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Maritza Cárdenas

The University of Arizona

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Abstract

This essay examines how representations from the Central American diaspora rewrite the Central American imaginary. It focuses on the ways EpiCentroAmerica—a poetry collective who view themselves as Central American, but reject a single unifying vision of home by seeing themselves as part of a transregional and transnational community—challenge traditional configurations of Central America(n). This reinscription of the signifier Central America is best exemplified in the work of Salvadoran-American poet Marlon Morales, whose poem “Centroamérica is,” avoids suturing Central America with traditional nationalist geological images of volcanoes and the isthmus, in favor of constructing Central America as an amorphous abstract and material entity. This study argues that by eluding a stable definition of Central America, as well as by dislocating Central America from its dominant cartographic image of a landmass and questioning its ontological validity, Morales advances a thoroughly reconfigured understanding of Central America—one that accounts for its diaspora that is a part of Central America while being apart from the geopolitical borders of the isthmus. Thus through Morales’s piece, in conjunction with the artistic work of the EpiCentros, alternative visions of Central America that both contest and disrupt the North/South America divide are presented.

From Epicentros to Fault Lines: Rewriting Central America from the Diaspora

Maritza Cárdenas
The University of Arizona

Where is the center of America, anyway?
Are there flowers on a volcano?
You can find the center in my heart
Where I imagine the flowers never die.

But today the volcano explodes in the way
It has every day for 30 years.
No it is not a sacrifice it desires
For we have already sacrificed too much

When can we rest from running?
When will the explosions in my heart stop
And show me where my home is?

Are there flowers on a volcano?
Am I a Central
American?
Where is the center of America?

-Maya Chinchilla

In this excerpt, taken from Maya Chinchilla's poem "Central Americanamerican," the speaker ponders, "Where is the Center of America anyway," in order to question dominant articulations that view Central America as a geophysical space with concrete borders.

Within these few poetic lines an epistemic shift occurs from conceiving Central America as exterior to the US, to imagining it as embodied within the Central American diaspora. This is achieved through Chinchilla's use of the image of the volcano—a governing trope within Central American discourse—which becomes uprooted as it moves from being external to internal to the speaker's body via the image of the constantly changing exploding heart which is now at the center of America.¹ As opposed to conventional representations of Central America which position it as an isthmus located outside of that other geocultural entity America, in this poem Central America is no longer perceived as grounded in one locale.² It is now de-territorialized by its diaspora carrying the center in their hearts. Central America is not static—like its people, it is a migratory subject redefined by the metaphoric explosions from its diaspora. Migration, Iain Chambers contends, has the ability to destabilize the territories of both the Third and First Worlds (2). This blurring of hemispheric and cultural division transpires in the poem as America/Central America are not positioned as distinct categories. Instead, Chinchilla provides a re-mapping of conventional cartographic bodies by playing with the structure in the phrase “center of America,” which syntactically links America/Central America together. It is in this rewriting of these geopolitical spaces that the speaker in the poem can begin another form of epistemological questioning: what, where, and who is Central America(n)? In doing so, this poem engages in what José Esteban Muñoz has labeled as “world-making”—texts that function to critique established truths by providing alternate views of the world (195).

This abbreviated reading of Chinchilla's poem embodies the thematic and theoretical concerns of this essay which examines how the interrelationships between geographic spaces and identity converge in the works of US Central American poets. Beginning in the late 1990's this suturing between a regional space and US cultural identity has come into prominence as certain diasporic subjects have increasingly begun to identify and claim textual and physical spaces as Central American. The creation of the first Central American Studies program at California State University Northridge by the Central American United Student Association

(2000), followed by the theoretical explications of the neologism Central American-American by scholar Arturo Arias (2003), as well as the civic petition to re-name the Westlake District in Los Angeles California as *Historic Central America* (2005), reveals the power the concept of Central America has in the diaspora within the realm of local and national cultural politics. The relevance of these cultural practices in trying to forge an autonomous social and discursive space for Central Americans in the United States cannot be understated; they are integral in fostering the notion of a Central American community.

For diasporic subjects from the isthmus, the concept of Central America becomes the terrain from which they can inscribe themselves into a larger matrix of discourses that repeatedly position them in an ambivalent socio-cultural space as being both a part of Central America while still being viewed as apart from it. Such cultural interventions can be witnessed in the formation of the literary collective known as EpiCentroAmerica, who use their artistic expressions to redefine the Central American imaginary.³ This essay highlights how these EpiCentros challenge current epistemological categories regarding the nature of spaces, places, and subjectivity via a critical reading of the poem “Centroamérica is” (2001) by Marlon Morales. In this work, Morales not only undermines and deconstructs ontological notions of Central America, but also unearths a problematic cultural nationalism that has been in circulation both within the isthmus and US diaspora. Accordingly, this article situates Morales’s resignifications of the isthmus as echoing the works of such cultural theorists as Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, Homi Bhabha, Walter Mignolo, and Ana Patricia Rodríguez, who destabilize seemingly ontological concepts, like Orient, Nation, and Latin America, by revealing how these physical spaces are discursive constructions and ideological effects of colonial/imperial processes.⁴ As such, this study will first sketch the contours of the isthmus imaginary in order to juxtapose how Morales’s rearticulation of Central America critiques dominant conceptualizations that view the diaspora as external to it, as well as those that attempt to utilize it to construct a form of cultural nationalism. This critical interrogation of the Central American imaginary by the diaspora is one fraught with tension; as the poem

as well as its interlocutor reveals the ambivalent positionality of an EpiCentro identity, which needs yet disavows the idea of Central America. Ultimately, this tension proves productive as the EpiCentros provide alternative ways of thinking about diasporic cultural identities.

The Isthmus Imaginary

In *Orientalism*, Edward Said proclaims that a region does not originate in specific geophysical characteristics. Instead, its ontological status is confirmed by a history and tradition of ideas, and metaphors surrounding it (4). Such is the case with Central America, which as a signifier has engendered its own tradition of figurations. Anthropological and geographical discourses, for instance, routinely view Central America as Middle America or Mesoamerica, a term designated to describe a physical topography consisting of “continental North America south of the US, comprising Mexico, Central America, and usually the West Indies” (dictionary.com). US popular culture and political rhetoric in its deployment of the pejorative term Banana Republic continuously conceive of Central America as a disorderly mismanaged space easily manipulated to further the US in its quest to accumulate capital. As Frances Aparicio and Susana Chávez-Silverman note, such gestures to “tropicalize” a particular Latin American “space, geography, group or nation, with a set of traits, images and values” is part of a longstanding Western imperial gaze (8).

In historiographies produced about the region, two competing meta-narratives emerge as to what constitutes Central America. Some historical texts employ a traditional definition of Central America, viewing it as a landmass situated between the two larger continents of North and South America.⁵ Central America becomes synonymous with isthmus, which in turn is perceived as an ontological reality: a geographic space whose physical parameters are usually between Guatemala in the north, and Panama in the south. Some examples of historiographies that utilize this notion of Central America as their analytic model are Rodolfo Cardenal’s *Manual de historia de Centroamérica* (1996), Anthony Coates’s *Central America a Natural and Cultural History* (1997), Lynn Foster’s *Brief History of Central America* (2000) and Thomas Percy’s *History of Central America*

(2006).

The other competing representation defines Central America as an entity limited to the five countries of Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras, and Costa Rica. In this view, while Central America is located within the isthmus, the isthmus itself (i.e. the geographic frame which usually houses seven rather than five countries) does not define it. Central America is seen as a historical construct comprised by countries and cultures that share a collective history. In asserting the primacy of this form of regional analytic, historian Hector Pérez-Brignoli argues that in order

to undertake a valid historical analysis of the region, however, something more than an operational definition of the region's extent and scope is required. It is essential that what we define have common social origins. The geographical frame is not in itself important except inasmuch as it conditions and reveals the lives of societies and groups. (XIV)

This idea of Central America is one upheld in other historical monographs such as Ralph Lee Woodward's *Central America a Nation Divided* (1976), Rodolfo Pastor's *Historia de Centroamérica* (1988), John Booth, Christine Wade and Thomas Walker's *Understanding Central America* (1989), James Dunkerley's *Power in the Isthmus* (1989), and Elizabeth Fonseca's *Centroamérica: su historia* (1998).

These two seemingly different discursive strategies of Central America, however, rely on the same types of assumptions. To view Central America as just the name of an isthmus ignores the ways in which "geography has epistemologically shaped thinking about the world and produced various notions of space, place, and location" (Rodríguez 4). In this particular context the space now conceived as an isthmus was not always perceived that way. It is a uniquely colonial invention.⁶ Likewise, scholars who continue to argue for the primacy of their historical approach equally ignore the problematic nature of their endeavor. Their scholarship does not account for why they choose to emphasize common links established by a Spanish colonial past over other ties created by such indigenous groups like the Mayas. Historians who claim to employ common social history as the only valid form of analysis seem unaware of the role their own textual production plays in reinforcing these particular notions

of Central Americanness. By choosing to privilege Spanish colonial history in their criteria, their works do not objectively study Central America; instead, they contribute to a discursive process that creates the belief that there is socio-historical unity between five countries in Central America. Moreover, despite their insistence that the geographical frame does not matter, most of these historians limit their study to the isthmus and rarely conceive of the diaspora as a significant component of that historical category. In short, dominant articulations of Central America problematically rely on limited spatial, temporal, and cultural understandings of Central America, ones defined by Spanish colonial discourse and limited by the geophysical borders of North/South America.

These spatial and temporal static dimensions can arguably be traced to a form of Central American nationalism. Central America is not a nation-state, but as Jorge Duany keenly notes in his study of Puerto Rico, this does not preclude a cultural nationalism from developing (2). Within the isthmus itself, there exists a very specific cultural history that conceives of Central America as a national formation that was referred to as *patria grande* ‘fatherland.’⁷ Arguably the signifier itself—Central America—is a residual effect of nation building since it emerged during the few years that it was a nation called the United Provinces of Central America (1823-40). As a means to cultivate this idea of Central America as an imagined community, ideologues in the nineteenth century often relied on certain tropes to represent this new nation. Some of the more pathologized associations were images of the isthmus and volcanoes—whose seismic activity was viewed as linking different spaces of the region together. This type of imagery manifested itself in many of the national symbols like the Central American flag, the Central American Coat of Arms, and the Central American hymn. Anne McClintock has argued that nations depend on constructions of gender and “are frequently figured through the iconography of familial and domestic space” (63). The burgeoning Central American nation-state was no different as it frequently used the family and the female body as a metaphor for the nation. Often these tropes (geography and family) were used interchangeably such as in the words of José Del Valle, politician and writer for the nineteenth-century Central American newspaper titled *El Amigo de la patria*

'Friend of the Fatherland,' who described Central Americans as being connected due to their geosocial location stating "Nacimos en un mismo continente; somos hijos de una misma madre; somos hermanos hablamos un mismo idioma; defendemos una misma causa; somos llamadas a iguales destinos" (*Colón en Centroamérica* 12) 'We were all born on the same continent; we are all sons of the same mother; we are all brothers; we all speak the same language; we all fight for the same cause; we are all called to the same destiny.' According to Del Valle, what binds the provinces of Central America are factors like culture and geography. He also conceives of Central America as a female body through the image of the mother whose children are the five provinces. Within this gendered rhetoric, Central Americans are members of the same family who share the same lineage and culture, and are beholden to the same destiny or cause. As McClintock notes, using a familial trope relies on patriarchal notions of "natural" forms of social hierarchy, and shapes hierarchical and social distinctions into a single genesis narrative (63). Analogously, Del Valle relies on the metaphor of the family to establish the idea that an organic relationship exists between spaces and peoples that are discontinuous and heterogeneous. Like families who may have differences, these dissimilarities are minimalized under the belief that a genealogical and common bond exists, and that this source of unity supersedes any other form of cultural and ethno-racial differences.

Although the Central American nation-state was officially dissolved in 1840, the nationalism it engendered can still be seen throughout the isthmus. For example, the national flags of most of the countries on the isthmus used the Central American federation flag as a model for their own. As late as 1961, scholar James Busey observed, "The ideal of restoration of union is persistent in Central American political thought. History texts of the region reiterate the aim of common nationhood. Each population regards itself as a part of a greater Central America" and marveled how the constitutions of Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, all have provisions in their constitution that state that the reconstruction and reunification of Central America as a nation is a "supreme patriotic aspiration" (14). His observation regarding Central American nationalism is reflected in historians like José Mata Gavidia who titled his history

of the region as *Anotaciones de historia patria centroamericana* (1969) 'Notes of a National Central American History.'

The significance of understanding the multiple configurations of the isthmus imaginary is that despite the loci of enunciation that produce these representations, the voices and experiences of the diaspora are noticeably absent. US based constructions of Central America as a Banana Republic posit all things Central America(n) as an Other to America. Equally problematic is the meta-narrative of *patria grande*, which has become naturalized in most Central American scholarship that conceives of Central America as either an isthmus or a historical construct. Nationalisms operate through exclusions, and in the case of *patria grande*, it limits that historical construct to certain countries, a certain colonial past, certain spatial planes, and arguably even certain racial populations. Under this notion of Central America there is a danger of not seeing certain nations (Belize, Panama) and indigenous/black populations (Mayans, Garifuna, Miskitos) as integral to the study of what is constitutive of Central American culture. In doing so, it can define the US Central American diaspora as *mestizo* immigrants that originated from only particular parts of the isthmus. Furthermore, since these ideas of Central America view it as located in a very specific territory, it also inevitably negates and renders invisible the histories of its diaspora residing outside of its borders. Without dislocating Central America from its geographic location, and without finding new ways to conceive of Central America, the cultural experiences of the US diaspora will remain missing or marginal in most histories of Central America.

EpiCentroAmerica

Recent scholarship has called attention to the need to challenge and encourage reconfigurations of Central America. Rodríguez's neologism "transisthmian," for instance, is an attempt to find new ways to "organize Central American texts into cultural, temporal spaces linked by social and economic flows that transcend geopolitical borders" (2). Likewise, Arias states that it is necessary to think about categories such as Central American as multiple and discontinuous rather than viewing them as having some sort of ontological integrity (*Taking Their Word* 190). He also

exposes how neocolonial processes such as expanding capitalism and globalization increasingly problematize distinct divisions of North/South (xii). In concert with Arias's objective, the work of EpiCentroAmerica encapsulates a diasporic critical vision of Central America. EpiCentroAmerica, an organic literary collective and artistic movement comprised of spoken word performers and activists, was formed in the year 2000 in Los Angeles California. The location of Los Angeles is more than an incidental backdrop, for the transnational networks in place in the city are what enabled this type of pan-ethnic and transregional group to develop. Los Angeles has the distinction of hosting the largest numbers of Central Americans outside of Central America; currently 1 in 5 Central American immigrants reside in Los Angeles (Terrazas). As documented in *Seeking Community in a Global City: Guatemalans and Salvadorans in Los Angeles* by Nora Hamilton and Norma Stolz Chinchilla, the massive influx of Central American immigrants to Los Angeles in the late 1970's and early 1980's forever changed the cultural landscape of that city (4). In Los Angeles the transborder flows of culture and capital intersect in such a way as to blur the lines between the US and Central America. Central Americans in Los Angeles can partake in similar cultural practices and have access to the same consumer products they had in the isthmus. They can attend isthmian civic ceremonies like the Central American Independence parade, eat from the same franchised restaurants available in their native countries, and can purchase items such as furniture in a local store in Los Angeles and have their extended families pick up said item from the same store on the isthmus.⁸ Similarly, a resident can get paid from his or her job and have that money remitted next day to their extended family in Central America. The circuitry of exchange between peoples, commodities, and finances from the isthmus and the US has completely altered the way immigrant communities relate to their homelands. The fact that Los Angeles plays host to such a deterioration of cultural borders is critical in the development of the construction of a US-based Central American cultural identity. Location, Arjun Appadurai contends, can provide the "staging ground for identity," especially those that are "spread over vast and irregular spaces as groups move, yet stay linked to one another through sophisticated media capabilities" (332).

Consequently, for the offspring of Central Americans living in Los Angeles, Central America no longer inhabits America's "backyard," but lives very much within their own physical and cultural limits.⁹ Enabled by globalization, this deconstruction between such binaries of America/Central America, and native/foreign, needs to "be seen as a complex, overlapping disjunctive order, which cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery models" (Appadurai 328).

Given the interstitial space the city of Los Angeles occupies, it is no surprise that it is the location that has given birth to a group of poets who choose to imagine themselves in a transregional fashion—EpiCentroAmerica—rather than simply nationalist terms like Salvadoran or larger hemispheric terms like Latino and/or Hispanic. The group emerged from a series of exchanges between two poets, Raquel Gutierrez and Morales, who later convened with other poets Gustavo Guerra Vasquez, Jessica Grande and Dalilah Mendez in an effort to explore and share their artistic works and cultural experiences. Among their main objectives was to create a space "to exchange words and ideas, to develop theories and realities of what it means to be Central American" (*EpiCentroAmerica* 3). This exploration has taken place in several media, including an anthology titled *EpiCentroAmerica* (2001) that was self-published as a chapbook, a blog titled *Welcome to Epicentroamerica* (2005), and a limited published anthology titled *Desde el Epicentro* (2007) co-edited by two members of the group, Maya Chinchilla and Karina Oliva Alvarado.

In fact, the group's name is directly linked to these exchanges as it was inspired by a poem written by Gustavo Guerra Vasquez titled "Epicentroamericanos" ("Welcome to Epicentroamerica"). EpiCentroAmerica as a signifier is marked by the multiple geocultural spaces that form the Central American diaspora, as it contains spellings of Central America in both English and in Spanish. In English the term is comprised of two words (Central America), while in Spanish, the term is constructed as one word (Centroamérica). In their choice of name the group identifies with both and neither. Capitalizing the letters C and A visually invokes the English spelling of the term, while the lack of physical space between both words mimics the Spanish use of the term. This

consolidation of two poles into one, as well as the impetus to remove the distance between the Central and America, is a thematic concern for this group, who because of their current location (Los Angeles), feel apart and a part of Central America. The Epi before the neologism CentroAmerica adds another layer of complexity as it plays on the notion, both visually and phonetically, of viewing EpiCentroAmerica as an epicenter, understood geologically as a physical place of origin. However, by calling themselves EpiCentros (multiple focal points) as opposed to a traditional singular epicenter, it dismantles the belief of an ordinary starting point. For this US Central American community, home is diasporic; it transcends geopolitical borders as it lives in the epicenters where EpiCentros are cultivating a new culture. Therefore, their very name rejects a single unifying vision of home.

This desire to contemplate what it means to be Central American, in all of these various textual spaces, has involved an intense meditation of the idea of home as it relates to both Central America and the United States:

I don't recall where, some time in some class, I read a line that said, "writing is my home" and that summed it up for me. This country is not my home, not in the idealistic, sweet narrative, warm and fuzzy way that white authors in all the novels assigned in English classes described as home. Central America is not my home either. Finding the epicentros has been a comforting experience in some ways...we write as a group because we have found community in each other's words and each other's worlds.
(*EpiCentroAmerica* 3)

According to the EpiCentros there is no stable notion of home, both the US and Central America are cultural and physical spaces that cannot provide a sense of community. This form of cultural alienation, however, is profoundly productive; as Carol Boyce Davies has observed, "migration creates the desire for home which in turn produces the rewriting of home" (84). Similarly, Dorinne Kondo has argued that the desire for an identity based on a stable notion of home creates performative acts that attempt to construct a home. These textual performances of "community" problematize that construction by "interrogating its suppression of differences

within [and by] highlighting its always provisional nature” (97).

Yet, as critical as the EpiCentros are of a romanticized rooted notion of Central America, or an originary Central American homeland, there is still a gesture of seeing themselves as part of a transisthmian imaginary. The name EpiCentroAmerica, after all, seems to subscribe to the notion that the volcanic and seismic activity that has defined the geographic landscape of the isthmus is also embedded in the US diaspora, particularly in Los Angeles, which is viewed as being connected to the isthmus by the same tectonic plates, and through shared experiences of geological activity. While EpiCentros effectively re-root/route Central America from its geophysical location, this decentering should not be seen as a rejection of this form of identification. Their choice of identity marker inserts them within discourses of Central America which, regardless of how conceived, tend to exclude the diaspora.

Thus, the meditations on home become textual spaces for this group to rewrite the Central American imaginary. Displacements and the creations of diasporas in the migrant landscape of contemporary metropolitan cultures have the potential to de-territorialize and de-colonize via its attempt to decompose and recompose history “interlacing between what we have inherited and where we are” (Chambers 15). As such, the emphasis on the relationship between writing and the articulation of home from these EpiCentros, as well as the connection between words and worlds, suggests that one’s idea of home cannot be simply inherited, but needs to be constructed. One of the more prominent examples that embodies this notion of re-constructing home emanates from co-founder of the group Morales, particularly in his poem “Centroamérica is.”

Centroamérica is

Fiction

Fabricated in the mind of money hungry promoters
of consumer propaganda
and the self-hating national pretense they invented

Pieced together like a quilt in thought

Cut up in deed

It’s an autopsy

Rotting flesh sewn back together
with sutures that will never heal

like barbed wire that keeps us apart. (35 original emphasis)

By choosing poetry as his medium and Central America as his object of study, Morales explicitly situates his work with that other poetic masterpiece about Central America—Ernesto Cardenal’s *El estrecho dudoso* (1966) ‘The Doubtful Strait.’ A genealogical retelling of political events of the isthmus, *El estrecho dudoso* uses poetry as a vehicle to “deconstruct official history, representing it from a new ideological viewpoint” (Shaw 66). This didactic quality of resignifying the isthmus from a “new ideological viewpoint” is also displayed in Morales’s poem. Comprised of one quatrain and a sextet and designed as a free-verse poem with no clear rhyme scheme or parallel form of meter, the poem lacks any punctuation, suggesting that its totality needs to be read as the definition of what constitutes Central America, while simultaneously alluding to the fact that perhaps readers may not know what it is. Morales employs both concrete and abstract language as Central America is conceived as a creative discursive act, a quilt, and a grotesque body. By juxtaposing such varying images and metaphors, Morales seems to intentionally avoid giving readers a stable classification. This is reinforced by the fact that there is no period in the poem, implying that this characterization, like its object of study, is not complete or set in stone, nor will it be the only version of Central America to be produced from the speaker—possibly a US diasporic subject. By labeling the object of discussion as *Centroamérica*—the signifier deployed in Spanish articulations of the isthmus—followed by “is” in English, the speaker is presenting this vision of Central America to audiences versed in Spanish and English, or probably immersed in both those cultural terrains.

One of the poem’s most compelling interventions is the way it seemingly dislocates Central America from its dominant cartographic image of a landmass. By having “Fiction” as the first word after the title, Morales criticizes the notion of viewing Central America as an autonomous ontological entity. Central America is conceived as an abstraction—as a process rather than a real physical space. It is viewed as a discursive construction, a figment of creative imagination, one deployed at times as a commodity, as a means to

consolidate heterogeneous cultures for the distribution of capital, or in the case of US articulations of Central America like CAFTA or Banana Republics, for the accumulation of capital. This notion of Central America as a process is echoed in the image of the quilt which serves as a reminder of the lack of organic unity present in Central America and calls attention to the labor and work involved to produce Central Americans. The quilt, which is an entity defined by its stitching of different fabrics and colors, is a metaphor that highlights how heterogeneous peoples from the isthmus are forcefully sutured in the production of its configuration. In this second stanza the image of Central America rapidly descends from an object of comfort (quilt), to a frightening image of a Frankenstein type of body, which like the quilt is also created through a forced and unnatural re-membering of fragments. Morales implies that a Central American imagined community provides a sense of belonging and comfort in abstraction. However, the minute this ideology becomes institutionalized to impose a forced unity, there is a disjuncture as it becomes “cut up in deed”—splintered in the very process that attempts unification (35). The item of comfort, therefore, turns into the monster, as the needle that was once used to suture a quilt becomes the same tool that forcefully re-assembles a dead body.

The image of a fragmented corpse is significant as it reiterates a theme of fragmentation, as well as evokes the idea of diaspora, which like the quilt is constructed in and held together by the concept of Central America(n). But the image of a splintered cadaver can also be read as a type of political commentary and critique, since images of fractured bodies, autopsies, and wounds allude to the violence in that region. During the civil wars of the 1980’s it was commonplace for civilians to encounter fragmented, mostly decapitated bodies in the streets. This imagery brings a materiality to the poem as well as illuminates how the Central American civil wars have been a defining feature of collective memory and source of trauma. In this aspect, the poem highlights the complex relationship US Central Americans have with their current setting as the US was largely involved in enabling this regional violence which, in turn, became one of the pivotal forces that created a Central American diaspora.

In addition, by (re)presenting Central America as a corpse,

Morales is explicitly critiquing the ideology of Central America as a *patria grande* which rhetorically relied on the body as a metaphor for the nation. According to literary critics John Beverly and Marc Zimmerman (1990), in Central America poetry has been the key medium for the expression of “nationalist discourses” (x). In fact, Morales uses poetry, the vehicle that once promoted a type of nationalism, as a means to undermine it through the depiction of Central America as a soulless fragmented corpse, one that is composed through labor and violence. Lacking any autonomy or totality, it is a disjointed body that can only attain wholeness through the constitutive process of stitching its parts back together. By presenting Central America in this fashion, Morales suggests that nationalism is not an act of volition but an act of imposition. The “sutures that never heal” are scars and reminders of the ways in which totalitarian projects like nationalism and histories engender physical and epistemic violence by imposing a sense of unity on diverse cultures and peoples. For Morales, Central America as a totality is both fictional and ephemeral, since the very stitches that hold the body of it together are precisely what prevent it from “healing” and “keeps it apart.” This textualization of Central America sees it as a specific ideological construct, a form of nationalist “propaganda” that is able to create a totality via “barbed wires that keep us apart” (35). The image of “barbed wire,” a material associated with fences and borders, is a deliberate figurative device that emphasizes that the idea that a concept like Central America(n) is bound by what it excises. Through this corporeal representation Morales argues that Central America cannot and should not be defined exclusively as a type of nation/nationalism or geophysical space. His poem reveals the need to think beyond concepts of nation and nationalism, and serves as a reminder of how these unifying gestures produce more moments of exclusion. As a potential voice for the diaspora, Morales’s poem provides an alternative compass that can help navigate and remap current problematic constructions of Central America that have been deployed by the US and the isthmus.

And yet, despite the poem’s scathing critique of Central America, calling it a “national pretense of consumer propaganda,” there is still an implicit desire to be a part of this isthmus imaginary (35). This tension is visually represented in the structure of the poem,

for although the words attempt to dislocate the dominant trope of the isthmus, the form of the poem manifests an image of a bridge connecting two poles. The use of bold font in the title, punctuated by the bold letters of the last verse reproduces an isthmus as it mimics a landmass that links two distinct elements. Furthermore, the fact that there are only two stanzas highlights the center of the page whose blank white canvas becomes the remarked space of the isthmus. The figure of the isthmus thus haunts this work as a palimpsest whose ghostly trace ironically surfaces precisely in those moments that seek to erase it. Like the content of the poem that suggests that Central America itself is a problematic fiction, the production of this type of poem also elucidates its necessity in the terrain of constructing new ethnic identities.

An Identity Based on Faults

This tension, this simultaneous affirmation and disavowal of Central America enables the creation of an EpiCentro identity—an identity that aims to find new linkages that forge the histories of the isthmus with the space of Los Angeles. The choice of name (EpiCentros) becomes even more relevant as epicenters and fault lines become new chronotropes added to discourses about isthmian identities. Geologists conceive earthquakes as transformative, as they remap and alter familiar territory and provide new cracks and fissures. These ruptures emerge from the collision of two opposing cartographic bodies that generate new contours to our inhabited world. As a metaphor for an EpiCentro identity, this diasporic subjectivity is framed as transregional, and contentious but generative. Tectonic plates and fault lines spatially and temporally exceed borders and physical parameters. The fact that despite apparent stillness tectonic plates are always moving invokes Stuart Hall's notion of cultural identities as a process never completed but always undergoing constant transformation (394). Producing new “explosions,” as Chinchilla would proclaim, the fault lines reveal the need to find organic forms of division, ones that occur within situational politics rather than “barbed wire fences,” which are traditional borders used in identity politics. An EpiCentro identity will still nonetheless have to find arbitrary moments of closure, but like epicenters, these forms of mapping will be shaped by common

yet unpredictable disturbances. Tectonic plates, after all, are volatile and rhizomatic. Each moment of tension and earthquake creates new fault lines and new sites of continuities and discontinuities. Reminiscent of Paul Gilroy's notion of the "changing same" (xi), epicenters and fault lines are constantly reproduced, each different from the rest, but with a connection to previous ones. Thus the poem, as a metonymical device for this new form of diasporic identity, operates as its own earthquake—a discursive fault line that decenters through multiplication, as it adds multiple cracks into the Central American imaginary, while still forging alternative transregional connections.

Notes

1 The coat of arms of the now defunct nation-state known as the United Provinces of Central America featured an image of five volcanoes surrounded by water. The five volcanoes were meant to represent the five former provinces: Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Honduras and Costa Rica. A vestige of this nationalist emblem can still be seen in the current Nicaraguan flag as well as in current consumer driven products such as the media television station known as *Centroamérica TV*.

2 Although the term America is the name given to the New World, it has become synonymous with the United States of America. The use of America as interchangeable with US acknowledges this problematic imperial/colonial gesture that sees the US as the most defining feature of this hemispheric entity.

3 In his most recent essay, Arturo Arias explores how *EpiCentroAmerica* is equally invested in challenging our traditional understandings of Latino communities and identities.

4 For a more detailed discussion please see Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, Homi Bhabha's *Nation and Narration*, Walter Mignolo's *The Idea of Latin America*, and Ana Patricia Rodríguez's *Dividing the Isthmus*.

5 Due to the scope of the literature involved in Central American historiographies, and the page constraints imbued within the genre of a journal article, the summaries in this work have not elaborated upon the nuanced ways in which historians conceive and study Central America. While there is more fluidity between these two analytic approaches than is suggested, for the most part, these have been the conventional approaches when studying Central

America.

6 According to Rodríguez, the Maya, for instance, conceived of their territory as an axis mundi (5). Though this is a bridge of sorts, it is still distinct than a landmass.

7 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

8 The Confederación Centroamericana (COFECA) annually sponsors a parade in September to honor Central American independence. It is the second biggest parade festivity in Los Angeles after the Rose Parade. In Los Angeles, the store *La Curacao*, for example, offers consumers the ability to order almost any item available in their store or catalog and have it picked up in most Central American countries. In addition, most *Curacao*'s contain the Guatemalan fast food restaurant *Pollo Campero* which has most of its franchises in Central American countries.

9 During the 1980's it was commonplace within US political discourse, especially within speeches by then president Ronald Reagan to refer to Central America as "America's backyard."

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