense of identity (Arola & Arola, 2015, p. 212). The contradictions present in this cultural negotiation are one of the main reasons why I will continue to use U.S. Central American as the cultural signifier to identity how these artists compose their affective ties of their diasporic identity through the zines and paintings I analyze in this chapter.

One of the zine creators, Veronica Melendez, composes art pieces that recognize the various ways people create home through household items seen in U.S. Central American homes. The collage below in Figure 4, however, contains personal belongings like letters and photographs as less thought of household items, which represent longing across distance from a person and place. The letter seen in the collage is from an individual that is expressing longing for a friend who has moved from Guatemala to the States. These letters are layered on top of landscape images of mountains and dense jungles that in other works, also contain images of

people with some of their bodies cut out—only an outline is left. The letter in the figure below, however, is addressed from an Arturo Butres to an Aracely and says, “Hay muchas cosas que

Figure 4
Veronica Melendez in *La Horchata* #9

quisiera decirle, pero de tanta tristeza todo se me olvida, pero quisiera decirle que la distancia no sera ninguna muralla para olvidar nuestra amistad y le pido a Dios Nuestro Señor que derrame sobre usted muchas bendiciones y tambien sobre su familia[43].” The handwritten letter is placed parallel to an image of a woman wearing a green coat while standing in an obscured snowy night. This collage demonstrates a common theme used in diasporic art, namely diasporic

[43] There are many things I want to tell you, but I’m so sad I forget everything, but I want to tell you that the distance will not be a wall to forget our friendship and I ask God our Lord to pour many blessings over you and your family.

filmmaking, of using epistolary writing as material objects that represent temporal and spatial distance from a dislocated significant other.

In *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking* (2001), film critic Hamid Nacify writes about the use of epistolary writing used in diasporic films to present a visual layer of spatial temporality which I find applicable for these art pieces. Epistolarity is another form of "thirdspace chronotope" demonstrated through letters or a telephone conversation to "create an illusion of presence that transforms the addressee from an absent figure into a presence, which hovers in the text's interstices" (p. 103, p. 154). The illusion of presence that points to the temporal interstices in the collage above is through Arturo's words of longing and the reassurance that distance will not be a barrier in his friendship with Aracely. The woman in the collage is seemingly Aracely, whose dark backdrop barely lights her presence behind the blurry snowflakes. The image that functions as a container for the letter and photograph is what looks like a dense jungle obscured by gray fog.

As a writer, I am intimately interested in the re-imaginings of the self through which I write except I learned to read and write Spanish first. I heard English and spoke it before I could write it. English is the language I use to understand things, but Spanish is where I feel things and these two inform my writing as I try to share my understanding of these complex structures of feelings. When I look at this collage that only contains two items in close proximity, I feel multiple things at once, but distance is not one of them. While Arturo is not seen in the collage, his writing marks his presence as one that wishes to express many words but can't remember them. What his memory allows for through the writing is to assure Aracely that distance will not disrupt their friendship. Through the distance, he communicates his presence through

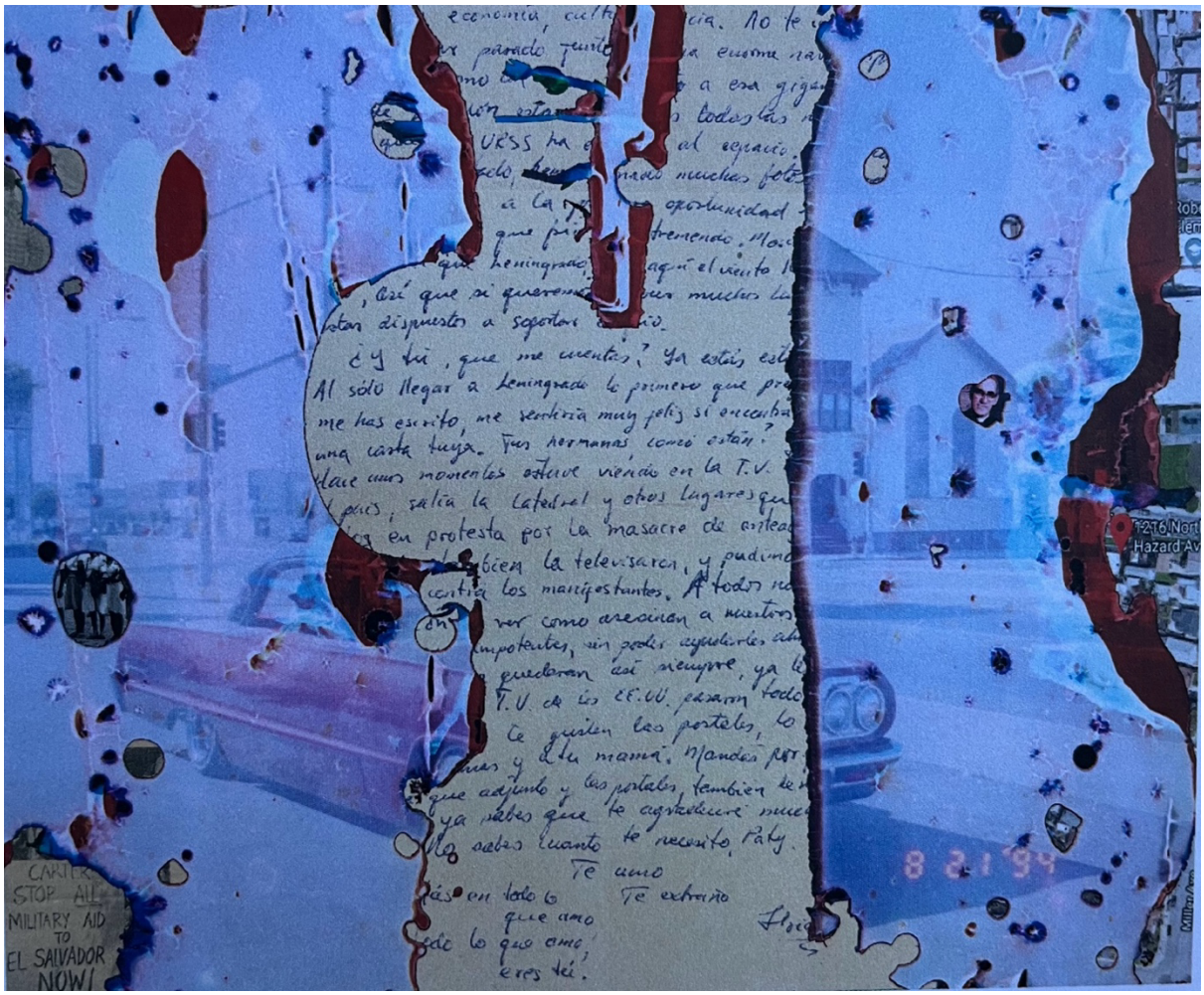
expressing the sadness he feels about the absence of words he wishes he could express. The woman in the image stands out to me because I once lived in a snowy place too and yet, my family's stories filled my mind with a home like the backdrop—a dense jungle-y place obscured by fog. This collage exists in this zine full of art pieces like this one which superimpose epistolary layers of spatial proximity, which is representative of the structures of feeling (be)longing through the relations individuals have with each other, to a place, and within dislocation to a homeland. As such, this page of the zine illustrates how land-based rhetoric can be both presence and absence, and in the diasporic composing of longing and remembering, can provide one avenue for complicating affective belonging.

The other figure below is from Salvadoran-American visual journalist, Semantha Raquel Norris, which appeared in Issue #9 Part 2 (July 2022). The image also caught my attention as it too contains sections of a letter in the middle of its design. This image has various superimposed layers that include a map, a faded image of a car on top dated from 1994, and a fragmented section of a love letter. There are recognizable images in the background such as Archbishop Oscar Romero[44] in the right and the four murdered American nuns in the left. But the words in the center communicate longing for a lover and reflections on the political unrest happening in the country. The letter writer switches from loving words of wanting to see his lover to asking questions about her family to opinions about the country. The fragmented letter offers snippets into a relationship that was interrupted by the War that persuades the viewer to wonder what stories could have existed if the war hadn't interrupted the relationship. The composer of this

[44] Romero was assassinated by a right-wing death squad while leading mass on March 24, 1980, which marked the start of the war. He wrote a letter to President Jimmy Carter asking him to stop sending military aid to El Salvador. At the time, the country was receiving a million dollars in aid a day.

Figure 5

Semantha Raquel Norris in *La Horchata* Zine #9



piece, Norris, echoes this sentiment in her artist statement, where she explains that an inherited box from her mother was full of letters and postcards from her mother's former lover. This archive of unforgotten memories helped Norris reconstruct her mother's interrupted past and provided understanding through the possibilities of stories that could have been. In Norris' own words, her mother's letters "document a love, a loss of home, a distance, a separation, a hope, and a yearning for a brighter future" (http://thelosangelespress.com). These letters contain the fragments of an interrupted life and Norris' visual representation of the stories she's reconstructing showcase how longing, el anhelo, for understanding what could have been enable

her to create stories that include her and the relations she accounts for, such as her mother and her former distant lover.

Through artistic representation, the Central American diaspora is simultaneously challenging what Latinx means, who it includes or excludes, and how to find belonging within the parameters of political invisibility. As Cardenas writes, "by symbolically and culturally inhabiting multiple locations, the boundaries of Central America expand creating a transnation—an imaginary space utilized in the diaspora as a site of belonging and cultural identity" (Cardenas 82). This imaginary space utilizes belonging and cultural identity as a commonplace that isn't bound to location or nationality, but rather, conveys a structure of feeling of what it's like to be Central American in the U.S. In addition to portraying the affective ties to homeland, U.S. Central Americans are also tackling invisibility from institutional settings.

Visualizing the Pain of Erasure

One of the artists also featured in La Horchata zine was Kiara Aileen Machado (b. 1993), a contemporary Central American artist based in Southern California, whose art can be seen in many galleries in the U.S. and internationally as well. She received her bachelor's degree in painting and drawing from Cal State-Long Beach but has credited her family as being a major part of her artistic education and cultural framing ("Artist Statement"). Many of her art pieces are full of vibrant colors that usually contain images of traditional Central American handcrafts or recuerditos (souvenirs) camouflaged behind dense flora. She utilizes quitapenas, or "worry dolls" from Guatemala that are given to anxious children so they can tell the doll their worries and as a result, their troubles go away. The paintings contain other artisan woodworks and other textiles that appear hidden behind lush plants from the Americas if you don't know what you're looking

for. When I first came across Machado's art in Issue #8, all of the artisanal art is what stood out the most as I'd only seen them in my home as my mom's chosen wall décor. The hidden objects,

Figure 6
Rosado by Kiara Aileen Machado

to me, were the centerpiece upon seeing them behind the plants. The vibrant colors tend to emphasize warm palettes that include reds, oranges, and purples which will have sharp contrasting outlines that don't take away from the hidden figures, but rather, create a multilayered composition that speaks to refuge—a temporary sanctuary for belonging.

My admiration for Machado's work since 2021 now extends beyond her submitted work for the zine issue so I've chosen other artistic pieces that were not in the issue, but part of the same series. The example above in Figure 6 is titled "Rosado" which highlights the color pink, both in the background and in the flora, which is enveloped by purples and blues that give a vibrancy to the contrasting pink flowers. In the center of the painting behind the palm leaf, I point you to a Quitapena doll that is obscured by the pink flowers and other miniature dolls. There's no beginning or end to the palm leaves, rather, their vertical placement and the flowers layered on top create a juxtaposition between the visible and invisible figures. The jewel-toned colors and overlapping foliage frame the hidden imagery which emphasize Machado's work as a "storyteller weaving a narrative that reveals itself to the viewer over time" (Machado, 2023). The narrative I understand from the painting is that the recognizable images like the Quitapenas and textiles, while hidden, are the most visible to me because I can identify it, but the overlaying surroundings slow my gaze down. What's recognizable to me are the visible parts of the Quitapena but my memory tries to fill in the rest of the image with the physical Quitapenas I've seen before. The fragmented visibility of the doll enables me to confront the erasure and distortion I feel in recognizing a cultural image that, while visible to viewers, still contains a different significance to me that I must also contextualize.

Machado recently won a grant from the podcast series, "Not Real Art" which highlights art "not suited for boring old art snobs." The winners of the grant are also awarded an episode in the series where Machado addresses how her art is politically driven and influenced by frustrations of having to consistently explain her Central American identity (she identifies as

Figure 7

Reflexiones by Kiara Aileen Machado

Central American but also acknowledges her Guatemalan-Salvadoran heritage) while also grappling with the privileges of being born in the U.S. Similar to Lovato, she contends with the juxtaposition of what it means to be a Central American when you're also from the U.S. and how the desire to express both reveal moments of belonging and nonbelonging, or visibility and invisibility. Machado states in the interview that her art is about "wanting to connect with folks who feel that erasure, who will have some type of visibility and invisibility" (Not Real Art, 2020). The feeling of erasure, as Machado expresses it through figures "enveloped and obscured" in her art, is a transformative space for constituting political visibility for Central Americans and their art. This visibility emerges amidst the repetition of having to explain her identity in relation to her art, manifesting in both her design choices and the audience's connection with her artistic pieces. In an interview with El Tecolote, Machado says:

> I feel a little helpless sometimes, it gets incredibly frustrating having to make the constant effort of reiterating the purpose behind my work in representing Central American identity. There are always art shows with all-Latinx contributors but the art

ends up being solely Mexican, so that makes me question how diverse these spaces really are. It's hard but I think that we're slowly making changes" (Tecolote Staff, 2020).

Machado doesn't have the option to be an elusive artist whose pieces can speak for themselves because even with Latinx art galleries, she still must explain what makes her art distinct from Mexican-American art. If you recall, U.S Central Americanness can be produced through its exclusion and one aspect of its marginality is in its spatial proximity to Mexico and the formation of the Mexican-American identity. This proximity between groups is one that Maritza Cardenas claims "conditions the process of Central Americans 'passing' as Mexican-Americans, particularly in geographical regions that rely on an Other Than Mexican (OTM) logic[45]" (p. 123). One of the regions where this logic circulates includes Southern California where ethnoracial nonwhite subjects are assumed as Mexican unless their idioms or cultural practices "out them" in a sense. Machado, for instance, explains: "I think whenever [people] see me or see anybody that looks Latina or speaks Spanish, they automatically assume that we're Mexican…I'm not seeing myself in the arts, in the news, and we're often criminalized because of our countries. We're often cast as like – violent or poverty-stricken" (Not Real Art, 2020). This reading of U.S. Central Americans passing as Mexicans, particularly those who are mestizo/a, renders them unintelligible and nonnormative while simultaneously passing as a normative signifier within Latinidad, which is the Mexican identity. More importantly, however, is that Machado is commenting on what diversity in Latinx spaces currently entails which is visibility afforded for Mexican art that doesn't include her intersecting Central American identity of Guatemalan and Salvadoran. There are varying

[45] Cardenas writes extensively on the assertions and limitations of the Central American identity. OTM logic complicates border discourse by showcasing how the language used by the U.S. Border Patrol gets taken up culturally and linguistically in everyday social spheres (p. 123)

degrees of visibility within the Latinx umbrella as discussed earlier and Machado's art and the promotional work she does in interviews to represent it directly address the dichotomy between visibility of Latinx art and the exclusion of Central Americans.

Part of this erasure for her comes from having to compete for representation in the Latin American artistic market while also acknowledging that she is centering certain marginalized groups while excluding others in her art to visually demonstrate how that erasure feels. The tension between invisible and visible in her art reflects not only her own grappling with her identity, but also how she has to continually explain the artistic expression of identity to promote herself. In the podcast episode, Machado relays the challenges of marketing herself were initially constrained because she struggled researching Central American topics in her profession unless she had a direct name or site. In "Not Real Art," Machado credits Algorithms of Oppression by Safiya Noble for making her think of the different ways systemic racism shows up in her professional sphere, which made her rely more on her community and the cultural events that they would host to garner exposure. As an artist, the challenge was learning how to market herself in the art business after she had graduated college. Machado says that, in her art education, "you're taught the technical ways of painting but not the business side" (Not Real Art, 2020). Machado shares that she had to learn the business side through trial and error which included master classes, online classes, learning how to write grant proposals, and being specific about the grants she researches and whether they have fees.

While my introduction to Machado was through La Horchata, Machado is gaining more and more recognition in the U.S. Central American art scene which means there are more writing demands in her job. She shares that speaking about her work is easier but having to write about

it takes practice, so she will "write in Spanish first and then translate" to see if it makes sense to her (Not Real Art, 2020). Turner and Gonzales (2020) emphasize that marginalized communities "are pushed to translate their fluid, emergent, and constantly changing linguistic and cultural practices to fit within rigid categories such as those imposed by standardized American English" ("Visualizing Translation"). Such translation takes place through many modes, mediums, and contexts, however art, as I've described in this section, and art as represented through zines, gives us a window into how affective belonging can be made manifest through the act of composing. In other words, translation for marginalized communities is not a neutral process but rather, one that is always racialized and must maneuver multiple languages, cultures, and histories.

In this chapter I examined Central American storytelling by analyzing the ways in which U.S. Central American artists portray and circulate anhelo and yearning as a structure of feeling through their visual media that re-envisions the U.S. Central American imaginary. Additionally, I analyzed oil paintings by Kiara Aileen Machado which illustrate the pain of erasure and the storytelling possibilities that come with visibilizing U.S. Central American narratives. These artists demonstrate their affective ties to the Central American imaginary through visual media and thereby offer another perspective of U.S. Central American storytelling that complicates identity building in the diaspora.

CHAPTER 5: MAKING CENTRAL AMERICAN RHETORIC

"In this life, our people are not things of silences but whole worlds bursting into breath." -Janel Pineda, "In Another Life"

I started this project seven years ago, perhaps one of the most vulnerable moments of my life when I was grieving so much loss. I went from being a person that rarely shared about my culture to, well, this. Writing about affective connections—que lujo[46]. I didn't mean to cope with loss by anchoring myself to institutional disciplines, but my mother dying right before I started grad school felt like I had also lost my grandmother all over again because I could no longer remember the past with her; rather, I was now facing a future where I'd remember them both longer than I had known them. I wasn't ready to let go, and I wanted to keep knowing them, but writing home through this project has cost a lot. The other option was to forget and stay silent, but then I would just be complicit in my own systemic silencing. Let me remind you that this inquiry began with me trying to position myself in the academy. Who am I as a researcher? Or in the language of cultural rhetorics: what is my story?

My Abuelita walked me to school every day for most of my childhood. She was always walking everywhere, haciendo mandados[47], helping my mother take care of the household. She used to sit at the dining room table to read the Bible every day in between chores. I'd sit at the chair next to her to do my pre-school homework and practice writing out the alphabet. It was during these times, while asking questions about my homework or during the walks to school, where she would tell me the stories that made her. Education, in terms of writing and reading,

[46] How luxurious.
[47] Running errands.

that is, mattered to her deeply, as she had been illiterate most of her life and learned both skills once she was in the States. She couldn't read or write but she could feel; she felt the complexity of life, and she lived it. It was the stories she told of her life that became the education that mattered most to me. Everything she knew was described through what was no longer around but far away.

At this dining room table, however, she created a visual map of her life through her memories, her mannerisms, her coping mechanisms, full of beauty and resilience that curved and spiraled in baroque ways across time and space. I vividly remember how she would take out an index card and show me how she wrote her "M's" in cursive for her name, Mercedes. Her blue pen moved slowly, looping down and up, as if she was cranking a heavy handle with just her finger and thumb. She'd hand me the pen and I would do the sharp peaks of an "N" for my name, Nissele. We wrote together as she taught me the world for the first time through her stories. She was practicing remembrance for her own life, piecing together the fragments to teach me how to appreciate what I had, and how to long for the home she left.

I am *tired*.

I *am* tired of kicking.

I am tired of clawing through these abyssal academic waters—for *her*,

I'd re-write this whole project in Spanish if only to show her how much knowledge was in her storytelling, how much meaning I have found in the pieces of my life with her wisdom, how much I have tried to silence it, how much space I've dared to take up to share it, both contradictory possibilities existing through my own remembrance of her. This is the cultural negotiation where my anhelo comes from. My longing for understanding what it means to be

Salvadoran-American in the U.S., a hyphenated identity-in-process, that is made manifest by articulations containing memory fragments and moments of affective belonging within and in relation to systematic and sociocultural exclusion, all without losing a sense of identity (Muñoz 2000; Arola 2016). Rather, as I try to visibilize this storying method for rhetorically analyzing multiply-situated perspectives with my writing, I demonstrate an act of disruption and resistance towards systemic oppression, a "tactical misrecognition of the self," working within and against the dominant narratives that dehumanize U.S. Central Americans (Munoz, 1997, p. 90).

Central American Rhetoric

My story is about giving voice to the silences within cultural memory, for my own family's re/membered story, but also to demonstrate a storytelling method of analysis within and against institutionalized hegemonies. Additionally, this story is also about contextualizing parts of the Central American historical amnesia and disrupting the "colonial fog of erasure" to simultaneously examine silence and storytelling as complex survival strategies (Rodriguez & Cuevas, 2017). As you've read in this project, the Latinx identity signifier in the U.S. contains dominant narratives of acculturation that can be examined through cultural matrices like Latinidad and the individuals it persuades or fails to include.

Within the space of inclusion/exclusion, visibility/invisibility, belonging/alienation, I have questioned what the cultural matrices of Latinx and Latinidad means to scholars who identified as such. I found myself asking the following questions:

1. What is the Latinx perspective in Rhetoric and Composition studies?
2. What role do Latinx scholars play in conversations about identity, resistance, and storytelling?

3. What can Central American rhetoric teach about transnational identity-building in the diaspora?

While there is increasing media coverage on Central American representation, take for example *Gentefied* (2021), *This Fool* (2022) or more recently, *Problemista* (2024), and at the same time there is a lack of inclusive representation for U.S. Central Americans in other social spheres (Padilla, 2022; Cardenas, 2018; Abrego, 2017; Osuna, 2016; Trujillo, 2021), such disciplinary questions invite a closer look into Latinx identity politics and how they are represented in rhet/comp scholarship. As I discussed in Chapter 2, Rhetoric and Composition scholars have developed many avenues for theorizing Latinx cultural differences and how they intersect with rhetorical understandings of identity, community, and literacy. These cultural differences are drawn from Chicanx frameworks such as testimonio, rhetoric of the flesh, and Anzaldúa's borderlands, for example, in large part because of the longstanding imperialist history of the U.S.-Mexico border.

The theorizing of the border between an imperialist North and an oppressed Global South, while an important discussion, has been limited to the Chicanx border subjectivity, however, and is "central to the grand narrative of the US-Mexico borderlands institutionalized by Chicanx and border studies scholars in the 80's and 90's" (Padilla, 2022, p. 134.). In particular, rhet/comp scholars have used Mexico and Latin America interchangeably (Ramirez 2009; Baca 2010; Ruiz 2016) to situate understandings of borderland and Chicanx perspectives which flattens out the discursive possibilities of migrant communities that are Latinx but not are not Mexican or Chicanx, such as the U.S. Central American community.

Using the mestiza consciousness as a quilting point between North American rhetoric and the rest of the Americas, however, has its limitations as it only acknowledges hybridity from a European/Indigenous perspective and does not fully account for Latin America's colonial history with slavery. While many of these theoretical positions seem to lack a unified political agenda, they do offer insight into what kinds of Latinx cultural and knowledge production are represented and valued in rhetorical studies. In other words, the sociocultural matrices through which Latinx individuals negotiate their cultural assimilation in the U.S., such as Latinidad or Mestizaje, offer nuanced understandings into identity-building and its limitations within diasporas as a site of affective belonging.

U.S. Central Americans are complicating their diasporic identities by culturing their identity-in-process within and in relation to their exclusion from social imaginaries. Their approach to storytelling and re/membering intergenerational trauma as they negotiate the acculturation can function as an avenue for rhetorically analyzing meaning-making within the diaspora. One of the limitations of researching U.S. Central American storytelling is that there is still a lot of misinformation on the absence of Indigenous or African communities in El Salvador because of its dominant historical narratives. However, the African diaspora exists in Central America as well, with Belize and Panama having the highest Black populations, the former containing the Garifunas who are an Afro-Indigenous community with their own diasporic identity. As Hoy (2010) and Lambert (2010) explain, being a Black Central American in the U.S. comes with other layers of invisibility due to the overlapping diasporic identities and the region's repressed history. Additionally, because La Matanza of 1932 forced Indigenous cultural practices underground, the Nahuat language in El Salvador has less than one hundred native speakers

which means the language is close to being extinct (Lemus, 2023). Visibilizing U.S. Central American humanity, then, comes with unlearning a lot of dominant narratives that contribute to the erasure to multiply marginalized communities across distances. The matrices available to mestizx subjects that help them gain or are excluded from cultural citizenship, such as Latinidad, can complicate the field's current understandings of social justice in Latinx communities and the colonial legacies we have to contend with in the U.S.

Where Are They Now?

Since I started searching for other Central Americans through social media, the circulation of the wars and gangs narrative has intensified and lulled now that the country is going through another election cycle. This year feels different though because the visibilizing efforts of U.S. Central Americans that are challenging these dominant narratives has only amplified over time. Lovato, for instance, has been using his social media platform and reporting connections to voice his insight on not just Central American erasure in journalism, but also in the literary market where our stories are "tropicalized" to be marketable. He began the hashtag #DignidadLiteraria, a grassroots campaign working toward the inclusion of Latinx authors, after the publication of American Dirt (2020) by Jeanine Cummins, a book that has been criticized for being about a Mexican migrant story and yet, written by a White non-migrant author. After his memoir was published, Lovato began working at UNLV as a creative writing professor.

The creators of La Horchata zine, Kim and Vero, have made another two-part issue and were able to reprint their earlier editions to circulate them once again. Melendez, who co-composed La Horchata zine, recently curated an exhibition titled "Connected Diaspora: U.S Central American Visuality in the Age of Social Media." This exhibit is an expansion of La

Horchata zine and it provides many Central American artists the opportunity to connect with each other and display their works. Semantha Raquel Norris, who was featured in the zine, created an online archive (Paty+Frido) where one can look through postcards, photographs, and letters that her mother left behind. The archive is interactive, and it allows the viewer to create their own collage with fragmented items.

Kiara Eileen Machado was starting to gain visibility as the pandemic hit but since then, she has become an internationally known artist with art pieces being shown abroad in European museums and in Central American ones. Her artistic style has changed from placing hidden images behind lush botanicals to visually narrate the pain of erasure towards centering Central American individuals in her art as a way to "amplify their voices and force the viewers to acknowledge their presence and cement their identities into tangible forms" (Machado, 2023). The oil paintings below demonstrate this centering of Zaira Miluska Funes[48] (Figure 8) and Janel Pineda[49] (Figure 9) while including the handcrafts, textiles, and botanicals in the background. Machado credits Kerry James Marshall[50] as an inspiration for her work and her latest series called, "Llamame Por mi Nombre[51]"demonstrates the beauty and hope that comes with centering stories that are otherwise obscured or forgotten. Machado explained in an interview: "The reason that I'm painting about this is because there's a lack of it and I'm holding that narrative that I have this control because I am part of this conversation" (Machado, 2023).

[48] She created the platform @CentAm_Beauty to highlight images that weren't about violence but to also center the diverse racial identities in Central America. She identifies as Afro-mestiza and has worked to visibilize the Afro-descendant population in El Salvador which had been erased from the national imaginary.
[49] Salvadoran-American poet Janel Pineda
[50] Contemporary artist known for his paintings that portray aspects of African-American everyday life. His work has helped increase the representation of African Americans in art museums.
[51] Call Me by My Name

Holding the narrative that we have control over our voice resonated with me because it has taken radical imagination to find a voice these last seven years that could speak to a conversation that otherwise excluded me.

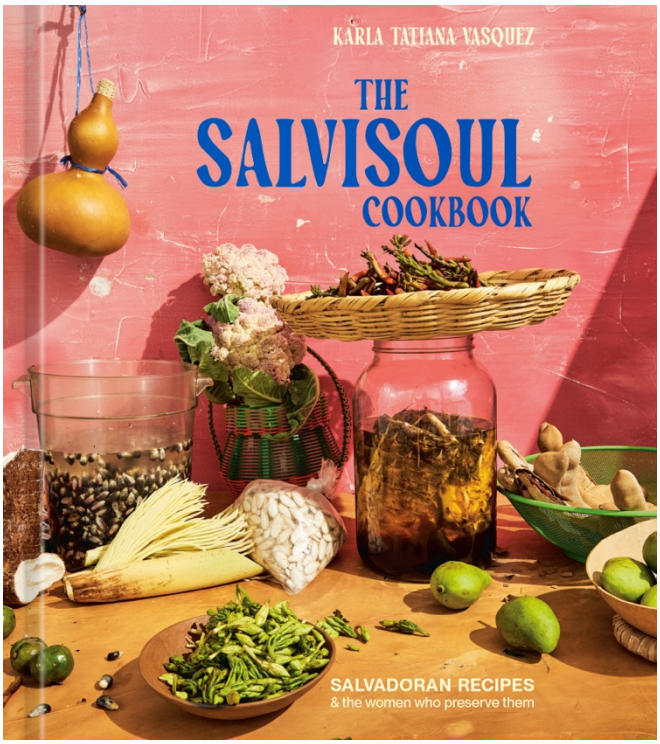
Figure 8
Zaira Miluska Funes

Figure 9
Janel Pineda

There's Beauty in Our Stories

If you remember from Chapter 4, I was initially looking for home by searching for Salvadoran recipes online. Since then, I've learned how to make Horchata de morro[52] and pastelitos con curtido which is not much, but I just haven't had the time because I've been researching for this project and negotiating my own affective belonging in real time. The chef and food writer I had found on Instagram back in 2020, Karla Tatiana Vasquez, recently published her book *The Salvisoul Cookbook* on April 30, 2024, and she also names ahnelo in the introduction as her "go-to feeling" to describe how she saw her family talk about Salvadoran food, a craving for home (p. 5).

Figure 10
The SalviSoul Cookbook, Salvadoran Recipes and the Women who Preserve Them; Ten Speed Press



[52] There are countless of horchata recipes that taste different than the Mexican version. Even then, everyone who makes it has their own approach.

Listen, I can't wait to cook from this book! It's been torture having this piece of home for almost a month and not be able to learn from it. This book is the first of its kind and until I flipped through the pages, I didn't realize how much shame I carried on Salvadoran cuisine claiming that it was all fried and meat-heavy. I was wrong, and Vasquez's articulation for this cuisine also included stories from the women that shared these recipes with her. It makes me tremendously happy to see other Salvadorans share their embodied knowledge and yearning for understanding the complexities of their diasporic identities as for me, reading their experiences helps my dislocated self out here in the Midwest feel a sense of connection. I cannot wait to have the time for making culture in other ways besides writing, such as cooking. I don't want to talk or write about the dishes my Abuelita used to make or avoid trying to learn them because the grief was too much. I want to make them myself and share it with my loved ones.

My grief doesn't drown me anymore as I wrote on this project through Mother's Day without spiraling, and in only a few days it will be seven years since my mother passed. I almost deferred my Master's program when she got sick and I told her I could wait a year and stay, but she said, "Para que? Cuidando muertos?[53] In a way, yes. That's exactly what I did. I became a student of death providing me the opportunity to heal. I've been wandering across the country since, scared shitless while pursuing an education, pouring my love and hurt into these words, and hoping I find the intellectual, beautifully convoluted, and joyful women that made me along the way.

Ok, I'm done telling you about my life now.

[53] For what? To take care of the dead?

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