## Chapter 15 - The Central American Experience Onscreen

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People of Mexican descent and Puerto Rican descent are the largest Latinx/Latin American groups in the US, but following these two groups, Central Americans (also referred to as “**Isthmians**'' in this chapter) comprise a significant portion of Latinx/Latin American communities across the country. Salvadorans and Guatemalans comprise the largest Central American populations in the US relative to the other five countries, and they are the third and fourth largest Latin American nationality groups after Mexicans and Puerto Ricans. As many as 3,782,000 Central American migrants reside in the United States - with the majority from Honduras, Guatemala, and El Salvador - a number that is increasing significantly as migration from the region escalates in response to intolerable violence, poverty, political instability, and natural disasters (Babich and Batalova, “Central American Immigrants in the United States”). This number does not take into consideration the US-born children of Central American diasporas who comprise a large and increasing portion of Central American-descent people in the US

Central America is an isthmus, or landbridge, between Mexico and South America that includes the seven countries of Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. It is a multiracial, multiethnic, and multilingual region with an approximate population of 182,036,161 across the region, according to United Nations figures (Worldometer, “Central America Population (Live)”). Central American countries and their peoples share many similarities as well as distinct historical, cultural, social, political, and economic circumstances that have shaped the lives and dynamics of the people who reside in the isthmus and those who migrate. Dominant portrayals of Central Americans historically and in contemporary film and mass media demonstrate the power of representation for better and for worse.

Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernandez write that “Our migrant communities come from countries that have been made to occupy the geopolitical margins as some of the most geodisenfranchised and georacialized people within the Americas. This bottom placement within global hierarchies is reproduced at local levels, influencing representations of Central Americans as silent and invisible. Thus, economic underdevelopment is transposed onto the people, shaping stereotypes around the tropes of impoverishment and violence” (4). Since the inception of films and television in the US, stories and adventures on screens enamored the public through stories and adventures, oftentimes in foreign lands with foreign people. Other media, such as radio, newspapers, and in the present-day, the internet and social media, have continued to disseminate discourses, ideologies, and representations of Central Americans throughout the US and the world.

**Mainstream (hegemonic) media** is the traditional and dominant form of media that is exclusively produced by professional media creators (e.g. journalists, filmmakers). It is hierarchically organized and monolithic in its practice, according to (Atton 492). Mainstream media, created by corporate media outlets, is focused on consumption by a wide audience with the intention of making a profit (Kenix 19). **Alternative media**, on the other hand, opposes the institutional and social order that mainstream media is embedded in; rather, it is invested in social change and challenging dominant structures (Kenix 19-20). Usually underresourced and beyond the commercial sphere, alternative media is produced by groups that have been historically and traditionally excluded by the mainstream media (Kenix 19-20). Tropes of Central Americans in film and media from the Cold War era (1960’s-1990’s) to the present day 2010’s illustrate the key historical and sociopolitical contexts around which representations of Central Americans in US films via Hollywood and in the mass media took shape. It is in these dominant portrayals in **mainstream** (**hegemonic) media** that portrayals of Central Americans have become deeply rooted in the American imagination. Throughout US and Central American history, two master images and their iterations have crystallized in the film and mass media: servant or enemy.

Central Americans in US film and mass media have been long been invisibilized and misrepresented, yet mainstream US media as powerful and pervasive as they may be have not entirely silenced the voices and stories of Isthmians. Through active cultural production, including of films and mass media, Central Americans are responding to over decades of controlling images, ideologies, and discourses that have spurred the drums of war, facilitated resource extraction and labor exploitation, and dismissed the complexity of Central Americans. Central American and Latinx filmmakers and media creators have produced humanizing Central Americans and authentic media representations that oppose damaging and distorted images of Isthmians in mainstream mass media. **Alternative media** produced by Central Americans and critical media creators challenge hegemonic Central American depictions in the US and represent the diaspora in innovative film and media content about Central Americans. Most Hollywood and US productions fall into the category of mainstream media, though some attempts from Central and Latin American producers to tell Central American stories have complicated this binary as well. Alternative media is often produced by Central American creators themselves with varying budgets and resource availability, but the re-construction of Central America and Central Americans in the media form is a significant disruption to dominant media portrayals. Through alternative media production, the bridge between continents and its peoples have refused to allow themselves to be trapped behind the lens of the imperialist, colonial, white gaze; they have always pointed their cameras back.

### Historical Context: Revolutions & Restitution

Central American and Caribbean laborers of working-class, Afrodescendant, and indigenous backgrounds comprised the primary working force in the inhospitable conditions of multinational corporate production and government projects since the nineteenth century and into the present. In the 1800’s, US businessmen like William Walker, among others, aimed to conquer Central American land to expand slavery. With private paramilitary support, Walker and other filibusters of the era waged the Filibuster Wars that conquered Nicaragua in 1856 with eyes set on the neighboring countries. Walker became interim president of Nicaragua in 1856 until Central American militaries and the British resisted efforts for Walker’s further expansion (Martelle n.p., Zemler n.p.). The US multinational corporation, the United Fruit Company (UFCO; now known as Chiquita Banana), held land in Central America and South America for banana plantation beginning in the 1900’s (Gonzalez n.p.). The construction of the Panama Canal directed by the US government between 1904 and 1914 also utilized Central American, Caribbean, and working-class US laborers. These historical precedents in the region laid the foundations for an ongoing relationship between the US and Central America as boss and worker, master and servant (Gonzalez n.p.; Martelle n.p.). The Latina domestic that has been present in US film is a continuation of this relationship of exploitation and servitude between the US and Central America.

The domestic/maid trope is often associated with African American women (the “Mammy”) and Mexican working-class women. However, Central American, specifically Salvadoran domestic workers were also caricaturized with that trope in the US cinematic universe. In the 1995 film, “Clueless,” wealthy white socialite Cher talks with her maid, Lucy, about her inability to communicate with her gardener Jose because Cher does not “speak Mexican.” Lucy responds angrily and with a heavy accent, “I no Mexican” before storming off. Confused by Lucy’s reaction, Cher’s ex-step brother, Josh, corrects her -- “Lucy is from El Salvador.” Explicitly referencing the Central American nationality of the maid character in film and media matters insofar as to understand the “different baggage” (Arias 170) carried by Central Americans as a result of specific transnational connections and histories between the US and the isthmus, according to Yajaira Padilla (43). Still, the Salvadoran maid characters in “Clueless” and in the 1998 sitcom “Will and Grace” featured sassy maids that often practiced refusal of a subordinate role through their willingness make the lead characters the butt of the joke and assert their selfhood as Salvadorans and with richer personalities, particularly through Rosario Salazar’s portrayal in “Will and Grace.”

<Fig. 15.1 here>

Salvadoran women arrived in Washington D.C. as early as the 1960’s to work as domestic servants for US diplomats and their families (Repak 2). The gendered labor of domestic servants from Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, began before the civil war, but as more Central American women began to integrate into the gendered labor force as caretakers, nannies, and maids, this trope become further crystalized in the American imagination (44). US foreign policy brokered by the Washington D.C. bosses of many domestic servants influenced their migration and integration into the domestic labor force (Repak 2). The gendered and racialized representation of Latina/Central American women as domestic servants for a white upper-class is a manifestation of imperialist interventions that created austerity in Latin America, resulting in the flow of prospective laborers from “backyard” colony to empire.

After decades of direct intervention in the Global South during President Theodore Roosevelt’s presidency (Gonzalez 28), the US changed its strategy from military invasion to covert operations that installed US allies in selected governments (Gonzalez 78). During the Cold War era between the Soviet Union (USS.R, now Russia) and the US from the mid- to the late-1900’s, the US emphasized its moral and political authority over the Soviet Union and the specter of communism. Central America became a battleground for the Cold War and the US’s anti-communist crusade as Cuba and the Soviet Union established ties with leftist and anti-fascist groups in the region. A pivotal Cold War tactic by the US that framed the future of US foreign policy in the region was the CIA-backed ousting of President Jacobo Arbenz in Guatemala in 1954. As Arbenz aimed to implement land reforms that jeopardized the power and profits of prominent landholding elites, which alarmed the US government and UFCO. Accused of being a communist during the mid-twentieth century, the US deployed its resources in collaboration with far-right co-conspirators to remove Arbenz from power, making him the first Latin American president to be ousted by US intervention. The context behind US intervention in Central America and the ensuing migration of Central Americans from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua is detailed in the film *Harvest of Empire* (2012) based on the book of the same name by Juan Gonzalez and explored in the PBS documentary series *Latino Americans* (2013). The documentary series *The Houses are Full of Smoke* takes a closer look at each of the countries in conflict as well.

The longest civil war in Central America took place between 1960 and 1996 in Guatemala, with insurgency led largely by peasant and indigenous groups. Then, between 1970 to 1990, Nicaragua was entrenched in its civil war between the authoritarian Somoza family and Sandinista rebels. In 1979, political organizers turned guerilla soldiers in El Salvador took up arms against the military dictatorship until the war’s end in 1992 (Grandin 88; Gonzalez 76; LeFeber 13-18). As satellite battlegrounds of the Cold War, the US and Soviet Union pumped funding, training, and resources to the respective sides that they backed throughout these countries' conflicts. Beyond material support, the ideological work of the US in specific entailed the production of films and media that boosted anti-communist propaganda in covert and overt ways. Film and TV media as well as news media facilitated Red Scare rhetoric that effectively convinced US citizens, particularly the white middle and upper-class populace, who their enemies are and who the US government must rescue from tyranny and bring to democracy (Herman & Chomsky n.p.). Despite Red Scare pressures, however, some filmmakers presented a critical stance on US intervention and war-mongering in the Global South (Landon, “Films of the Cold War”; “Movies,” <https://coldwar.unc.edu/film/>).

The most canonical films about the Salvadoran civil war were often not produced by Salvadorans themselves but by American and Mexican producers or even casted Salvadoran actors, but they provide necessary context to the era’s circumstances. The 1989 film *Romero* portrays the tensions and the circumstances that eventually led to Salvadoran priest Oscar Romero’s assasination during Catholic mass in 1979 after he organized peaceful protests against the government and spoke out against the military junta who ran the government. Often considered the spark that started the war, Priest Romero’s life demonstrates how religious leaders were either complicit to military dictatorship or resistant to it as Romero was, which ended with the killing of agitators to the regime. The Salvadoran film *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* (*Surviving Guazapa*) is a 2008 film produced in El Salvador about a military soldier and guerilla rebel who band together to survive bombings and attacks with the goal of getting a young girl stranded on the same mountain as them to safety. Many Salvadorans did not know the war’s motives and goals, or at the very least the intricacies of power that puppeteered the war, yet they were all victims to rampant militarized violence, especially as nearly 85% of acts of violence were committed by state agents (United States Institute of Peace n.p.). *Sobreviviendo Guazapa* is a Salvadoran depiction of the war time that is enriched further by documentary narratives like *Maria’s Story: A Documentary Portrait of Love and Survival in El Salvador’s Civil War* (1990). *Maria’s Story* takes a close look at the life and efforts of guerilla soldier Maria Serrano to organize peasant communities during the war in her crusade as an FMLN combatant and educator to the guerilla rebel’s children. This documentary demonstrated the critical role of women in the guerilla movement in El Salvador that is often relegated to the margins, and similarly, the documentary *Las Sandinistas* focuses on the role of women combatants in the Sandinistas rebel group during the Nicaraguan civil war in taking down the US-backed Somoza regime and in present-day politics against misogyny and corruption in Nicaragua.

The renowned film *Voces Inocentes* (2004) illustrates the turmoil that families faced as military and guerilla soldiers recruited boy children during the decade-long Salvadoran civil war that killed nearly 75,000 people between 1979 to 1992 (Cuffe, n.p., “War, amputation, refuge”). Between daily storms of cross fires, bombs, and attacks between military soldiers, well supported by the US government, and rebels in the guerilla coalition called Farabundo Marti Liberation Front (FMLN), a young boy in a Salvadoran town, Chava, tries to survive both the violence of the era and recruitment of boys primarily by military dictatorship forces and sometimes by guerilla rebels, as both ended the childhoods and lives of Chava’s neighbors and friends. Eventually, after surviving the escalating violence that claims lives around him and sparing him, Chava leaves the country to the US to escape the fatal conditions that pushed thousands of Salvadorans from their country to the U.S and other countries.

In the case of Guatemala, the American produced documentary films *When the Mountains Tremble* (1983), *Granito: How to Nail a Dictator* (2011), and *500 Years: Life in Resistance* (2017) are a trio of documentary films that have portrayed the history of conflict, collaboration, and resistance between the Guatemalan government, US interventionism, working-class and indigenous Mayan communities. Mayan and human rights activist and leader Rigoberta Menchu narrates her family’s history and the history of the Maya people in their struggle against racism, colonialism, and genocide in Guatemala which the more recent film, *500 Years* elaborates to emphasize the history and development of the Mayan indigenous peoples resistance to ongoing inequality and the remnants of civil war’s corruption and racism in modern-day Guatemala. *Granito* relies on uncovered footage and evidence to build a case against the former dictator Efrain Rios Mont who presided over the genocide campaign during the Guatemalan civil war. Indigenous peoples as key enemy of the state during the civil war era are largely featured in these documentary films as the survivors and leaders who resist racist state violence from the Guatemalan mestizo state and the US imperialist project.

Reaching the international stage from Guatemala, director Jayro Bustamante has produced acclaimed films with indigenous lead actors and plots that revolve around the lives and histories of Guatemala’s indigenous peoples, including his award-winning films *Ixcanul* (2015) and *La Llorona* (2019), both featuring Mayan Kaqchikel actress Maria Mercedes Coroy and indigenous lead actors in a country that seldom includes indigenous peoples in its mainstream portrayals. *Ixcanul* focuses on the experiences of a young Kakchiquel woman in the highlands of western Guatemala where traditional Mayan life persists. She deals with the constraints of machismo, poverty, and structural racism as an indigenous woman from a family of subsistence farmers. Migration also plays a role in the film as economic austerity pushes her love interest to leave Guatemala to the US like many other Guatemalans have done in pursuit of opportunity. *La Llorona* on the other hand shuttles between modern Guatemala and the Guatemalan civil war and genocide. Relying on the folklore of *la llorona* about a ghostly woman seeking vengeance and closure, the family of a former president and alleged genocidal dictator (assumed to represent Efrain Rios Montt) is frustrated by the protestors outside their home as he evades justice for his crimes against humanity during the war era. Beyond protests for justice, however, a supernatural force has entered the house as well after the hiring of a new servant woman (Mercedes Conroy) as ghostly appearances of those killed in the genocide fill the home and nightmares of genocidal violence begin to fill the family’s psyche until the former general is killed by his wife, possessed by the spirit of a woman who filled her nightmares and reveals that she and her children were murdered by her husband.

<Fig. 15.2 here>

Though El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala cinema deal with the Cold War conflicts and its consequences, recent cinema in these countries aims to revitalize cinematic production and culture in these countries. According to Camilla Fojas, the Festival Icaro del Audiovisual Centroamericano are institutions that aim “to support, promote, and sustain Central American cinemas in the recognition of shared histories of internal wars, military dictatorships, US intervention, and shared experiences of economic, social, and political instability” (98). However, more contemporary productions “deal with the postwar era, the construction of national identity, and the problems associated with social and economic instability” (Fojas 99). One key example is the Central American International Film Festival, a transnational effort between Los Angeles and San Salvador “dedicated to showcasing Central American struggles, history, culture, and talent through the world of cinema” (“Central American Film Festival”) to make up for the lost time of the internal conflicts that curtailed cinematic productions. Though this paper does not delves into cinematic productions of the other Central American countries--Honduras, Costa Rica, Panama, Belize, and Nicaragua--films from these countries have also aimed to expose the social conditions of racism, colonialism, sexism, homophobia, and poverty in these contexts. The diversity of Black, indigenous, non-mestizo, and women actors and storylines is finding a niche in a growing film culture in these regions. The appendix includes films to watch for a richer and more complex portrayal of Central America beyond the more commonly understood countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua.

### The Modern Refugee Crisis

In 2014, the news media became saturated with constant headlines of a “border crisis” in which migrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras were filmed and interviewed constantly, captured on TV. They shared their experiences with violence, poverty, political instability, and natural disasters of their home countries and why they joined the migrant caravans to the US. Nicaraguans too have been fleeing political persecution and instability in their country under the Daniel Ortega regime, but most migrate into neighboring Costa Rica. This surge in immigrants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has elevated the national debate about immigration control in the US Meanwhile, the Costa Rican government contends with Nicaraguan migrants and Panama receives hundreds of migrants crossing through Panama to travel northward. The rise in Central American migration to the US became overwhelming in 2014 and continued to escalate.

Many migrant justice advocates and lawyers pressured the US government to provide due process in asylum hearings for the many migrant children and asylum seekers. In the news media, photographs, articles, and sound clips of migrant children crying and pleading for their families in ICE facilities channeled the trope of the helpless refugee. Suffering migrant mothers and children are more prone to embody this controlling image, which can generate compassion and empathy that become politically useful in migrant advocacy and immigration litigation. However, the news media’s fixed portrayal of Central American women and children as *only* defenseless refugees dismisses the resilience and agency that these migrants also possess. Central Americans’ narratives of endurance and resourcefulness become obscured behind the helpless refugee trope that reduces migrants to a crying child and a suffering woman, nothing more. Still, this image featured in national and global news media has called into question the US’s human rights leadership and generated calls for accountability and justice.

In capturing the migrant narrative in film, the canonical *El Norte* (1083) followed by the more recent film *La Jaula de Oro* (*The Golden Dream)* (2013) provide a fictional portrayal of the journey north to the US from Guatemala. Then, the documentaries *Which Way Home* (2009) and the emergent Central American-produced classic *Los Eternos Indocumentados* (2020) deal with the roots of migration and the perilous journey of those seeking refuge. *El Norte*, like *Voces Inocentes*, is another example of American and Mexican productions that seldom cast Guatemalan and indigenous peoples to tell their narratives yet provides impactful portrayals of Central American and indigenous experiences with migration. Chicano director Gregory Nava tells the tale of Guatemalan Mayan siblings who escape the terror of the Guatemalan civil war and arrive in Los Angeles to pursue the “American Dream.” Mayan organizers agitate through a labor union for better conditions in their Guatemalan village only to be pillaged by the Guatemalan army in response. After this ordeal, the siblings Rosa and Enrique migrate through Mexico to arrive in Los Angeles where they realize that arriving is only the first challenge. As undocumented migrants, Rosa and Enrique must navigate the precarious labor market for newly arrived undocumented workers like themselves who must also be precautious and alert for signs of immigration enforcement that targets workers without legal status in ‘80’s California.

Similarly, *La Jaula de Oro* follows the journey of three Guatemalan youth who become tired with their precarious condition in Guatemala. Based in the present, two of the youth, Juan and Sara come from the same town and plan to travel together until they met Chauk, a Mayan youth who cannot speak Spanish. The three migrant youth set out to Mexico where they realize the dangers of being young and Guatemalan in Mexico where officials crack down on Central American migrants. The language barriers between Chauk and the two others create some difficulty in comprehension compounded by Juan’s jealousy of Chauk and Sara’s burgeoning friendship. Sara becomes a victim to the gendered and sexual violence that women migrants endure in the hands of organized crime and Chauk, almost nearing the end of the journey, is shot and killed by a border vigilante. Juan successfully arrives in the US, though alone and bearing the weight of trauma, to work a factory job that feels distant from the American Dream he gave up much to acquire.

The documentaries *Which Way Home* and *Los Eternos Indocumentados* aim to humanize migrant narratives even further by demonstrating the factors behind migration and the cruelty of migration through Mexico to the US *Which Way Home* follows the journeys of Mexican, Salvadoran, and Honduran youth as they ride the top of trains and evade police along the way. They bounce between shelters to acquire a meal, shower, and relief from the difficult trek, and in tragic cases, the children are never heard of again, with the hope that they arrived and the fear that they were deported, or worse, killed. Salvadoran American director Jennifer Carcamo’s documentary *Los Eternos Indocumentados* channels Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton’s poetic image of the eternally undocumented to refer to the Central Americans who lay between the crossfire of policy, dictatorship, and anti-immigrant attitudes. She interviews policymakers, activists, organizational leaders, and migrants themselves to understand the root causes of migration from Central America and the experiences of migrants in an anti-immigrant regime in the US Her work is used widely in Central American Studies classrooms and for lessons on Central American migration, paving a way for Central American voices to be centered in understanding the reality of Isthmians. The films discussed in this chapter are but few of the many titles that explore issues, experiences, and portrayals of Central Americans, but they are some of the most significant productions that deal with this diverse and multifaceted group of people.

<Fig. 15.3 here>

### Central Americans Countering the Mainstream in the Digital Age

In response to mainstream media that “lacks genuine interest in Central American societies, disregards cultural notions, reveals biases, and oversimplifies phenomena” (Brown and Vida, “Central American News”), Central Americans have engaged in alternative media production for more humanizing and critical narratives. During the Cold War era, revolutionary factions and social movement actors in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala crafted an alternative narrative against US and right-wing propaganda that vilified guerilla soldiers and their cause (Chavez 5, McIntosh 12-13). The digital age and 21st century cultural and media production are an opportunity and an intervention to articulate “how the US diaspora views this particular spatial construct—Central America—as a site from which to assert their own sociopolitical claims” (Cardenas 6-7) rather than simply a peripheral and distant “backyard” for the US to use as it pleases (Cardenas 5).

Recently developed resources have unified Central Americans in the US and beyond through the online community of Central American Twitter toward the cause of representation and alternative media production. News media platform Central American News (n.p.) and social media pages such as Central American Beauty on Instagram (@centam\_beauty) and the Central American Voices podcast have also amplified Central American issues, identities, and experiences in the digital sphere and soundscape. Additional social media pages and digital communities have been cultivated largely due to platforms like Central American Twitter (#CentralAmericanTwitter) that have provided a space for connection and storytelling online among Central Americans in diaspora (Vida, “How #CentralAmericanTwitter Evolved Beyond a Hashtag Into a Much-Needed Community”). Twitter and Instagram pages like Garifuna Market (@GarifunaMarket) and Blactina Media (@blactina) have provided space for further marginalized Black and indigenous Central Americans as well in the face of mestizo hegemony in Central American spaces. Throughout history and across generations, if a platform for Central Americans to tell their stories did not exist, they have created it on their own and with each other. Central Americans are no longer marginal or invisible peoples. Their experiences, histories, narratives, and voices are central to the fabric of what is “American.” Rather, Central American cultural production has long challenged notions of Americanness, decentering the U.S rendition of its own exceptionalism, innocence, and superiority. Central Americans have never been silent and passive subjects; they have been revolutionaries, activists, artists, writers, creators, and filmmakers. Through diverse Central American narratives on the big screen and beyond, the people of the Isthmus continue to build bridges between borders and over walls.

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Pictures, 2009.

*Will and Grace*. Directed by David Kohan and Max Mutchnick, performances by Erick

McCormack, Debra Messing, Megan Mullally, and Sean Hayes, Warmer Brothers, 1998.

### For Further Study

*La rebúsqueda*, Álvaro Jared Martínez, Clack Films, 2014.

*El silencio de Neto*, Luis Argueta, 1994.