

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: PERFORMING ARCHIVES: HOW CENTRAL AMERICANS PERFORM RACE IN THE DMV

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Performing Archives: How Central Americans Perform Race in the DMV examines the lives of Central Americans in the Washington metropolitan area, also known as the DMV, between 1960 and 2000. I explore how Central Americans were racialized and how their personal archives demonstrate quotidian performances of race and community formation in the region. To determine how Central Americans were racialized, I discursively analyze local newspapers, as well as letters, congressional proceedings, and reports sources, to make sense of the racial ideologies that circulated regionally. The racial meanings ascribed to Central Americans is significant because it shapes how others perceived them. These perceptions also had material impacts on their lives, informing where they live, where they work, their experiences in schools, and interactions with police. Local media, politicians, and bureaucrats used language and images to construct Central Americans as a racial Other. In their racialization, they also used African Americans as a comparative foil, resulting in an ideological binary between Blackness and Latinidad in the region. Central Americans were described as Spanish-speaking, brown,

working-class, “illegals,” and delinquents. This homogenized Central Americans, a racially and ethnically diverse diaspora.

As a method of self-documentation and self-preservation, Central Americans’ personal archives complicate and contest this dominant discourse. Reading personal archives performatively reveals the ways in which Central Americans navigated their racialization through quotidian performances of race. Racial performances refer to Central Americans’ embodied knowledges on race. These performances consisted of learning African American Vernacular English to find belonging, relying on kin networks to transgress the spatial constraints of illegality, or expressing solidarity through declarations and gestures, like head nods. Overall, my argument is twofold. First, I argue that Central Americans’ racialized experiences be understood through their personal archives because they provide insight into the interpersonal effects of, and quotidian responses to, racist structures. Second, I argue that Central Americans’ experiences navigating a region historically defined through a Black-and-white racial binary allows us to understand the processes of race-making more deeply by demonstrating that their racialization is informed by local and hemispheric racism that draw on a variety of signifiers to place others in shifting hierarchies.

PERFORMING ARCHIVES: HOW CENTRAL AMERICANS PERFORM RACE
IN THE DMV

by

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Dedication

To my dad, Julio (1966–2017), and the region that raised me.

Acknowledgements

I want to first thank my father. *He llegado a entender todas las maneras en que todavía estás conmigo. Es como si todavía estuvieras enseñándome como ser las tareas en el comedor, asi como lo hacías cuando estaba pequeña.* Although born from life experiences, this project took shape as a graduate student at the University of Maryland (UMD). As a first-generation college student, I did not *really* know what graduate school was. Despite my naïveté, I am incredibly thankful to the current and former faculty and staff at the University of Maryland, especially in the Departments of American Studies, Performance Studies, the Graduate School Writing Center, and University Archives, who have helped me grow so much intellectually and professionally. I am grateful that Mary Sies modeled community-engaged scholarship for me early on in my career. I also want to thank Caitlin Marshall and Linda Macri for convincing me that I am, in fact, a writer and showing me how to care for my craft. Lae'l Hughes-Watkins, you welcomed and cultivated my ideas on archives both theoretically and practically.

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When I walked through the massive doors of Tawes Hall on UMD's campus, I also had no idea I would make life-long friends. Y'all have collectively taught me—more than anyone—to enjoy the process. Brieanne Adams, Devon Betts, and Dallas Donnell, for me, the memories of our laughs will always echo through the American Studies corridor. Mark Lockwood, our phone calls always gave me the confidence boost to keep on, keepin' on. Nohely Alvarez, Kristy Li Puma, Sarah Scriven, Jordan Ealey, and Tara Demmy, I could go from seminars to writing retreats, from happy hours to sleepovers infinitely with y'all. José Centeno-Meléndez, even though you did not attend graduate school at UMD, we adopted you. Thank you for always being willing to bounce ideas and, along with Kristy and Manny, do the work for our beloved DMV. All of you have cared for my spirit and mind. For that, I am forever grateful.

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I am indebted to my mother. *Gracias por enseñarme a confiar en mí misma y dejar que siguiera mis curiosidades. Te lo debo todo. Mis abuelitas eran las primeras archivistas que conocí, espero poder cuidar las historias familiares como ustedes lo han hecho. A mis tías y tío gracias por compartir las historias de sus vidas conmigo, me han inspirado y dado fuerza.* To my sisters, thank you for always reminding me to come home. My soul needs it, especially on Sundays.

And lastly, my deepest gratitude to everyone who shared their personal archives. I thank you for trusting me to account for Central Americans' experiences in the DMV. I hope I have done the diaspora in the region justice with these words.

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Figure 1 Map of the DMV by Nohely Alvarez

A Note on Language

Examining multiple diasporas that are racialized in similar and distinct ways requires that I outline the specific terms I use to describe the various ethnic and racial groups. Namely, I discuss Central Americans. Central Americans are an ethnically and racially diverse people with roots in nation-states now known as Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and Panama. There are a number of ways Central Americans identify. These identifiers include, but are not limited to: Black and/or Indigenous, creole, mestiza/o or ladina/o—which is interpreted as mixed-race, Asian, or white. Collectively, those from Central America also generally fall under the pan-ethnic category of Latinx. While the term Latinx is consistently being discursively constructed, I use it to describe those with converging and diverging (post)colonial subjectivities that were based in Latin America and parts of the Caribbean but are now a part of a diaspora.¹ Throughout this project, I primarily use gendered terms like “Latina/o” as opposed to “Latinx” because my interlocutors identified themselves along these gendered binaries.

When possible I identify a person’s racial identity, along with their national, or pan-ethnic identity. When I do not qualify a nationality or pan-ethnic identity with a racial identity, I am using the terms inclusively. I emphasize that although terms like “Central American” or “Latinx” are racialized, they are not racial categories. This

¹ Nicholas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the Politics of Race and Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Frances R Aparicio, “Jennifer as Selena: Rethinking Latinidad in Media and Popular Culture,” *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 93, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600016>; Marta Caminero-Santangelo, *On Latinidad: U.S. Latino Literature and the Construction of Ethnicity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007).

is particularly important when considering, for example, Afro- or Black Central Americans alongside African Americans. Black is used to refer to members of the African diaspora, regardless of nationality. In the region, this includes Afro-descendents from Latin American, the Caribbean, the United States, and Africa. However, Central American interlocutors and American sources sometimes misuse “Black” for a number of reasons. First, mestizaje is the prevailing racial ideology in Latin America. This racial ideology celebrates miscegenation and cultural fusing, relegating Blackness and Indigeneity to a colonial past in favor of a mixed-race, harmonious modern future.² In Central America, in particular, Blackness is not generally imagined as a part of that hybridity. Second, there is a tendency to associate Blackness with Black American culture because of American hegemony globally.³ And, third, African Americans were the dominant Black population in the region because the region had a limited immigration history. These points are indeed complicated by the large diaspora of African immigrants that arrived in the latter decades of the twentieth century from places like Ethiopia, Eritrea, Ghana, Nigeria, Somalia, and Sudan, among others.⁴ However, this immigration and population

² Juliet Hooker, “Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race,” *Politics, Groups, and Identities* 2, no. 2 (April 3, 2014): 188–201, <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2014.904798>.

³ Lorgia García Peña, *Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022).

⁴ Research suggests that some first generation African immigrants and their second generation children emphasize their ethnic identity, in part, to distinguish themselves from African Americans. Others acknowledge the differences, but claim to also relate to African Americans. This is certainly an interesting site for further inquiry. See Kassahun Kebede, “Twice-Hyphenated: Transnational Identity among Second-Generation Ethiopian-American Professionals in the Washington, DC, Metropolitan Area,” *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 10, no. 3 (September 2, 2017): 252–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17528631.2017.1319146>; Onoso Imoagene, *Beyond Expectations: Second-Generation Nigerians in the United States and Britain* (Oakland: University of California press, 2017); Shelly Habecker, “Not Black, but Habasha: Ethiopian and Eritrean Immigrants in American Society,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35, no. 7 (July 2012): 1200–1219, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2011.598232>.

growth is happening alongside that of Central Americans and other Latinxs.

Therefore, their impact on localized understandings of Blackness were still very much in formation between 1960–2000. Overall, in this project I avoid the slippage that occurs between racialized ethnic groups and intentionally use ethnic, pan-ethnic, and racial signifiers.

Introduction

“This being the case, writing history merely involves manipulating archives. Following tracks, putting back together scraps and debris, and reassembling remains, is to be implicated in a ritual which results in the resuscitation of life, in bringing the dead back to life by reintegrating them in the cycle of time, in such a way that they find, in a text, in an artefact or in a monument, a place to inhabit, from where they may continue to express themselves.” - Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits” (2002)

Julio was resolute. After fighting colon cancer—a terminal illness that disproportionately affects African American and Latino men—my father Julio took his last breath at dawn in a hospice center in Arlington, Virginia. The director of Roger J. Mason Funeral Service in Northwest, Washington, D.C., arrived to the inner-ring suburb within an hour of calling him. Although there are many funeral homes in Northern Virginia, this funeral director had an established relationship with Funerales Achuapa (Achuapa Funeral Home) in my father’s rural hometown in Jutiapa, Guatemala.⁵ Julio’s parting wish was that we take him back. The American funeral director advised, that in order to file his death and prepare a funeral in his native land, I needed to obtain his social security card. Heavy with grief, two friends accompanied me to scavenge my parent’s bedroom for it. My father had his own disorderly filing system. My mother Elda once recalled, “no le gustaba que le tocara uno un papel de esos porque decía que le iba servir” (he did not like you touching any one of those papers because he said he would need it later). Perhaps the order of his archive made sense to him, but for us it was 50 years of accumulated things. My friends and I

⁵ Achuapa is the Indigenous name of my paternal family’s ancestral land in and around El Progreso, Jutiapa, Guatemala. Achuapa is nahuatl for río de achioté (river of achioté) or tierra de achioté (land of achioté). Achioté is a spice that comes from the seeds of the annatto tree, native to Central America.

looked through dressers, filing cabinets, stacks of papers, and manila envelopes for a small rectangular paper with a bluish tint about three inches wide and two inches tall. After spending some time looking, I laid down on my parents' bed still experiencing the heaviness of the morning.

"I found it!" my friend Mary exclaimed suddenly. I sat up to verify her findings with other records.

"That ain't it," I said laughing. She had found his counterfeit.

The moment was comedic but unsurprising because my father was undocumented for much of our lives, migrating to Northern Virginia in 1986 and legalizing his status in 2006. Why would he keep his counterfeit social security card so long after legalizing his status? By the time we found it, my father had been a permanent legal resident for 11 years. Did he think he might need it at some point in the future, as my mother recounted?

Going through his belongings also brought about the realization that his things—documents, photographs, jewelry, clothes, cassettes—were all I physically had left to piece his life together. When he transitioned to the spiritual realm, my father was only a month shy of turning 51. For much of my life he was reserved about his past. There were infinite moments of silence that I wanted to pry open to learn about his childhood, reasons from immigrating, why he came to the Washington region, what it was like to live undocumented, learn English, and raise daughters in the United States, and so much more. Yet, I would not have the chance to ask these questions again (I had tried in the past to no avail). And although my questions were deeply personal, his life reflected and refracted that of hundreds of thousands of

Central Americans who came to call the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area home. For many, it was not home by choice, but by force and coercion at the hands of nation-states in Central America and the U.S. How would the lives of people like my father be retold and remembered?

The archive is a place we visit to reconfigure the past. Archives (plural) generally refer to the records and artifacts people create to document people and organizations, while the archive (singular) refers to the place in which collections of these records and artifacts are held.⁶ The archive, as it is commonly imagined, is a public place that bestows historical value on to the people, places, groups, and things it preserves. Yet, Julio lived a relatively quiet life, deflecting attention from himself—intentionally or unintentionally. Therefore, his life was not one to be memorialized by a wider public, like that of politicians, organizers, or artists. His name would not be indexed in databases or finding aids. Yet, I found remnants of his life in newspaper articles that exclaimed in their titles, “27 Aliens Travel Here in Small Van; 17 Seized” and “Many Immigrant Families Are Torn Apart By Their New American Lives.” In the archive, Julio’s life, and that of many other Central Americans, was marked by illegality. The language and images found within the archive form part of discourse that works to ascribe meaning onto Central Americans, or in other words, racialize them.⁷ As numerous Black and colonial studies scholars demonstrate, the

⁶ “SAA Dictionary: Archives,” accessed February 17, 2024, <https://dictionary.archivists.org/entry/archives.html>.

⁷ I draw my understanding of racialization from Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Third edition (New York: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group, 2015), 109–112. Following critical theorists like Foucault, Hall, and Fleetwood, discourse is a visual and linguistic system of representation that reinforces social hierarchies. See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith, First American Edition (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972); “The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power” Stuart Hall, *Essential Essays. Volume 2: Identity and Diaspora* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2019), 146, 155; Nicole R. Fleetwood, *Troubling*

archive is a site of power struggles, crucial to determining what we know and how we know it.⁸ The archive is a tool for reconstructing racial meanings because they document the ideologies and structures that make racial difference in real time and how scholars come to recapitulate it in the future.

In D.C. and its inner-ring suburbs, otherwise referred to as the DMV, the archive largely constructed Central Americans as Spanish-speaking, brown, “illegal aliens.” I use “brown” similar to Kelly Lytle Hernández to indicate a “complexion-inflected class specificity.”⁹ Therefore, Central Americans in the DMV were understood through a linguistic practice, complexion, class, and immigration status. While this racialization began with Central American immigrants, it was not exclusive to them. Racial meanings were expanded upon to include delinquency for 1.5 and 2nd generation Central American youth. This discourse devalued Central American life and impacted how the general public perceived Central Americans, where Central Americans lived, and how they lived in the region. Is this how my father’s story would be retold and remembered? That is, through the prisms of illegality and labor. As American studies scholar Lisa Marie Cacho similarly asked in the wake of her cousin’s untimely death, how could I explain “how much he meant”

Vision: Performance, Visuality, and Blackness (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

⁸ Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” in *Refiguring the Archive*, ed. Carolyn Hamilton et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 19–27, http://link.springer.com/10.1007/978-94-010-0570-8_2; Saidiya V. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 1–14; Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009); Marisa J Fuentes, *Dispossessed Lives Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2016).

⁹ Kelly Lytle Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, American Crossroads 29 (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2010), 10.

when his life was devalued by the wider-public?¹⁰ The archive presented a methodological problem.

Despite the findings within the institutional archive my father's personal archive depicted a more complex image of his life and the life of other Central Americans. Complex in the sense that a person is not solely a victim nor an unequivocal agent against racism.¹¹ My father's personal archive portrayed him as an undocumented immigrant, but also as avid learner—taking classes at the neighborhood community center to improve his English, and a devout Catholic, especially later in his life. His personal archives also portrayed him as a member of a large Central American diaspora. Many images depicted him drinking, going on outings, and romantic dates with friends, most of whom he knew since childhood. While the institutional archive gives insight into how others perceive Central Americans, the personal archive gives insight into how Central Americans perceive themselves.

Due to these distinctions, I find it necessary to expand upon the accepted definition of archives. Archives are the material manifestation of discourse as produced and collected by dominant and subjugated figures. An archive is therefore the collection of records and artifacts that document knowledge and determine knowledge. On one hand, the institutional archive is considered to be the repository of “objective” and “official” knowledge. The personal archive, on the other hand, is a mode of self-documentation and self-preservation. It consists of stories, objects, and

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records, most of which are tucked into our memories and shelves, under beds, in dressers, or attics. Put simply, personal archives tell the story from a different vantage point.

I may never precisely know why my father kept his counterfeit social security card long after he legalized his status. However, I could question how he used it, why he used it, what knowledge it professed. Julio clandestinely immigrated to the suburbs of D.C. in 1986, living between Falls Church and Arlington, Virginia. That same year, President Ronald Reagan signed into law the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). IRCA granted amnesty to millions of undocumented immigrants who arrived before 1982. However, it also increased resources for policing the border and effectively made employers into pseudo immigration agents by criminalizing the hiring of undocumented workers.¹² Although the act sanctioned employers for hiring undocumented workers, the fees were minimal. The legislation more so required employers to file employee identification without legitimizing the documents they utilized to prove their lawful residence in the U.S.¹³ Employers demand for identification documents led to undocumented immigrants obtaining them through a variety of means.¹⁴ Julio was no different. He obtained a social security card—albeit counterfeit—to facilitate him getting a job, open a bank account, pay taxes, rent an

¹² Leisy Abrego et al., “Making Immigrants into Criminals: Legal Processes of Criminalization in the Post-IIRIRA Era,” *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 3 (2017): 694–715, <https://doi.org/10.14240/jmhs.v5i3.105>; Susan Bibler Coutin, *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants’ Struggle for U.S. Residency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

¹³ De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life,” 437; “Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986, <https://www.eeoc.gov/history/immigration-reform-and-control-act-1986>

¹⁴ Coutin, *Legalizing Moves*, 2000, 49.

apartment, and get a driver's license. Julio preserved his counterfeit because it was vital to his existence in the U.S. and, specifically, in the DMV for twenty years.

The counterfeit was just one among many documents that corroborated his illegality. My father's personal archive demonstrated, in part, that he was aware of his racialized position in the U.S. As an undocumented Central American he needed to act and move in certain ways, such as documenting his continuous presence in this country in hopes of preventing forced removal.¹⁵ His personal archive, therefore, represented a racial performance. Following Diana Taylor, I understand performance to be embodied acts that articulate knowledge of self for or against the state, or the communities to which the performer may or may not belong.¹⁶ In other words, Julio's experiences as an undocumented Central American man shaped what he knew and how he acted. He had accumulated a knowledge of his own racialization in order to navigate the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area accordingly. This was embedded in his personal archive. My encounter with my father's personal archive led me to examine the lives of Central Americans in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.

This project questions how Central Americans were racialized in the region and how personal archives demonstrate quotidian performances of race and community formation. I analyze institutional archives to understand how Central Americans were ascribed racial meaning between 1960–2000. This era encompassed significant changes in the region, marked by the beginning of a predominantly Black city, diversifying suburbs, the Civil Rights Movement, and increased Central

¹⁵ Coutin, 30.

¹⁶ Diana Taylor, *Performance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

American immigration. Within the institutional archive, I draw on discourse found in locally circulated newspapers, reports, letters, and oral histories. I cast personal archives against the regional racialization of Central Americans, engaging in a sort of dialectic between how Central Americans are racialized and how they understand their racialization. Within personal archives, I examine oral histories, photographs, as well as school and church documents. I read these archives performatively to identify how Central Americans made sense of themselves corporeally to outsiders and one another.

Ultimately, my findings are twofold. First, I argue that Central Americans' racialized experiences must be understood through their personal archives because they provide insight into the interpersonal effects of, and quotidian responses to, racist structures. Central Americans' personal archives help us understand the strategies they used to find greater belonging in the region along and across racial, ethnic, gendered, and class lines. Central Americans came to understand how they were racialized through language, illegality, class, and criminality and implemented embodied acts to withstand the material implications of this racialization on a day-to-day. They leveraged their knowledge on race and acted accordingly. Their performances were not grand in character. They included adopting African American Vernacular English because English was generally valued more than Spanish. Undocumented immigrants used their intimate kin networks to transcend the spatial constraints of illegality. And, young people expressed their knowledge of a shared struggle with subtle acts like head nods and declaratives like "I am Spanish," when

denied their Latinidad. These performances contested and complicated dominant discourse on Central Americans.

Second, I argue that, in the DMV, Central Americans are racialized in relation to African Americans. Central Americans' racialized experiences are both shaped by and understood through African Americans in the region. In the latter half of the twentieth century, Central Americans were not given access to the social benefits of whiteness and were compared to African Americans. On one hand, language and illegality became a way to draw arbitrary differences between Blackness and Latinidad, erasing Black Central Americans from public discourse and the ethno-racial imaginary. On the other hand, Central Americans came to occupy similar class positions as many African Americans. For example, the domestic work that many Central American women do in the region, was largely done by African American women prior to the Civil Rights Act. Their shared class positions often brought them to occupy the same neighborhoods and schools, where they were policed by law enforcement and treated as delinquents in school and in their neighborhoods. So, while there was a hegemonic understanding of Blackness and Latinidad as different, they were often grouped together through class status and tropes of criminality. Altogether, Central Americans' personal archives demonstrate the embodied knowledges and practices they developed as a result of being racialized in relation to African Americans. It is through the personal archive that I intend to nuance understandings of Central Americans.

A (very) Brief History of People and Place

The region many of us have come to know as the DMV is the ancestral lands of the Piscataway, Nacotchtank, Manahoac, and Doeg nations. These native nations spoke a range of Algonquian and Siouan languages. Once a linguistically diverse region, Indigenous languages were diminished through centuries of settler colonial violence. This was onset by the English in 1607 when they settled “in the heart of the Powhatan Confederacy,” establishing a settlement that came to be known as Jamestown, Virginia.¹⁷ In 1608, English colonists traveled north on the Chesapeake Bay and its tributaries, among them the Potomac River.¹⁸ They came into contact with Indigenous nations along the Potomac in contemporary Northern Virginia, Washington, D.C., and Maryland. Local wars, raids, and endemic diseases had devastating effects on Indigenous nations. However, historians Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove claim that it was colonists’ quest for land to grow tobacco throughout the mid-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century that ultimately displaced Indigenous people.¹⁹ Colonists transformed the region surrounding the Potomac into tobacco plantations labored by enslaved Africans and indentured servants.²⁰

In 1790 the newly formed U.S. passed the Residence Act, which transformed the plantation landscape along the Potomac into the seat of the federal government.²¹ The District of Columbia was created from land Maryland and Virginia ceded to the federal government. As Asch and Musgrove put it, “Early Washington was a

¹⁷ Chris Myers Asch and George Derek Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 7, <http://www.myilibrary.com?id=1043070>.

¹⁸ Asch and Musgrove, 8.

¹⁹ Asch and Musgrove, 12–14.

²⁰ Asch and Musgrove, 12–15.

²¹ Asch and Musgrove, 24.

Southern city that was immersed in slavery and benefited immensely from it.”²²

While Irish immigrants, many who did not originally speak English, helped construct the District from plantations and woodlands to the nation’s capital, builders depended heavily on enslaved labor to both develop the city and depress wages for white laborers.²³ Altogether, the dependence on enslaved labor discouraged white labor migration to the area throughout much of the nineteenth century, despite the citizenship benefits that the newly formed U.S. offered white immigrants.²⁴

Throughout the nineteenth century, the District’s African American population grew. The city was deemed more tolerant than the surrounding rural areas in Maryland and Virginia.²⁵ Although the surrounding counties were less tolerant, there were still a number of postbellum African American communities that emerged in the neighboring states. These include Lakeland and North Brentwood in Prince George’s County in Maryland and Freedman’s Village and Tinner Hill respectively in Arlington and Falls Church, Virginia, among others.²⁶ Thus, for much of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, the region was African American and white.

²² Asch and Musgrove, 17.

²³ Baillie Warden, “A Chorographical and Statistical Description of the District of Columbia,” 26–27. This source accredits the Irish population for constructing Washington in the first 20 years. However, it does not take into account the dependence on enslaved African labor. It did not see people of African descent as human. Asch and Musgrove challenge the predominance of the Irish in Washington. See *Chocolate City*, 32–28.

²⁴ Baillie Warden, 26–27.

²⁵ Audrey Singer, “Metropolitan Immigrant Gateways Revisited, 2014,” *Brookings* (blog), November 30, 1AD, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/metropolitan-immigrant-gateways-revisited-2014/>; Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 33.

²⁶ Dennis E. Gale, *Washington, D.C.: Inner-City Revitalization and Minority Suburbanization*, Comparative American Cities (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). For a comprehensive history of African Americans in the suburbs see Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

Washington, D.C., was not a large industrial city like other popular immigrant destination, such as New York, Philadelphia, or Baltimore.²⁷ The area's economy came to revolve mostly around the federal government. The District grew and the suburbs developed directly with the federal government's expansion during Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s and World War II in the 1940s.²⁸ Government and clerical employment were among the most common forms of work, attracting internal migrants to the capital region. Among the largest groups of migrants were African Americans, but it also included Indigenous folk, from the Deep South, namely from the Carolinas and Georgia, searching for better economic and educational opportunities.²⁹ By 1960, the city was predominantly Black.³⁰ Although there were Afro-descendent immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa, the overwhelming majority of those who identified as Black were African Americans. Washington became the first major Black city in the nation and earned the moniker "Chocolate City" in 1975 from Parliament, a popular funk band.³¹ The growth of the African American population in the mid-twentieth century also

²⁷ Audrey Singer, "Metropolitan Washington: A New Immigrant Gateway," in *Research in Race and Ethnic Relations*, ed. Enrique S. Pumar, vol. 17 (Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 2012), 3–24, [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0195-7449\(2012\)0000017004](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0195-7449(2012)0000017004).

²⁸ Martha Derthick, *City Politics in Washington, D.C.* (Cambridge, Washington DC: Joint Center for Urban Studies of Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard University, Washington Center for Metropolitan Studies, 1962), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015030797826>; Gale, *Washington, D.C.*; Andrew Friedman, *Covert Capital: Landscapes of Denial and the Making of U.S. Empire in the Suburbs of Northern Virginia*, American Crossroads 37 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013).

²⁹ Minner discusses the northern migration of the Lumbee from their tribal homelands in North Carolina to East Baltimore in "Revisiting the Reservation: The Lumbee Community of East Baltimore." Indigenous nations also migrated to D.C. This include, for example, the Occaneechi Band of the Saponi Nation, whose tribal lands are also in North Carolina. Anecdotally, I learned that members of the Occaneechi Saponi in D.C. were racialized as either Black or white.

³⁰ Derthick, *City Politics in Washington, D.C.*

³¹ The naming of the District as Chocolate City occurred in 1975 when Parliament released their album by the same name as a tribute to the city. See Leone, "Parliament."

extended beyond the District with middle-class African Americans also migrating to the inner-ring suburbs, especially after the 1968 Housing Rights Act and Martin Luther King's assassination, which set the city ablaze the same year.³² Predominantly African American internal migration and the minimal international migration helped maintain D.C. and its suburbs a region that was primarily African American and white and almost exclusively spoke English.

At the same time, there was a growing enclave of Spanish-speaking residents with origins in Latin America and the Caribbean who started to also make the region home.³³ Many early Latina/o migrants came to the area because they were employed by the federal government. This included American citizens from the continental U.S. and Puerto Rico, who were employed as clerical workers and military personnel. Washington was not only the locus for the federal government, but also international affairs. Latin American embassies and other international agencies like banks and research firms were based in the capital city and its neighboring suburbs. This sector employed a range of international white-collar and service-oriented employees.³⁴ Olivia Cadaval, Terry Repak, and José Centeno-Melendez posit that embassies, U.S. agencies, and international organizations were fundamental to starting the Latina/o community in the Washington metropolitan area because they were early

³² Gale, *Washington, D.C.* Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century*.

³³ Asian and African immigrants also made the region home. More historical work needs to be done. The 1882 Foundation has been doing important historical preservation work around the Chinese in Washington, specifically.

³⁴ Terry A. Repak, *Waiting on Washington: Central American Workers in the Nation's Capital* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995); José Centeno-Meléndez, "Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s" (Austin, Texas, University of Texas at Austin, 2023).

employers.³⁵ Yet other Latina/o migrants came to the region for educational purposes, attending schools like Howard University, George Washington University, and the University of Maryland, College Park, among others. Even after their schooling or employment ended, a number of Latinas/os stayed in the DMV. In the 1960s and seventies most concentrated in the neighborhoods of Adams Morgan, Mount Pleasant, and Columbia Heights. However, there was also a growing group in the inner-ring suburbs. Early on, it was mostly—though not exclusively—wealthier white Cubans in places like Takoma Park, Maryland and Falls Church, Virginia.³⁶ However, that changed with increased migration from Central and South America. From 1980 to 1990 alone, the Latin American and Caribbean population in the inner-ring suburbs approximately doubled in size.³⁷

The cast of Latinas/os in the Washington metropolitan area in the early- to mid-twentieth century were a multi-racial group, with origins in Bolivia, Cuba, Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Panama, Peru, and Puerto Rico, among other countries. They became an anchor for the growing Latina/o population throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century and beyond. Latina/o immigrants arrived to a place that was largely defined through a Black—understood as African American—and white racial binary. While this might be said of most of the U.S., the DMV was different. It had a distinct political economy and minimal

³⁵ Repak, *Waiting on Washington*; Centeno-Meléndez, “Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s.”

³⁶ Margaret S. Boone, *Capital Cubans: Refugee Adaptation in Washington, D.C.*, Immigrant Communities & Ethnic Minorities in the United States & Canada, no. 40 (New York: AMS Press, 1989).

³⁷ Audrey Singer, “Latin American Immigrants in the Washington, DC Metropolitan Area.”

history of international immigration. By the mid-1960s, the emerging local Latina/o community made their presence known throughout the Washington metropolitan area.

Before dominant discourse identified the emerging population as Latina/o, they were identified as “Spanish.” Publicly, this linguistic and ethnic assignment differentiated Latinas/os from African Americans and whites in the region, regardless of Latinas/os’ racial identities. As immigration policy became more restrictive in the U.S. and more immigrants came to Washington, illegality became another characteristic attributed to Latinas/os and, namely, Central Americans. Immigration enforcement and their co-conspirators policed the spaces undocumented Central American immigrants occupied by patrolling neighborhoods with large Latina/o populations, listening for language differences, racially profiling brown Latinas/os, and conducting raids of workplaces and parks. And lastly, young Black and Latino boys, who were either born or raised here, were classified as social problems in their neighborhoods and schools. In schools, Black and Latino boys were chastised for fighting and being unruly. In the media, reporters, residents, and school administrators called for greater discipline. In neighborhoods, gentrifying neighbors called on greater police presence to police Black and Latino people for things like drinking in public, facilitating the gentrification of neighborhoods in D.C. Here, I am using Black and Latino as mutually inclusive categories, though dominant discourse did otherwise.

U.S. Central Americans: Race, Space, and Performance

Central Americans are one of the largest diasporas in the U.S.³⁸ The Migration Policy Institutes claims that in 2023, Central Americans comprised of approximately 7.2 million people nationwide. The exponential growth of Central Americans in the U.S. in the eighties and nineties caught the attention of the general American public, as well as scholars, leading to the formation of a subfield within Latinx studies. With origins in literary studies and sociology, the subfield uses the humanities and social sciences to research people with origins in the isthmus, the thin strip of land connecting North and South America across the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean. While there was scholarly work on Central America prior to the formation of the subfield, what distinguished its current iteration is best encapsulated in the first few lines of Maya Chinchilla's poem, "CentralAmericanAmerican,"

Centralamerican American
does that come with a hyphen?
a space?³⁹

Chinchilla's opening question asks the readers to grapple with the place of a growing diaspora in the U.S. and the problem of identity. The understanding of Central America and, thereby, Central Americans came to be inextricably linked with the U.S. This subfield is sometimes referred to as U.S. Central American studies because it emphasizes the transnational character of the isthmus and the diaspora in

³⁸ In 2022, Migration Policy Institute placed El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras in the top national diasporas. With this in mind, I also add Belizeans, Costa Ricans, Nicaraguans, and Panamanians to conclude that collectively the region is among the largest. See "Top Diaspora Groups in the United States," <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub/charts/top-diaspora-groups-united-states-2022>

³⁹ Maya Chinchilla, "Solidarity Baby and CentralAmericanAmerican," Chinchilla Like Tortilla, April 15, 2009, <https://mayachinchilla.com/archives/>.

the States without the presumed assimilation.⁴⁰ I am indebted to formation of U.S. Central American studies because it has been instrumental in expanding Latinx studies, which has historically concentrated on Mexicans, Cubans, and Puerto Ricans in the continental U.S. However, I depart from the field theoretically and methodologically by drawing on race and ethnic studies, geography, and performance to understand Central Americans in the DMV.

The field has largely argued that Central Americans remain marginal in the U.S. That is, Central Americans are excluded from structures and cultural representations. This is captured through prominent theories in Central American studies that include Arturo Arias' conceptualization of Central American invisibility, Susan Bibler Coutin's "spaces of non-existences," and Yajaira Padilla's "non-belonging." While these theories are important to bringing greater attention to Central Americans' cultural and structural exclusions, they do not fully allow me to grapple with the racialization of a racially heterogeneous diaspora. As Afro-Central American scholar Vielka Cecilia Hoy concisely explained, Black Central Americans are invisibilized in the isthmus; and in the U.S., they are visible as African Americans and invisible as Latinxs, and even invisible as Afro-Latinxs in places like California. Central Americans are not deemed marginal collectively because race and place matter. Hoy, therefore, raises the importance of place and relationality to the racial formations of Central Americans.

⁴⁰ Karina Oliva Alvarado, Alicia I. Estrada, and Ester E. Hernández, eds., *U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* (Tucson: The University of Arizona Press, 2017), 28–29.

Due to the unique spatial formation of the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area, I draw on scholars at the intersections of race and ethnic studies and geography. Scholars such as Wendy Cheng, Perla M. Guerrero, and Genevieve Carpio argue that race is formed through place-based relational processes that are informed by the region's political economy.⁴¹ The DMV is different from other places with large Central American populations. It has a different political economy and history than that of Los Angeles, the Bay, Houston, New York, or even Miami. Although the aforementioned metropolises have economies as varied as manufacturing, oil, or global banking, they all have thorough histories of large-scale international migration and longstanding Latinx populations. The DMV's political economy is largely based in the federal government. The growth of the region was primarily due to northern African American migrations. While the Latinx population has its origins in the nineteenth century, it grew exponentially in the latter half of the twentieth century.⁴² Central Americans were a sizable part of Latinx growth in the region. They came to a place that was a Southern city with global power and largely shaped by white and African American social relations.

In Washington, Central Americans arrived at a time in which African Americans were increasingly rising through the middle-class because of the Civil Rights Movement. They came to occupy jobs that were once predominantly held by

⁴¹ Wendy Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Diazes: Remapping Race in Suburban California* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Perla M. Guerrero, *Nuevo South: Latinas/Os, Asians, and the Remaking of Place*, First edition, Historia USA (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017); Genevieve Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads: How Place and Mobility Make Race* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019).

⁴² Centeno-Meléndez, "Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s."

African Americans. The class convergence brought Central Americans and African Americans in closer proximity to one another. Historian Cecilia Márquez argues that Latinos in the South navigate a Black/non-Black binary.⁴³ While this is true to an extent, it obscures the role white supremacy plays in grouping Central Americans alongside Blackness and does not significantly emphasize how localized understandings of Blackness also shaped how Central Americans were racialized.

The Washington region is home to a diverse African diaspora with many Ethiopians, Eritreans, Ghanians, Nigerians, and Somalians, to name a few. However, Blackness was understood as being synonymous with African Americans. This is due to a number of reasons I outlined previously, dealing with mestizaje and global American hegemony. Another major reason is the region's limited immigration history. While the region did have immigrants of African descent, the population grew alongside that of Central Americans. The impact African immigrants have had in shaping localized understandings of Blackness between 1960–2000 was still in formation. Contemporarily, the presence of Ethiopians and Eritreans, for example, is very visible in places like Northern Virginia and Montgomery County.⁴⁴ Historically, however, African Americans were the largest minoritized group and most significant subculture in the region. As such, African Americans served as a foil for Central Americans' presumed brownness, Spanish-speaking abilities, and illegality. However, at other times, they were both deemed as social problems because of their opposition

⁴³ Cecilia Márquez, *Making the Latino South: A History of Racial Formation*, Latinx Histories (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2023).

⁴⁴ For more on the cultural geography of Ethiopians see Elizabeth Chacko, "Ethiopian Ethos and the Making of Ethnic Places in the Washington Metropolitan Area," *Journal of Cultural Geography* 20, no. 2 (June 2003): 21–42, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08873630309478274>.

to whiteness. This was the case for Central American youth who along with their African American counterparts were scolded for their so-called behavioral issues and were policed in their schools and neighborhoods. Central American and African Americans' proximity to one another resulted in racialized experiences that were shared or contingent upon one another.

Central Americans' racialization in the Washington region shaped how they acted and moved in the everyday. It resulted in a set embodied knowledges and practices on race. For example, if someone was racialized as "illegal" it required people to know how to prove their legality, even if it was through counterfeits. I understand racialization through sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant, who define racialization as the process of ascribing meaning on to bodies, practices, and social positions.⁴⁵ This is achieved through racial projects that are structural and representational. A key tool of racialization is discourse, which visually or linguistically represents a subject and makes them knowable. Discourse also has material implications, determining how a subject acts. Performance studies argues, that there is a correlation between discourse and embodied acts.⁴⁶ Following Judith Butler and Jonathan Xavier Inda, I understand performativity to be the discursive systems—visual or linguistic—that construct the racial and gendered body and condition normative behaviors.⁴⁷ While performativity focuses on the system of

⁴⁵ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal* 40, no. 4 (December 1988): 519–31, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>; Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Jonathan Xavier Inda, "Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body," *Latino Studies Journal* 11, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 74–99; Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different: Performance and Law in Asian America*, Postmillennial Pop Series (New York: New York University Press, 2013).

⁴⁷ Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution"; Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Inda,

linguistic and visual signifiers, it solicits particular embodied acts. Throughout this project, I examine both performativity and performance. As Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson notes, the transition between performativity and performance is the process of racialization.⁴⁸ In short, discursive systems construct and condition the body and solicit performances that produce racialized subjects.

Theories of performativity allow us to realize the role racial discourse plays in how people use their bodies to conform to racializing discourse. Chambers-Letson, for example, discusses how those detained in Japanese internment camps had to perform patriotism because they were racialized as foreign threats.⁴⁹ While the body can be used to conform to processes of racialization, it can also be used to challenge it. Saidiya Hartman explains this phenomenon through her concept of “performing Blackness.” Performing Blackness refers to the embodied acts Black folk use to create, reinscribe, or challenge racial meaning and hierarchies.⁵⁰ I expand upon Hartman’s concept and consider performing race as a parallel term to articulate how Central Americans respond to racialization. For example, holding onto a counterfeit social security card could be a way to challenge an immigration system that sought to exclude undocumented laborers. Using a counterfeit social security card can also be understood as something that reifies how illegality is an immigration status that is linked to particular phenotypes. In either case, the use of a counterfeit is an example of a racial performance. Inspired by Katherine McKittrick, who uses performance as one way Black women have produced alternative geographies, I also consider Central

“Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body”; Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different*.

⁴⁸ Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different*, 16.

⁴⁹ Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different*.

⁵⁰ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 57.

Americans' racial performances as tools to create space for themselves in the DMV.⁵¹ These racial performances, and by effect spatial productions, are embedded within the personal archive. In this sense, the personal archive performs.

Performance studies scholars have long argued over whether performances remain or disappear.⁵² I build on scholars like Taylor, José Muñoz, and Robin Bernstein who help me argue that the body is an archive and that the archive performs.⁵³ Taylor was instrumental in not privileging the written as the only form of knowledge. She emphasizes the knowledge we carry in our bodies as equally important and refers to it as the repertoire. Muñoz and Bernstein blur the boundaries between the archive and the repertoire, respectively emphasizing how things can hold traces of performance and can script a performance.⁵⁴ Their contributions enable me to emphatically claim that archives perform, and they consist of embodied acts, objects, and records.

How to Perform Archives: And Everything That Happens Before That

The title, "Performing Archives," encapsulates the methodological process that undergirds this project. Foundationally I consider the act of archiving to be a

⁵¹ Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

⁵² José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (January 1996): 5–16, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407709608571228>; Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (December 1997): 11–18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1997.10791844>; Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*. (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2005), <http://public.eblib.com/choice/publicfullrecord.aspx?p=179272>; Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2011).

⁵³ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*; Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence"; Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things," *Social Text* 27, no. 4 (2009): 67–94.

⁵⁴ Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence"; Bernstein, "Dances with Things."

performance because it consists of the repetition of archival practice: the process of selecting, storing, and maintaining records for an audience—whether that be the state, institutions, community, friends, family, or one-self.⁵⁵ In this project, I rely on two types of archives: the institutional and the personal. The institutional, generally, gives insight into how others perceived Central Americans racially and is often considered the formal and official account. The personal gives insight in how Central Americans understood themselves racially. In their creation, they both undergo processes of evaluation that give records, objects, and stories value—whether personal or historical; however, they are formed from different vantage points and distinct commitments. The institutional archive is committed to representing the state, an organization, or a public figure and they have a public audience. Some examples of this include, the National Archives or the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library. Institutional archives are generally not concerned with representing the masses and their quotidian experiences in meaningful details.⁵⁶ The personal archive is committed to representing the self, or at times, a larger group unit such as the family, neighborhood, or community for a private audience. The formation of such an archive is motivated by necessity and relationships, which is why they include state-issued identification, as well as family photographs.

⁵⁵ Terry Cook and Joan M. Schwartz, “Archives, Records, and Power: From (Postmodern) Theory to (Archival) Performance,” *Archival Science* 2, no. 3–4 (September 2002): 171–85, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02435620>.

⁵⁶ There are archivists attempting to challenge the oppressive histories of the archive. For some examples, see Lae’l Hughes-Watkins, “Moving Toward a Reparative Archive: A Roadmap for a Holistic Approach to Disrupting Homogenous Histories in Academic Repositories and Creating Inclusive Spaces for Marginalized Voices,” *Journal of Contemporary Archival Science* 5, no. 6 (2018): 1–19; Christian Kelleher, “Archives Without Archives: (Re)Locating and (Re)Defining the Archive Through Post-Custodial Praxis,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 1, no. 2 (2017), <https://journals.litwinbooks.com/index.php/jclis/article/view/29>.

I draw distinctions between the institutional and the personal archive, however, they are not always so clear. Sometimes, there are elements of the personal in the institutional archive.⁵⁷ This might include oral histories or quotes. And other times there are elements of the institutional in the personal, such as government-issued documents or newspaper clippings. This dissertation also blurs the lines between the institutional and the personal archive. I assembled multiple personal archives consisting of photographs, documents, oral histories, and the very words that span the pages of this academic text, which in effect produce an archive of Central Americans in the DMV. This archival text will sequentially be deposited to an institutional repository, primarily available to students, faculty, and staff. While I advocate for community archives because it helps ensure minoritized people maintain possession of their precious mementos and knowledges, I also understand the value of centralized institutional archives. Institutional archives are where most researchers visit to produce and disseminate new ways of knowing. Therefore, being a part of an institutional archive can impact how we come to understand a subject, like Central Americans, at a larger scale. Finding one's community in the institutional archive can also be self-affirming, weaving oneself into a larger historical narrative. As minoritized people, we do not *need* the affirmation of institutions to validate our experiences, but it can be helpful in terms of political recognition and mobilization.

It is also important to recognize the history of institutional repositories taking from minoritized people. Consider, for example, indigenous materials that were

⁵⁷ This is clear in the D.C. Public Library's People's Archive. The People's Archive is committed to documenting local histories and cultures and accepts a wide range of donations. What has helped amplify their collection is that they are the repository for D.C. Oral History Collaborative. So, the oral histories collected by grant awardees are stored there.

stolen and are now held at places like the Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History, for example.⁵⁸ With this in mind, creating *Performing Archives* required a level of co-curation that occurred between me and my interlocutors. This occurred in choosing the objects and records that they presented and I, in turn, analyzed. Additionally, since this project would be accessible to a broader public, I filtered personal details that were not relevant to the project in order to maintain a level of privacy. I want others to find and come to know Central Americans within institutional repositories in new ways, but I also want to redirect them to the knowledge that is held within community— among mothers and fathers, aunts and uncles, neighbors and chosen kin. In this sense, I perform a disruption in the schema of research, encouraging researchers to go and build trust with the community. Defining archives as institutional and personal is important because their formations, commitment, and impact are different. However, I ultimately destabilize the binary between personal and institutional archives—“formal” or “official” and “informal” or “unofficial” knowledges.

To build an understanding of how Central Americans were ascribed racial meaning, I examined locally circulated newspapers, congressional proceedings, correspondence between bureaucrats, politicians, and local Latino leaders, as well as reports local commissions produced. Though I did look through microfilm for news articles in the *Washington Afro-American*, most of these newspapers were digitally accessibly through databases at The University of Maryland, University of

⁵⁸ For more on the Indigenous struggle to repatriate the remains and artifacts housed within institutional repositories see Chip Colwell, *Plundered Skulls and Stolen Spirits: Inside the Fight to Reclaim Native American Culture* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Pennsylvania, and D.C. Public Library. Others were located as clippings at the D.C. History Center. In addition to these repositories, I also consulted the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. I used discourse analyses to examine these sources and identified how they described Central Americans and Latinas/os, more broadly. I tracked the metadata, including prominent themes, people, and places, in a cloud-database.

Of this wide-range of sources, I primarily relied on English-language newspapers. These included *The Washington Post*, the *Evening Star*, *The Washington Daily News*, *The Washington Informer*, and the *Afro-American*. These newspapers are comprised of the mainstream press and the Black press. I identified news articles covering local Latinas/os as early as 1962. Coverage increased in the mainstream press in the following decades, namely in *The Post*, *The Informer* and the *Afro-American* minimally covered Latinas/os because they did not view it as a part of their outlined mission to serve Black people. However, I did find local coverage on Latinas/os in these newspapers in 1969 and 1991 when Latinas/os made demands of the predominantly African American District government. While there was an emergence of local Spanish-language newspapers in the latter decades of the twentieth century, I focused on the aforementioned newspapers because they were the leading periodicals for African American and white American populations. Therefore, they give insight into how the majority of African American and white American publics hegemonically racialized Central Americans in the region.

Stilson Hutchinson founded *The Post* in 1877 with the goal of it being a Democratic daily newspaper from the nation's capital.⁵⁹ At the time of its founding partisan newspapers were still common.⁶⁰ For the latter half of the twentieth century, *The Post* was the leading newspaper in the region.⁶¹ In addition to congressional news, news from New York, and international news, *The Post* also published District and suburban news since its early beginnings. The newspaper had a local and national circulation. However, the readership was primarily local. Katherine Graham, editor from 1963–1981, reaffirmed the newspaper's dedication to the local, claiming, "our base is local and our primary purpose is to be a local newspaper."⁶² *The Post's* major competitor throughout much of the twentieth century was the *Evening Star*. *The Post* and the *Star* also competed with *The Washington Daily News* between 1921–1972.⁶³ However, the *Star* acquired it thereafter. The *Star* was established as a non-partisan paper in 1852 and operated until it declared bankruptcy in 1981. Since its first issue, the *Star* was dedicated to local news.⁶⁴ Among the mainstream newspapers, the *Star* was at times favorable among African American readers.⁶⁵ Nonetheless, it remained moderate in terms of racial justice. While it was a top local newspaper for much of the early twentieth century, in the 1960s it began to descend into its ultimate financial demise in 1981.

⁵⁹ Chalmers McGeagh Roberts and Chalmers McGeagh Roberts, *In the Shadow of Power: The Story of the Washington Post*, Rev. & updated.-- (Cabin John, MD: Seven Locks Press, 1989), 1.

⁶⁰ Roberts and Roberts, 5.

⁶¹ Roberts and Roberts, 396.

⁶² Roberts and Roberts, 462.

⁶³ Rosenbaum, "The Washington Daily News Ceases Publication," *New York Times*, July 13, 1972; See Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/sn82016181/>.

⁶⁴ Faye Haskins, *The Evening Star: The Rise and Fall of a Great Washington Newspaper* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 8.

⁶⁵ Haskins, 46–48.

While the aforementioned newspapers had a mixed-race readership, especially after the Civil Rights Movement, Black presses emerged out of the need to champion racial justice and empower Black folk.⁶⁶ Washington has a long history of Black newspapers circulating since 1870.⁶⁷ *The Informer* and the *Afro-American* were the only Black presses running between 1960–2000 and continue to publish today. The *Washington Afro-American* emerged when the *Baltimore Afro-American* (1892–) absorbed *The Washington Tribune*, which circulated from 1921–1946.⁶⁸ *The Informer*, is a newer Black press with Calvin Roark founding it in 1964. Both newspapers contained coverage of international Black politics, however, issues concerning Black Latinas/os were hardly mentioned. Moreover, both the *Afro-American* and *The Informer* were dedicated to African American audiences. As the “About” section in *The Informer* states, it serves “African Americans in the DMV.”⁶⁹ Thus, their audience was and continues to be mainly African Americans.

I accompanied these traditional archival methods with an examination of personal archives. I initiated my study of Central Americans’ personal archives with families I have established relationships with in the region. Perhaps it is obvious, but the personal archive is in fact quite personal and incomplete. Just because I am a member of the community I studied, it did not mean people were eager to speak with

⁶⁶ Armistead Scott Pride and Clint C. Wilson, *A History of the Black Press*, Moorland-Spingarn Series (Washington, D.C: Howard University Press, 1997); Hayward Farrar, *The Baltimore Afro-American, 1892-1950*, Contributions in Afro-American and African Studies, no. 185 (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998); Patrick Scott Washburn, *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*, Visions of the American Press (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ Pride and Wilson, *A History of the Black Press*, 97–102.

⁶⁸ Pride and Wilson, 102. See *The Washington Informer*, “About,” <https://www.washingtoninformer.com/about/>

me or share records and objects that were significant to them.⁷⁰ I received trepidation and rejection from a handful of people I asked to participate, even though some knew me for most of my life. This could be for a number of reasons. First, general distrust and a desire for privacy, which I sympathize with because it requires a level of vulnerability that could be emotionally or materially consequential. Second, I am a Ph.D. candidate. Although I write with the hope of creating a more just world, it does not dissolve the privileges I carry being rewarded professionally for my research. Potential oral history narrators might also have been be critical of what they gain materially, ideologically, or affectively from their participation. In this sense, it was not a mutually beneficial relationship. Inversely, they might have also questioned what value their personal archives have for a researcher.

Those who did decide to participate recognized that they were helping me and not the other way around. They mostly viewed me in relation to their children or family friends. I was considered to be a part of a younger generation trying to “do good” for our community. To a lesser extent, interlocutors may have also seen me as a peer. While there were varying degrees of trust, we differed in terms of race, gender, nationality, immigration status, and/or age. This was made evident in oral history interviews. Narrators would use the clause “like you” to draw a distinction between them and myself. This form of differentiation—whether accurate or otherwise—was used in an attempt to draw greater clarification, such as explaining what it meant to “look Spanish” or what it was like to be second generation Central

⁷⁰ For more on the range of experiences an “insider” researcher has when conducting research with their community see, Linda Williamson Nelson, ““Hands in the Chit’lins,”” in *Unrelated Kin*, by Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis and Michèle Foster, 1st ed. (New York: Routledge, 1996), 183–99, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203760376-15>.

American. In this way, I was integrated into the oral history narrative because they viewed me as both an insider and outsider of various communities. Despite deciding to participate, most narrators remained reserved when it came to sharing records or objects. They often turned to me and asked what I wanted to see. In doing so, they had either not had the time to consider what objects and records they thought were important or did not see them as relevant for my project. And while narrators were open to answering questions, they undervalued the details of their experiences, describing racialized scenarios as “not a big deal” or “it was what it was.” In this sense, our interpretations and evaluations of scenarios, objects, or records might differ.

Ultimately, I conducted oral histories with twelve people with roots in El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Panama, and—of course—the DMV. Narrators were either born in the isthmus or in D.C. and have spent at least three decades living in the region. I met with narrators to agree upon parameters for the interview and I also invited them to bring records and objects to facilitate their storytelling. Most did not come with many records or objects to share, if any at all. I found that many community members did not quite understand why I would be interested in the things they collected over the years. In instances like this, I utilized my curatorial practice and gave them suggestions after listening to their oral histories. This process required continuous communication. Most of the tangible things people shared were printed photographs, paper documents, and some digital photographs. Once we identified records, I offered to digitize their things. This way I could analyze their records and they would have an additional copy of their precious items. I took this cue from

community archival practices.⁷¹ My hope was that this was an act of reciprocity for the time they gave to me. Although most of the personal archives I analyzed came from people I built relationships with over time, I also found remnants of the personal in the institutional archive. Sometimes I found it in *The Post*, but it was mostly in oral histories held at the People's Archive, the Anacostia Community Museum, and the Smithsonian Latino Center (the predecessor to the National Museum of the American Latino). With digitized copies of personal archival records, I followed similar processes of inserting metadata into the cloud-database.

In addition to considering archiving as a performance, to perform archives also refers to how we read them. I engaged the personal archives performatively. In other words, I read for and alongside embodied knowledges. I began my analyses with noting the visual or sonic details of the source. What is visible or audible in it? It might be what someone is wearing, how someone said something, what someone is doing, or how something is written. I also question beyond the frame or edges of the record, especially if the body is not readily visible or audible. I ask, for example, what was happening beyond the frame? Who produced this record? Where was it produced? How did someone use this record? How did they get the record? In short, I concentrate on the embodied acts that animate the sources within and beyond the record or object.

Following a thorough description of the source, I allow a detail to “puncture” me, as cultural critic Roland Barthes would say.⁷² While Barthes theorized the

⁷¹ The Lakeland Community History Project in College Park, Maryland and the South Asian American Digital Archive are great examples of community archives.

⁷² Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, Pbk. ed (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

“punctum” as the detail that draws you into a photograph, Black studies scholars like Brent Hayes Edwards and Tina Campt have also argued that affect plays an important analytical role in archival research and visual analyses.⁷³ In my analyses of Central Americans’ personal archive, this detail that affectively draws me in might be visible or audible in the source or might exceed it. And, at other times, the captivating detail might change or expand. For example, I have been initially drawn to where a photograph was made, but then come to see how the subjects of the photograph are holding hands or consider all the people that were needed to make this photograph possible.

Upon noticing the captivating detail(s), I follow dance scholar Melissa Blanco Borelli’s example of performative writing.⁷⁴ She positions herself alongside the people she wants to center and uses her own embodied knowledge to interrogate the archive. In doing so, she illuminate her desires of the archive, instead of hiding behind the veil of objectivity.⁷⁵ In my research, I use the embodied knowledge I accumulated growing up in the region and having spent significant time with interlocutors, to drive further questioning and speculation of the source. In this sense, I am enacting my own experiences as a U.S. Central American in my writing. My subjectivity and embodied knowledge is not hidden within the text. I italicize my

⁷³ Brent Hayes Edwards, “The Taste of the Archive,” *Callaloo* 35, no. 4 (2012): 944–72, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2013.0002>; Tina Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁷⁴ Melissa Blanco Borelli, *She Is Cuba: A Genealogy of the Mulata Body* (Oxford University Press, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199968169.001.0001>.

⁷⁵ Brent Hayes Edwards and Saidiya Hartman are also great examples of illuminating their desire in the archive and writing beyond its limits. See Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”; Edwards, “The Taste of the Archive.”

performative writing to highlight the distinct register of analyses and tonal shift that occurs.

Lastly, I situate my analysis of the personal archive within the larger historical context. This is why there is a constant back-and-forth between what is happening historically, what the institutional archive is saying about Central Americans, and what Central Americans' personal archives are saying about themselves. The back and forth illuminates the racial discourse that constructs and conditions the body, as well as how the body conforms or contends with the discourse. Structurally, the text also reflects how performativity and performance transition from one to another to construct the racialized Central American in the DMV. Altogether, performing archives refers to how an archive is constructed, the embodied knowledge embedded within it, how my embodied knowledge is utilized to read it and, in turn, how I reflect the performativity and performance of Central Americans racialization in my writing.

My methodology thus reorients knowledge production from institutions to Central Americans by holding their personal archives to be sites of embodied knowledge on race. By focusing on Central Americans embodied racial knowledge, we learn how a growing ethnic group adapts and responds to different racial landscapes. I emphasize how Central Americans are not just passive historical subjects of racialization. Rather, they developed thorough knowledge on their racialization to navigate the region's social landscape. It is necessary we come to understand Central Americans' racialized experiences through performative readings of personal archives. This mode of analysis provides a more dynamic understanding

as to how race impacts people at the scale of the body, especially across a racially heterogenous diaspora. If we mainly rely on dominant discourse, we continue to perpetuate hegemonic understandings of Central Americans that erase Blackness and Indigeneity.

Additionally, my work underscores the significance of place and relationality to understanding race-making processes. Because the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area did not have a large history of immigration and was primarily defined through a Black-and-white racial binary, it highlights how central Blackness is to forming understandings of other racialized groups. Central Americans in the DMV were not granted access to the social benefits of whiteness and were compared and contrasted to African Americans, resulting in discursive divide between Blackness and Latinidad that were hinged upon one another. Discourse was informed by local and hemispheric racism that drew on various signifiers like language, skin color, legal status, or class status to place Central Americans in shifting racial hierarchies. Overall, my work provides a theoretical and methodological intervention in Central American Studies, as well as Latinx Studies, by emphasizing the significance of place and the use of personal archives.

Chapter Breakdown

This project is concerned with the embodied knowledges and practices that Central Americans acquired to navigate their racialization in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. It also develops and utilize performing archives as a methodology to enable such an understanding. Chapter 1, “Performing Archives: To Sight, Cite, and Site U.S. Central Americans,” further develops my theoretical framework and

proposed methodology, which contribute to Latinx studies as a different mode of analyzing U.S. Central Americans. I converge multiple theoretical frames from race and ethnic studies, geography, and performance studies. I argue that with these theoretical frameworks and a performative analysis of archives, we can sight, cite, and site U.S. Central Americans. By this I mean that we are able to comprehend their complexity, value their lived experience as knowledge, and emphasize the significance of the place they inhabit and the spaces they create. I examine three major theories within U.S. Central American studies: invisibility, non-existence, and non-belonging. These theories are instrumental to the creation of the field. However, they do not allow me to understand how a racially heterogenous diaspora is racialized in different ways across different regions in the U.S.

Highlighting the significance of race, relation, and place, I also examine scholarship on relational and regional racial formation. I outline the processes of racial formation and the role of discourse and place in that. I apply this theoretical frame to understand Central Americans in the DMV because the region is distinct from major places Latinx studies tends to focus on, such as Los Angeles, New York, and Miami—just to name a few. The incorporation of Central Americans into the DMV is specific to this place. Central Americans in the DMV were in close proximity to African Americans in and around “Chocolate City.” Thus, Central Americans’ racialization in the region was contingent upon African Americans’ racialization. How Central Americans were racialized determined how they performed race. The notion of performing is built upon theories of the performative and performativity, which emphasize the role discourse plays in constructing and

conditioning the body. However, it also contends that the body can act against discourse. Therefore, my focus on performance allows me to consider the impact racialization has on the scale of the body. I identify how the racializing discourse impacts how the body moves and acts in personal archives. I build on theories at the intersection of performance and archives to assert that the archive performs. In building “performing archives” as a method, I enable an understanding of Central Americans that renders them complex people and valorizes their embodied knowledges.

Chapter 2, “Sound of Legibility” examines the relationship between race, place, language, and sound. I question how language was used to racialize Central Americans in a primarily African American context. I also ask how Afro-Central Americans made sense of their racialization through Spanish and English. I analyze local newspaper articles, as well as letters between local Latino leaders, a U.S. senator, and the appointed mayor. These sources highlight how the sound of Spanish became a point of contention for District law enforcement and politicians, during a time of transition in which the city became predominantly African American, had an African American mayor-appointee, and elected a predominantly African American city council. Meanwhile, however, the police force was still predominantly white. In this context, the sound of Spanish became a sonic signifier of difference and English was a sonic signifier of belonging. The sound of Spanish became a means to racially distinguish the growing Latina/o population.

Discursively, the identifier was considered a mutually exclusive category. In particular, Blackness and the practice of speaking Spanish were commonly

considered binaries. In their organizing efforts, local Latinos often called for English and Spanish language acquisition. While this might have been a good first step, it did not do much for Afro-Central Americans and Afro-Latinas/os, more broadly. They had to navigate a sort of cognitive dissonance between their ability to speak Spanish and the way they were racialized as Black. Moreover, Latino leaders' efforts neglected how the sound of Spanish was a totalizing signifier that racialized Black and non-white Latinas/os. Assimilation would not be possible for many. Afro-Central Americans and Afro-Latinas/os' personal archives, which in this chapter consist of oral histories, photographs, and a church certificate, demonstrate how they navigated this racial, linguistic, and sonic landscape. I argue that they utilized African American Vernacular English to assert a sense of belonging in the region, where Spanish rendered them foreign. Overall, Afro-Central Americans' demonstrate that African American cultural practices like language were one way they could assuage xenophobia, demonstrating a Black relationality that is obscured in assimilation narratives.

Chapter 3, "Intimate Illegalities," investigates the relationship between race, space, illegality, and gender. I question how Central Americans came to be racialized as brown and "illegal" nationally and with regional specificity. I also question the effect being racialized as "illegal" had on brown Central Americans' use and occupation of space. How did that differ between men and women? Similar to the previous chapter, I rely on local newspapers to determine how they were racialized. Central Americans came to be racialized as "illegal" due to the racial project of illegality. The racial project of illegality worked structurally to construct Central

Americans as “illegal aliens” through restrictive immigration policies and denying them asylum during major conflicts in the isthmus. It also discursively represented brown Central Americans as illegal. In the Washington region, Blackness served as a foil to Central Americans. This discursive representation added to the pre-existing binaries between Black and Spanish. That is, Central Americans were conceived of as brown, working-class, Spanish-speaking, undocumented immigrants. Central Americans were also described as economic threats to African Americans, during a shift in the political economy post-Civil Rights.

Immigration enforcement, local law enforcement, and residents policed Central Americans in public spaces like parks and workplaces to detain them for deportation. However, many of the newspaper accounts focused on Central American men. This chapter thus reveals the gendered disparity present in the institutional archive and the importance of looking at Central Americans’ personal archives. Women were seldom mentioned and when they were, they were often relegated and confined to the basement. Using the personal archives of my mother and aunts, which for this chapter consist of oral histories and photographs, I turn to the basement. Prior to 1968, paid domestic labor was primarily held by African American women in the region. However, Central American women came to represent a significant portion of this labor category. The basement was the home for many Central American women who came to the DMV and engaged in domestic work, many of them were undocumented. As opposed to understanding the basement as a site of submission, I consider the basement a site from which Central American women leveraged their social resources. It is from the basement that I argue, Central American women used

and expanded what I refer to as intimate illegalities to build community and transcend their spatial confinement. In so doing, Central American women are exceeding the dominion the state has on how they move and use space.

Chapter 4, “Subtle Solidarities,” examines African American-Latino relations through Central American boys. I question how the media represented African American-Latino conflict and the role it had on racializing Central Americans and Latinos. Moreover, I question how Central American boys made sense of their racialization through this very paradigm of conflict. I discursively analyze the mainstream press and the Black press, but also identify elements of the personal archive in the institutional record. Additionally, I examine the oral histories and photographs of Black and brown Central Americans, who grew up in the District in the eighties and nineties. I find that the press constructs Central American youth, and in particular boys, as delinquents that are at odds with Black youth or the wider Black political establishment. Within the press this is made clear on two occasions. First, in the coverage of a junior high school that brought African American and Latina/o youth together, alongside whites and some Asians, in the late 1960s. The second occasion is in the coverage of the Mount Pleasant uprising, where Latinos and their allies took to the streets and destroyed property in protest of police violence. These conflict narratives reinforced a discursive divide that understood Blackness as American and Latinidad as foreign non-Black. I argue Central American youth learned to navigate this binary at times performing a subtle solidarity that communicated an acknowledgement of a shared struggle between Central Americans and African Americans. While the forms of subtle solidarity include gestures and

declarations, they point to the possibilities of more overt political collaborations and mobilizations.

I conclude this project by emphasizing the importance of recognizing Central Americans as agents, attempting to navigate the racist structures they inhabit. *Performing Archives* enables us to grapple with Central Americans with more complexity and upholding their embodied knowledges as important forms of knowledge production. Central Americans in the DMV showed me the importance of relationality and highlight linked pasts and presents between Central Americans and African Americans. Perhaps, more importantly, in Central Americans' performances I see a glimmer of hope for a future in which their lives and the lives of their African American counterparts are valued.

Chapter 1: Performing Archives: To Sight, Cite, and Site U.S. Central Americans



Figure 2 Franklin (left), Fulvia (right), baby girl (front), and Vanessa (back) laugh and play on the couch in their family home in the Shaw neighborhood in Northwest Washington, D.C., circa March 1983.

I shuffled through the stack of photographs Franklin brought to his sister Julieta's house. Franklin, Julieta, and their five other siblings, along with their spouses, children, in-laws, and grandchildren gathered on October 28, 2023 to celebrate 50 years since the Brooks siblings emigrated from Panama City, Panama to the United States, specifically to Washington, D.C. I sat with Franklin who talked me through the images he placed in Ziploc bags for his trip from the District to Prince George's County, where everyone met. When working with Central Americans' personal archives, the number and type of records vary. One Salvadoran American, for instance, told me all he had was the four pictures he showed me digitally and the oral stories he shared. Another Nicaraguan American only shared school and church

documents his mother saved in a folder. The Brooks, on the other hand, had hundreds upon hundreds of records and objects in Julieta's home alone. The records and objects they shared ranged from photographs to government-issued identification, to handwritten notes, and even a set of keys.

This photograph was like many of the Brooks' photographs I perused: taken in and around their family home. It depicted young people sitting on a red couch. There was not a gap between them. They rested in the pockets their bodies created for one another. Their bodies entangled, yet comfortable. Franklin, on the left, grabbed onto his sister Fulvia's shoulder leaning his weight onto her and pushing her forward as she held onto her baby girl, who stared at something to the side, unbothered by the commotion behind her. Meanwhile, preteen Vanessa tucked herself between her older siblings, leaning into Franklin and sitting behind Fulvia. From this position, Vanessa used her fingers to create bunny ears behind Fulvia's head, as if corroborating with Franklin to jokingly annoy their sister. I can imagine the sounds of Caribbean English, Caribbean Spanish, and back to English homegrown in D.C., reverberating from one sibling to another. In between words Franklin and Fulvia laugh with open mouths, illuminating joy from their eyes as they look at the lens. What led to this moment? The monotony of this photographic event leaves more questions than answers. However, it is perhaps the monotonous quality of the image that gives it its resonance.

The way the siblings' arms, backs, abdomens, and hips hold one another as they laugh on the couch is what draws me into the photograph. Their jovial and caring

gestures puncture me.⁷⁶ It reminds me of my own childhood on the couch, where my younger sister and I invented games in boredom, sometimes ending up piled on top of one another. Or now, how my mother's couch in my own childhood home is a resting place for multiple generations. I admit the photograph affectively consumed me, but for more reason than my own familial memories.⁷⁷ I follow visual culture scholar Tina Campt's methodological encouragement to allow affect to open up the "interpretive possibilities of images" that then allow me remain cognizant of the social and historical significance of such a photograph to Central Americans in the DMV.⁷⁸ As bell hooks and Campt have argued in relation to Black family photographs, art historian Deanna Ledezma also adds that Latinx family photographs can have both "personal value and political potency" because they at once visualize belonging and challenge dominant representations.⁷⁹ I therefore begin with what punctures me, but remain cognizant of the significance of the this photograph, along with many other personal archival records, to a cultural and historical account of Central Americans in the D.C. metropolitan area.

This photograph was captured by Franklin's father Delano, who according to several of the siblings was always taking pictures. This one was taken circa March 1983 in their family home, once located in Shaw, a historically African American

⁷⁶ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*.

⁷⁷ In "Feeling Family Photography," Smith warns against the affective projections that specters cast upon family photographs because it can lead the specter to presume more than they actually know and potentially reifying the racist, gendered, class, and colonial ideologies that have underwritten a history of photography.

⁷⁸ Campt, *Listening to Images*, 5.

⁷⁹ Deanna Ledezma, "Regarding Family Photography in Contemporary Latinx Art," *Art Journal* 79, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 80–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2020.1747805>; Tina Campt, *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012); bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1992).

neighborhood in the Northwest quadrant of the District. Their previous home is now almost unrecognizable. The interior walls are layered with bright white paint to compliment the open floor layout, geared to the aesthetics of the gentry, who move into the District and buy multi-million-dollar row homes. There isn't a trace that the Brooks were there. The memories the Brooks created in their childhood home were almost torn down wall-by-wall, if not for their personal archives. Perhaps this is just a side effect of revolving homeowners. However, when gentrification happens with the force it has in Washington, D.C., it has the potential to erase a people's history and place in the city. Therefore, the mere existence of this photograph is significant because, in attesting to family history, it places them in a city that develops, displaces, and erases those who were once there. The photograph reinstates Central Americans in the region, and specifically, in the District. Moreover, it challenges many preconceived notions of who Central Americans are in the region. The Brooks are proud Afro-Panamanians. Altogether, when personal archives are read performatively they help expand what we know about Central Americans, race, and place.

In the larger project, I question how Central Americans, like the Brooks, were racialized in the region. I also ask how they, in turn, performed race and created a sense of belonging in community. As a foundation for the larger project, I draw on theories of relational and regional racial formation, space and place, and performance and performativity, to examine the lives of Central Americans in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. In this chapter, I outline the theoretical paradigms in Central American studies, the significance of examining race and place, identify the ways race is performed, and the contours of the region. Overall, I argue that performing

archives is a methodological and theoretical tool that allows us to grapple with how Central Americans experience race and place at the scale of the body and identify ways they contested and conformed to the social landscape.

Performing archives identifies the embodied knowledges within personal archives. It examines gestures, actions, and sounds. It can be understood to accomplish three central goals. That is, to sight, cite, and site the diaspora.⁸⁰ Generally, sight refers to visual perception. I use sight as a nod to the paradigm of invisibility that remains prominent in Central American studies.⁸¹ Much like the paradigm Arias constructed, my usage of sight expands visual perceptions and refers to a much broader comprehensibility. Sighting Central Americans does not underestimate the potential of opacity, which is an important strategy Central Americans and other minoritized people utilize to resist cognitive and physical confinement.⁸² Rather, to sight the Central American diaspora signifies a commitment to critically comprehend the diaspora for the complex people they are. I take up theories on invisibility, non-existence, and non-belonging in Central American studies and challenge them to consider the multiple contours of race. A performative

⁸⁰ Arturo Arias and Claudia Milian refer to Central America as a site and sight to describe it as a place that has “gained visibility and significance in the United States.” While we use similar terms, I use it within a different context to describe what performing archives can achieve for Central Americans. Arturo Arias and Claudia Milian, “US Central Americans: Representations, Agency and Communities,” *Latino Studies* 11, no. 2 (June 1, 2013): 131, <https://doi.org/10.1057/lst.2013.1>.

⁸¹ Arturo Arias, “Central American- Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the US Latino World,” *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 168–87, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600007>.

⁸² John Brooks argues that opacity and illegibility, that is the inability to see or understand clearly, is a strategy twenty-first century Black artist have taken up in their work to disrupt a fixed meaning of Blackness. See *The Racial Unfamiliar*. Additionally, in studying Mexican and Central American migrants from 2000–2012, Rebecca Schreiber argues that although migrants have had to increasingly represent themselves in a surveillance state, visibility does not have inherent value. See *The Undocumented Everyday*.

analysis of Central Americans' personal archives reveal that we are visible, we do exist, and we belong to one another, as well as Others with whom we form communities founded on shared experiences and knowledges.

Citing Central Americans can be said to respond to U.S. Central Americanist Yajaira Padilla's call of "seeing beyond the dominant."⁸³ To cite Central Americans is to continue a feminist of color tradition and utilize the personal as crucial knowledge.⁸⁴ It is what feminists Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa refer to as "theory in the flesh." As they concisely attest, "A theory in the flesh means one where the physical realities of our lives—our skin color, the land or concrete we grew up on, our sexual longings—all fuse to create a politic born out of necessity."⁸⁵ Our life experiences confronting racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism shapes our political ideologies, but also, as E. Patrick Johnson reminds us, how we act, how and what we speak, and how we move.⁸⁶ Our life experiences are thus embodied, meaning they inform how we think and how we act. In this context, citing Central Americans refers to using their theories in the flesh, as represented in their personal archives. While I focus, in part, on the processes of racialization, I highlight how Central Americans navigate their racialized experiences at the scale of the body through quotidian performances. Citing Central Americans thus enables us to exceed or

⁸³ Yajaira M. Padilla, *From Threatening Guerrillas to Forever Illegals: US Central Americans and the Cultural Politics of Non-Belonging*, First edition, Latinx: The Future Is Now (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2022).

⁸⁴ Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa, eds., *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, Fourth edition (Albany: State University of New York (SUNY) Press, 2015); Luz del Alba Acevedo, ed., *Telling to Live: Latina Feminist Testimonios*, Latin America Otherwise (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001).

⁸⁵ Moraga and Anzaldúa, *This Bridge Called My Back*, 19.

⁸⁶ E. Patrick Johnson, "'Quare' Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother," *Text and Performance Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (January 2001): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10462930128119>.

complicate the dominant representations of Central Americans that confine our understanding of diaspora to simplified narratives.

Siting Central Americans follows the examples set by those at the intersection of race and ethnic studies and geography. I emphasize the significance of space and place to understanding the Central American diaspora's racialization. In sighting Central Americans, I locate them in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. To date, most scholarship on U.S. Central Americans is situated within a California context. The Washington region has a different historical formation, political economy, and, in effect, relationship to immigration than California. And while the DMV is situated in—and deeply influenced by—the South, it is also an international metropolis. The way race has been historically understood in the region plays a significant role in how folks in the area come to understand Central Americans and how Central Americans created their identities in their new home. Siting Central Americans also refers to locating the alternative spaces Central Americans' produce through their quotidian performances. In their usage of language and sound, kin networks, and gestures, Central Americans produce alternative geographies.

Sighting, citing, and siting Central Americans coalesce in reading personal archives performatively. Put differently, performatively examining personal archives enables us to peel the layers required to understand Central Americans' racialized experiences and racial performances within the specificity of space and place. Altogether, performing archives allows me to consider how the Central American body is ascribed racial meaning and how the Central American, in turn, act as they make a home in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. If not for anyone else, this

multi-prong framework highlights Central Americans lives in Washington metropolitan area from the perspective of Central Americans in the region, for Central Americans in the region.

On U.S. Central American (in)visibility, (non-)existence, and (non-)belonging

Central America is the name used to refer to the thin strip of land, or the isthmus, connecting North and South America across the Atlantic and Pacific Ocean.⁸⁷ Maritza Cárdenas argues that the notion of Central America and, thereby, Central Americans emerges from discourse that cultivates a shared identification with the isthmus.⁸⁸ Cárdenas outlines how in the aftermath of independence from Spain, this discourse consolidated, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica into “Central America.” However, in the diaspora, Central America has come to include Belize and Panama, albeit marginally.⁸⁹ Central American studies, a subfield of Latinx studies, has largely argued that U.S. Central Americans are structurally and culturally excluded from their countries of origin, the U.S., and Latinidad.⁹⁰ The framework of exclusion has brought much needed attention to the plight and contributions of Central Americans in the U.S., reshaping the field of Latinx studies. However, I move away from using the framework of exclusion that has historically

⁸⁷ Ana Patricia Rodríguez does a precise geological reading of the isthmus and how its topography is linked with its position politically and economically throughout history. See Ana Patricia Rodríguez, *Dividing the Isthmus: Central American Transnational Histories, Literatures, and Cultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2009), 4–7.

⁸⁸ Maritza E. Cárdenas, *Constituting Central American-Americans: Transnational Identities and the Politics of Dislocation*, Latinidad: Transnational Cultures in the United States (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2018).

⁸⁹ Cárdenas.

⁹⁰ Following Frances Aparicio’s definition of Latinidad, I understand and use Latinidad as a discursive construction that attempts to explore and encapsulate the “convergences and divergences” of (post)colonial subjectivities held among those with origins in Latin America and parts of the Caribbean. See Frances R Aparicio, “Jennifer as Selena: Rethinking Latinidad in Media and Popular Culture,” *Latino Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2003): 90–105, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.lst.8600016>.

shaped U.S. Central American studies because it does not allow us to grapple with how multiple systems of domination have shaped the lives of Central Americans in distinct ways, nor how Central Americans have implemented practices to withstand their marginalization and forge belonging.

Cultural critic Arturo Arias was instrumental in establishing the theoretical foundations of U.S. Central American studies. In his seminal work, “Central American-Americans: Invisibility, Power and Representation in the U.S. Latino World,” he questions why U.S. Central Americans have remained invisible in the public imaginary despite their large diasporic presence in the country. Arias describes invisibility as that which is “unpresentable.”⁹¹ Therefore, invisibility is not only concerned with the ocular. Rather, it means to not be comprehensible—visually or sonically. Arias argues that U.S. Central American invisibility is the effect of coloniality.⁹² That is, Central Americans remain invisible because of the persistence of colonial hierarchies Europeans imposed on the people they colonized. Coloniality took the form of historical Mexican dominance in the isthmus, contemporary forms of state-sanctioned violence, and for many in the diaspora, navigating illegality in the U.S. To minimally preserve themselves, Arias asserts, U.S. Central Americans adopt a “strategic non-identity,” denying the possibility for an identity politic to emerge.⁹³

⁹¹ Arias, “Central American- Americans,” 169.

⁹² Following the work of Anibal Quijano, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, and Yomaira Figueroa-Vasquez, I understand coloniality to be the ideologies, hierarchies, and practices that were implemented during colonialism and continue in slightly altered forms well after formal colonialism end. See Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Neplantla: Views from South* 1, no. 3 (2000): 533–80; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “ON THE COLONIALITY OF BEING: Contributions to the Development of a Concept,” *Cultural Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (March 2007): 240–70, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601162548>; Yomaira C. Figueroa-Vásquez, *Decolonizing Diasporas: Radical Mappings of Afro-Atlantic Literature* (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2020).

⁹³ Arias, “Central American- Americans,” 181–183.

This manifest in non-Black Central Americans “passing” as Mexican. A decade later, in 2013, Arias and Claudia Milian revisit the trope of invisibility, questioning how Central Americans become visible or invisible in the U.S.⁹⁴ They maintain that Central Americans remain invisible. However, this time it is not because Central Americans have not asserted themselves into the U.S. or within Latinidad. Rather, according to Arias and Milian, Central Americans remain invisible because there is a lack of historical contextualization that explains the precarious migrations to, and vulnerable positions in, the U.S.⁹⁵

The framework of invisibility is important to articulating an aspect of the Central American experience as it relates to their position within the U.S. and Latinidad. However, it is also vital to ask who U.S. Central Americans are invisible to? And how are they invisible? For example, Elana Zilberg demonstrates how young Salvadoran immigrants in Los Angeles were hyper visible in the eyes of law enforcement, resulting in increased policing, detention, and deportation.⁹⁶ Similarly, in the Washington region, Central Americans are in many ways hyper visible through the latter half of the twentieth century as undocumented, poor, laborers. They were policed by law enforcement, immigration enforcement, employers, and other residents. Vielka Cecilia Hoy, on the other hand, says that Black Central Americans are invisible on the isthmus.⁹⁷ In this sense, she agrees with Arias and Milian’s claim,

⁹⁴ Arias and Milian, “US Central Americans.”

⁹⁵ Arias and Milian, 142.

⁹⁶ Elana Zilberg, “Fools Banished from the Kingdom: Remapping Geographies of Gang Violence between the Americas (Los Angeles and San Salvador),” *American Quarterly* 56, no. 3 (2004): 759–79.

⁹⁷ Vielka Cecilia Hoy, “Negotiating Among Invisibilities: Tales of Afro-Latinidades in the United States,” in Miriam Jiménez Román and Juan Flores, eds., *The Afro-Latin@ Reader: History and Culture in the United States* (Durham [NC]: Duke University Press, 2010), 429.

though with greater nuance in regard to race. On the isthmus, Black Central Americans were made invisible under mestizo nationalism. Although it has temporal and spatial variations, mestizo nationalism asserts the nation's identity and culture to be mestizo.⁹⁸ Meanwhile, Black and Indigenous people are continuously excluded from full citizenship in Central America. Hoy argues that Black Central Americans in the U.S.

are no longer invisible; rather they are visible, in the ways that African Americans are racialized in the United States and the West Coast in particular: non-Spanish-speaking and from the United States South. They continue to be invisible as Latin@s, because they are separate from the ways the Mexican identity is formed. And of course they continue to be invisible as Afro-Latin@s, as this identification hardly exists in the West Coast.⁹⁹

Hoy demonstrates that “invisibility” varies depending on how a person is racialized and in relation to specific ethno-racial groups in specific places. As a Black Central American in California, she was understood as African American and did not fit the conception of Latinidad because it was defined by Mexicans. However, not all regions understand Latinidad through Mexicans. I return to this point on the importance of race and place at length in the next section. For now, it suffices to say that Zilberg and Hoy help demonstrate that Central American opacity is determined by the racial meanings ascribed to their bodies at various scales—whether that be the nation-states they immigrate from and to, the institutions they encounter (e.g. law enforcement or immigration enforcement), and approximate racialized groups.

⁹⁸ Juliet Hooker, “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion: Race, Ethnicity and Multicultural Citizenship in Latin America,” *Journal of Latin American Studies* 37, no. 2 (2005): 16.

⁹⁹ Vielka Cecilia Hoy, “Negotiating Among Invisibilities: Tales of Afro-Latinidades in the United States,” in Jiménez Román and Flores, *The Afro-Latin@ Reader*, 429.

Susan Bibler Coutin theorized U.S. Central American exclusion under spatial terms with her concept of “spaces of nonexistence.” In her ethnographic research on undocumented Salvadorans, Coutin theorizes “spaces of nonexistence” as being formed through the physical presence of Salvadoran immigrants in the U.S. and the inability to obtain legal protection under the law as non-citizens.¹⁰⁰ Under this spatial concept, Coutin posits that the only way of existing in space are through legal means. In so doing, she suggests that the state is responsible for producing nonbeings and beings. However, as Nelson Maldonado Torres states, “in modernity, what one finds is not a single model of human being, but relations of power that create a world with masters and slaves.”¹⁰¹ In other words, the lack of legal protection many Central Americans experience in the U.S. does not render them inhuman, but a human being within a matrix of power relations. Second-class citizens and non-citizens continue to exist despite their legal status.¹⁰² While I understand that “spaces of nonexistence” names the exclusionary legal space undocumented Central Americans move in and out of while in the U.S., I refuse the all-encompassing role that is placed on the state in producing the human. Solely relying on state law to affirm existence denies all the ways in which undocumented Central Americans, and otherwise, insist on being in space, especially amidst repressive and oppressive regimes in the isthmus and the U.S. As geographer Katherine McKittrick argues, subordinated and minoritized communities produce alternative geographies.¹⁰³ Following McKittrick, I assert that

¹⁰⁰ Susan Bibler Coutin, *Legalizing Moves: Salvadoran Immigrants’ Struggle for U.S. Residency* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), 30–34.

¹⁰¹ Maldonado-Torres, “ON THE COLONIALITY OF BEING,” 251.

¹⁰² Here, I am thinking about citizenship as what Evelyn Nakano Glenn refers to as “formal citizenship,” meaning that it is endowed by a law policy belonging to a political territory.

¹⁰³ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*.

U.S. Central Americans produced space through everyday acts in which they navigated racial landscapes and, along the way, forged community. In other words, as U.S. Central Americans lived their racialized realities, they engaged in practices alongside community that fostered belonging.

Yajaira Padilla critically considers Central Americans' ability to belong in the U.S. Building and diverging from Coutin and Arias, respectively, Padilla develops a theory of "non-belonging." Non-belonging implies an exclusion from an identity and space. However, Padilla adds that "non-belonging" does not preclude the possibilities of being a part of something.¹⁰⁴ Through an analysis of media depictions of U.S. Central Americans and different forms of cultural productions by Central Americans, Padilla argues U.S. Central Americans are not only excluded but their belonging is experienced by way of exclusion. Put differently, Central Americans find belonging among one another in their exclusion. Non-belonging is therefore a critical space from which U.S. Central Americans can critique hegemonic modes of being a part of a greater entity. Central Americans belonging within non-belonging demonstrate a counternarrative. Padilla provides an astute example of this critical form of non-belonging, in a poem from Javier Zamora's *Unaccompanied*, where the narrator shares that Chino, a Salvadoran gang member, protects the narrator from immigration enforcement.¹⁰⁵ In his expanded memoir, *Solito*, Zamora consistently describes Chino as family—sometimes a brother and sometimes a father—during their journey across Guatemala, Mexico, and the U.S. Chino and Zamora were more than just gang

¹⁰⁴ Padilla, *From Threatening Guerrillas to Forever Illegals*, 5, 29–30.

¹⁰⁵ Padilla, 43.

members and “illegals” to one another. Zamora cared for and protected one another during their immigration journey. This is among the type of social relations and human complexity I hope to illuminate in my work. I aim to highlight how Central Americans survived the racist landscape they traversed and in doing so created a sense of belonging in community.

While Padilla examines dominant and counternarratives of Central Americans via media and cultural production, I rely on a different set of methods that allow me to grapple with racial differences and multiple forms of belonging in the quotidian. I tend to how Central Americans were regionally racialized through the dominant narratives espoused by the media and politicians and highlight Central Americans’ intricacies through performative readings of personal archives that represent their day-to-day life. In focusing on the day-to-day through personal archives, alongside the specificity of place, I challenge hegemonic understandings of U.S. Central American belonging in space. I find that belonging is not only predicated on Central American exclusion alone. Rather, it is also dependent on the racial, ethnic, class, gendered, and numerous other divergences embedded within this pan-ethnic and transnational identifier. I come to understand that U.S. Central American belonging is found relationally through shared knowledges established across time and space among people with interconnected histories in the Washington region.¹⁰⁶ As Édouard Glissant put it, “Relation is not made up of things that are foreign but of shared

¹⁰⁶ Édouard Glissant conceives of relationality as a shared knowledge established in the creation of power relations throughout modernity. While Glissant conceives of relationality in the Black Atlantic, I consider how relationality and belonging is established in the Washington region. See Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, trans. Betsy Wing, n.d.

knowledge.”¹⁰⁷ While for Glissant the shared knowledge derives from the middle passage endured by enslaved African people, I question the shared knowledges among and between U.S. Central Americans, other Latinxs, and African Americans in the Washington region. I find U.S. Central Americans identified ways to establish belonging among one another and Others, with whom their histories converged and diverged, in and beyond the Washington region.

This project takes the position of recognizing the ways in which U.S. Central Americans are included and excluded both in cultural representations and structurally. For example, Central Americans are represented as undocumented but not represented as Black. Simultaneously, I also call attention to the ways in which U.S. Central Americans wield their power and agency to navigate their inclusions and exclusions across different scales of the nation, region, as well as spaces determined by race, ethnicity, class, and gender. This could look like, for instance, adopting African American Vernacular English or establishing a kin network with members who can travel internationally.¹⁰⁸ I find that in navigating these different scales, U.S. Central Americans create space for themselves in and beyond the local landscape. Moving away from the static framework of exclusion, allows me to trace the layered and shifting power differences among a multi-racial and multi-ethnic diaspora from within and in relation to other minoritized groups in the area. Overall, I aim to offer a

¹⁰⁷ Glissant, 9.

¹⁰⁸ The terminology used to describe the English practiced by African Americans has evolved over time. I choose to use African American Vernacular English to emphasize the ethno-racial group it originates with, its everyday spoken format, and its variation from Mainstream American English. See Jennifer Bloomquist et al., “The Sociolinguistic Construction of African American Language,” in *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language*, ed. Jennifer Bloomquist, Lisa J. Green, and Sonja L. Lanehart (Oxford University Press, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795390.013.63>.

depiction of U.S. Central Americans that honors the many ways Central Americans live their lives here.

Relationally Racializing Central Americans in Place

One of my primary questions is: how were Central Americans racialized in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area? To understand how U.S. Central Americans were racialized, I rely on sociologists Omi and Winant's theory of racial formation. The theory of racial formation understands race to be a category that is embedded with meaning through specific historical, social, and political processes that bear with it material implications.¹⁰⁹ Racial meaning is ascribed onto groups of people, embodied practices, or social positions through a process of racialization. Racialization begins with racial projects, which are representational or structural measures that interpret, represent, and explain racial difference.¹¹⁰ Racial projects, like segregation and illegality, make race a social category embedded with meaning and material difference that determine how people live their lives. For example, a racial project like segregation determines where a person can live or go to school, leading to the notion that some people come from "good" schools and neighborhoods, where others come from "bad" schools and neighborhoods. Similarly, the racial project of illegality determines who can immigrate, how they immigrate, and under what conditions, determining their immigration status and class mobility, leading to the idea that some immigrants are poor "illegals," while others are "good" immigrants.

¹⁰⁹ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.

¹¹⁰ Omi and Winant, 125.

Through racialization these meanings and material differences are linked to groups of people with supposedly distinct physical characteristics, as well as embodied practices, and social positions. Discourse, as a linguistic and visual means of representing a subject and sequentially knowing a subject, is a technology of racialization because it provides the rhetorical and ocular evidence of otherness within dominant modes of representations. Discourse, in turn, justifies political and economic structural differences, helping create more material inequalities between racial groups. Race, is therefore, a signifier that is embedded with meaning and material difference. However, this meaning and material difference is not created in isolation. Natalia Molina and others have added that racial formation always occurs in relation to others across space and time.¹¹¹ That is, the meaning that is ascribed to one group, such as U.S. Central Americans, is a part of a “mutually constitutive process.”¹¹² In short, relational racial formation asks us to consider “how, when, where, and to what extent” racial projects—whether representational or structural—converge and diverge among racialized group.¹¹³

Nationally, U.S. Central Americans have been racialized in relation to Mexicans as poor, brown, Spanish-speaking, “illegal aliens, despite their racial heterogeneity and varying legal statuses.”¹¹⁴ This racialization occurred structurally

¹¹¹ Natalia Molina, Daniel HoSang, and Ramón A. Gutiérrez, eds., *Relational Formations of Race: Theory, Method, and Practice* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2019).

¹¹² Natalia Molina, *How Race Is Made in America: Immigration, Citizenship, and the Historical Power of Racial Scripts* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 3.

¹¹³ Molina, 3.

¹¹⁴ Numerous scholars have discussed the racialization of Mexicans. See Nicholas De Genova and Ana Y. Ramos-Zayas, *Latino Crossings: Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, and the Politics of Race and Citizenship* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America*, Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 2004); Nicholas De Genova and Duke University Press, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and “Illegality” in Mexican Chicago* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2005),

through the racial project of illegality, wherein immigration policy post-1965 made it more difficult for Latin Americans and Caribbeans to obtain authorization to immigrate to the U.S. While Central Americans have immigrated to the U.S. since the nineteenth century, more Central Americans fled the isthmus due to civil wars, political conflict, and related economic instability in the latter half of the twentieth century. Due to U.S. foreign policy and the country's support of right-wing regimes in the isthmus, the U.S. denied Central Americans asylum and made them "illegal aliens." Through the criminalization of illegality, Central Americans were also detained and deported at alarming rates. Visual and linguistic discourse pertaining to Central Americans as "illegal" was circulated and used by the media, politicians, and government bureaucrats, making illegality one way of knowing the emerging diaspora. Those represented as "illegal aliens" were often people with dark features and olive to brown complexion. They were perceived to not belong in other known racial categories such as Black, Asian, or white. Individuals and institutions used established perceptions of Mexicans as poor, brown, Spanish-speaking, and "illegal" to racialize Central Americans.¹¹⁵ In sum, dominant discourse, structural exclusion from legality, and the similarities to Mexicans, helped racialize Central Americans accordingly.

While Central Americans were racialized in relation to Mexicans nationally, a regional analysis depicts Central Americans slightly different. Central Americans

<https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822387091>; Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*.

¹¹⁵ We can also come to understand Central American racialization in relation to Mexicans through Natalia Molina's concept of racial scripts, which are how individuals and institutions use established perceptions and policies towards one racialized group to draw similarities or differences with another racialized group. See Molina, *How Race Is Made in America*, 6–9.

were still hegemonically marked as brown, Spanish-speaking, “illegal aliens,” however, it was done in contrast to African Americans. At the same time, Central Americans were also deemed a social problem in similar ways to African Americans, bringing them in closer relation to one another. Central Americans were distinguished from African Americans through questions of language and citizenship. At the same time, however, they were also conceived of as problems together and for one another. Geographers at the intersection of relational race and ethnic studies highlight the importance of place in relational racial formation. Cheng, Guerrero, and Carpio, among others contend racial formation occurs not only relationally, but also regionally.¹¹⁶ These scholars argue that race is informed by the political economy that make a region, the racial ideologies that seek to maintain the status quo, and the diverse group of people who call the place home. Taking inspiration from their work, I question not only how Central Americans are racialized regionally, but also in relation to local populations. Particularly, I turn to Clyde Woods and Guerrero who draw attention to the way a region’s hegemonic bloc uses racial ideologies to maintain domination.¹¹⁷ The Washington region has a distinct political economy and racial history that effects how Central Americans were racialized. When Central Americans arrived in Washington, they came to a predominantly African American and white landscape. By the 1960s there were growing populations from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia, yet African Americans were historically the largest ethnic minority and significantly shaped the place many

¹¹⁶ Cheng, *The Changs Next Door to the Diazes*; Guerrero, *Nuevo South*; Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*.

¹¹⁷ Clyde Adrian Woods, *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, The Haymarket Series (London ; New York: Verso, 1998); Guerrero, *Nuevo South*.

Central Americans came to call home. In this way, my work intervenes in Central American studies, which has largely placed Central Americans in California and in racial relation to Mexicans.

Márquez argues that in much of the South, Latinas/os were racialized in proximity to Blackness.¹¹⁸ It was not a matter of whether someone was white or non-white, rather it was a question of Black or non-Black.¹¹⁹ Márquez demonstrates that in the South non-Black Latinas/os were granted provisional whiteness. Provisional whiteness meant that non-Black Latinas/os were given white privileges like attending white schools and living in white neighborhoods, but within those spaces most did not fully pass as white.¹²⁰ Their non-whiteness was readily identified based on their corporeality or embodied practices, such as language. Márquez's work therefore makes clear how non-Black Latinas/os were structurally admitted into whiteness, but in many day-to-day interactions their non-whiteness was signaled.

Expanding on Marquez's contribution, I posit that the way Central Americans were racialized in the Washington region was always contingent upon the racialization of African Americans. To various degrees, Central Americans were compared and contrasted with African Americans in a way that is different from the elite D.C. area Latinas/os Márquez discusses in her work. Many Central Americans in the region occupied working-class or a working-poor economic position that significantly shaped how whites and African Americans racialized them. For example, Central American immigrants were positioned as a significant economic

¹¹⁸ Márquez, *Making the Latino South*.

¹¹⁹ Márquez.

¹²⁰ Márquez, 3–6, 9–10.

threat to working-class African Americans. Moreover, I find that while whites managed the porosity of whiteness on an interpersonal scale, African Americans also managed the porosity of Blackness interpersonally. For instance, Afro-Central Americans were, at times, marginalized for speaking Spanish by their African American peers, demonstrating the hegemony of Anglophone Blackness. I do not intend to imply that Central Americans, or more broadly Latinas/os, were oppressed by African Americans. Instead, I suggest that examining Central American racialization in Washington allows us to see how dynamic power relations are, especially among people of color. Here, I understand power as heterogenous, extending from institutions to social life.¹²¹ There is the possibility of powering over, meaning to dominate and control resources, and the power to resist, whether socially or in institutions. I unravel how diverse people leverage power over one another, as well as leverage power to resist.

Despite Central Americans being hegemonically racialized as poor, brown, Spanish-speaking, “illegal aliens,” and generally criminals, Central Americans are a multi-racial and multi-ethnic diasporic group with a range of languages and legal statuses. Afro-Latinx Studies and Critical Latinx Indigeneities helps me grapple with the multiplicity of power that is exercised within and against diasporic groups. Scholars like Maylei Blackwell, Floridalma Boj Lopez, Luis Urrieta, and Juan Herrera, for example, demonstrate how brown Indigenous people are interpellated as Latinxs because of the hegemonic understandings of Latinidad.¹²² Yet brown

¹²¹ Randall H. McGuire and Robert Paynter, eds., *The Archaeology of Inequality*, Social Archaeology (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass., U.S.A: B. Blackwell, 1991).

¹²² Maylei Blackwell, Floridalma Boj Lopez, and Luis Urrieta, “Special Issue: Critical Latinx Indigeneities,” *Latino Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2017): 126–37, [https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0064-](https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0064-61)

Indigenous people still encounter discrimination from non-Indigenous Latinxs.¹²³ For example, many non-Indigenous Central Americans look down upon Indigenous Central Americans speaking native languages in public. Moreover, Pablo José López Oro illustrates how the Afro-Indigenous Garínagu of Central America are never quite interpellated as Black because they are Latinx; nor Indigenous, Central American, or Latinx because they are Black.¹²⁴

The racist ideologies that plague Central Americans emerge in the isthmus and are further complicated when Central Americans come to Washington. Within the context of Central Americans in the DMV, Yomaira Figueroa Vasquez's "cartographies of racialization" is helpful. Cartographies of racialization asserts that anti-Blackness and specific colonial histories shape the understanding of race in former colonies and in contemporary metropolitan centers that diasporic subjects inhabit.¹²⁵ This theory reveals how "unfixed" racial and ethnic experiences are when moving across space.¹²⁶ Cartographies of racialization helps explain how an afro-descendent Guatemalan woman is considered to be a dark-skin Ladina among other Guatemalans but is considered Black in the DMV. That is, until she speaks Spanish, during which her Blackness, and the Blackness of Afro-Latinxs more broadly, is brought into question because it does not fit the conceptions of what it means to be

0; Juan Herrera, "Racialized Illegality: The Regulation of Informal Labor and Space," *Latino Studies* 14, no. 3 (October 2016): 320–43, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-016-0007-1>.

¹²³ Blackwell, Boj Lopez, and Urrieta, "Special Issue"; Herrera, "Racialized Illegality."

¹²⁴ Pablo José López Oro, "Ni de Aquí, Ni de Allá: Garífuna Subjectivities and the Diasporic Politics of Belonging," in Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, Jennifer A. Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel, eds., *Afro-Latin@s in Movement: Critical Approaches to Blackness and Transnationalism in the Americas*, Afro-Latin@ Diasporas (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

¹²⁵ Figueroa-Vásquez, *Decolonizing Diasporas*, 9–12.

¹²⁶ Figueroa-Vásquez, 9–12.

Black in the region.¹²⁷ Cartographies of racialization also helps explain how an Indigenous Salvadoran is identified as Latinx in the DMV. However, their Latinidad and Salvadoranness is degraded by her Salvadoran compatriots when they hear her speak Nahuat because of anti-Indigenous sentiments in Latin America. In short, Figueroa Vasquez's theory allows us to trace the converging and diverging ways people are racialized, depending on modalities such as place, phenotype, language, class, and immigration status.

Furthermore, U.S. Central American racialization is complicated by the hierarchical relationship between the United States and Central America. While the U.S. did not colonize Central America formally, it did exert imperial power and influence, establishing a hierarchy in which the U.S. reigned over Central America.¹²⁸ In this relationship, the United States determined immigration status and organized labor within the nation, generally relegating Central Americans to precarious and low-wage manual and service labor and illegality. It is through this hierarchical relationship that Central Americans are often viewed as “job-stealers” in the Washington area. Therefore, the racialization of Central Americans in Washington must contend not only with understandings of race locally and in the isthmus, but also with the hierarchical relationship between the U.S. and Central America. To map the relational racialization that occurs in the DMV, I have to critically engage with

¹²⁷ As Johnathan Rosa and Nelson Flores have argued, language makes race. See Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, “Decolonization, Language, and Race in Applied Linguistics and Social Justice,” *Applied Linguistics* 42, no. 6 (December 27, 2021): 1162–67, <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amab062>.

¹²⁸ Keri Vacanti Brondo, *Land Grab: Green Neoliberalism, Gender, and Garifuna Resistance in Honduras* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2013); Jason M. Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America*, 1. pbk. pr, *The United States in the World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2013); Michael E Donoghue and Project Muse, *Borderland on the Isthmus Race, Culture, and the Struggle for the Canal Zone* (London: Duke University Press, 2014), <https://muse.jhu.edu/book/69098/>.

Central Americans' and African Americans' multi-faceted relationship with one another. This relationship is not a simple hierarchy, but a dynamic power relation that is constantly shifting between people and place.

Washington Cartographies

The Washington, D.C., metropolitan area is a region composed of the District of Columbia, counties in Northern Virginia, and parts of Maryland. The region is also known as the DMV. I came of age in the region in the 2000s and I heard “the DMV” announced all over local hip-hop radio, as well as rap and go-go songs.¹²⁹ It demarcated the area that was encompassed by the Capital Beltway and the inter-state crossings my family and I made for work and leisure on a regular basis. Overall, the DMV resonated with me because it was home. However, home is also a produced space. And, how my family and I ended up calling this place home is not coincidental. To better understand the Washington metropolitan area as a place where Central Americans came to live and be racialized, I answer how this place was produced and why Central Americans immigrated to the area.

Economic geographers emphasize the role of political economy in producing space by identifying the role of the state and business elite. They trace how the elite use and move the means of production, and locate the effects it has on the working-class.¹³⁰ I use geographer Neil Smith's definition of a region as an interconnected

¹²⁹ Calling out the DMV was often used in rap and go-go, a local genre of music, to express a form of belonging and unity across counties. This expression was also coming about amidst increased gentrification in DC, during which many Washingtonians had to move to neighboring counties. For more on the emergence of the “DMV,” see Britt Peterson, “Who’s Responsible for Naming Greater Washington the ‘DMV?’ - Washingtonian,” *Washingtonian*, July 6, 2015, <https://www.washingtonian.com/2015/07/06/whos-responsible-for-naming-greater-washington-the-dmv/>.

¹³⁰ Neil Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics: Homeless Vehicles and the Production of

economic network of employers and employees producing, supplying, and distributing goods and services to conceptualize the metropolitan area as a region woven together through the political economy of the federal government and its respective domestic and foreign affairs.¹³¹ Put differently, the Washington metropolitan area is interconnected because the federal government is the central economic engine that is dedicated to administering and funding initiatives domestically and internationally. The federal government is a primary employer but also produces auxiliary employment sectors such as subcontracting, service work, construction, and real estate, as well as retail and restaurants. While the federal government is not the only employer, it drives additional economic activity and entwines the space together. This makes the DMV a very white-collar region that depends heavily on low-paying service work, construction, and—to a different effect—restaurant and retail. Although the federal government continues to expand as an economic engine and the region continues to grow, I focus on the space within the Capital Beltway. That is, the District and the inner-ring suburbs of Montgomery County and Prince George’s County in Maryland, as well as the City of Alexandria, Arlington County, and Fairfax County in Virginia.¹³² I focus on these specific

Geographical Scale,” *Social Text*, no. 33 (1992): 55–81, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466434>; David Harvey, *Spaces of Global Capitalism* (London ; New York, NY: Verso, 2006); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California*, American Crossroads 21 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Juan D. De Lara, *Inland Shift: Race, Space, and Capital in Southern California* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018).

¹³¹ Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics,” 73.

¹³² Technically the City of Falls Church is also within the Capital Beltway. The City of Falls Church neighbors but is different from Falls Church in Fairfax County. It distinguished itself from Falls Church in Fairfax county to keep African Americans out of its political boundaries. Therefore, historic African American settlements in Falls Church, Fairfax County remain directly outside of the City of Falls Church borders. The City of Falls Church continues to be one of the wealthiest and whitest cities in Virginia. Although it is home to the Eden Center, a strip mall and cultural center transformed mostly by Vietnamese refugees in the late-twentieth century, plans for development in 2024 threaten its future.

municipalities because they were developed alongside the growth of the federal government and were primary destinations for Central Americans and other immigrants between 1960 and 2000.

As the nation's capital region, the DMV operates at various scales, which is significant to understanding how Central Americans came to call this place home and how they in turn were racialized. I borrow my understanding of scale from Smith, who defines scale as differential spatial ranges in which power struggles occur.¹³³ Scales are nested and include the body, home, community, urban space, region, and global boundaries.¹³⁴ Washington operates at the international, national, regional, and local scale because it is where power is negotiated and arranged. This includes deciding to place differential value across spaces and places. According to Ruth Wilson Gilmore, this is how racism takes place, through "a deadly dealing displacement of difference into hierarchies that organize relations within and between the planet's sovereign political territories."¹³⁵ In other words, Washington is where deadly and life-giving decisions are made for populations within the U.S. and across the globe. It is where politicians and bureaucrats have justified and executed the stealing of Indigenous lands, chattel slavery, and racial segregation, as well as international coup d'états and military occupations. In this sense, racism is exercised by the U.S. from Washington. Importantly, the decisions to place differential value on

See <https://justice.tougaloo.edu/sundowntown/falls-church-va/#:~:text=Not%20a%20sundown%20town%2C%20but,of%20the%20town%20by%2020%25>. And <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fairfaxcountyvirginia,fallchurchcityvirginia/PST045222>

¹³³ Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics," 66.

¹³⁴ Smith, "Contours of a Spatialized Politics."

¹³⁵ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, "Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference: Notes on Racism and Geography," *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 2002): 16, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0033-0124.00310>.

places, spaces, and by effect people, at the international and national scale have local implications. In what follows, I illustrate how the decision to expand the federal government, along with the nation's growing political influence during the Cold War, and the national movement for Civil Rights produced a shift in the economy, developed the suburbs, and brought about increased immigration from the global South, and specifically from Central America, between 1960 and 2000 to the DMV.

American imperialism was foundational to developing and populating the Washington metropolitan area.¹³⁶ That is to say, that the political, economic, and military influence of the U.S. produced the region spatially. The U.S. emerged as an imperial power almost immediately after its inception with foreign policy such as the Monroe Doctrine. However, after World War II, the US expanded its influence and saw itself responsible for a global capitalism shaped in their vision.¹³⁷ Anything that was a threat to this was an enemy of the United States. Internationally, this brought the country into a series of anti-communist proxy wars throughout the global South. This role on the global stage created more jobs in the region and developed the city along with the inner suburbs.¹³⁸

Through spatial analysis, Andrew Friedman examines the role U.S. empire played in the suburbs of Northern Virginia—namely, Arlington County, the City of Alexandria, and Fairfax County. As the home to the Pentagon, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), and many bureaucrats and politicians, Friedman argues

¹³⁶ On a national scale, Juan Gonzalez makes a similar argument. He argues that Latinx migration to the United States is the effect of American imperialism. See Juan González, *Harvest of Empire: A History of Latinos in America*, Rev. ed (New York: Penguin Books, 2011).

¹³⁷ Friedman, *Covert Capital*, 2.

¹³⁸ Gale, *Washington, D.C.*, 11–12, 21.

that Northern Virginia was the site from which American imperialism was exercised.¹³⁹ Put differently, Northern Virginia was where bureaucrats and politicians decided and enacted covert international missions, occupations, and wars to meet the political, economic, and military interests of the United States.¹⁴⁰ As such, Friedman adds that Northern Virginia became a “safe house” for American bureaucrats and politicians, as well as their international counterparts, who together orchestrated US imperialism in nations throughout Latin America, the Caribbean, Middle East, and Asia.¹⁴¹

While Friedman focuses on Northern Virginia, I add that the District, along with Maryland’s inner suburbs are also a place from which American imperialism is exercised. In addition to both places being home to countless bureaucrats and politicians, the District hosts 174 embassies with their diplomats and staff. In addition to the obvious federal institutions involved in international affairs, the Department of State, Department of Defense, and CIA, the U.S. Agency for International Development and the World Bank are also located in the District. Furthermore, the National Security Agency is located directly outside of Prince George’s and Montgomery County in Maryland. And as the federal government came to rely on subcontractors to help carry out defensive initiatives, these private companies largely dispersed into the office buildings in the suburbs of Northern Virginia and Maryland.

Altogether, I build on Friedman’s argument to suggest that the entirety of the Washington region was a “safe house” for American bureaucrats and politicians, as

¹³⁹ Andrew Friedman defines imperialism as “a system of scope, hierarchy, appropriation, and domination.” See Friedman, *Covert Capital*, 8.

¹⁴⁰ Friedman, *Covert Capital*.

¹⁴¹ Friedman, 22–28.

well as their international counterparts. However, along with the elite came those poorer refugees and immigrants who were negatively impacted by U.S. imperialism.¹⁴² Some of these migrants worked for the elite. As Cadaval, Repak, and Centeno-Meléndez note, American and Latin American political elite were the earliest employers of working-class migrants.¹⁴³ These migrants were primarily women working in the domestic service sector.¹⁴⁴ Other migrants came to the region because they were, to several degrees, connected to this group of women and/or learned about the economic opportunities that existed in the region through their social networks. In short, the imperial relationship between the U.S. and places like Central America, led to the increase of immigrants and refugees populating Washington and its suburbs from the mid- to late-twentieth century.

While the U.S. intervened in world affairs and expanded the federal government, there were important domestic movements that also shifted the region's economy. Repak points to the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibited discriminatory practices based on race, color, religion, gender, nationality, and disability, as a force behind who performs low-wage service labor in the region.¹⁴⁵ With the Civil Rights Act and the broader social movement that sought out equality across lines of difference, Repak claims more white women entered the waged workforce and African American women left domestic service jobs for clerical

¹⁴² Friedman, *Covert Capital*.

¹⁴³ Olivia Cadaval, *Creating a Latino Identity in the Nation's Capital: The Latino Festival*, Latino Communities (New York: Garland Pub, 1998); Repak, *Waiting on Washington*; Centeno-Meléndez, "Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s."

¹⁴⁴ Repak, *Waiting on Washington*; Centeno-Meléndez, "Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s."

¹⁴⁵ Repak, *Waiting on Washington*, 55.

occupations.¹⁴⁶ This left a need for cleaners and care workers in the region, which Repak suggests Latinas, and in particular Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans, started increasingly filling in the 1970s and 1980s.

With the expansion of the federal government and related jobs, the region's economy was expanding and developing, leading to an overall labor shortage in the region by the 1970s.¹⁴⁷ There was a need for more housing and office buildings, as well as commerce. According to Repak, the construction and restaurant industry were major employers for Latinos, and specifically Guatemalans, Nicaraguan, and Salvadoran men, especially in the 1980s.¹⁴⁸ Where African American men were well represented in the construction sector's skilled trades, occupying jobs such as electricians, plumbers, and air conditioning specialists, immigrant Latino men largely occupied the labor needs in drywall, landscaping, painting, and restaurants.¹⁴⁹ Many of the working-class Latinxs who migrated to Washington through the mid- to late-twentieth century were therefore in greater economic proximity to working-class African Americans.

The exponential growth of Central Americans in the region between 1960 and 2000 was because of the rise in American imperialism, the growth of the federal government and related jobs, and the domestic Civil Rights movement. As the U.S. emerged as a global power, the federal government and its subsidiaries required more space and employees. The imperial connections to Washington helped usher elite and

¹⁴⁶ Terry Repak claims that by the end of the 1980s only 3.5 percent of African American women worked in domestic service. See Repak, 57–59.

¹⁴⁷ Derthick, *City Politics in Washington, D.C.*

¹⁴⁸ Repak, *Waiting on Washington*, 59–60, 100.

¹⁴⁹ Repak, 59–60, 100.

working-class migrations from countries in which the U.S. intervened. Additionally, as the region spatially and economically developed and the Civil Rights movement encouraged more integration in the waged and clerical workforce, there was also a need for low-wage manual and domestic service labor. Central Americans came to occupy a significant portion of this work force.

While it is difficult to quantify their growth in the region between 1960 and 2000 due to absent and inconsistent census categories, I draw on national and local data to demonstrate their overall growth. In 1960, there were only about 48,900 Central Americans throughout the U.S., with the largest amount being from Panama, then Nicaragua, Honduras, and El Salvador followed behind.¹⁵⁰ By the year 2000, there were over 2 million Central Americans in the U.S.¹⁵¹ Locally, it is difficult to account for how many Central Americans there were specifically. However, by 1970 people of “Spanish origin or descent” composed 2.5 percent of the total population in the DMV and by 2000 “Hispanics or Latinos” composed 10.3 percent.¹⁵² This amounted to over 67,000 people in 1970 and over 383,000 people in 2000.¹⁵³ Of the 383,000 Latinxs in the DMV, Central Americans amounted to over 114,000 people, with the majority of Central Americans immigrants arriving in the 1980s and 1990s during the height of civil wars and political instability in the isthmus.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁰ Batalova, “Central American Immigrants in the United States,” August 31, 2015.

¹⁵¹ Batalova.

¹⁵² “Spanish” was a term used to distinguish Latinas/os from white Americans and African Americans. U.S. Census Bureau, “Social Explorer: Census 1970” and “Social Explorer: Census 2000.”

¹⁵³ Latino leaders believed there were 50,000 Latinas/os in Washington alone. See U.S. Census Bureau, “Social Explorer: Census 1970” and “Social Explorer: Census 2000.” In Washington alone, leaders

¹⁵⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, “Social Explorer: Census 1970” and “Social Explorer: Census 2000.”

Although the Washington metropolitan area became home to one of the largest Central American populations in the country,¹⁵⁵ it differed significantly from comparable regions with notable Central American populations. There was not a large historical Latinx population, nor was there a single ethnic group that was the majority, such as Mexicans in Los Angeles or Puerto Ricans in New York. Rather, the dominant ethnic minority in the region was historically African Americans. As more poor and working-class Central Americans arrived in the region they settled in and around a place that was known as “Chocolate City” for its vibrant African American population and culture.¹⁵⁶ Furthermore, poor, and working-class Central Americans came to occupy economic sectors that were previously taken up by working-class African Americans. This spatial and economic proximity enabled the media, politicians, bureaucrats, and local non-profit leaders to racialize Central Americans in relation to African Americans. They discursively drew similarities and differences between African Americans and Central Americans. This racializing discourse was not unidirectional. Whites, African Americans, and Latinxs wielded racializing discourse that was often anti-Black, anti-Indigenous, anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and classist to shape the hegemonic Central American body. This racializing discourse was grounded in overlapping power-relations and multi-scale geographies across the Americas.

¹⁵⁵ Nicole Ward and Jeanne Batalova, “Central American Immigrants in the United States,” migrationpolicy.org, May 9, 2023, <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/central-american-immigrants-united-states>.

¹⁵⁶ Washington, D.C., came to be known as Chocolate City through the funk band Parliament. Parliament’s third album was titled “Chocolate City” (1975) and was a tribute to the District. See

Altogether the spatial dynamics occurring in the Washington metropolitan area produced what McKittrick refers to as a geography of domination. McKittrick defines geographies of domination as the “material spatialization of ‘difference.’”¹⁵⁷ That is to say, that the differential values assigned to bodies is materialized in space and organize power relations.¹⁵⁸ This spatialization of difference, or geographies of domination, are naturalized and determine who and where a person belongs or does not belong.¹⁵⁹ It is for this very reason, one might be surprised to see a Latina pulling into a drive-way in the wealthy suburb of Bethesda in Maryland. Latinas “seem” to not belong there. Then, however, we might rationalize the sort of space she might occupy in Bethesda as a domestic laborer. According to McKittrick, geographies of domination, like the ones listed above, are naturalized “through economic, ideological, social, and political processes that see and position the racial-sexual body within what seem like predetermined, or appropriate places and assume that this arrangement is commonsensical.”¹⁶⁰ In other words, economic, ideological, social, and political processes place value on racialized and gendered bodies, determining where they belong and do not belong.

I use McKittrick’s conceptualization of geographies of domination to consider the Washington, D.C., metropolitan region as a geographic space of domination. However, also within the geographic space of domination are moments of retreat, in which minoritized subjects produce a space of their own. Critical of the ways in which space is used to conceal and marginalize Black women at various scales,

¹⁵⁷ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xvi.

¹⁵⁸ Gilmore, “Fatal Couplings of Power and Difference,” 16.

¹⁵⁹ McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*, xv.

¹⁶⁰ McKittrick, xv.

McKittrick proposes new methods for analyzing geography to make sense of Black women's spatial production. She brings attention to how geography is created by subaltern figures in a variety of cultural expressions or acts that occur at the scale of the body. These expressions and acts are "poetics of landscape" and they refer to the ways in which geography is expressed through that which is written, performed, or felt by Black women.¹⁶¹ Through McKittrick, I assert that performances produce alternative geographies. I identify these performances and productions of space in the personal archive of Central Americans to enunciate how they have used their embodied knowledges within the geographies of domination they were incorporated into.

Performing Race

"You sound Black," is a comment many working-class Central Americans—regardless of their racial identities—hear growing up in the DMV. The obvious question is, well, how does one *sound* Black? While Blackness is not a monolith and does not have a sound, sound is ascribed racial meaning whether it be music or, like in this comment, the way someone speaks.¹⁶² When someone says this comment within the DMV it signals the use of African American Vernacular English. Moreover, the comment points to how embodied practices are read as racial signifiers by drawing on existing racial discourse. In addition to questioning how Central Americans were racialized, I also question how Central Americans performed race. Central Americans "sounding Black" is an example of a racial performances. I

¹⁶¹ McKittrick, xxi–xxiii.

¹⁶² Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*, Postmillennial Pop (New York: New York University Press, 2016).

understand racial performances to be embodied acts that express knowledge about race. To elaborate, racial performance are expressive bodily gestures, actions, and practices that emerge from the processes of racial formation. Racial performances articulate and awareness that racial meaning is being ascribed onto actors' bodies. Racial performances are utilized to mitigate the violent effects of being racially othered. I do not necessarily claim that racial performances directly correlate to a person's racial identity. Nor do I assert that race is a corporeal phenomenon alone. I do, however, use racial performances to call attention to how the body is discursively ascribed racial meaning and how people, in turn, come to understand their racial differences and use their bodies to act accordingly or disaccordingly.

I consider the exchange between racial discourse and the body through theories of the performative and performativity. J.L. Austin theorized performatives as verbal utterances that act.¹⁶³ Performative “do” something. Consider the now famous example of uttering “I do” at matrimonial ceremonies. The act of saying “I do” changes the people who are saying it from single to married persons. Soyini Madison adds that performatives are more than verbal utterances. They are symbols that “make something happen, disturbs, reinvents, or creates—large or small—a consequence.”¹⁶⁴ As such, symbols—whether linguistic or extralinguistic—“make something happen” and can have “a consequence” that reinforce racial differences. Returning to the example of, “you sound Black.”¹⁶⁵ This comment is not merely

¹⁶³ J.L. Austin, “How To Do Things With Words” (Harvard University: Oxford University Press, 1955), 5–6.

¹⁶⁴ D. Soyini Madison, “Dressing Out-of-Place: From Ghana to Obama Commemorative Cloth on the American Red Carpet,” in *African Dress: Fashion, Agency, Performane*, ed. Karen Tranberg Hansen and D. Soyini Madison (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2013), 218.

¹⁶⁵ Madison, 218.

descriptive but applies a host of other meanings to the person associated with Blackness. The comment, “you sound Black” and the act of “sounding Black” is therefore a performative because it is changing how a person is perceived and how they are, in turn, policed by school teachers, store clerks, and police officers, to name a few. While this is a singular example, this performative exists within a larger web of discourse.

Butler’s theory of performativity claims that discursive systems of power construct and act on a body to condition normative gendered behaviors.¹⁶⁶ In this sense, it is not just a single utterance but a system of symbols that act on a body. While Butler is concerned with gender, Jonathan Xavier Inda adapts the theory of performativity to consider how race becomes a naturalized category embedded with ideological and, in turn, material differences through the repetition of discourse in which “physical features are linked to attributes of intellect and behavior.”¹⁶⁷ In short, discourse draws a connection between the racialized body, its mind, and its actions. For instance, discourse has naturalized the linkage between Black people and African American Vernacular English, leading to the idea that there is a singular way someone can “sound Black.” While Inda discusses how the ideas around racial difference are normalized, he does not detail examples of the body performing and more so focuses on the role of discourse.

Chambers-Letson, on the other hand, analyzes the role discourse plays in quotidian and artistic performances. He examines how the law creates conditions that

¹⁶⁶ Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution.”

¹⁶⁷ Inda, “Performativity, Materiality, and the Racial Body,” 80.

elicit and demand performances from racialized bodies. I understand the law to be a key discursive genre that racializes subjects by establishing systems of material difference, which in turn also produce racial meaning. As such, Chambers Letson develops the concept of legal performativity, which refers to the ways that “the law manifests itself in and on the body through expressive acts.”¹⁶⁸ In other words, the law does not just iterate the rules but creates the systematic conditions that changes how people have to act. To help illustrate this, Chambers-Letson provides the example of Japanese Americans interned in concentration camps during World War II, in which the state denied them legal subjectivity and required them to perform American patriotism through acts like pledging allegiance to the flag.¹⁶⁹ Chambers-Letson therefore demonstrates how the law, as a discursive genre, establishes material differences and produces racial performances. While Japanese Americans performing patriotism is an embodied act that conforms to the demands of the state, performance can also be used to contest the discursive meanings ascribed onto racialized bodies. In this light, we can begin to see how working-class Central Americans adopt African American Vernacular English. Since working-class Central Americans’ labor was—and continues to be—structurally exploited, they were often placed in spatial proximity to working-class African Americans, leading to Central Americans to adapt similar speech patterns. This at once distinguishes them from whiteness but is also a rejection of narratives that claim immigrant groups assimilate to whiteness. In

¹⁶⁸ Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different*, 6.

¹⁶⁹ Chambers-Letson, *A Race so Different*.

adopting African American Vernacular English, Central Americans might be said to be resisting whiteness.

I build on theories of the performative and performativity to emphasize the interplay between racial discourse and the body, allowing me to conceptualize U.S. Central Americans' racial performances. As mentioned in the introduction, performance refers to embodied acts that articulate knowledge of self for or against the state, or the communities to which the performer may or may not belong. Race, on the other hand, is a corporeal signifier embedded with meanings that emerge out of historical, social, and political processes.¹⁷⁰ To perform race, therefore, means to use the body to articulate knowledge of self that is based on one's racialized experiences. This includes, for example, Central Americans' using different languages or different variations of language in different context. This could be speaking Indigenous languages in public as a means to assert Indigeneity or speaking African American Vernacular English as a means to assert belonging in a historically African American and white region. I refer to these acts as racial performances because the embodied acts use and correspond with the discursive meanings that are ascribed onto our bodies in a world that is organized through race.¹⁷¹ I am inspired by Saidiya Hartman, who develops the concept of performing Blackness as a range of embodied acts by Black people that produce, rearticulate, or contest racial meaning and hierarchies.¹⁷² However, I use racial performances as a concept that can be applied to a multi-ethnic group that is at once racialized and multi-racial. In identifying racial performances, I

¹⁷⁰ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*.

¹⁷¹ Omi and Winant.

¹⁷² Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 57.

ultimately argue that U.S. Central Americans are keenly aware of how they are racialized and navigate their regional landscape accordingly. Their embodied knowledges are embedded within the archive.

Performing Archives

The way Central Americans perform race is embedded within the personal archive. In making this claim, I am participating in a fundamental debate with performance studies on whether performances remain or disappear.¹⁷³ I use Taylor, Muñoz, and Bernstein as my foundations for understanding how the performing body is an archive, but also how the archive is embedded with performing bodies. Taylor argues that the body is a repository of knowledge that at times works in tandem with the archive but is not determined by it.¹⁷⁴ This is an important articulation because it democratizes knowledges in a way that does not uphold the written word. Rather, it also allows us to understand inherited practices like culinary traditions and dance forms as equally important. Performances becomes even more important when considering that personal archives are difficult to encounter, especially among Central Americans who might have immigrated, have limited space, or simply do not hold onto things for a variety of reasons.

While Taylor invites us to examine the body as its own repository, Muñoz blurs the boundaries between the archive and the body. He theorizes ephemera as “traces of lived experience and performances of lived experience.”¹⁷⁵ Ephemera expands what is considered to be evidence and includes things that contain lived

¹⁷³ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence”; Jones, “‘Presence’ in Absentia”; Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*; Phelan, *Unmarked*; Schneider, *Performing Remains*.

¹⁷⁴ Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, 21.

¹⁷⁵ Muñoz, “Ephemera as Evidence,” 10.

experiences—such as photographs, videos, or artifacts—as well as corporeal practices of lived experiences—such as a movement, gesture, or verbal communication. In sum, through the conceptual development of this term, Muñoz importantly argues that performances are imprinted, stored, and contained in a variety of repositories, whether they be things or the body.

In many sources the body is present either visually or audibly, whether in photographs or audio recordings. However, there are many sources in which the performing body is a bit more difficult to identify. Many of these include documents, such as the counterfeit social security card. For these types of sources, Robin Bernstein's theory is particularly helpful. Much like Muñoz's ephemera, Bernstein claims "[s]criptive things archive the repertoire."¹⁷⁶ Scriptive things are artifacts that invite bodies into a performance, while still allowing for interpretation, resistance, and improvisation based on the positionality the person interacting with the artifact occupies. Through scriptive things, Bernstein argues that it is a person's interaction with artifacts and records that reifies racial subjectivities.¹⁷⁷ Returning to the example of the counterfeit social security card, scriptive things helps make sense of the different ways people preserve their documents. My father preserved his counterfeit social security card because he was aware of his racialized subjectivity as undocumented and depended upon it. His keeping of it many years later, however, suggests he knew the precarity of his legalized immigration status. Thus, Bernstein helps demonstrate not only how race is performed, but also how archives perform.

¹⁷⁶ Bernstein, "Dances with Things," 89.

¹⁷⁷ Bernstein, "Dances with Things."

I rely on the personal because they consist of records and artifacts Central Americans wanted to use to represent themselves. Latinx scholars like Robb Hernández, Gretel H. Vera-Rosas, and Floridalma Boj Lopez, highlight the significance of studying archives collected by Latinxs to understand identity and community in spite of being institutionally ignored or reduced. Hernández argues archives composed by queer Chicanx artists form an “archival body,” which embodies their personhood, their social position, and their communities.¹⁷⁸ Vera-Rosas, on the other hand, argues Central Americans become transnational subjects through physical and digital archives used to communicate.¹⁷⁹ And lastly, Boj Lopez argues that we must think of the archive broadly to include performances because crucial for the displaced Maya diaspora to identify with their Indigeneity amidst the hegemony of Latinidad and Central Americanness.¹⁸⁰ Building on the aforementioned Latinx scholars, I conceive of the personal archive as mode of self-documentation and self-preservation that consist of embodied acts, records, and artifacts. I argue that Central Americans’ personal archives, when read performatively, are an alternative site of knowledge on race.

Conclusion

While the field of Central American studies has undertaken the investigation of the diaspora, I argue that we need to change how a multi-racial and multi-ethnic group of

¹⁷⁸ Robb Hernández, “Drawn from the Scraps: The Finding AIDS of Mundo Meza,” *Radical History Review* 2015, no. 122 (May 2015): 72–73, <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849540>.

¹⁷⁹ Gretel Vera-Rosas, “Immigrant Intimacies: Understanding Mediated Relationships Across Borders,” *Chiricú Journal: Latina/o Literatures, Arts, and Cultures* 5, no. 1 (2020): 41, <https://doi.org/10.2979/chiricu.5.1.04>.

¹⁸⁰ Floridalma Boj Lopez, “Mobile Archives of Indigeneity: Building La Comunidad Ixim through Organizing in the Maya Diaspora,” *Latino Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2017): 201–18, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0056-0>.

people with origins in the isthmus are studied. In doing so, we can move expand the field to think beyond its existing tropes that presume racial uniformity. The emerging subfield has claimed that U.S. Central Americans are invisible, non-existent, or do not belong. Their theoretical contributions have been foundational to making space for Central American studies within Latinx studies. However, Black and Indigenous studies have challenged to grapple with Latinx's racial heterogeneity. These frameworks of exclusion do not grapple with the ways U.S. Central Americans are included and excluded at distinct times and in different ways, according to the ways different Central Americans are racialized. That is, the framework of exclusion does not account for how Central Americans are incorporated into the racial order of the U.S. and ascribed racial meaning.

When considering racialization, it is necessary to undertake the relational and regional study of race because it offers a more comprehensive understanding of how race is experienced on the day-to-day, as well as how racialized groups are interconnected. With the region being the seat of the federal government and the site from which U.S. imperialism takes place, Central Americans' racialization in the Washington, D.C., region is unique in comparison to other places in the United States, such as Los Angeles. The history and political economy of the region brought Central Americans in closer proximity to African Americans in significant ways and racialized them accordingly. Local media and politicians, as well as local residents, evaluated and outlined Central American characteristics to draw similarities and differences between them and African Americans. Speaking Spanish, for instance, was evaluated as foreign and English (with a particular accent) was deemed "native."

Although, I am concerned with the regional and relational structural process that is racialization, I stress the importance of identifying the ways Central Americans navigated their racialization in the day-to-day. This is found within Central Americans' personal archives. I analyze Central Americans' personal archives performatively to understand their racialized experiences at the scale of the body. I identify quotidian performances, such as speaking African American Vernacular English, which produce alternative geographies that forge community with Central Americans, African Americans, and others. I find that Central Americans express an embodied knowledge of how they are differently racialized and wield their power and agency to navigate the region and create ways to belong in the region. Ultimately, it is from Central Americans' personal archives that I "sight" Central Americans complexity, "cite" their lived experience, and "site" them in the DMV, shaping how we come to understand Central Americans in the U.S. and outlining the possibilities for solidarity.

Chapter 2: Sound of Legibility

“We came together because we were Latinos. We had to come together. Teníamos el lenguaje que era parte of how we relate to each other.” - Arturo Griffiths

The recorder turns on and a feminine voice immediately breaks through the static noise:

“Y en qué año vino a este país?” (And, in what year did you come to this country?) Asked Gina Becker, the interviewer.

“Marzo 15, 1919” (March 15, 1919), Corina Smith replies without pause.¹⁸¹

The interview continues, and her Spanish Caribbean accent becomes more noticeable.

“Yo fui huérfana de muy pequeña. Y quien me crio fue mi hermana. Mi mamá nació en San Salvador, pero fue a otro país, no sé a dónde...Yo nací en Monte Cristi, Republica Dominicana...” (I have been an orphan since I was small. My sister raised me. My mother was born in San Salvador, but she left to another country, I do not know where...I was born in Monte Cristi, Dominican Republic...)

I was in disbelief. I was listening to the voice of a woman with familial ties in Central America, who immigrated to the Washington region in the early twentieth century. Less than two minutes into the recording, there is an audible knock on the door that disrupts the interview. The visitors’ knuckles placed their last beat on the door. Corina responds immediately, as if she expected the visitor.

“Come in baby. Put it right inside the door. Thank ya!”

¹⁸¹ Corina Smith, interview by Gina Becker, June 23, 1981, Beacon College Celebración de la Mujer Latina Oral History Project, Courtesy of D.C. Public Library’s People’s Archive.

The visitor then replies inaudibly.

“Mhmm. Ok. You’re welcome. Close it tight.” Corina said in return.

The door shuts. As I listened intently, the sudden exchange between Corina and the visitor caught me off guard. Corina transitioned from a Caribbean-accented Spanish to an African American Vernacular English. The sweetness expressed in “come in baby” and the melodic “mhmm” took me to the Black American South. Perhaps this observation is more reflective of my own listening practice. I learned to “listen in detail” as Alexandra Vasquez says, to identify the racial and geographic histories of people around me.¹⁸² However, Corina’s transition happened with such ease that there was not a trace of the Spanish Caribbean on the tip of her tongue or on the walls of my ears. It was almost as if it was an entirely different woman speaking, an African American woman from the South to be exact.

Of course, Mrs. Corina Smith was not originally from the American South. She was born Corina Saillant on the island of Hispaniola, near the Haitian-Dominican Republic border, to a mother from El Salvador and a father from the Dominican Republic.¹⁸³ Local Latina/o elders refer to her as Mamá Corina because, as an early immigrant to the region, she welcomed many of those who made similar voyages from Latin America and the Caribbean to the DMV. Corina immigrated to the Washington region in 1919 at 13 years old. She arrived via a passenger ship that

¹⁸² Alexandra T. Vazquez, *Listening in Detail: Performances of Cuban Music*, Refiguring American Music (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

¹⁸³ There are discrepancies on whether her maiden name was Saillant or Sellano. While the marriage certificate says the former, the interview transcript says the latter. I decided to go with Saillant since that was what it said on the marriage certificate, however, I theorize this later on. See “District of Columbia Marriages, 1811-1950,” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:V64J-RJJ> : Thu Oct 05 14:26:45 UTC 2023), Entry for Nelson R Smith and Corina L Saillant, 31 Mar 1923; Corina Smith, Beacon College Celebración de la Mujer Latina.

docked in South Carolina. At once she immigrated north, following her older sister Teolinda Ruiz, who initially immigrated to Prince George's County, Maryland.¹⁸⁴ Shortly after arriving, Corina moved to the District,¹⁸⁵ where she attended school and, some scholars believe, she was also employed as a domestic worker for a U.S. family.¹⁸⁶ Corina came to a post-World War I city that was approximately 75 percent white and 25 percent Black.¹⁸⁷ The area was reckoning with staunch racial segregation and anti-Black violence on one side and the fervent struggle for racial justice on the other.¹⁸⁸ As a brown-skinned woman at the time, census enumerators classified Corina as Black.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸⁴ Corina Smith, Beacon College Celebración de la Mujer Latina. Also see José Centeno-Meléndez, "Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s–1970s", PhD diss., (University of Texas at Austin, 2023), 98–99, for a beautiful reading of Corina Smith's migration north mirrored that African Americans from the deep South.

¹⁸⁵ She first lived on 19th Street Northwest, near Embassy Row in Washington, D.C. She later moved to the Northeast quadrant of the District with her husband.

¹⁸⁶ Ginetta Candelario reports that Corina Smith was a domestic worker for a U.S. family, while Centeno-Meléndez writes a quilted history of D.C.'s Latina domestic workers, using Smith as a point of departure. However, I cannot find verification of this.

¹⁸⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, "District of Columbia Population by Race and Hispanic Origin: 1800 to 2010,"

<https://planning.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/op/publication/attachments/Chapter%25202.pdf>.

While these are the official statistics, Centeno-Meléndez reminds us how the census fails to capture the racial and ethnic nuance of Latinas/os in Washington, especially in the early twentieth century.

¹⁸⁸ I understand anti-Blackness to be the ideologies and material realities that seek to deteriorate and destroy the inherent humanity of people of African descent. At this time in D.C., Black men were touted as rapist and criminals in 1919. white vigilante groups sought to enact violence as a result, leading to what came to be known known as the Red Summer of 1919. For a more detailed and comprehensive historical overview of Washington, D.C., see Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*.

¹⁸⁹ There is also a discrepancy in Corina Smith's year of arrival. While she says in her oral history, she arrived in 1919, 1930 census record reports 1922. See "United States Census, 1930", *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X34T-HBM> : Tue Oct 03 13:20:07 UTC 2023), Entry for Nelson R Smith and Corina Smith, 1930. Furthermore, her reasons for immigrating are plenty. Smith says she immigrated for school and to be adventurous. At the time she departed the Dominican Republic border, the United States also occupied the Dominican Republic (1916–1924). See: April J. Mayes, *The Mulatto Republic: Class, Race, and Dominican National Identity* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015); Lorgia García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016). Ginetta Candelario claims she was hired by a U.S. family she met during the republic's occupation. See Ginetta E. B. Candelario, *Black behind the Ears: Dominican Racial Identity from Museums to Beauty Shops* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

While Corina's phenotype put her in closer proximity to African Americans, her native tongue distinguished her from her counterparts. Once in the District, she met her soon-to-be husband Nelson R. Smith, an African American man from Virginia, who worked in the Library of Congress. At the time they met, Corina only spoke Spanish and Haitian Creole. Nelson spoke some Spanish, "pero yo no hablaba inglés" (but I did not speak English), Corina said.

Era una combinación algo serio, porque el inglés es muy malo de aprender. Es muy difícil. Usted lo escribe de una manera y lo pronuncia de otro. (It was a strange pairing, because English is very bad to learn. It is very difficult. You write it one way and you pronounce it another.)

Despite the language barrier, Corina and Nelson married in March of 1923 and moved to Fairmount Heights in Prince George's County in 1924. Fairmount Heights is situated directly across the northeast city boundary in Maryland. In the early-twentieth century, it began transforming from rural county farmlands to suburbs. Developers targeted African Americans to purchase subdivisions and Corina and Nelson were early property owners within the developing suburbs.¹⁹⁰ By the mid-twentieth century, Fairmount Heights became an African American suburb.¹⁹¹

While Corina speaks about the language barrier she experienced when she arrived to the Washington region, she was surrounded by English-speaking African

¹⁹⁰ Robinson White and Allan Clark, two Washington developers and attorneys, purchased subdivisions of land in Fairmount Heights and encouraged African Americans to purchase subplots. See "History: Fairmount Heights," *Fairmount Heights, Maryland*, accessed November 20, 2023, <https://www.fairmountheightsmd.gov/148/History>. By 1937, the *Afro-American* referred to Fairmount Heights as an "all-colored town." See "All-Colored Md. Town Festive on Anniversary," *Afro-American*, August 7, 1937, <https://proxy.library.upenn.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/all-colored-md-town-festive-on-anniversary/docview/531161987/se-2?accountid=14707> (accessed November 20, 2023).

¹⁹¹ For a comprehensive history of Black suburbs throughout the twentieth century see Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

Americans. In fact, she likely came to learn English primarily through her husband. She heard the American South in his diction, a reminder that though they met in the city, Nelson's roots, and his parents roots, and maybe even his grandparents roots, were in Virginia.¹⁹² By 1981, when the oral history was recorded, she spoke in Spanish but continued to interject English that was noticeably influenced by African American Vernacular English from the U.S. South. This particular sound came across in small clauses throughout the interview—"to take up nursin'" or "no wonda' his heart is bad." While linguists discuss the variability in African American Vernacular English, literary scholars have discussed the cultural significance of African American Vernacular English to defining Black folk as humans in the Western hemisphere.¹⁹³ Each time Corina spoke, she ensured there was not a remnant of Spanish in her English, nor English in her Spanish. How did Corina learn to transition between languages and cultures so effortlessly? Perhaps it was merely the effect of time in the region. Nonetheless, I wondered how the sound of her English played a part in creating a sense of belonging among African Americans? In other words, did Corina identify shared knowledges with African Americans? Did her Dominican Spanish also afford a sense of belonging among the Latina/o population, especially as it grew in the District and the suburbs? belonging is found relationally through shared

¹⁹² "United States Census, 1930", *FamilySearch*(<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:X34T-HBM> : Tue Oct 03 13:20:07 UTC 2023), Entry for Nelson R Smith and Corina Smith, 1930.

¹⁹³ Henry Louis Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism*, Twenty-fifth anniversary edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 141; Walt Wolfram, "The Sociolinguistic Construction of African American Language," in Bloomquist et al., "The Sociolinguistic Construction of African American Language," 338–352; Sharese King, "From African American Vernacular English to African American Language: Rethinking the Study of Race and Language in African Americans' Speech," *Annual Review of Linguistics* 6, no. 1 (January 14, 2020): 285–300, <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-linguistics-011619-030556>.

knowledges established across time and space among people with interconnected histories in the Washington region.

I use Mamá Corina's oral history to begin pondering about the relationship between race, place, language, and sound. Sound studies scholar Jennifer Lynn Stoever argues that the listening ear discerns racial difference via sound.¹⁹⁴ While Stoever comes to this conclusion through an Anglophone context, I examine the Washington region as Spanish became a more prominent practice and descriptor for people. Linguists Johnathon Rosa and Nelson Flores argue that despite Latina/o phenotypic heterogeneity, language makes race.¹⁹⁵ According to them, the relationship between language and phenotypic difference is naturalized through European colonization.¹⁹⁶ Society places European languages and bodies as superior to non-European languages and bodies.¹⁹⁷ While English and Spanish are both European languages, English is given greater value because the U.S. is a global imperial power. Language thus becomes a means to wield privilege and power not only against, but among racially and ethnically minoritized people. Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez, scholar of the Spanish-speaking African diaspora, develops "critical cartographies of racialization" as a framework for understanding the divergent ways people are racialized in former colonies and metropolises.¹⁹⁸ Language

¹⁹⁴ Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*.

¹⁹⁵ Jonathan Rosa and Nelson Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language: Toward a Raciolinguistic Perspective," *Language in Society* 46, no. 5 (November 2017): 621–47, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0047404517000562>; Jonathan Rosa, *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and the Learning of Latinidad*, Oxford Studies in the Anthropology of Language (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019), 3.

¹⁹⁶ Rosa and Flores, "Unsettling Race and Language"; Rosa, *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race*.

¹⁹⁷ Rosa, *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race*, 4.

¹⁹⁸ Figueroa-Vásquez, *Decolonizing Diasporas*, 9–12.

is one of many characteristics that determine divergent racialization. Scholar of Afro-Latinidad, Lorgia García Peña, analyzes the racial value that is attached to English-speaking Black persons in comparison to non-English speaking Black persons across the world.¹⁹⁹ As Rosa notes, English is viewed as a sign of progress.²⁰⁰ Altogether, García Peña argues that Blackness is defined and understood through the U.S. and Anglophone experience.²⁰¹ In Washington, Blackness is heard in variations of American English and conceptualized as “native,” claiming to belong to this region. What was it like to hear Spanish in D.C. and it’s inner-ring suburbs?

This chapter examines the role language played in ascribing racial meaning to Central Americans and Latinas/os in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area between 1960–1985. In particular, I consider how language is used to racialize Central Americans—some of whom self-identify as Black Latinas/os and others who are racialized as Black—in a primarily African American context. Furthermore, I ask how these Central Americans make sense of their racialization vis-à-vis Spanish and English to navigate the predominantly anglophone Black and white landscape. I analyze Central Americans’ oral histories, photographs, and certificates alongside *The Post*, the *Star*, *The Washington Daily*, and letters between local leaders and national and local politicians. These sources allow me to understand the role Spanish played in racializing Latinas/os in D.C. in relation to African Americans and identify how Afro-Central Americans used language in response to their racialization.

¹⁹⁹ García Peña, *Translating Blackness*.

²⁰⁰ Rosa, *Looking like a Language, Sounding like a Race*.

²⁰¹ García Peña, *Translating Blackness* argues that globally Blackness is defined and understood through the U.S. Anglophone experience. While I do not believe this sentiment is always true at a regional scale. Consider Southern Florida or New York City, for example, it is the case in the Washington region.

Central Americans strategically utilized English to adjust the way they were perceived and created a sense of belonging in the DMV because Spanish was othering. Following scholars such as Rosa, Flores, and Stoeber, I suggest that the sounds of Spanish and English became sonic signifiers of difference and belonging that are read alongside the body. Spanish became a totalizing signifier used by African American and white Americans to ascribe racial meaning onto Latina/o bodies regardless of phenotype. Aware of this phenomenon, I argue Afro-Central Americans in the DMV used African American Vernacular English in an attempt to find belonging among African Americans. I refer to Spanish and English as “sonic signifiers” because it is not about the words that are being spoken or the speech pattern that is articulated. Rather, the listening ear is able to hear that something does or does not pertain to a particular place. The sound of Spanish signaled that a person did not belong to a group that was deemed “native.” Instead, it belonged to a group labeled “foreign.” Sometimes this othering further marginalized Spanish-speaking Central Americans and Latinas/os. At other times, Spanish protected them. The sound of Spanish simultaneously created a group of racialized foreigners that were both distinct from African American and a multi-racial, pan-ethnic group that mobilized politically, culturally, and interpersonally around a shared language.

I use multiple vantage points throughout the twentieth century to demonstrate how Spanish and English become sonic signifiers of difference and belonging in the Washington metropolitan area. I first illustrate this by examining how the inability to speak English and only speak Spanish justified police brutality in the District. Upon establishing the significance of the sound of language to racialization in the area, I

use Afro-Dominicana Juana Campos' oral histories to help narrate Corina's experiences with African Americans and Latinas/os in the region. These experiences impacted when she spoke Spanish or English and how she spoke these languages. Thereafter, I highlight the political tensions that emerge between African Americans and Latinas/os in the city to determine power relations based on language, race, and ethnicity. Within this larger historical context, I then examine a photograph, a certificate, and oral histories of young Panamanian and Nicaraguan immigrants, who were coming of age in the city and inner-ring suburbs throughout the 1970s and 1980s. I identify how Spanish continued to be a totalizing signifier and how they used English to maneuver their Anglophone social spaces. Afro-Central Americans' use of spoken language highlights the inaccessibility of whiteness among Latinas/os like them, the limitations of Spanish translation amid anti-Blackness, and the relative social value placed on American Blackness in the region. As they navigated these multiple forms of marginalization, language was a means to create and maintain relationships with Latinas/os and African Americans.

It's (not) a Language Problem

Eduardo drove down the narrow, car-lined Park Road in the Northwest quadrant of the District. He was a few blocks away from his home on 1735 Lamont Street Northwest. On this particular Saturday night, he was coming home from a church dance. As a 24-year-old in a new city, these outings tended to be pleasant. The Latin American Social Club organized dances like this, bringing Latinas/os from the area together through dance and music.²⁰² Live music and dances helped new arrivals like

²⁰² "YWCA Classes Set for all Ages: Dance Planned." *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959-

Eduardo reestablish themselves in Washington and connect with other Spanish speakers. By October 1966, Eduardo had only been in Washington eight months. He was a refugee, escaping the Fidel Castro regime in Cuba.²⁰³ While approaching the corner of Mount Pleasant Street, Eduardo lost control of the steering wheel and came to a jolting stop as the front of his vehicle crashed into a parked car.

Officers J.B. Richards and Richard D. Clark stopped to investigate the accident. They approached Eduardo's car, speaking to him in English. While the officers made noises with the instruments in their mouths, it was nothing more than sound for Eduardo. As a formal language, it was incomprehensible. As a result, it is perhaps no surprise that what was said between the police officers and Eduardo escaped the historical record. However, I imagine Eduardo apologetically yelling, "¡Lo siento! ¡Perdón!" (I'm sorry! I'm sorry!) as he experienced remorse after being at fault in a car accident. The police officers, on the other hand, likely made demands of Eduardo, barking incoherencies. Unable to comprehend the police officers, I imagine Eduardo retreading into himself like you do when you do not understand what is being said around you. He placed his hand on the transmission level to put the car in reverse and clear the road for traffic, in an attempt to relieve the compiling problem: the accident, the inability to understand what was being said to him, and being an obstruction in the road. Suddenly, he felt the brisk autumn evening through his open door and J.B. Richard's two brusque hands on his shoulders pulling him out. Richards and Clark then proceeded to take out their nightsticks and beat him, while

1973), December 30, 1960. <https://www.proquest.com/historical-newspapers/ywca-classes-set-all-ages/docview/141231647/se-2>.

²⁰³ For more on Cubans in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area see Boone, *Capital Cubans*.

he wailed in Spanish. “No voy a huir” (I am not going to flee)! In late October 1966, Eduardo Montesinos was charged with assaulting a police officer.²⁰⁴

This incident between Eduardo and the Metropolitan Police Department (MPD) was among the earliest news stories covering the local Latina/o population in the metropolitan area. The incident, however, was not atypical. Police violence was an enduring issue in Washington for African Americans and Latinas/os, alike.²⁰⁵ While the District became 60 percent Black by the mid-1960s, MPD remained 80 percent white.²⁰⁶ Moreover, from 1874–1966 the District was ruled by a presidentially appointed Board of Commissioners, composed of three people.²⁰⁷ At a time in which most government entities did not reflect the population they served, the calls for diversifying law enforcement was a first step. African American residents advocated for the hiring and promotion of Black police officers. To a similar effect, Latina/o residents advocated for greater language training and the hiring of Spanish-speaking police officers. However, the most publicly vocal Latino advocates did not account for the ways in which Spanish racialized Latinas/os and how interactions with law enforcement reinforced racial difference.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁴ Jim Hoagland, “Language Barrier Blamed in Conflicts with D.C. Police,” *The Washington Post, Times Herald* (1959–1973), November 13, 1966.

²⁰⁵ Jim Hoagland, “Language Barrier Blamed in Conflicts with D.C. Police”; John Bloom, “‘To Die for a Lousy Bike’: Bicycles, Race, and the Regulation of Public Space on the Streets of Washington, DC, 1963–2009,” *American Quarterly* 69, no. 1 (2017): 47–70, <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2017.0003>; Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 351–354.

²⁰⁶ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 352.

²⁰⁷ Bloom, “‘To Die for a Lousy Bike’”; Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 165.

²⁰⁸ I say Latinos hear intentionally because most of those speaking on the issue in institutional archives are men with origins in Latin America or the Spanish-speaking Caribbean.

Montesinos' case became emblematic of the so-called language problem in the city.²⁰⁹ Latino leaders claimed that the "lack of communication between two policemen and Montesinos sparked the assault incident, and that the case typifies a significant problem faced by the entire Latin American community here."²¹⁰ Herein, the issue was not whether the police violence was ethical or moral, nor does it question whether the legal charge against Montesinos was justified. Rather, for the publicly vocal Latino leaders, the issue in question was the language barrier that prevented Montesinos and the police officers from communicating effectively. As a result, they sought to close the language gap. Members of the Latina/o community urged for police officers to participate in Spanish language training to break the "sound barrier" that made Latinas/os a "silent minority."²¹¹ Spanish language is described as a sonic force that is inaudible in Washington. However, Latinas/os were not actually silent. People who are able to hear, can also hear foreign languages, even if they cannot make sense of the sound patterns and its signification. Instead, it was a refusal to listen. Latinas/os who, exclusively or primarily spoke Spanish, were therefore not silent. They were illegible, meaning incapable of being deciphered, by the Anglophonic listener in the Washington landscape. Prominent Latino civic leaders, Jose Roig, Carlos Rosario, and Rev. Antonio Welty agreed that Spanish was illegible in Washington. In fact, Rosario later referred to the illegibility as a

²⁰⁹ These are just a few examples of where Spanish is posited as a problem: Philip Shandler, "The Silent Minority," *Evening Star*, January 5, 1969; Francis Giles, "D.C. Latin Americans Appoint Study Groups," *The Washington Post*, August 24, 1972; Judith Valente, "Spanish Heritage Fete Has a Kickoff," *The Washington Post*, July 26, 1976; Zita Arocha, "Influx From Suburbs Strains District Clinics," *The Washington Post*, June 28, 1986.

²¹⁰ Jim Hoagland, "Language Barrier Blamed in Conflicts with D.C. Police."

²¹¹ Martin Weil, "Group Urges Pilot Project to Teach Spanish to Police," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1969.

“handicap” for Latinas/os.²¹² He claimed, “Unless communication between the police and our community is established, there will be more ugly incidents like the Montesinos one. There will be even worse situations. And we want to avoid this.”²¹³ Under this logic, if Montesinos could speak English, he would not have become victim to police violence. Conversely, if the officers spoke Spanish, the incident would not have escalated. This logic presumes that the inability to communicate in the same language is the only cause for institutional violence.

In the aftermath of Eduardo’s violent encounter with police, Latinas/os sought to implement practical solutions to the “language problem.” Immediately, they met with MPD and came to an agreement that there would be Spanish speakers on the Citizens Advisory Council—a group of residents that advise each precinct, police officers would use volunteer translators, and the force would recruit Spanish-speaking officers.²¹⁴ Shortly after, in 1968, the city launched the Pilot Precinct Project, a program developed to improve community-police relations that ran from 1968–1973. The site of the community policing experiment was the 3rd Precinct, which encompassed the highest concentration of Latinas/os in the region. The solutions to integrate more Spanish-speaking personnel in MPD and implement the latest community-policing models of the era were well-intended. However, they failed to account for the ways the illegibility of Spanish was becoming a means to give racial meaning to a growing population in D.C. and the role police violence has played in shaping race in the U.S.

²¹² Francis Giles, “D.C. Latin Americans Appoint Study Groups.”

²¹³ Jim Hoagland, “Language Barrier Blamed in Conflicts with D.C. Police.”

²¹⁴ Philip Shandler, “Police, D.C. Latin Leaders Act to Close Language Gap,” *Evening Star*, December 12, 1966.

Some Cubans in Washington suggested that language was the only characteristic that distinguished them from whiteness. At a public forum regarding the Metropolitan Police and Montesinos incident, a Cuban woman remarked, “There is a saying in Cuba that only the poor, the Negroes and the Chinamen go to jail.”²¹⁵ The woman is drawing a contrast between the soundscapes and racial order of Cuba and those of Washington. The soundscapes of Cuba are hegemonically Spanish and unless you are poor, Black, or Chinese, then a person would not have trouble with the police. However, in Washington, the soundscape and racial order are reconfigured. In Washington, a person is also susceptible to trouble with law enforcement if you speak Spanish, as well. While we do not know much about Montesinos’ racial identity or class status, the contrast the Cuban woman draws between Cuba and Washington, suggests that Eduardo’s altercation with the police is unique to Washington.²¹⁶ The commentator hints that the police violence Eduardo experienced in Washington, D.C., would not have occurred in Cuba because Eduardo is not racially or sonically minoritized there.

In another example, the *Star* interviewed a psychiatrist from Cuba, Dr. Ricardo Galbis. They asked whether there was a specific problem that Latina/o

²¹⁵ Philip Shandler, “Police, D.C. Latin Leaders Act to Close Language Gap.”

²¹⁶ Margaret Boone conducts an anthropological study of Cubans in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area, where she classifies Cubans in five major locale groups: Adams Morgan in the District, Silver Spring/Takoma Park on the border of Montgomery and Prince George’s County in Maryland, Barcroft Apartments and Lake Barcroft in Falls Church, Fairfax County, Virginia, and lastly Rockville and Potomac in Montgomery County, Maryland. Boone claims that Adams Morgan was primarily a destination for Black Cubans. Silver Spring/Takoma Park was mixed- in terms of race and class. In Falls Church, Rockville, and Potomac it was non-Black Cubans. Those who came without economic means lived in Barcroft Apartments, which got the name Little Havana, in Falls Church. Wealthy Cubans lived in the exclusive Lake Barcroft neighborhood in Falls Church, as well as Rockville and Potomac. While Boone claims that the Adams Morgan area was the primary location for Black Cubans, it does not mean that it was exclusive to Cubans. Non-Black Cubans also lived in the Adams Morgan area. See *Capital Cubans*.

immigrants faced that differed from other immigrants. He, in turn, compared Latinas/os with the Irish. “I think many of your Anglo-Saxon immigrants, like the Irish after the potato famine, came here, but they had the language. And, of course, your Puerto Ricans may or may not have the language. But the Latin Americans—most come without the English language and they have to learn that as basic communications.”²¹⁷ By comparing Latina/o immigrants to Irish immigrants of previous generations, Galbis claims that language is the additional obstacle that Latinas/os have to overcome. At the same time, in comparing Latina/o immigrants to Irish immigrants, he is also pointing to the possibilities of assimilation in ways that are impossible for Asian and Black folk. Galbis did not see himself and other Latinas/os as a racial minority like African Americans, Africans, or Asians. For him, language was the only practice that separated most Latinas/os from assimilating into whiteness.

Language was more than a means of verbal communication that would facilitate assimilation into whiteness. Media discourse used language to construct Latinas/os as not white by linking gestures, movements, and behaviors to a disposition associated with Spanish-speaking Latin America and the Caribbean. Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas and the Caribbean were encapsulated under the single moniker of Latin America. The *Star* reported that in addition to the language barrier, “People coming to the United States from these [Latin American] countries thus have a deep-rooted fear and distrust of police...The very fact that police held [Montesinos] for questioning may have been enough to make him fight to

²¹⁷ Elizabeth Roach, “Dr. Galbis on District's Latin Minority,” *Evening Star*, July 22, 1975.

get away as though he were struggling for life.”²¹⁸ Contributors to this report claim that tensions between Latinas/os and police officers originate in Latin America, where the police execute dictatorial violence.²¹⁹ With this, the conflict is inherent to immigrants and refugees from Latin America. While the *Star* expresses a sympathetic tone towards Latinas/os who physically struggle with police, the viewpoint does not critique the violence police officers enacted. Instead, those at fault are the Latinas/os who incite the altercation who are allegedly more prone to this behavior because of the context in Latin America and the Caribbean. Additionally, it points to the Latina/o body as one that acts against agents of the state. Under this lens, Latinas/os do not only speak Spanish, but resists arrest and cannot be detained. In this sense, the Latina/o body is constructed as unruly and not willfully disciplined.

The sound of Spanish and the physical movements of people who speak Spanish are perceived to not belong to the U.S., but rather to Latin America. The illegibility of Latina/o bodies who spoke Spanish in the region is further emphasized by Reverend Antonio R. Welty, who described an interaction between a police officer, a Spanish-speaking man charged with running a red light, and another Spanish-speaking witness. The Spanish speakers used “their hands, their heads, their eyes” to talk.²²⁰ Spanish has, what linguist call, a high gesture frequency; while English has a low gesture frequency.²²¹ Spanish speakers use the corporeal to

²¹⁸ Philip Shandler, “Police, D.C. Latin Leaders Act to Close Language Gap.”

²¹⁹ Authoritarian regimes in Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean fueled most migration to Washington from the 1960s through 1990s. However, it is important to note that the United States supported a number of the right-wing regimes through foreign aid, military and police training, and weaponry.

²²⁰ Martin Weil, “Group Urges Pilot Project to Teach Spanish to Police.”

²²¹ Jody Sherman and Elena Nicoladis, “Gestures by Advanced Spanish-English Second-Language Learners,” *Gesture* 4, no. 2 (February 11, 2005): 143–56, <https://doi.org/10.1075/gest.4.2.03she>; Simone Pika, Elena Nicoladis, and Paula F. Marentette, “A Cross-Cultural Study on the Use of

expressively communicate, whether emotively or factually. Moreover, when a person does not know a language they rely on other forms of communication, including gestures. Pointing fingers, expressive faces, and limbs in motion are another means of saying what cannot be said. Was this Spanish-speaking man simply trying to explain what happened? Nonetheless, the police officer decided that they were drunk because of these very same gestures.²²² The sound of Spanish is therefore not limited to language that is spoken but is rather read alongside physical movements and behaviors that are associated with various spatial scales: Latin America and the Spanish-speaking body. The sound of Spanish ultimately helped create a multi-scale distinction between the emerging Spanish-speaking community and the established residents of the Washington region.

Montesinos' incident was one of several unjust interactions with District police officers, most of which went unrecorded by the press.²²³ Local Latino leaders and newspapers claimed the cause for Latina/o-police conflict was the language barrier. Civic leaders sought to minimize the language gap between Latinas/os and the police, as well as other government entities. In the late-1960s and through the 1970s, MPD held hearings with the Latina/o community, sought to recruit more Spanish-speaking police officers, and enrolled others in Spanish-language courses. Some Latinas/os thought that this would ameliorate conflicts with police and that language was a means to assimilate into whiteness. However, the situation with

Gestures: Evidence for Cross-Linguistic Transfer?," *Bilingualism: Language and Cognition* 9, no. 3 (November 2006): 319–27, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1366728906002665>.

²²² Martin Weil, "Group Urges Pilot Project to Teach Spanish to Police."

²²³ See Philip Shandler, "The Silent Minority" and Martin Weil, "Group Urges Pilot Project to Teach Spanish to Police," they make mention that there were more incidents of police violence, although they do not provide details.

Montesinos and many others was more than a language problem. The sound of Spanish became one way to distinguish Latinas/os, regardless of phenotype, from the local English-speaking population and attribute racial value to distinct bodies.

Listening for Corina

I never got the chance to meet Corina Smith. In this sense, she differs from the majority of the people whose life experiences make this project. However, I was compelled to write about her for a number of reasons. First, her maternal origins in El Salvador make her among the earliest Central American immigrants in the Washington region. Second, her existence as a Black woman challenges the dominance of Central American mestizaje, especially as it exists among Salvadorans. Third, her ability to seamlessly transition between a Caribbean-accented Spanish to an African American Vernacular English was striking, yet familiar. It reminded me of how many contemporary Central American youth in the DMV transition from speaking Spanish to African American Vernacular English with ease. Was Mamá Corina an early practitioner of this form of bilingualism? Mamá Corina made me wonder what it was like to be a Black Salvadoran-Dominican woman in the DMV.

Corina has transitioned and there are limited sources to make sense of her life in its entirety. The oral history she recorded in 1981 as a part of Beacon College's Celebración de la Mujer Latina Oral History Project is the only record within Corina's personal archive that is publicly accessible. To date, I have been unable to get in touch with Mamá Corina's descendants. Yet, I hear traces of her in the personal archives of other Afro-Latinas from the region. I use Juana Campos' oral history, also recorded for the Celebración de la Mujer Latina Oral History Project, as well as the

oral history records for the *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington, D.C.*, to better “hear” Mamá Corina’s life. I consider Juana a member of what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the chorus.²²⁴ The chorus is Hartman’s methodological tool for narrating the historical lives of unnamed and erased Black girls and women in the archive from “inside the circle.”²²⁵ The chorus is composed of them, everyday Black girls and women sharing life and space. I think of the chorus as harmonizing the experiences of one another. By this I mean Black girls and women may experience things at different registers based on their positionalities, but still similar or complimentary in nature. Juana’s oral history helps narrate Corina’s story in the Washington region from within the harmonic circle.

Ms. Juana Campos came to Washington, D.C. during Jim Crow. She was born in Santiago de los Caballeros, a city a part of the Santiago province in the Dominican Republic. Like Corina, and many other immigrants of the early twentieth century, Juana came to Washington by passenger ship. She embarked on a boat called the SS Borinquen, a passenger line that traveled between Santo Domingo, San Juan, and New York.²²⁶ Once Juana docked in New York she traveled south to the District in 1940. In Washington, Juana observed, “estaban separadas las gentes como [pacientes de] tuberculosis. Prietos y blancos apartes. En Nueva York no se notaba porque hay mucha gente Latina” (People were separated like tuberculosis patients.

²²⁴ Saidiya V. Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*, First edition (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019).

²²⁵ Hartman, xiv.

²²⁶ Juana Campos, *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington, D.C.*, M03-027 Exhibition Records, Series 3: Exhibit Files 1961–1996, Box 13, Folder 10. Courtesy of Anacostia Community Museum; T.E.B., “Chatter and Chimes: Back from Santo Domingo,” *New York Amsterdam News*, August 13, 1938.

Blacks and whites separated).²²⁷ When Juana arrived to Washington, she noted the segregation between Black and white people in the city, most of whom were American. She keenly compared racial segregation to the way tuberculosis patients are separated from the general public. This form of spatial segregation was new to Juana. While anti-Black racism exists throughout the Americas and the Caribbean, the form of legal segregation that existed in the U.S. during the Jim Crow era was unique. Juana also drew a significant contrast between New York and Washington, claiming that racial segregation was less apparent in the former because there were so many Latinas/os. Juana suggests that had she remained in New York, she would easily integrate into the Latina/o community. In Washington, however, the largest social groups were African Americans and whites. As a Black woman, she did not have the option to integrate with whites.

As Black Latinas in Jim Crow Washington, D.C., Corina and Juana navigated similar social tensions. With a small Latina/o population in the area, Corina had to learn to navigate the social world she inhabited. Corina recalled that there were not many Latinas/os in the District in the 1920s, much less in the suburbs.²²⁸ The inability to speak English was othering. “Al principio fue bien duro porque casi no había Latinos y yo no sabía inglés” (In the beginning, it was very difficult because there were hardly any Latinos and I did not know English), Juana echoed. “La

²²⁷ Juana Campos, *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington, D.C.*, M03-027 Exhibition Records, Series 3: Exhibit Files 1961–1996, Box 13, Folder 10. Courtesy of Anacostia Community Museum.

²²⁸ Throughout Corina Smith’s oral history interview, she refers to “aquí afuera.” This could mean in the suburbs, where she was when the interview was recorded. However, the research on exploitative and abusive domestic work in Washington, D.C., and the reports of her being a live-in domestic make me wonder if “aquí afuera” also means out of an employer’s home. In the early twentieth century was she among even fewer Latinas living outside of their employers’ surveillance?

primera Latina que conocí fue a Corina Smith” (The first Latina I met was Corina Smith), she added.²²⁹ While both Corina and Juana were ascribed Blackness on sight, their inability to speak English distinguished them from their African American counterparts. At times, speaking Spanish created a relational barrier between African Americans and Afro-Latinas/os. It was a sonic signifier of difference. Juana recollected having enrolled in a segregated school on 10th and U Street Northwest with four other Dominicans. It was likely the Grimke School in the U Street Corridor, a vibrant neighborhood that was a hub for African American culture from the 1920s to the 1940s. While Shaw was home to central figures in African American culture, like Langston Hughes and Duke Ellington, it was an Anglophonic space. “Cuando empezamos a hablar español” (When we started speaking Spanish), she said, “se empezaron a reír de nosotros. Salimos corriendo y no volvimos más porque le cogimos miedo” (they started laughing at us. We left running and never returned because we got scared).²³⁰ The sound of Spanish was peculiar to Juana’s African American peers. The sound of it was odd enough to stir laughter directed at Juana and her Dominican counterparts. In response to the laughter, fear rose in them and they left to never return to the school again. The fear Juana and her counterparts experienced may not have been a fear of violence, but rather a fear of not belonging. Spanish was not a normalized sound for the African Americans around them. Already

²²⁹ Juana Campos, interviewed by Gina Becker, 1981, Beacon College Celebración de la Mujer Latina Oral History Project, Courtesy of D.C. Public Library’s People’s Archive.

²³⁰ Juana Campos, *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington*, D.C., M03-027 Exhibition Records, Series 3: Exhibit Files 1961–1996, Box 13, Folder 10. Courtesy of Anacostia Community Museum.

marginalized for their Blackness, Juana and other Afro-Latinas/os also felt marginalized from African Americans.

Did Corina learn African American Vernacular English to better belong in Washington's African American community and limit circumstance like this from cyclically occurring? Was this a practice Corina's elders also used? Corina's maiden name, as mentioned, was Saillant. This is the surname that is written in historical census records. However, in her oral history the audio sounds like she says her maiden name is Sellano. The transcript verifies it as such. Is it Saillant or Sellano? I am less concerned with what her maiden name was in (so-called) actuality. Instead, I am wondering if this was yet another instance of Corina making herself legible to the listener. Was she Saillant for the English-speaking census enumerator? Was she Sellano for the Spanish-speaking interviewer? Corina was born near the Haiti-Dominican border, a place wrought with anti-Haitian violence.²³¹ Did she learn to strategically go from Haitian Creole to Spanish from her elders to protect themselves from the violence sanctioned by the Dominican Republic? Was transitioning from Spanish to English in the DMV just her expanding her repertoire? Did she teach Juana how to wield English and Spanish in her favor?

While Juana felt ostracized for speaking Spanish in public, Dominican scholar, Ginetta Candelario, asserts that “in the 1950s and 1960s, Spanish-language use became a means of affirming a Latino identity, and for Afro-Latinos it became a shield against anti-[B]lack racism.”²³² In 1961, after African dignitaries were

²³¹ García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad*.

²³² Candelario, *Black behind the Ears*, 159.

repeatedly denied service at establishments in the District and Maryland, President John F. Kennedy, urged establishments in Maryland and Virginia, among a handful of other nearby states, to treat foreign diplomats with respect.²³³ As a result, Candelario adds, DMV “businesses, government officials, and residents were encouraged to distinguish between U.S.-born [B]lacks and foreign [B]lacks” by listening for a foreign language or a distinct international accent when speaking English.²³⁴ Thus, how one spoke a language mattered. The slightest accent gave and took away privileges in the DMV. Juana, used Spanish to protect herself and her children from anti-Black racism that targeted African Americans.²³⁵ She cautioned her D.C.-born children to speak Spanish in public places, allowing them to support white-serving establishments because they were seen as international and not domestic Black people.²³⁶ In the DMV, international Black people garnered a different social value than those from the U.S. Similarly, Juana used language to gain employment at places like King Dry Cleaners, which would otherwise solely employ whites, in Alexandria, Virginia. “In those days,” Juana remarked, “nobody recruited Black people to work, unless you were foreign. Isn’t that something?”²³⁷ Could this be why Corina never lost her Spanish tongue and perfected her bilingual transitions? Was she the one to teach Juana to use Spanish to protect herself from anti-Black racism? While Juana and Corina could attempt to use Spanish to protect themselves from anti-Black racism

²³³ Candelario, 159; Calvin B. Holder, “Racism Toward Black African Diplomats During the Kennedy Administration,” *The Black Studies Journal* 14, no. 1 (September 1983): 31–48.

²³⁴ Candelario, *Black behind the Ears*, 159.

²³⁵ Candelario, 159–60.

²³⁶ Candelario, 159–160.

²³⁷ Juana Campos, *Black Mosaic: Community, Race, and Ethnicity among Black Immigrants in Washington, D.C.*, M03-027 Exhibition Records, Series 3: Exhibit Files 1961–1996, Box 13, Folder 10. Courtesy of Anacostia Community Museum.

espoused by white Americans, it was not always a protective shield as Candelario proposes. If that were the case, there would not be multiple accounts of police violence against Latinos in the District. While Spanish was used as a means to distinguish African Americans and Afro-Latinas/os it was still a means to racialize people as non-white. The use of Spanish as a shield, therefore, had limitations.

Anti-Blackness prevailed among the Latinas/os in Washington. As explained in the previous section, some privileged Latinas/os suggested that language was the only characteristic that separated them from whiteness. Carlos Rosario was among the loudest advocates for the Latina/o community in Washington, petitioning for English-language learning, Spanish-language learning, and representation in D.C. government. Rosario was born in Puerto Rico. After fighting in World War II within a segregated Puerto Rican unit of the U.S. Army, he became an x-ray technician.²³⁸ Employed by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, Rosario immigrated to Montana in 1950 and later relocated to the District in 1952.²³⁹ “Carlos Rosario me conoce a mi desde que él llegó,” Juana commented. “El siempre ayudo mucho a la comunidad Latina pero a la gente blanca” (He always helped the Latina/o community a lot, but the white people).²⁴⁰ Carlos and Juana knew each other since he arrived in

²³⁸ “Puerto Rico’s 65th Infantry Regiment Honored at U.S. Capitol,” *State News Services*, April 13, 2016, https://link-gale-com.proxy.library.upenn.edu/apps/doc/A449859887/AONE?u=upenn_main&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=6bb6c202; Joseph D. Whitaker, “Hispanic Leader Carlos Rosario Dies,” *The Washington Post*, February 4, 1987, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/local/1987/02/04/hispanic-leader-carlos-rosario-dies/5fc780a3-a77b-4dfb-adc3-62c860c82bbc/>; Carlos Sanchez, “The Old Man’s Hispanic Honor,” *The Washington Post*, February 10, 1990, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/02/10/the-old-mans-hispanic-honor/db8163f9-2451-4500-a9a0-547f9f7840b6/>

²³⁹ Whitaker, “Hispanic Leader Carlos Rosario Dies.”

²⁴⁰ Juana Campos, interviewed by Gina Becker, 1981, Beacon College Celebración de la Mujer Latina Oral History Project, Courtesy of D.C. Public Library’s People’s Archive.

the District. While she acknowledged that Carlos was a helpful force in the Latina/o community, Juana shared that his help did not extend to all members of the community. According to Juana, he only helped white Latinas/os. Juana's comment points to the political neglect Afro-Latinas/os experienced in the District. Prominent Latino civic leaders, many of whom were white or mestizo, did not account for the specific needs of Afro-Latinas/os in their organizing efforts. Language assimilation, for example, would not stop housing discrimination or labor exploitation.²⁴¹ Today, the late Carlos Rosario is the namesake of an adult school for English language acquisition, workforce development, and citizenship classes. His namesake school represents the practical, though limiting tools, that seek inclusion into the region's social, political, and economic landscape. Corina and Juana's life stories, however, reveal that you need more than assimilation to be included.

Afro-Latinas/os were navigating power dynamics in white American, African American, and Latina/o spaces. Lopez Oro is helpful in thinking through the overlapping geographies that Afro-Latinas/os in Washington inhabited. Examining the Garínagu in New York, an Afro-Indigenous group from Central America with origins in St. Vincent, he argues that they do not neatly belong to Blackness, Indigeneity, or Latinidad because of their multiple forms of displacement.²⁴² To a similar effect, Afro-Latinas/os in Washington did not neatly belong within African American and Latina/o spaces. Being Black Latinas/os in the U.S., speaking Spanish

²⁴¹ Enid Doggett, "A mother Figure for Immigrants," *The Washington Post*, July 12, 1984.

²⁴² Paul Joseph López Oro, "'Ni de Aquí, Ni de Allá': Garífuna Subjectivities and the Politics of Diasporic Belonging," in *Afro-Latin@s in Movement*, ed. Petra R. Rivera-Rideau, Jennifer A. Jones, and Tianna S. Paschel (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2016), 61–83, https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-59874-5_3.

in an Anglophone Black space, and being Black in Latina/o spaces often rendered Afro-Latinas/os illegible. Yet, if we listen to the chorus of Afro-Latinas we can better understand the multiple spaces they inhabited and were excluded from. In these interstitial spaces, they negotiated how to use language to better navigate the white American, African American, and Latina/o spaces they traversed.

Because the City is Black

From 1874–1966, Washington, D.C., was ruled by a presidentially-appointed board of commissioners. District citizens were disenfranchised for the overwhelming majority of this time period, only earning the right to vote for president in 1961. In 1967, President Lyndon B. Johnson did away with the board of commissioners and established a mayor-commissioner and nine-person city council. He appointed African American Walter E. Washington as mayor-commissioner, as well as a majority African American city council. Johnson’s appointment differed drastically from the previous board of commissioners, reflecting African American activism in the city and more accurately representing its demographic changes to a predominantly Black city.²⁴³ Despite these changes, Washingtonians did not have the right to self-govern and their budget was still under the dominion of Congress. While significant changes occurred at the local government level in terms of racial representation, Latinas/os grew dissatisfied with the city not meeting the growing population’s needs.

By 1966, Latino civic leaders and newspapers reported there were approximately 50,000 Latinas/os living in the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area.²⁴⁴

²⁴³ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 351.

²⁴⁴ Claude Koprowski, “Spanish-Speaking Community Protests Poverty Fund Cuts,” *The Washington Post*, December 12, 1966; Susan Jacoby, “50,000 Latin Good Neighbors Settle Here: Uncertainties

They advocated for access to language learning, job-training, youth programs, housing justice, improved police relations and city government personnel. Unable to get the support of local government, Latina/o civic leaders leveraged the District's limited self-government and sought out the help of Democratic Senator Joseph Montoya of New Mexico. Senator Montoya was the only Hispanic member of the Senate and a member of the D.C. Appropriations Subcommittee, responsible for approving the District's budget.²⁴⁵ The Committee for the Aid and Development of Latin Americans in the Nation's Capital (CADOLANCA) wrote a letter to Montoya on October 20, 1969. The coalition's chairman, Carlos Rosario, wrote, "[We] request you to urge Senators Tydings, Mathias, and Spong to take whatever steps are necessary—including, the early establishment of a permanent Spanish-speaking office or Agency in the District Government—to meet the needs of the 50,000 Spanish-speaking District residents—as the needs of Spanish-speaking residents are being met in other major cities from coast-to-coast."²⁴⁶ Rosario asked Montoya to petition his colleagues Joseph Tydings and Charles Mathias, Jr. from Maryland and William Spong, Jr. from Virginia on the D.C. Appropriations Subcommittee to pressure the District's government into establishing an office dedicated to the city's Latinas/os like had been done in other major cities. In drawing a contrast between the nation's capital and other large U.S. cities, Rosario suggested D.C. was not meeting,

Back Home Led Them to Seek New Lives," *The Washington Post*, December 23, 1968; Martin Weil, "Group Urges Pilot Project to Teach Spanish to Police," *The Washington Post*, December 5, 1969.

²⁴⁵ I use Hispanic to describe Montoya because he claimed to descend from Spanish settlers in New Mexico. For more on Senator Joseph Montoya see "Joseph Manuel Montoya," in *Dictionary of American Biography*. New York, NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995. *Gale In Context: U.S. History*.

²⁴⁶ Committee for the Aid and Development. Of Latin Americans in the Nation's Capital (CADOLANCA) to Senator Joseph M. Montoya, October 20, 1969, Thomas L. Lalley Pilot District Project, MS 0885, Folder 189, D.C. History Center.

nor setting, the standard for serving Latina/o residents. This is significant within the racial landscape of the late-1960s because at the time Washington, D.C., was the only major U.S. city governed predominantly by African Americans. Other large cities like Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, Houston, and Miami were governed primarily by white Americans.²⁴⁷ Rosario therefore claimed that a predominantly African American city was not serving its Latina/o residents adequately, suggesting that the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement was partial.

Montoya responded to the letter from CADOLANCA by addressing Mayor-Commissioner Washington directly. “I wish to enlist your own personal assistance and cooperation in improving the terrible conditions which exist here in the District for Spanish-speaking residents,” Montoya wrote on November 6, 1969. “[B]y improving conditions here in the Nation’s capital, we can point to our accomplishments here with pride and use our experiences here in improving conditions throughout the nation.” According to Montoya, “Spanish-speaking people” across the nation were the worst off in terms of education, employment, housing, and poverty. “From what I have seen and from what I have been told, conditions for the Spanish-speaking in Washington, D.C., are no exception,” he added. Montoya closed the letter by asking Mayor-Commissioner Washington a series of questions to identify the educational attainment, rate of employment, and housing condition of the “Spanish-speaking” in comparison to “the Negro and other Americans.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁷ While other cities like Flint, Michigan; Gary, Indiana; Cleveland, Ohio; and Richmond, California; had African American mayors in the late-1960s, the District was the only major U.S. city.

²⁴⁸ Senator Joseph M. Montoya to Mayor-Commissioner Walter E. Washington, November 6, 1969, Thomas L. Lalley Pilot District Project, MS 0885, Folder 189, D.C. History Center.

Montoya specifically asks for a direct comparison between the “Spanish-speaking” Latinas/os and Black Americans first, and then other Americans. Discursively, he creates a racial binary between Latinas/os and Black people, where Black comes to be synonymous with African Americans. He implied that the social landscape in Washington is unique in that the equality of others is assessed through Black people first. In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, Montoya and other Hispanic and Latino politicians measured the outcomes of the movement by comparing Latinas/os with Black folk. One *Star* article argued that attention continued to be given to Black people, but now it’s also time for the federal government to acknowledge the conditions of Latinas/os.²⁴⁹ According to the article, “Spanish leaders” claimed that their constituents were “worse off in every field than the [B]lacks, and farther behind in the drive for relief.” Washington D.C. was an ideal city for politicians to measure the benefits of the Civil Rights Movement on Black people and its supposed underwhelming outcomes on Latinas/os because it was a place where mostly African Americans had a semblance of local political power. In other words, because the District was a Black city, primarily composed of African Americans with an appointed African American mayor and a predominantly African American city council, critics pointed to how one minoritized group did not extend political power to another racialized minority.

With Montoya as an ally, District Latinas/os petitioned city council to host a hearing on January 27, 1970, with the aim of obtaining financial resources for the aid the community needed. A number of Latinas/os testified their need for education,

²⁴⁹ Philip Shandler, “The Hispanics’ Plea: ‘Now It Is Time for Us,’” *Evening Star*, April 11, 1971.

housing, employment, public safety, and government representation, which included the formation of a committee to establish a long-term mayoral unit to serve District Latinas/os. Language access was central to all the programs they requested. In response, some council members objected Latinas/os' requests for a separate city agency because they believed that "language was the only difficulty unique to Spanish residents."²⁵⁰ The predominantly African American city council, did not see Latinas/os' needs as entirely distinct from the needs of Black residents in the city. *The Post* reports, "The six Negro members of the nine-member council recognized most of the complaints as the same ones that Negroes had been forced to deal with in earlier days."²⁵¹ While the City Council acknowledged the shared struggle between Black people and Latinas/os, they were hesitant to provide Latina/o-specific accommodations. Again, a racial binary was constructed, founded upon the meaning of Blackness in the region. For the city council, language was the only difference between the two groups. This highlights how Blackness in the DMV was primarily thought of as American and English-speaking. For Latinas/os, on the other hand, language was a significant difference between them and their neighbors. It was what distinguished them from the majority African American population in the city and made them subordinate. Linguistic difference thus became a unifying political strategy for Latinas/os. Though there was potential for solidarity among African Americans and Latinas/os in the District, it was obscured by differing opinions on the significance of linguistic difference. The result was oppositional political forces.

²⁵⁰ Constance Holden, "Latin Residents Tell City Council of Troubles," *Evening Star*, January 28, 1970.

²⁵¹ William Raspberry, "Council Learns What It's Like to Belong to Latin Minority," *The Washington Post*, January 30, 1970.

The opposing forces in Washington's local political struggle was reified federally. Martin G. Castillo, the California Democrat who served as the chairman of Richard Nixon's Cabinet Committee on Opportunity for the Spanish Speaking, dubiously and antagonistically questioned whether the District's city council could meet the needs of the Latina/o community. "What's at stake here," Castillo commented, "is whether opportunity for some will be achieved at the expense of others...whether we will prove wrong what the historians said, that there is no greater oppression than that practiced by a recently oppressed minority."²⁵² Castillo argues that the social, political, and economic achievements of African Americans is coming at the expense of Latinas/os. He dissolves white supremacy for the racial inequalities African Americans and Latinas/os, among others, experience. Instead, he positions African Americans and Latinas/os as oppositional forces vying for resources. Castillo alludes to the strides African Americans, as well as other Black Americans, made as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. Now in positions of relative political power, Castillo claims African Americans are replicating similar forms of oppression onto Latinas/os.

Locally, in the city, Reverend Welty and, his contemporary, health professional Ricardo Galbis express similar sentiments. Resentfully, Welty proclaims, "The Blacks move up one millimeter and they have conquered the heavens..."²⁵³ Like Castillo, Welty is referring to the strides that Black folk made as a result of the Civil Rights Movement. As Washington, D.C. transitioned from white political power to

²⁵² Paul Hodge, "D.C. Council Hearing Airs Ills of Spanish Community," *The Washington Post*, January 28, 1970.

²⁵³ Betty Medsger "Latins Form Largest Immigrant Group," *The Washington Post*, December 4, 1972.

Black political power, at least demographically, another minoritized group was not included. Galbis explained the particularities of local politics. “This is a unique situation because this city is [B]lack, and the [B]lacks have faced so much discrimination, and they have faced a difficult uphill battle which hasn’t even ended yet. And we have found out that a minority can also discriminate against another minority.”²⁵⁴ Here Galbis acknowledges the plight of Black Americans, while arguing that they are responsible for carrying-out racism against Latinas/os. The Latino politicians and civic leaders at the federal and local level, however, disregard the lack of sovereignty the District had. They construe structural racism against Latinas/os as being executed at the hands of African Americans. The role white supremacy played (i.e., through disenfranchisement, white flight, and disinvestment) in structuring the District up until that point was invisibilized and, generally (and unfortunately), Latinas/os’ political enemy became African Americans.

In the fight for language justice through education, housing, employment, and government representation, Latinas/os politically asserted Spanish as a unifying characteristic that distinguished them from Black people. While Blackness is a global signifier, in D.C., it came to primarily signify African Americans. Latinas/os leveraged Washington, D.C.’s limited sovereignty and found allies in the federal government under the guise of being “Spanish-speakers.” Meanwhile, local African American politicians refused to acknowledge the differences between minoritized groups in the District, leading to the neglect of Latina/o residents. Solidarity between African Americans and Latinas/os precluded. Local Latinos and their federal allies

²⁵⁴ Elizabeth Roach, “Dr. Galbis on District’s Latin Minority,” *Evening Star*, July 22, 1975.

critiqued Washington's political establishment and blamed African Americans for the structural racism Latinas/os experienced. This positioned African Americans in tense political relationships with one another that drew racial binaries between both groups. The result of this local political struggle was the arbitrary separation between Latinidad and Blackness. Where Latinidad was defined by speaking Spanish, Blackness was defined by English-speaking African Americans.

We Spoke Like Jamaicans



Figure 3 Florencia, Georgie, unknown child, and Julieta pose before they depart from Panama to Washington, D.C., October 28, 1973.

The borders of the photograph are yellow with age. A young man with a small, rounded Afro stands in the center. He wears a multi-print button-up shirt tucked into khaki-colored, wide-leg trousers. Standing in front of him is a toddler-aged girl, who is uncomfortable (or shy?) and attempts to hide herself in between his legs. On either side of him stand two teenage girls with even larger rounded Afros and carefully coordinated outfits. They each wear red tops with matching jean jackets, along with denim bottoms and platform clogs. The teenage girls make sure we notice their

striped red, black, and green knee-high socks that are reminiscent of the Pan-African flag, a symbol of Black liberation popularized by Marcus Garvey.²⁵⁵

I could tell the girl on the left Florencia by her pose. Even when I met her, nearly 50 years after this photograph was taken, she exhaled the confidence of someone who knew they were—and continue to be—“that girl.” It was clear that Florencia had grown up with the ability to hold herself in high regard by the way she placed her hand on her hip and popped it out, slightly leaning her head in the same direction. At a recent family gathering, her granddaughter said, “Grandma, you always been a diva!” It’s true. Notice the way she smirks at the camera while the others squeeze their brows together, attempting to avoid the brightness of the sun in Panama. Florencia was determined to look good in the photo.

Meanwhile, the girl on the right poses modestly, though her slightly clenched fist signals she still has the rebellious swagger of an adolescent asking, “are we done here?” Her name is Julieta. The young man next to her is her neighbor Georgie. Julieta and Georgie pose with a certain stiffness, as if the photograph was a mere formality meant to document a significant moment. I find this happens often in family photographs that I have studied for this project. Someone behind the camera is intent on capturing a moment and interrupts the natural movements of people. It results in those posing for the camera to be stilled by rigidity. However, there’s a difference between Georgie and Julieta’s stiffness. Georgie stands with his feet hip-width apart, grounding him in place. Julieta’s stiffness is mostly concentrated in her upper-body.

²⁵⁵ Leah Donnell, “On Flag Day, Remembering The Red, Black and Green,” *National Public Radio: Code Switch*, June 14, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/06/14/532667081/on-flag-day-remembering-the-red-black-and-green>.

However, her left knee bends, suggesting that as soon as the photograph is taken, she is moving.

I could read the differences in bodies between extraordinary moments and the quotidian as Julieta flipped through photographs in her living room in Chillum, Maryland. Indeed, this particular photograph was intent on capturing the remarkable. It depicts a farewell. Georgie drove Florencia and Julieta, along with their mother Beatriz and five other siblings to the airport as they departed for Washington, D.C., on October 28, 1973. Is this why Julieta was eager for the photograph to be over and done with? Was she anticipating her future in D.C.? Florencia, Julieta, and their siblings Gabriela, Franklin, Fulvia, Carlos, and Vanessa were dressed in versions of the same outfits the oldest sisters wore. Their maternal aunt Anita sent them the coordinated outfits to wear on their trip. Florencia believes Anita sent them the jackets to protect them from the incoming winter temperatures in D.C. While this may be true, I was left to wonder about the matching socks, resembling the Black liberation flag, a symbol of global Blackness. What did Anita's sartorial choice communicate about the Brooks' family's place in Panama and in Washington? As Afro-Panamanians, was she suggesting D.C. would feel like Black freedom?

The Brooks are Afro-Caribbean Panamanians, who lived in an intergenerational home in Rio Abajo, a neighborhood in Panama City. Julieta and Fulvia's great-grandparents emigrated from French and English-speaking Caribbean countries to build the canal in the early 1900s. Within three generations, English became the primary language spoken at home. Spanish was spoken in more public places like the store, school, and workplaces, excluding the canal zone. In Panama,

Spanish was the primary language and it was used as a signifier that distinguished Afro-Caribbeans from Afro-Coloniales, who are Afro-descendent Panamanians with roots extending to the Spanish colonial era.²⁵⁶ Between the 1920s and 1940s, Panama, and much of Central America, passed legislations that revoked, or made it more difficult, for Afro-Caribbeans to immigrate or obtain birth-right citizenship.²⁵⁷ Afro-Caribbeans used Spanish to claim their place in the isthmus. Despite Afro-Caribbeans attempts to claim their place in Panama, anti-Black and xenophobia persisted through the mid-twentieth century. Growing up, Julieta said, “They were not [...] hiring anybody that did not speak fluent Spanish or ‘looked’ Hispanic—that had the straight hair, light-skin type of thing going on.”²⁵⁸ While Julieta’s family were native Spanish speakers, they were Black. It was partially for this reason that Julieta’s father, Delano, had a hard time getting a job. And the racist future looked bleak for Julieta and her siblings. Anti-Black racism and xenophobia were therefore among the principal reasons Julieta and her family emigrated from Panama.

The Brooks family immigrated to Washington, by then a predominantly Black city, because their aunt Anita moved to the District after marrying an African American man named Donald from North Carolina. The siblings affectionately called him Uncle Al.²⁵⁹ Anita and Al first welcomed their brother-in-law Delano in 1967. After some circular migration between D.C. and Panama, Delano filed immigration

²⁵⁶ Kaysha Corinealdi, *Panama in Black: Afro-Caribbean World Making in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022), 16–20.

²⁵⁷ Corinealdi, 16–20, 61–79.

²⁵⁸ Julieta Simmons, oral history by author, Chillum, Maryland, June 10, 2023. For a more capacious reading of Afro-Caribbeans from Panama see Corinealdi, *Panama in Black*.

²⁵⁹ Uncle Al is a sort of folklore in and of himself. Some called him “Hollywood Al” others “Ponytail” and he owned a shoeshine shop on 10th and U Street. See https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/ponytail-a-u-street-shoeshine-mans-legend-lives-on--at-least-for-now/2012/11/13/cbfd1cdc-2a84-11e2-bab2-eda299503684_story.html

paperwork for his wife Beatriz and their seven children. Upon their arrival in October 1973, they all moved into Anita and Al's apartment on Belmont Street and 14th Street Northwest, located in a working-class African American neighborhood. Julieta credits her Uncle Al for her family's ability to successfully transition to their life in a new country. Beatriz ultimately enrolled the younger children in H.D. Cooke Elementary School and the older children at Lincoln Junior High School, where the schools were predominantly African American, but there was an established and growing Latina/o population.

Despite growing up speaking English and Spanish, the Brooks children were still troubled by the language differences. Gabriela noted, "When we came here to the United States, it was completely different. Our English wasn't like American English...We spoke like Jamaicans."²⁶⁰ Unlike many other immigrants from Central America, the Brooks siblings could speak English, allowing them to communicate with their Anglophone peers. However, it usually came with "what'd you say, I didn't understand?" While they shared the same language, there was an audible difference in how the older Brooks' siblings and their African American counterparts spoke English that still made them foreign in D.C. The Brooks' English syllables were a bit softer, than the ones heard in D.C. The status of foreigner was only exasperated because they had spent primary school learning to read and write almost exclusively in Spanish. While at Lincoln, Florencia and Julieta were enrolled in English as a second language. English as a second language was a fairly recent program implemented in a few D.C. schools. It physically separated students based on English

²⁶⁰ Gabriela Brooks, oral history by author, Chillum, Maryland, August 26, 2023.

fluency. There, they met all the other “Spanish” kids, offering Florencia and Julieta a chance to socialize with other Spanish-speakers. Although a form of marginalization, the space provided the means for a new subjectivity to form in D.C. “When you were with the Spanish kids, you were a Spanish kid no matter your race or whatever color you were,” said Julieta. Spanish was a totalizing signifier that ascribed racial meaning to Latinas/os. This is not because people identify with Spain in meaningful ways. Rather, the sound of Spanish was the most prevalent practice that distinguished Latinas/os in the Washington area from others. It was what made them different. Spanish became an identity descriptor that was placed upon and taken up by Latinas/os in Washington.

Although other racial signifiers like complexion and hair texture were acknowledged, Spanish maintained its primacy as a sonic signifier that determined understandings of race. “It was me, Franklin, and José,” Fulvia recounted. “They were harassing us on the playground because we were the Black Spanish. ‘Speak Spanish’ [they would say] and smack Franklin on the back of his head. And then they would smack José on the back of his head.”²⁶¹ The children who taunted Fulvia, Franklin, and José when they first arrived to H.D. Cooke expressed disbelief that someone who is of darker complexion, and self-identifies as Black, could speak Spanish. Black “Spanish” kids were an anomaly. While the racial identity of the children was unknown, the children othered them. Through the sound of language, other children participated in an evaluation of aural and racial normativity. The

²⁶¹ Fulvia Brooks, oral history by author, Chillum, Maryland, August 26, 2023.

children engaging in infantile bullying reveal that being Black and speaking Spanish was incongruent within D.C. at that time, and arguably continues to be.

At young ages, the Brooks children learned that their intersecting positionalities made them susceptible to the everyday violence of racism and xenophobia at various scales—from the playground to interactions with law enforcement. While Ms. Juana Campos was a part of Mamá Corina’s chorus, the Brooks children were in many ways the echo. The echo refers to how later generations experience similar processes to elders who have traversed the spaces they inhabit before them. Franklin recollected, “Mamá told me, ‘You have three strikes against you. You are Black. You are male. You are foreign.’”²⁶² As such, the Brooks children made decisions to protect themselves from these sorts of attacks and attempted to mitigate becoming targeted. I remember if I went anywhere,” Julieta said, “I spoke English. I was like, ‘Nope, I’m not telling you I’m Spanish.’”²⁶³ According to Julieta, telling people you were Spanish came with more scrutiny, especially as a Black girl from Panama with familial roots in the Francophone and Anglophone Caribbean. If she said she was Panamanian she would then have to go on to explain where Panama is located and, in turn, what Central America is. Panama and Central America were strange concepts to most District residents at that time. Most people vaguely knew about the Panama Canal. However, Jamaica and an Anglo-Caribbean sound was more familiar when read alongside a Black body. For Julieta, saying she was Jamaican was simpler than attempting to explain the multiple

²⁶² Franklin Brooks, Jr. personal communication with author, Chillum, Maryland, October 28, 2023.

²⁶³ Julieta Simmons, oral history by author, Chillum, Maryland, June 10, 2023.

cartographies she inhabited—Black, Caribbean, Central American, Panamanian that spoke Spanish and English. In Washington, Julieta and her siblings learned the racial values placed on language and how that was read alongside their Blackness.

In Panama, generations of Afro-Caribbean Panamanians learned Spanish to withstand the xenophobia and anti-Black racism they encountered. For the Brooks, English was reserved for the home and Spanish used in public. Once in Washington, however, the values placed on language changed. In the District, English was the dominant language. While the Brooks were bilingual, they initially spoke English with an Anglophone Caribbean accent. This distinguished them from their African American counterparts, but not as much as Spanish. Spanish was a totalizing signifier that ascribed racial meaning onto bodies, despite their range in phenotype. It became an identity descriptor for Latinas/os of any race. Yet, to hear Black folk speak Spanish was still something that caused cognitive dissonance because of dominant conceptions of race and language. In the District to be Black is to speak English, even if it was with an Anglophone Caribbean accent. The Brooks learned to navigate these dynamics by primarily speaking English and selectively speaking Spanish. In doing so, Afro-Central Americans wielded language to manage processes of othering between being “Black” or “Spanish.”

Girar: From Hee-rohn to Juh-roan

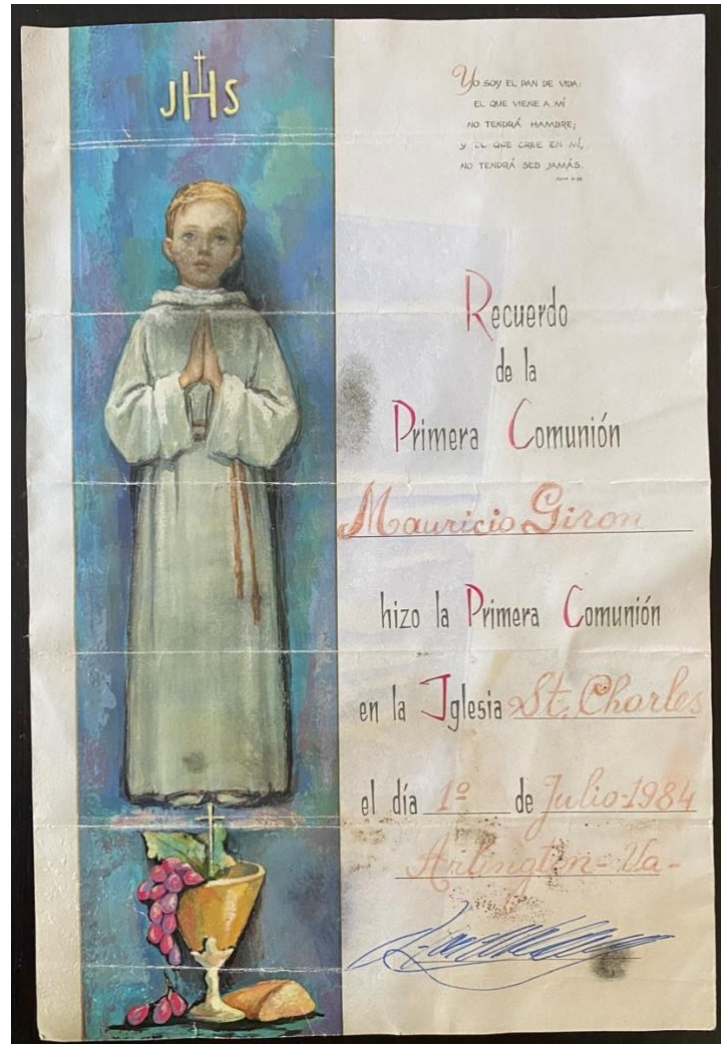


Figure 4 Fabricio Jiron's first communion certificate from St. Charles in Arlington, Virginia, July 1, 1984.

Fabricio—or Mr. Jiron (pronounced juh-roan), as I have called him since I was a teenager—opened the off-white folder to show me the documents he brought to share in the interview. His mother, Yadira, had given him several documents before she returned to her native Nicaragua in 2021. While Yadira stored them in her home, Fabricio admitted he had mostly kept them in his car since he gained possession of them. A bit embarrassed, he apologized for the papers' conditions. Nonetheless, most of the things were still in pretty good shape, thanks to his mother's archival care. It

was a set of school, church, and government documents from his time in the small town of Nindirí in Masaya, Nicaragua, as well as his time in Los Angeles and Northern Virginia. I pointed to a document with a narrow illustration along the left side of the page. It featured an altar boy standing with his hands in prayer, a golden chalice filled with grapes and a loaf of bread in the foreground, and the letters “JHS” in the background. While the multi-colored Catholic iconography was noticeable among many monotone documents, it was the text on the document that caught my attention. It read, “Mauricio Giron hizo la Primera Comunión en la Iglesia St. Charles el día 1o de Julio 1984, Arlington, Virginia.” Why did it say Mauricio Giron (with a G) as opposed to Fabricio Jiron (juh-roan), or even Fabricio Jirón (pronounced hee-rohn) like it would be spelled in Spanish? Was it simply an orthographic error? Now living in Arlington, Virginia, was this an attempt to anglicize his name? Giron with a G, similar to the Spanish word “girar,” meaning to turn on an axis. Was Mr. Jiron re-inventing himself? Is this when he went from hee-rohn to juh-roan? Mamá Corina’s echoes continued to reverberate in the decisions that led to Mr. Jirón (hee-rohn) to now be referred to as Mr. Jiron (juh-roan).

Fabricio arrived in Arlington, Virginia in 1982. In more ways than one, Arlington was different from Los Angeles—the city he called home as he transitioned from childhood to adolescence. After years of migrating within Nicaragua, and later to Costa Rica, Fabricio was reunited with his extended family and his mother Yadira in a two-story home his grandmother Bertilda rented in the predominantly Mexican American neighborhood of Highland Park in Los Angeles. Fabricio’s grandmother Bertilda welcomed her children, children in-laws, grandchildren, and nieces and

nephews into the home she created as they left Central America throughout the 1970s and 1980s. They found ease in the ability to speak Spanish among multiple generations of Central Americans in the home, as well as the city at-large. “It’s either English or Spanish in L.A. You can get away with either or,” Fabricio recollected.

Only nine years old when he arrived to California in 1980, Fabricio learned English rather quickly. “In L.A., I was able to pick up—I think—the language easier because there were more people that spoke Spanish. So, I could ask just about anybody if I didn’t know how to say [something].” Fabricio was able to rely on family that arrived before him, as well as his peers to learn English. Spanish, and the fluidity of going back-and-forth to English, was common and even normalized in Los Angeles. In the DMV, however, this was not the case. In the DMV, Spanish was a sonic signifier of difference. As a child, Fabricio recalled waking up, thinking he was back in L.A.. Instead of being in L.A., Fabricio lived with his mother in a single room within a garden-style apartment in the inner-ring suburbs of the nation’s capital.

For the past couple of decades, the suburbs of Washington, D.C., had undergone significant population changes. The suburbs developed around numerous postbellum African American communities that were historically situated in Alexandria, Arlington, and Falls Church in Virginia, as well as Montgomery County and Prince George’s County in Maryland. In the latter half of the twentieth century, African American migrants, along with international immigrants from Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia exponentially diversified the inner-ring suburbs.²⁶⁴ The 1968 Martin Luther King uprisings expedited the migration of people of color

from the inner-city to suburbs, while the 1968 Fair Housing Act supported it. As the suburbs were diversifying, whites were also leaving. Dennis Gale contends that the integration of schools in the inner-ring suburbs from 1959–1973 led to whites self-segregating by leaving the area and/or enrolling their children in private school.²⁶⁵ By the 1980s, there were more African American, Latina/o, and Asian American students enrolled in suburban public schools.²⁶⁶ Therefore, even in the suburbs, Central Americans like Fabricio were less likely to encounter many white peers. Instead, Fabricio formed a part of an emerging space primarily occupied by African Americans, Latinas/os, Asian American. Yet, in this space Spanish was still illegible.

The illegibility of Spanish in the suburbs is read in Fabricio's first communion certificate. "Mauricio Giron hizo la Primera Comuni3n en la Iglesia St. Charles el d3a 1o de Julio 1984, Arlington, Virginia." His name was written in cursive script, using red ink. Cursive script is often used to write faster because the lines of letters curl and converge into one another. Here, however, it looks like "Mauricio Giron" was not written fast, especially in comparison to the other handwritten text like "St. Charles." The script was heavier in weight as if the pen had traced over each letter a couple of times. The ascending line that initiates the "M" is particularly dense, as if to correct a mistake in the spelling. Was the "M" supposed to be an "F?" In Central America and Los Angeles, Fabricio said, it was pronounced Fabricio Jir3n (*hee-rohn*). In Northern Virginia, however, the consonants in his name lost their soft curves and turned into sharp edges at the tongue. His name was contorted "Fa-breek-io Ji-ren," "Fa-breek-io

²⁶⁵ Gale, *Washington, D.C.*, 132.

²⁶⁶ Gale, 183.

Garen.” Tired of the mispronunciation, Yadira altered the spelling of her son’s name. “Faubricio Giron.” She lost the accent in translation and added letter combinations she thought would be more familiar to English-speakers. If she spelled his first name “Faubricio” others would pronounce it like Mauricio. Yadira reasoned if she replaced the “J” for a “G,” perhaps Americans would soften the consonant to an exhale released from the back of the throat. Just maybe, if she made these orthographic modifications, they would finally pronounce her son’s name with dignity. So, Yadira attempted to institutionalize the modified name by registering him in public school and Sunday school. However, the mispronunciation continued and gave way to misspellings like in the first communion certificate. The Sunday school teacher assumed the young student’s name was not “Faubricio,” but rather “Mauricio.”

Yadira’s attempts at normalizing Spanish in Northern Virginia through her son’s name in the mid-1980s were largely unsuccessful. Then, at 14 years old, Fabricio saw another opportunity to take ownership over his name. “Juh-roan,” someone called out at Kenmore Middle School in Arlington, Virginia. He had never heard anyone pronounce it that way. It resonated with him. From that point onwards, he decided that was exactly how he would pronounce his last name. I questioned whether anglicizing his surname changed how people perceived him and whether that was a motivating factor. Was he trying to be perceived as something other than Latino? “They can look at you and know you’re from somewhere,” Fabricio replied. For Fabricio, “somewhere” was a non-white place. He acknowledged his epidermal reality, recollecting how a white boy called him the n-word in Los Angeles. Yet, he did not self-identify as Black. Instead, he recognized his brown skin. Nonetheless,

Fabricio knew that his body was read as not white and was incapable of being white. “I don’t know if I decided [to change my name] because I wanted to be more Americanized. Maybe that led to it?” Fabricio pondered. “I could tell you it sounded better than how everyone else was pronouncing it...Also, I didn’t go by Fabricio. I went by Fab Jiron (*juh-roan*).” Fabricio is not the only immigrant to have anglicized his name. Countless immigrants have done the same. Historians and linguists have argued that the decision to anglicize names was a means to mitigate racism and xenophobia.²⁶⁷ While Fabricio’s decision to introduce himself as Fab Jiron (*juh-roan*) may not have been a conscious decision to Americanize himself, he recognized that his name was not legible in the Washington metropolitan area and anglicized it. Perhaps it was his experience with racism that drove him to unconsciously change the pronunciation of his names.

Fabricio took advantage of an opportunity to reclaim his name and how it was pronounced. Fab Jiron (*juh-roan*). Fab Jiron (*juh-roan*) offered an air of racial ambiguity. It led to questions like is it Jerome? And, for Spanish speakers, they curiously asked: is it supposed to be Jirón (*hee-rohn*)? He trafficked in the ambiguity of being from “somewhere” that was not white yet, despite the ambiguity, it did not grant him access to whiteness. Nonetheless, asserting an anglicized name was a tactic, which De Certeau describes as a sort of artform used by those without power.²⁶⁸ De

²⁶⁷ Kirsten Lise Fermaglich, *A Rosenberg by Any Other Name: A History of Jewish Name Changing in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2018); Scott Baird, “Anglicizing Ethnic Surnames,” *Names* 54, no. 2 (n.d.): 173–92, <https://doi.org/10.1179/nam.2006.54.2.173>. Smith, “American Names: Declaring Independence,” *Immigration Daily*, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://www.ilw.com/articles/2005,0808-smith.shtm>

²⁶⁸ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 37–38.

Certeau explains that tactics do not alter the larger systems of power, rather they take advantage of the system where possible. In reclaiming and asserting his anglicized name, Fabricio, is not attempting to change the systems that racialized him as non-white, but rather he is attempting operate within it. He adjusted the way he pronounced his name to traffic in racial ambiguity. However, when his name was heard and read alongside his body, he passed for being African American. At least now people would have trouble rendering him foreign. Yadira attempted to create a space for Spanish in the Anglophone landscape through the modification of her son's name. Fabricio, on the other hand, found ways to live within the Anglophone landscape by sonically placing himself in proximity to Blackness. Perhaps in his *gira*, that is, his rotation, he was returning to a Blackness that was rejected in Central America. Jiron (*juh-roan*) ultimately became the last name his four children came to know and pronounce.

Conclusion

The sound of Spanish was largely incomprehensible in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. The sonic illegibility was a major site of conflict for Latinas/os in the region as they interacted with police, schools, and other public institutions. I refer to the language difference as a sonic illegibility because I am less concerned with what is being said, but rather how foreign language is experienced. For example, as early as 1966 in D.C., a police officer heard a Cuban refugee speak Spanish and did not comprehend the sonic patterns. In turn, the police officers presumed he was being defiant, leading to a brutal case of police violence. Through sonic difference,

Latinas/os in the region were racialized as distinct from U.S.-born whites and African Americans.

Central Americans, and Latinas/os more broadly, recognized the value placed on English in the region. Some Latinas/os pushed for English-language acquisition and organized to have more public Spanish-language resources. Among those organizing, some believed that language was a means to assimilate into whiteness. In other words, they believed Latinas/os were only a language away from whiteness. However, Afro-Latinas/os, many with roots in Central America, demonstrate the inability to assimilate into whiteness. As a result, they identified ways to navigate the multiple spaces they inhabited. Some decided to speak English in the linguistic tradition of African Americans from the South, while others ensured they spoke Spanish in an attempt to evade anti-Black racism. Afro-Central Americans created community with other Spanish-speakers because of a shared language, but they also spoke English to find belonging among African Americans and evade being labeled as foreign.

Language was among the earliest signifiers used to racialize Central Americans. As immigration policy changed, and the political and economic turmoil in the isthmus increased, the sound of Spanish came to signal illegality. The racialized Central American accumulated racial meaning over time and attempted to manage how they were perceived and navigated their new homes accordingly. The threat of immigration became an additional reason some Central Americans might avoid speaking Spanish in public, if it was possible. For young Central Americans, who either immigrated to the DMV at a young age or were born in the region, speaking

African American Vernacular English was a means to resist tropes of illegality and non-belonging. African American cultural practices thus helped Afro-Central Americans, as well as non-Black Central Americans, assuage xenophobia. Therefore, Central Americans found belonging among and alongside African Americans through the sound of language.

Chapter 3: Intimate Illegalities



Figure 5 Adilia and Elda laughing on their tía Maura's stoop in Chirilagua, Alexandria, Virginia, 1987.

Two women stand side-by-side on the stoop of a red-brick home with a white screen door. The sun sits high in the sky, illuminating their persons while simultaneously casting shadows across them. Their dark brown, curly mullets are iridescent and frame their full faces. Adilia is on the left, wearing a short-sleeve, button-up blouse tucked into a knee-length skirt, cinched at the waist with a wide belt and small heels. She dressed in white from head to toe. On the right, Elda wears a baby blue blouse with ruffled sleeves to accentuate her shoulders on top of a matching knee-length skirt with red peep-toe heels. Adilia's dainty earrings are noticeable, only because Elda is not wearing any. Adilia, having arrived a year earlier, was more established than her younger cousin Elda—a distinction expressed by the fine earrings Adilia

wore. *I am reminded of how Elda, my mother, still reprimands me for leaving the house without earrings, cautioning that I look like a boy. Why didn't she have earrings if she was otherwise quite adamant about wearing them? Perhaps it was because Elda had just arrived to Northern Virginia, while Adilia arrived a year earlier. Earrings, or not, both Elda and Adilia are dressed in their best. Perhaps it was Sunday, the only day both of them do not work.*

Adilia and Elda look into the lens of the camera with a sense of comfort, if not familiarity. The camera reflects them mid-laugh. Adilia was not ready for the photo to be taken. She holds onto the black iron guardrail, standing straight with her shoulders raised to her ears in joy. Knowing her, she probably made herself laugh with a joke or a vulgar remark. Elda, on the other hand, manages to strike a flirtatious pose. Her coy posture, teases a smirk on my face because it reminds me of her charismatic personality. She holds onto the opposite guard rail, leaning her weight onto it as she pops her knee forward and pushes her hip coquettishly towards Adilia. Elda and Adilia's interior arms lay on their side, and their hands graze each other in subtle intimacy, demonstrating their reliance, support, and care for each other. New to the United States, the closest thing Adilia and Elda had to a sister was one another, and the closest thing to a mother was their tía Maura.

Elda and Adilia posed for this photograph in front of their tía Maura and her husband tío Beto's home in Alexandria, Virginia. Like many Central Americans in the late 1980s, the young women had recently emigrated clandestinely from Guatemala to the Washington metropolitan area, namely the suburbs of Northern Virginia. Adilia and Elda left their mothers and daughters behind without a promised

return date.²⁶⁹ All the while, anti-immigrant discourse targeting Central Americans as “illegal aliens” took the nation and, in specific ways, the region from the 1970s onward. This chapter seeks to understand these simultaneously structural and interpersonal dynamics. It questions how brown Central Americans came to be racialized as “illegal,” the effects of that racialization, and, in turn, how undocumented Central Americans maneuvered around illegality. I use “brown,” similar to Lytle Hernández, to indicate a “complexion-inflected class specificity.”²⁷⁰ Activists and scholars have importantly critiqued the centrality of brown Latinxs in narratives of illegality. They have argued that Blackness plays a critical role in how migrants disproportionately experience illegalities, though they may not be racialized as “illegal.”²⁷¹ Despite this brownness is still central in discourses on illegality. Since I am interested in how a people get racialized as illegal through discourse, “brownness” remains a relevant signifier.

Illegality is a state of being physically in a sovereign territory without government authorization and under imposed and extended vulnerabilities.²⁷² These vulnerabilities include low wages, distressed housing conditions, family separation, and the possibility of forced or coerced removal, to name a few. Many scholars of illegality, including Nicholas De Genova, Mae Ngai, and Lytle Hernández, argue that

²⁶⁹ Leisy Abrego discusses family separation's emotional toll on transnational Salvadoran families in *Sacrificing Families*.

²⁷⁰ Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, 10.

²⁷¹ Tatiana K Benjamin, “Black Removal and Invisibilty: At the Intersections of Race and Citizenship in the 21st Century” (University of Maryland, College Park, 2018); Brittnee Alyse Meitzenheimer, “‘Know That We Exist’: Storytelling as Self-Making for UndocuBlack Students,” 2020; Timantha Goff et al., “Uncovering the Truth: Violence and Abuse Against Black Migrants in Immigration Detention” (UndocuBlack Network, Black LGBTQIA+ Migrant Project, Blac Alliance for just Immigration, Freedom for Immigrants, 2022).

²⁷² De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life,” 429.

illegality is a racial project that delineates and reinforces racial differences.²⁷³ De Genova advances this argument by emphasizing the historical and legal construction of illegality.²⁷⁴ Furthermore, he claims that the practices that condemn, deport, and strip migrants of their rights, and the visual and linguistic discourse that make this visible racializes migrants.²⁷⁵ To a similar effect, Ngai posits that restrictive immigration policy materialized categories of racial difference through the status of citizen and non-citizen.²⁷⁶ Expanding on Ngai and similar to De Genova, Lytle Hernández demonstrates how the U.S. Border Patrol used visual signifiers of class, complexion, and national origins to target Mexicans, producing them as brown illegal aliens.²⁷⁷ Scholars such as Guerrero and Zilberg point to how the racial contours of illegality are a means to police space well beyond the U.S.-Mexico border.²⁷⁸ Situated in Northwest Arkansas, Guerrero argues that white nativist perceive the mere presence of those racialized as brown Latinas/os and their everyday activities as illicit, otherwise known as an “act of spatial illegality.”²⁷⁹ Zilberg, on the other hand, posits that national borders are controlled and transgressed at the scale of the Central American body in Los Angeles.²⁸⁰ The literature highlights how illegality, race, and space are intertwined to determine who belongs and does not belong in a given place.

²⁷³ De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life”; Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*; Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*.

²⁷⁴ De Genova, “Migrant ‘Illegality’ and Deportability in Everyday Life.”

²⁷⁵ Nicholas De Genova, “Spectacles of Migrant ‘Illegality’: The Scene of Exclusion, the Obscene of Inclusion,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 36, no. 7 (July 2013): 1180–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783710>.

²⁷⁶ Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*.

²⁷⁷ Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, 10.

²⁷⁸ Zilberg, “Fools Banished from the Kingdom”; Guerrero, “Northwest Arkansas’s Now Societal Concern: ‘Illegal Aliens,’ Acts of Spatial Illegality, and Political Mobilizations,” in *Nuevo South*.

²⁷⁹ Guerrero, *Nuevo South*, 153.

²⁸⁰ Zilberg, “Fools Banished from the Kingdom,” 759.

Whether one belongs or does not belong legally and racially, in turn, affects how one can hold and use space. With this in mind, I suggest law enforcement, politicians, bureaucrats, and local residents, policed the space occupied by Central Americans who were racialized as “illegal.”

I expand on previous work on race, space, and illegality and consider how Central Americans were racialized as “illegal” in specific ways regionally and the spatial contours of that racialization. Do they remain bound to space? How did gender inform how they used space? Moreover, I also ask how Central Americans withstood and survived their illegality. Throughout this chapter, I rely on newspaper articles from *The Post* and the *Star* to establish the context of how brown Central Americans came to be racialized as “illegal” nationally and regionally and the effects that their racialization had on how they occupied and used space. I also conduct performative readings of a series of photographs belonging to, and oral histories conducted with, some of the women in my family: Adilia, Elda, and two of Maura’s surviving daughters, Natalia and Patricia to get at the personal experiences of undocumented Central American women. I look to the personal archives of women in my family because Central American women led the growth of isthmian immigration to the region yet are rarely mentioned or depicted in media narratives of illegality.²⁸¹ Most local media coverage on illegality concentrated on Central American men. My mother and aunts’ personal archives provide a different perspective, revealing how building close relationships within domestic spaces and knowledge sharing—like how to

²⁸¹ Repak, *Waiting on Washington*; Centeno-Meléndez, “Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s.”

migrate to the U.S., where to live, and how to gain legal status—maintained and sustained a diaspora.

Central American women like my mother and aunts exercised what I call intimate illegalities. I build on feminist theorist Lauren Berlant, who describes the act of being intimate as communicating with minimal signs.²⁸² Within the context of Central American women's personal archives their records are signs of intimacy. It might be a touch—as seen in the first photograph, a look, a gift. Intimacy, here, exceed heteronormative romantic relationships and examine women's care work. Moreover, Berlant claims intimacy has the capacity to “to create spaces and usurp places meant for other kinds of relation.”²⁸³ I consider the ways Central Americans intimate relationships created spaces that were life sustaining in places that sought to exploit their labor. In short, the intimacy held between Central American women is embedded in their personal archive and when they are read performatively, it reveals how they created life sustaining spaces. Intimate illegalities thus refers to the interpersonal relationships that materially and emotionally helped undocumented immigrants as they migrated and recreated lives in the Washington region. Ultimately, I argue that despite the racial, gendered, and spatial implications of illegality, undocumented Central American women used intimate illegalities to build community and challenge the boundaries law enforcement, politicians, bureaucrats, and local residents placed on their bodies.

²⁸² Lauren Berlant, “Intimacy: A Special Issue,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (January 1998): 281, <https://doi.org/10.1086/448875>.

²⁸³ Berlant, 282.

I outline the legal changes and discourse that constructed Central Americans as brown “illegal aliens” in the Washington metropolitan area. This context underscores Central Americans’ regional and relational racialization as being construed through anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, and xenophobia. It also establishes the type of place to which Maura and the remainder of her nuclear and extended family migrate and come to navigate. I consider how the construction of brown Central Americans as “illegal” effected the spatial autonomy of undocumented Central Americans and specifically Maura’s family, who have roots in Guatemala and El Salvador. Through their stories of migration and succeeding arrival to the suburbs of Washington, D.C., I trace the emergence of intimate relationships as a means to navigate immigration and illegality. I highlight how Maura and Adilia asserted themselves in private white spaces as live-in nannies to legalize their immigration status as well as that of others, and strengthen community. Lastly, I examine the ways community helped undocumented Central American women transgress the borders to which they were bound.

Embodying Illegality

In 1971, an anonymous immigration official estimated there were between 15,000–30,000 undocumented immigrants in the DMV. According to him, the number of undocumented immigrants was increasing at a rate of 6,000 arrivals per year, with over 50 percent being from Central and South America.²⁸⁴ A year later, the *Star* reported, “The Latin presence is certain to grow. Since immigration laws were liberalized in 1965, the percentage of white Europeans has dropped considerably and

²⁸⁴ Bill Bancroft, “Many Area Aliens Tread a Tightrope,” *The Washington Post*,” October 30, 1971.

more Latins are coming than ever before.”²⁸⁵ Washington’s mainstream conservative newspaper expressed concern over the changing racial makeup of immigrants due to the 1965 Immigration Act. While the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act did diversify the pool of immigrants it admitted to the United States, it also numerically restricted immigration from Latin America and the Caribbean.²⁸⁶ Therefore, the Immigration Act did not open the doors to the nation the way the *Star* insisted. Immigration to Washington from Latin America and the Caribbean was occurring prior to 1965 and continued thereafter.²⁸⁷ However, the amended legislation marked the beginning of Washingtonians’ elevated concern over undocumented immigration from Latin America, especially Central America, to the region.

The *Star* article continued and started to focus more on Central American immigration alongside Mexican immigration. “Although a presidential commission recently urged a crackdown on the 1 million to 2 million, mostly-Mexican, illegal immigrants in the United States, pressures to cross the border in search of jobs are going to greatly intensify in the next 10 to 15 years as the adult labor force throughout Central America jumps to 70 percent,” the journalist reported. Drawing on a long history that connotes Mexicans with illegality, the newspaper claims that most undocumented immigrants are Mexicans. However, it also adds that population growth in Central America will lead to increased undocumented immigration of

²⁸⁵ Richard Critchfield, “The Spanish-Speaking: New Latin Arrivals Often Victimized Here,” *The Evening Star*, April 3, 1972.

²⁸⁶ Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*, 214; Adam Goodman, *Deportation Machine: America’s Long History of Expelling Immigrants*, Politics and Society in Modern America (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 136.

²⁸⁷ Elaine Peña, “The Latino DC History Project: 2009–2010 Synopsis” (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2010); Centeno-Meléndez, “Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s.”

laborers from the isthmus, corroborating the immigration agent's claim that the majority of undocumented immigrants are Central American or South American. The *Star* signaled to local readers that Central Americans were economic migrants and neglect the involvement the U.S. historically played in destabilizing the region and supporting violent right-wing regimes, which led to increased emigration from Central America. In claiming that most undocumented immigrants are Mexicans and sequentially predicting that Central American laborers will follow, the *Star* drew a racial and class-based correlation between Mexicans and Central Americans.

Structurally, restrictive immigration policies produced Central Americans as "illegal aliens." The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act was fundamental to this production for two reasons. First, as previously mentioned, it placed immigration limits on the Western hemisphere, where none existed. Second, it only allotted 10 percent of visas to skilled and unskilled labor and required the Secretary of Labor to certify that there were not enough American laborers to perform the job at the time an individual applied for a visa and specifically the location where they sought employment.²⁸⁸ These clauses made it overwhelmingly more difficult for Central Americans to immigrate to the U.S. legally.²⁸⁹ For many working-class Central Americans already employed by embassies in Washington, the 1965 Immigration Act's labor requirements made it challenging for them to adjust their immigration

²⁸⁸ Immigration and Nationality Act, 1965; Charles B. Keely, "Effects of the Immigration Act of 1965 on Selected Population Characteristics of Immigrants to the United States," *Demography* 8, no. 2 (1971): 157–69, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2060606>.

²⁸⁹ Ana Patricia Rodríguez discusses how some Central Americans benefitted from the passage of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act in "Salvadoran Immigrant Acts and Migration to San Francisco (circa 1960s and seventies)," however, this was not the case for the majority of Central Americans in the U.S. See Alvarado, Estrada, and Hernández, *U.S. Central Americans*, 41–59.

status to permanent residents by obtaining employment with American employers like they would previously.²⁹⁰ Now, they also had to prove that Americans were not capable, able, or qualified to perform the same jobs they sought. Without the ability to adjust their status by obtaining employment, service staff who left their diplomatic employers became undocumented.²⁹¹ Central Americans who found themselves in this predicament were, in turn, not directly eligible to legally endorse family members seeking to migrate to Washington.

The need to emigrate from Central America intensified throughout the 1970s and 1980s because of violent right-wing regimes, civil war, and corresponding economic crises. Meanwhile, the making of undocumented Central Americans continued. Refugees fleeing the instability in the isthmus were at odds with U.S. because the U.S. supported many of the regimes that refugees were fleeing. As a result, the U.S. denied asylum to the majority of Central Americans. Activism led to the creation of legislation like the 1986 Illegal Immigration Reform and Control Act, which allowed those who arrived to the U.S. before 1982 to adjust their immigration status. However, the majority of Central Americans came thereafter and, as part of the legislation, Congress expanded immigration enforcement.²⁹² A few years later, the 1996 the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act would make it easier to apprehend and deport undocumented immigrants.²⁹³

²⁹⁰ Centeno-Meléndez, “Placemaking in a City of Nations: Latino Community Formation in Washington, D.C., 1820s – 1970s,” 126.

²⁹¹ Centeno-Meléndez, 126.

²⁹² Abrego et al., “Making Immigrants into Criminals.”

²⁹³ Abrego et al.

Although they were refugees, many viewed Central Americans as economic immigrants, looking to take American jobs and posing an economic threat. This trope was especially pervasive as emigration from El Salvador and Guatemala increased. “Illegal aliens don’t replace suburbanites in the employment market.” Lee G. Cremer, President of the Union of Immigration and Naturalization Employees, said in an interview with *The Post* about the growth of the Latina/o population in the region.²⁹⁴ “Our semiskilled are definitely being replaced by illegals because they will accept low wages and working conditions that our own semiskilled and unskilled will not.”²⁹⁵ Cremer’s statement constructs undocumented immigrants as a problem for one group of Americans but not others. He constructed these two American groups through racially coded language of space and class to draw generalized distinctions between African Americans and white people. In context, he suggested that undocumented immigration from Central America would not be a problem for middle-class, presumably white, suburbanites. The suburbs developed around African Americans in the early- to mid-twentieth century.²⁹⁶ And, by the 1970s, African Americans, Latinas/os, and Asians, were increasingly diversifying the suburbs.²⁹⁷ Yet, the history of white flight and redlining in the suburbs still made most suburbs in the region predominantly white places, both numerically and in ideologically. Therefore, undocumented immigration from Central America was perceived to pose a threat to white people in the suburbs.

²⁹⁴ Bancroft, “Many Area Aliens Tread a Tightrope,” *The Washington Post*,” October 30, 1971.

²⁹⁵ Bancroft, “Many Area Aliens Tread a Tightrope/”

²⁹⁶ Gale, *Washington, D.C.*; Boone, *Capital Cubans*; Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*.

²⁹⁷ Gale, *Washington, D.C.*; Boone, *Capital Cubans*; Carpio, *Collisions at the Crossroads*.

Harmless to middle-class white suburbanites, Cremer suggests that undocumented Central American immigrants threatened the economic well-being of semiskilled and unskilled workers who mainly resided in cities. In Washington, African Americans occupied most semiskilled and unskilled labor and were the majority of residents in the District. While the District had a strong Black middle-class, Cremer was again relying on dominant tropes of race, class, and space that primarily imagined African Americans as poor or working-class city dwellers. One *Post* reader felt so adamant about the effect of undocumented immigration on Black folk that he wrote a letter to the editor. “Employers who hire illegal aliens while half the black youths [*sic*] in this city, and in this nation also, are without jobs should be given stiff civil and criminal penalties,” said Robert F. Zeltner in 1978.²⁹⁸ Zeltner and many others used undocumented immigrants as scapegoats for Black unemployment in the city at a time in which there was lack of public investment in it, especially after the 1968 Martin Luther King uprisings.²⁹⁹ Undocumented Central Americans became associated with semiskilled and unskilled labor and economic became the scapegoat for the social and economic problems of the city, which directly impacted African Americans.

Discursive representation also contributed to how an undocumented person “looks” like through discourse that drew distinctions between Central Americans and other ethnic and racial groups. In addition to being associated with illegality, semi- and unskilled labor, Central Americans were also imagined to have dark features and

²⁹⁸ Robert F. Zeltner, “Letters to the Editor: A Case for Deporting Illegal Aliens,” October 21, 1978.

²⁹⁹ Tanya Maria Golash-Boza, *Before Gentrification: The Creation of DC’s Racial Wealth Gap* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2023). Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation’s Capital*, 382–389.

olive to brown complexion. The racialization of Central Americans as brown “illegal aliens” erased Black and Indigenous immigrants from Central America and reinforced mestizaje by creating a totalizing brown figure.³⁰⁰ However, in the Washington metropolitan area, the racialization of Central Americans was also profoundly shaped by domestic anti-Black and anti-Indigenous sentiments, as well as xenophobia.³⁰¹ In describing Washington’s Latin American immigrants, the *Star* wrote in 1971,

“Immigrants from the Dominican Republic, Guatemala and El Salvador, many with Indian blood, tend to predominate the inner-city. Cubans and Puerto Ricans, especially if educated, tend to live in the suburbs and be more easily assimilated into the mainstream of middle-class American society. Negro Latins tend to be the worst off, since few are accepted by the culturally insecure American blacks.”³⁰²

The *Star* stratified local populations between Dominicans and Central Americans of “Indian blood” in the inner city, educated Cubans and Puerto Ricans a part of the “mainstream” in the suburbs, “mainstream middle-class American society,” Black Latinas/os, and Black Americans.³⁰³ From this vantage point, the outlined stratifications drew both explicit and implicit racial and ethnic distinctions, as well as some spatial differences that were familiar to the Washington audience.

The *Star* situated Central Americans primarily in the inner-city and described them as “Indian.” Their placement in Washington’s inner city positioned Central Americans alongside poor and working-class African Americans in the District, as

³⁰⁰ Herrera, “Racialized Illegality”; Meitzenheimer, “‘Know That We Exist’: Storytelling as Self-Making for UndocuBlack Students.”

³⁰¹ Hernández, *Migra! A History of the U.S. Border Patrol*; Cecilia Márquez, “Juan Crow and the Erasure of Blackness in the Latina/o South,” *Labor* 16, no. 3 (September 1, 2019): 79–85, <https://doi.org/10.1215/15476715-7569839>; Márquez, *Making the Latino South*.

³⁰² Critchfield, “The Spanish-Speaking: New Latin Arrivals Often Victimized Here,” *The Evening Star*, April 3, 1972.

³⁰³ While Ginetta Candelario argues that Dominicans in D.C. were more likely to self-identify as Black, the stratification the newspaper article describes outlines how white people perceived them.

discussed. Nevertheless, the claim that they have “Indian blood” sets them apart. While indigeneity comes in many phenotypes, the conceptualization of Central Americans as Indigenous draws on visual legacies of colonialism in the Americas that depict Indigenous people in anthropological photographs and as caricatures in mascots, cartoons, and marketing imagery. Moreover, the identification of Central Americans as Indigenous draws on Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua’s dominant articulation of identity as mestiza/o. Their articulation of mestizaje utilizes indigeneity as a national symbol, all while disavowing Indigenous people and excluding Blackness as foreign or, at best, marginal.³⁰⁴ Although most Central American nations strategically used indigeneity to tout mestizaje as a progressive racial ideology, the U.S. viewed Indigenous heritage as recessive.³⁰⁵ It used this ideology to justify U.S. imperialism in much of Central America.³⁰⁶ Public discourse helped transpose these visual and ideological connotations of indigeneity in the U.S. and Central America onto Central Americans in Washington.

The *Star* also distinguished Central Americans from two of the largest Latino groups in the U.S.: Cubans and Puerto Ricans. Additionally, the reporter places Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the suburbs of D.C. As previously mentioned, suburbs were coded white places. By placing Cubans and Puerto Ricans in the suburbs, the *Star* is suggesting their proximity to whiteness. Their immigration and citizenship

³⁰⁴ Hooker, “Indigenous Inclusion/Black Exclusion”; Hooker, “Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race”; Cárdenas, *Constituting Central American-Americans*.

³⁰⁵ Hooker, “Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race”; González, *Harvest of Empire*, 27–57.

³⁰⁶ Hooker, “Hybrid Subjectivities, Latin American Mestizaje, and Latino Political Thought on Race”; González, *Harvest of Empire*, 27–57.

status undergirded their perceived whiteness. Unlike Central Americans, Puerto Ricans are American citizens by birth due to the 1917 Jones Act.³⁰⁷ Furthermore, unlike Central American refugees, the U.S. welcomed Cuban refugees from the 1950s and 1960s with a pathway to permanent legal residency.³⁰⁸ Through Puerto Rican and Cubans' perceived proximity to whiteness, the *Star* delineated for audiences what Central Americans did not have: whiteness, middle-class status, formal citizenship, or permanent legal residence.

The final clause in the *Star* quote: "Negro Latinos tend to be the worst off, since few are accepted by the culturally insecure American blacks" further reveals the mainstream racial connotations associated with Central Americans and the perceived relationship between Latinas/os and African Americans. U.S. racial logic has historically used blood quantum to either recognize someone as Indigenous or as Black. Under this structure, Central Americans cannot be of "Indian blood" and Black.³⁰⁹ Therefore, Central American and Afro-Latina/o identities exist as separate from one another. However, Afro-Latinas/os are not neatly grouped with African Americans in the Washington area either. The *Star* suggests that Black Latinas/os should be welcomed by Black Americans, especially in a predominantly African American city, because of a shared Blackness. However, according to The *Star*, they are not accepted due to African Americans alleged cultural insecurity. For a

³⁰⁷ De Genova and Ramos-Zayas sparse out how Puerto Ricans and Mexicans draw distinctions between one another. Formal citizenship, as bestowed by the nation-state, is essential. See *Latino Crossings*.

³⁰⁸ The 1966 Cuban American Adjustment Act made it possible for Cubans who lived in the U.S. for a minimum of one year eligible to become legal permanent residents.

³⁰⁹ María Josefina Saldaña-Portillo, "Critical Latinx Indigeneities: A Paradigm Drift," *Latino Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2017): 138–55, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0059-x>.

mainstream newspaper to claim African Americans are culturally insecure is to falsely imply that they are devoid of culture. It also demonstrates that the press is in some ways more sympathetic toward a perceived foreign Blackness as opposed to domestic American Blackness.³¹⁰

Ultimately, Central Americans came to join Mexicans as “iconic illegal aliens” through structural and representational measures that led Central Americans to be imagined not only as “illegal,” but also as brown, poor, or working-class. There was an acknowledgement of the racial diversity among Latinas/os—albeit in archaic terms that drew on long histories of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigeneity. In that acknowledgment, Central Americans were not to be confused with African Americans, Afro-Latinas/os, or white Latinas/os. In outlining the different Latina/o groups in the region, alongside African American and white groups, the *Star* and *The Post* explicitly and implicitly described Central Americans corporeally. These descriptors made visible the archetype of illegality in Washington, which was substantiated through an immigration system that made a large portion of Central Americans “illegal.” Illegality, therefore, came to be embodied for Central Americans. Illegality came to be embodied in the sense that it was corporeal—read through skin tone, speech, mannerisms, sartorial choices—as well as internalized, informing how they thought.

³¹⁰ In the 1960s, John F. Kennedy had asked businesses in Washington, D.C., Maryland, and Virginia, among other nearby states, to differentiate between domestic Blackness and foreign Blackness after several international Black diplomats were denied service at businesses in D.C. and Maryland. See Candelario, *Black behind the Ears*, 159.

The Stoop in Chirilagua

While the figure of the brown undocumented Central American was constructed structurally and discursive forms of representation at a national and regional scale, the women in the photograph experienced illegality at the scale of the body. How did they become “illegal” subjects? How did they end up posing on a stoop in Alexandria, Virginia? What decisions did they make? What made it possible? The decision to migrate without government authorization and sequentially live under the conditions of illegality was Elda and Adilia’s only viable option for them and their daughter’s survival. They did not ask how to legally migrate because they knew of the legal, racial, and class obstacles that preceded them. Instead, they questioned how to migrate clandestinely, where to migrate, who would care for their daughters, and how they could withstand the hurdles of illegality in the U.S. The answer to these questions relied upon the knowledge and abilities of others, creating an interconnected and intimate network of support.

Adilia grew up poor. Her father, José, worked the ports in Puerto Barrios and Santo Tomás de Castilla in Guatemala’s Caribbean coastal state of Izabal, where the United Fruit Company exported bananas. Adilia’s mother took after the home. Still, this was not enough for the family. In 1979, at the age of 13, Adilia began working as a domestic servant for a wealthy Guatemalan-American family living between the capital of Guatemala City and the port town of Puerto Barrios. At the age of 18, Adilia got pregnant. The 60 monthly quetzales the wealthy family paid her was not enough to buy her daughter milk, which at the time cost about 18 quetzales.³¹¹ For

³¹¹ Quetzales are the currency in Guatemala. Over the past several decades the exchange rate has been approximately 7–8 quetzales for every U.S. dollar.

Adilia and her daughter, it was a life-or-death situation. In 1986, Adilia left her toddler daughter with her mother, Maruca, in Izabal and headed towards Northern Virginia, where Maruca's sister, Maura had already welcomed Adilia's brothers.

Similarly, at the young age of 18, Elda left her aldea of Buenos Aires, a small town in Izabal, for her maternal ancestors' aldea, or village, in the southeast state of Chiquimula. Elda arrived pregnant, and her mother, Telma, arrived alongside her, newly separated from years of spousal abuse. Humbly, kin welcomed them in a small, rural town with a single dirt road that winded along the curvatures of the surrounding mountains. A few months later, in March 1987, Elda gave birth to Idania. While Elda's maternal family surrounded them, they hardly lived off the small lot of land they cultivated. There was barely enough for sugar or baby's milk. So, when Idania was three months old, Elda entrusted Telma with her firstborn. Meanwhile, she picked up and left again. This time, however, Elda returned to her home state of Izabal to prepare for her clandestine flight to the Washington suburbs of Northern Virginia. She landed in Northern Virginia in June 1987.

Adilia and Elda were among many mothers and fathers who left children in their countries of origin before migrating to the U.S. As Leisy Abrego put it, parents "have faced great personal, political, and financial barriers and at times worked through immense hesitation before taking the steps to migrate. In every case, and for various reasons, insurmountable desperation ultimately forced them to push through their pain and leave their children with other caregivers."³¹² Such was the case for Adilia and Elda. However, I want to emphasize the matriarchal nature of their

³¹² Abrego, *Sacrificing Families*, 26.

migration. As investigative journalist Terry Repak argues, Central American immigration to Washington was led by women.³¹³ They relied on their mothers to be caregivers for their daughters while they made their way to the suburbs of D.C. Furthermore, they only arrived there because of their tía Maura, who immigrated to the Washington area a few years prior.

What were the intermediate acts of intimacy that led to Adilia and Elda's immigration? These acts are sometimes perceived as inconsequential that they get lost in the historical account (or perhaps I did not ask the right questions?). Did Maruca borrow a neighbor's house phone to call her sister Maura? I speculate Maura picked up her ringing phone in Alexandria, Virginia to hear her younger sister desperately utter, "Adilia se quiere ir...¿Me la cuidas allá?" (Adilia wants to go...Will you care for her over there?) I imagine Elda calling her tía Maura to tell her, "¿Tía, me recibe? Mi hermana me consiguió el dinero. No le diga a mi papa que me voy. Solo necesito posada." (Auntie, will you receive me? My sister got me the money. Don't tell my dad I'm leaving. I just need somewhere to go.) Did Maura respond, "Sí, hija. Vente. A lo menos con frijoles y tortilla comemos" (Yes, daughter. Come. We can at least sustain ourselves with beans and tortillas)?

Maura, although Guatemalan, lived in San Salvador, El Salvador, with her husband Beto Juarez from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. They raised five of their six children in the capital city until they left forcibly. Beto worked at Cartonera Centroamericana, a packaging manufacturing company, and Maura had a sewing factory. Their middle-class employment afforded them a comfortable life in El

³¹³ Repak, *Waiting on Washington*.

Salvador. As their daughter Natalia put it, “Economicamente, pues, vivíamos bien. No eramos ricos, pero teníamos todo lo necesario” (Financially, well, we lived good. We were not rich, but we had the essentials).³¹⁴ Meanwhile, the political and ideological struggles that culminated in the Salvadoran Civil War were volleying and intensifying. Salvadoran authoritarianism persisted, revolutionary forces emerged, and violence ensued, especially in San Salvador.³¹⁵ Natalia and her younger sister Patricia recalled when the political climate was worsening between the state military and the guerrilleros. “Hubo un día que nos dejaron cerrados en los colegios” (There was a day when they locked us in at school), Natalia shared. “Mi pobre mamá anduvo buscándonos por todos lados... Cuando salimos había tanquetas, muertos por todos lados” (My poor mother was looking for us everywhere... When we left, there were tanks, dead people everywhere).³¹⁶ Patricia followed,

“Esa vez a mi sí me dejaron salir de la escuela. Yo tuve que meterme a un restaurante porque estaban disparando y el restaurante me deja entrar y cerraron las puertas. Pero cuando salí, gente muerta en la calle. Eso era horrible para cuando uno es niño” (That time I was allowed to leave the school. I had to go into a restaurant because they were shooting and the restaurant allowed me inside and shut the doors. But when I left, dead people on the streets. As a child, that was horrible to experience).³¹⁷

Amidst this violent social climate of the Salvadoran Civil War circa 1978, the Juarez family received a threat against their lives. Upon returning from visiting family in Guatemala, they found a menacing note telling them to leave the house or have their family killed. The following dawn, the Juarez’s fled San Salvador for

³¹⁴ Natalia Salmeron, oral history by author, Dumfries, Virginia, January 7, 2023.

³¹⁵ Erik Kristofer Ching, *Stories of Civil War in El Salvador: A Battle over Memory* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2016), 32–40.

³¹⁶ Natalia Salmeron, oral history by author, Dumfries, Virginia, January 7, 2023.

³¹⁷ Patricia Vaughn Juarez, oral history by author, Dumfries, Virginia, January 7, 2023.

Guatemala. Beto and Maura tried to recreate their lower-middle-class life for their children in Guatemala. However, they did not have enough funds to build a home of their own. Sequentially, Beto and Maura applied for and received temporary visas to the United States. Beto had a female cousin already living in the area, which brought them to Northern Virginia. Once here, they let their visas expire. Although undocumented for a time, Maura and Beto's arrival in the early 1980s shaped where their children, nephews, and nieces—like Elda and Adilia—would settle.

By the time Elda arrived to Northern Virginia in 1987, Maura and Beto rented a duplex off Mount Vernon Avenue. The duplex was on the edges of Chirilagua, a neighborhood on the Arlington and Alexandria border that obtained its moniker because of the large population of migrants from a town of the same name in San Miguel, El Salvador. Chirilagua, along with other surrounding areas in Northern Virginia, the District of Columbia, and Maryland, became places where Central American communities were (re)built. Maura and Beto welcomed Elda, as well as the growing number of her first and second cousins that started making the DMV home with and without legal paperwork. Tía Maura provided physical and emotional safety, and also connected them to resources to ease the transition from Guatemala to Washington. *Mire, será que tiene trabajo para mi sobrina (Look, would you happen to have work for my niece)?* Adilia and Elda, therefore, depended on their interpersonal relationships, particularly those constituted by other women, to leave their countries of origin and arrive to their destination in the DMV.

While the photograph only depicts Elda and Adilia, it also encapsulates the larger community that made it possible for them to pose in Virginia's Chirilagua. As

the primary caregiver and homemaker, Maura made her family's home a place of refuge, where the law was not. The image of Elda and Adilia playfully laughing and grazing hands on the stoop in Chirilagua reflects feelings of relief and support. It represents how their immigrant experiences in the Washington area were intimately interwoven and, at times, dependent upon one another. While Adilia and Elda labored Monday through Saturday cleaning homes and taking care of white children, the tide turned Saturday evening when they wandered Arlington, Alexandria, and Falls Church, Virginia with one another, as well as with other cousins, friends, and lovers, and later returned to tía Maura's home for maternal care on Sunday.

Policing Central Americans in Place

Columbia Road was bustling with the song of motors running, children crying, and the incomprehensible chatter between adults. "Two men in neatly pressed suits" exited their Ford sedan, which they had parked on the curb for some time.³¹⁸ They approach a man who was exiting the Safeway and "flash their identification and attempt to question him."³¹⁹ They were agents for the local district office of Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS). According to a Chilean woman who worked in the neighborhood, immigration agents drove down Columbia Road at least 20 times a day. The man the agents stopped to question responded in a string of curses. His name was David Gutierrez. While his immigration or citizenship status was unknown, as the Director of Personnel for D.C. government during Mayor Marion Berry's administration, he was, at minimum, a permanent resident. Agents

³¹⁸ Cecilio J. Morales, Jr., "Only in America Can You Be Hispanic: How the D.C. immigration boys keep reinforcing your identity," *The Washington Post*, August 2, 1981.

³¹⁹ Morales, Jr., "Only in America Can You Be Hispanic."

stopped Gutierrez simply because he fit the racial profile of an undocumented immigrant.

While a correspondent for *The Post* accounted for this instance in 1981, the newspaper reported on how immigration agents targeted Latinas/os living near the Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant neighborhoods as early as 1973.³²⁰ Despite being quite diverse with Asian and Black immigrants and citizens living in the neighborhood, Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant earned the reputation of the Latina/o “barrio” in the District. It extended from Park Road south towards Florida Avenue and from 16th Street west towards Connecticut Avenue. There, immigration agents used discriminatory tactics to approach people they suspected of being undocumented at bus stops along Columbia Road or at their homes.³²¹ According to Vernon Jervis, former INS spokesperson, complexion, alongside mannerisms, mode of dress, and language, are considered reasonable causes to suspect someone of being undocumented.³²²

Immigration agents, and, at times, other area residents, racially profiled brown Latinas/os, leading to immigration raids of various sizes that detained many Central Americans. Though immigration agents began targeting Latinas/os by policing the so-called barrio, it came to exceed the neighborhood’s border. Starting in 1976, there were more public accounts of specifically detaining large groups of Central Americans across the District and warned of fugitive undocumented immigrants in the region.³²³ The policing of undocumented immigrants, mainly from Central

³²⁰ Isabel West, “Ferment in the Barrio,” *Evening Star*, November 11, 1973.

³²¹ West, “Ferment in the Barrio.”

³²² Morales, Jr., “Only in America Can You Be Hispanic.”

³²³ Alfred E. Lewis and Martin Weil, “27 Aliens Travel Here in Small Van; 17 Seized,” *The*

America, and the spaces they visibly occupied substantiated the racial project that made brown Central Americans illegal in the Washington metropolitan area. Black studies scholar Simone Browne's concept of "racializing surveillance" is helpful to understanding what was occurring in the Washington region. Browne refers to racializing surveillance as the monitoring of a perceived suspects in a way that make concrete "boundaries, borders, and bodies along racial lines."³²⁴ Where the region, to a minimal extent, recognized that there were Afro-Latinas/os, racializing surveillance differentiated and reinscribed the figure of the brown undocumented Latina/o vis-à-vis Central Americans. As such, brown Central Americans were perpetually policed in place for their presumed illegality.

Among the earliest and largest reported immigration raids in the latter half of the twentieth century took place on November 28, 1976, at West Potomac Park, located off Ohio Drive Southwest near the National Mall. West Potomac Park was a popular place for Latinas/os in the Washington area to play soccer. On that Sunday afternoon, next to the reservoir known as the Tidal Basin, 350 spectators came to watch local players from El Salvador and Peru compete against one another in a lively soccer game. According to Edward Burns, the deputy director of the INS district office, agents arrived at the park and approached "people who looked in the judgement of the officers to be aliens," demanding they show their permanent resident cards.³²⁵ Immigration agents called United States Park Police for support, resulting in agents and park police chasing people by foot, horseback, and motor

Washington Post, November 20, 1976.

³²⁴ Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 16.

³²⁵ Louise A. Reid, "Illegal Aliens Raid Nets 26 Suspects," *The Washington Post*, November 29, 1976.

scooters as the crowd of soccer players and spectators fled in fear of deportation. Reportedly, some of those present at the soccer game even jumped into the Tidal Basin. Agents and police officers ultimately arrested 26 immigrants, mostly from El Salvador and some Guatemalans.³²⁶ The raid led to the deportation of 24 people.

The raid, also called the “Sunday Soccer Bust,” resulted from a bondsman asking the Park Police to arrest an individual who did not attend his deportation hearing. Park police, in turn, tipped immigration agents to the significant presence of Latinas/os playing soccer at West Potomac Park on Sundays. It was not just the act of a single person not attending their deportation hearing that led to a massive immigration raid, mainly impacting Central Americans. Instead, the visibly large presence of those racialized as “illegal” was enough to justify the policing of public place. The policing of local Central American and other Latina/o residents at a national park in Washington, in turn, signified that they did not belong in the region nor the nation.

Spaces of leisure for Central Americans were not the only places policed. In fact, Blackie’s House of Beef, located on 2nd and M Street Northwest in Dupont Circle, was raided several times. On March 30, 1978, agents captured 18 restaurant workers and detained 11 on bond, mainly bussers and cooks from El Salvador. A *Post* correspondent wrote, “As people arrived to eat in the quiet dining rooms, busboys and workers in the kitchen and upstairs section were seen running for places to hide. Eighteen were caught and questioned. One was found, finally, hiding among

³²⁶ Among the 26 immigrants arrested, one or two of them were from Colombia. Of those 26 immigrants detained, two were not deported to their countries of origin because they were legal permanent residents.

vegetable boxes in a 35-degree food locker.”³²⁷ Similar to the raid on the soccer game a few years prior, immigration agents instilled fear in workers. The threat of deportation caused them to run and hide, desperately attempting to hold onto the bit of freedom they had.

Judge Louis Oberdorfer declared this raid at Blackie’s unlawful because immigration agents utilized a warrant that permitted the search of property premises and objects.³²⁸ Under this decree, agents unlawfully detained undocumented workers, treating humans as property. This logic emerged out of anti-Black chattel slavery, in which enslaved people were treated as property and did not have the right over their own bodies and space. Now, immigration agents used similar logics on undocumented workers. Despite Oberdorfer ruling the first raid unlawful, immigration agents conducted another raid of the restaurant on November 17, 1978, with a warrant that explicitly permitted them to search for undocumented people.³²⁹ They detained 14 people, 11 of whom were Salvadoran men, and one was a Honduran woman. This time, however, INS tipped off *The Post* to document the spectacle of the immigration raid.³³⁰

³²⁷ “Illegal Aliens Are the Object of Restaurant Raid,” *The Washington Post*, March 31, 1978.

³²⁸ Kenneth Bredemeier and Christopher Dickey, “Raid on Illegal Aliens Ruled Unlawful by Judge,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1978.

³²⁹ Christopher Dickey, “14 Aliens Nabbed in Restaurant Raid,” *The Washington Post*, November 18, 1978.

³³⁰ The documentation of the raid is an example of what De Genova refers to as the “spectacle of illegality.” See “Spectacles of Migrant ‘Illegality.’”



Figure 6 Immigration agent walks a group of restaurant workers out of Blackie's House of Beef after an immigration raid on November 17, 1978. Photograph by Charles De Vecchio, The Washington Post.

The Post published two grainy photographs. One photograph communicated the agency's triumph as an immigration agent in a trench coat, tie, and large clear glasses stares ahead. He marches forward with detainees proceeding behind him in two lines. They all wear the same uniform—a white jacket and black pants, a typical uniform for kitchen workers and bussers in high-end restaurants. I can imagine the workers' non-slip shoes quietly syncopating with one another's footsteps as they march out of Blackie's House of Beef. Most of them look downwards, evading the camera. Perhaps they did so in shame or embarrassment. Or, perhaps, they were attempting to preserve their identities. In either case, immigration agents took their dominion of self. One man, however, looked directly at the camera. It might have been an accident, but it also could be an act of defiance. Though the agents publicly humiliated them, he decided to look straight ahead with a sliver of pride and decency. The second photograph featured an immigration agent in plaid trousers and a dark

blazer, swinging his arms in an attempt to grasp a man running forward in his uniform. Ahead of him is another man, jogging away in the same clothing. I hope they were able to escape the arms of agents and the coldness of cells.

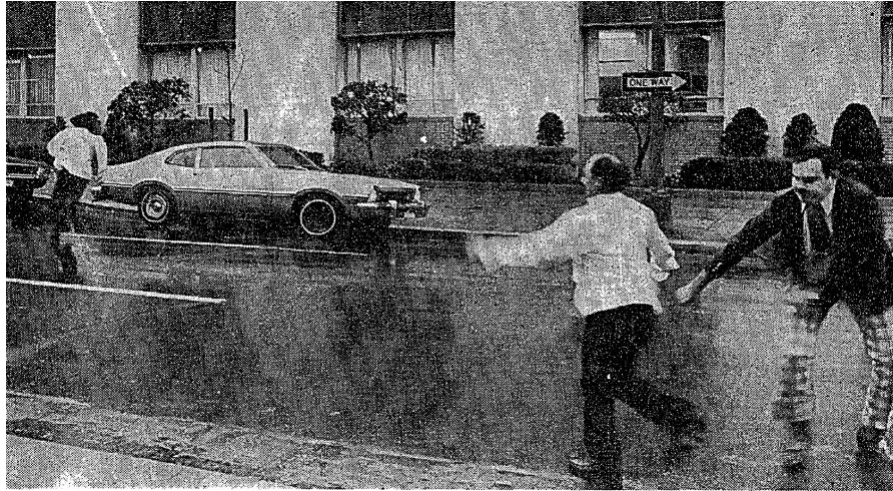


Figure 7 Two restaurant workers from Blackie's House of Beef running away from an immigration agent, November 17, 1978. Photograph by Charles De Vecchio, The Washington Post.

I question why The Post would publish an image of an agent's failed attempt to capture potentially undocumented workers. Like other reports on immigration raids, the article highlighted the escape of undocumented people. The newspaper articles detail immigrants jumping into the Tidal Basin, hiding in unconventional places, or being on the run, as if to say that undocumented immigrants remain fugitive among the larger population in the region. The photographs served as a subtle alarm or a "wanted" notice for the audience to remain alert for those who are racialized as "illegal." It was brown Latinos.

The descriptive accounts of policing Central Americans in spaces of leisure and workplaces primarily focused on men. In much of the discourse on illegality, women were seldom mentioned and even less likely to be visibilized through photographs. This reflects the general gendered division of space, where men occupy

public and more visible space and women tend to occupy private and less visible space. The exception to this was América Sosa. Sosa was an outspoken member of CoMadres, an organization established in 1977 in El Salvador by women whose relatives were disappeared, imprisoned, or politically assassinated by El Salvador's right-wing government and its death squads. They formed CoMadres with the support of Saint Oscar Romero and were instrumental in a larger movement by Central American women responding to the multi-prong political, social, and economic crises that erupted in the isthmus during the latter half of the twentieth century.³³¹ Through their circulation of information, investigation of victimins, and acts of civil disobedience, the CoMadres demanded the right-wing government to truthfully answer to what happened to the people they deemed terrorists or subversives. In their pursuit for the truth, the CoMadres also became the political enemies of the Salvadoran state.³³² Sosa fled El Salvador when the death squads terrorized her neighborhood of San Antonio Abad in San Salvador, and they began to directly pursue her, even after abducting one of her sons and torturing her husband to death.

³³¹ Newspapers covered the CoMadres organizing in El Salvador primarily, but in some instances, they also talked about their work in the diaspora. CoMadres and the other women-led Central American organizations and how they formed part of a larger genealogy of feminist movement in Central America, as well as Latin America. For the limited literature that exists on CoMadres see Mariclaire Acosta, "The Comadres of El Salvador: A Case Study," in *Surviving Beyond Fear: Women, Children and Human Rights in Latin America* (Fredonia, NY: White Pine Press, 1993), 126–39; Jennifer Schirmer, "The Seeking of Truth and the Gendering of Consciousness: The CoMadres of El Salvador and the CONAVIGUA Widows of Guatemala," in *"Viva": Women and Popular Protest in Latin America* (London : New York: Routledge, 1993), 30–48; María Del Mar López-Cabrales, "Las comadres y CONAVIGUA. Mujeres centroamericanas buscando un espacio para sus reivindicaciones.," *Estudios Latinoamericanos* 3, no. 6 (August 10, 1996): 181, <https://doi.org/10.22201/cela.24484946e.1996.6.51505>; Beryl Langer, "Mothers of the Disappeared in the Diaspora: Globalization and Human Rights," in *Human Rights and Gender Politics: Asia-Pacific Perspectives*, ed. Anne-Marie Hilsdon et al., 0 ed. (Routledge, 2012), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203060209>.

³³² López-Cabrales, "Las comadres y CONAVIGUA. Mujeres centroamericanas buscando un espacio para sus reivindicaciones.," 194.

Sosa arrived in the Washington region in 1985, with the support of Dumbarton United Methodist Church in Georgetown.³³³ Once here, she continued her activism with CoMadres in the diaspora.³³⁴ Sosa was the director of CoMadres in D.C. Their office was in the First United Church of Christ, located at 945 G Street Northwest.³³⁵

On March 28, 1989, immigration agents detained her for deportation at the CoMadres office in the local church.³³⁶ Sosa believed her arrest was politically motivated, though immigration officials denied that. The spokesperson for INS at the time, Duke Austin, commented, “The question is, is she legally in the United States... When you have an activist with high visibility, it’s easier to locate them than someone in Adams Morgan in a basement.”³³⁷ While Austin does not admit that Sosa’s detainment was politically motivated, he does reveal that her visibility as an activist, speaking against the U.S.-supported, right-wing Salvadoran government, made her a more susceptible target. On the other hand, had she remained in a basement, living a life that was less visible to authorities, agents would have had a more challenging time accumulating evidence to detain Sosa. Austin’s comment points to the threat of deportation embedded in undocumented Central Americans’ occupying visible space, whether it be for leisure, work, or activism. In turn, he

³³³ Karlyn Barker and Evelyn Hsu, “Refugee’s Arrest at D.C. Church Incites Protest,” *The Washington Post*, March 29, 1989.

³³⁴ CoMadres came to be an international group with members and allies in Costa Rica, Mexico, the U.S., Australia. López-Cabrales, “Las comadres y CONAVIGUA. Mujeres centroamericanas buscando un espacio para sus reivindicaciones.” 196; Langer, “Mothers of the Diasappeared in the Diaspora: Globalization and Human Rights.”

³³⁵ Karlyn Barker and Evelyn Hsu, “Refugee’s Arrest at D.C. Church Incites Protest”; First United Church of Christ DC, “Serving Our Community,” accessed February 10, 2024, <https://www.firstuccdc.org/index.php/justice-service/>.

³³⁶ Barker and Hsu, “Refugee’s Arrest at D.C. Church Incites Protest.”

³³⁷ Elizabeth N. Aoki, “Salvadoran Activist Fights Deportation: Supporters Flock to Arlington Hearing,” *The Washington Post*, August 12, 1989.

condemns undocumented Central Americans to the basement in order for them to remain invisible to mainstream society.

While América Sosa is the only woman publicly named as being detained by INS in the region, it does not mean Central American women were not being policed or detained. However, it does point to Central American women's lack of visibility in public accounts. The lack of visibility is partly due to the type of labor many undocumented Central American women performed. Many worked in private homes, cleaning, providing childcare, and elderly care throughout the region. Some even lived with their employers in an extra bedroom, likely located in the basement. INS spokesperson, Duke Austin, used the basement as a metaphor for undocumented immigrants' invisibility. It is underground, has little to no windows, and tends to be dark and moldy. Moreover, laborers are prone to greater exploitation and subservience when the basement belongs to an employer. It is the type of space Duke Austin preferred undocumented Central Americans occupied. Out of sight.

In all, the archetype of the "illegal alien" was used to police public spaces brown Central Americans occupied, leading to immigration raids and individual arrests. While immigration raids were a means to manage undocumented immigrants, reports always included anecdotes of Central Americans escaping the grasp of law enforcement. The documentation of their escape, in turn, made the undocumented Central American hyper-visible and justified more policing. These accounts primarily focused on men. When an undocumented woman by the name America Sosa ensured she was visible in protests El Salvador's state violence, she was relegated to the basement by the INS. The policing of space thus challenged undocumented

immigrants' spatial autonomy. That is, undocumented Central Americans' ability to occupy space was always in question. Places of leisure like public parks or workplaces became sites where authorities and residents could contest undocumented Central Americans' ability to remain and move through the U.S. The basement, on the other hand, is where Central American women were condemned.

The Basement



Figure 8 Maura walking down the stairs to her basement apartment in her employer's home in Arlington, Virginia, ca. March 1985.

Maura was among numerous undocumented Central American women who were “out of sight” to many, providing domestic labor for Americans and living in the basement of their employer's home. In this picture, Maura has her hair pulled back. It remains a bit disheveled, perhaps from a long day at work. She wears an all-white dress and a

green delantal (apron), typical of those found in Central America with multiple pockets. These aprons were most suitable for entrepreneurial women in the isthmus. Women who wore these aprons often sold food and merchandise or provided services like sewing. They did business in the streets of Central America or from their homes and used the pockets on the apron like cash registers. How did Maura obtain the apron so typical of the isthmus? Did she bring it with her when she initially immigrated? Or did someone bring it to her? The apron was a reminder of Maura's past as a seamstress in El Salvador. Perhaps that's where she pocketed the money from the day's earnings. Here, however, she wears the apron in her newly acquired job as a live-in nanny for a Jewish woman who was a single mother of two in the Arlington Ridge neighborhood of Arlington, Virginia. Maura opened the door to her apartment in the basement of the single-family home. As she holds onto the rail and steps forward to go down the stairs, she is stopped by someone pointing a camera lens toward her. Maura's lips are pressed tightly toward her face, but her high cheekbones and the lines around her mouth reveal her content. Was it her husband Beto who surprised her with the camera as she was getting ready to leave work and retire downstairs? Was it one of her four children who lived in the basement apartment with them? Or was it a friend from church visiting her at home?

A devout Jehovah's Witnesses, Maura's local congregation aided her in finding employment as a live-in nanny shortly after arriving to Northern Virginia. Sociologists have led research on paid domestic work, generally, using a global economic framework. However, focusing on the regional highlights the role social movements played in shifting political economy. Maura's employment as a domestic

worker came at a time when white women were increasingly entering the workforce. *The Post* estimated that there were 350,000 women in Washington's labor force, and over half of them had children under 18 years old.³³⁸ Meanwhile, as a result of the Civil Rights Movement, African American women in the region were leaving the paid domestic sector, creating an employment gap for immigrant women like Maura to fill.³³⁹ Maura engaged in domestic care work, cleaning, gardening, cooking, mending clothes, and providing childcare for \$125 a week. With Maura likely working approximately 50 hours a week, this was well below the federal minimum wage in 1981.³⁴⁰

The Juarez family, however, has fond memories of how much Maura's employer loved her. Maura's daughter Patricia recalled that the girls Maura took care of "loved her like a grandmother."³⁴¹ As Anita Shelton, former executive director of The National Committee on Household Employment, said in 1980, "The relationship between a household worker and her employer is not akin to any relationship we know."³⁴² This is because domestic workers perform the household labor that make them "like" family in that their work is associated with a traditional maternal figure. Yet, domestic workers are not family. They are exploited laborers. Undocumented

³³⁸ Susan Wood, "Help: As the Need for Domestic Help Increases, so do Expectations—on Both Sides," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 1980.

³³⁹ Repak, *Waiting on Washington*, 55–59.

³⁴⁰ By 1981, the federal minimum wage was \$3.35. If Maura worked for 40 hours at the minimum wage, she would have earned \$134 a week. However, she likely worked more than 40 hours a week due to the demands of household labor. See U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Minimum Wage Workers in Virginia—2014," Accessed October 1, 2023, https://www.bls.gov/regions/mid-atlantic/news-release/2015/minimumwageworkers_virginia_20150720.htm#:~:text=The%20prevailing%20federal%20minimum%20wage%20was%20%242.90%20in%201979%2C%20%243.10,and%20%245.15%20in%20September%201997.

³⁴¹ Patricia Vaughn Juarez, oral history by author, Dumfries, Virginia, January 7, 2023.

³⁴² Wood, "Help"

live-in domestic workers were particularly vulnerable to exploitation. They often did not have contracts that regulated their labor, protected them from abuse, or ensured their housing. This was the case for Maura.

Albeit exploitative and unequal, Maura leveraged her relationship with her employer for housing. It not only afforded her a place to live but also her husband, as well as their children, and extended family. Whenever someone needed a place to stay, Maura would ask her employer. Maura's daughter Natalia recounted the employer's response, "'Maura'—no, María le decía. 'Quien quiera venir, tu la puedes traer'" ("Maura"—no, she would call her María, 'whoever wants to come, you can bring them').³⁴³ Interestingly, this anecdote reveals the unique relationship Maura and her employer had with one another. On one hand, despite being "like" family, the employer never pronounced Maura's name correctly, demonstrating a level of disregard for Maura's individual person. For Maura's employer to care for her "like family," but refer to her by the incorrect name, is a reminder of Maura's replaceability. On the other hand, Maura had established enough trust between them, allowing her to welcome a host of undocumented nieces and nephews into the Arlington basement throughout the early 1980s, before Maura could afford a home of her own in the edges of Chirilagua. Maura's housing helped undocumented family members get adjusted before finding jobs and moving into an apartment with others.

Maura leveraged her relationship with her employer to legalize her status and that of other family members. The employer filed immigration paperwork on her behalf and legalized her status within two years of arriving in the U.S. Upon receiving

³⁴³ Natalia Salmeron, oral history by author, Dumfries, Virginia, January 7, 2023.

permanent residency, Maura filed immigration paperwork for her husband Beto and her children, who remained in Guatemala. “A todos nos salió la residencia por mi mami” (We all got permanent legal residence because of my mom), Natalia acknowledged.³⁴⁴ “Para ese tiempo era más fácil” (In those times, it was much easier), Patricia followed, recognizing how it has only become more challenging to migrate as a permanent resident from Central America or to change one’s immigration status.³⁴⁵ I do not intend to glorify the relationship between domestic workers and their employers. However, I want to highlight how Maura was well aware of the precarity of illegality in the U.S. and the emotional hardship of being separated from children. As a result, Maura used her embodied knowledge and position as a live-in nanny to strategically use her employer to gain permanent residence for her and her family. Because of their mother Maura, Natalia and Patricia were able to come to the U.S. as legal permanent residents in 1983 and 1986, respectively, and live in the basement. *Did Natalia bring her mother the apron? Was she the one to take the picture of Maura after a long day of work?*

Natalia and Patricia’s immigration status set them apart from the majority of their cousins, who migrated clandestinely and lived under a state of illegality, such as Adilia. Adilia declared,

Yo lo que quería era papeles. Desde que yo vine yo sabía...porque ya había tenido tanto que haber con inmigración en México y casi en Estados Unidos. Yo de inmigración, ya no quería saber (What I wanted was papers. I knew that since I arrived...because I had already dealt with immigration so much in Mexico and almost in the United States. I did not want anything to with immigration anymore).³⁴⁶

³⁴⁴ Salmeron, oral history.

³⁴⁵ Vaughn Juarez, oral history.

³⁴⁶ Adilia Lemus, oral history by author, Alexandria, Virginia, December 27, 2019.

Maura kept her sisters wishes and looked out for Adilia. It was through her tía Maura that Adilia learned that if she was a live-in domestic worker, it would be easier to legalize your status. In turn, Maura used her friendships with members of her congregation to connect Adilia to a job as a live-in domestic worker in Herndon, Virginia. They were hopeful that Adilia could also legalize her status through these means. And, as if she was directly following Maura's footsteps, Adilia also lived in her employer's basement.

Adilia kept several photographs from her time as a live-in domestic worker. Of the many photographs with Adilia and white children in the suburbs, one photograph drew me in. Adilia was not even pictured, yet it has her traces. She stood behind the polaroid camera, depicting a circular dining table in front of a large window with plants at its sill. A fair-skinned woman with long black hair sits at the table, holds up a baby girl with one hand, and smiles into the camera's lens. Meanwhile, the baby girl struggles to stand on the woman's thighs and mischievously looks toward the floor as if considering a better surface to stand on. The baby is Evelyn, Adilia's second daughter and the first of her children born in the States.



Figure 9 Polaroid of Maleysi holding her niece Evelyn, ca. 1991

With Adilia working as a live-in nanny, Evelyn spent her early years living at work with her mother and the white children her mother cared for. Despite living in an employer's home, Adilia cultivated relationships with other Central Americans and Latinas/os. These included other Latina domestic workers who lived in the neighborhood, and it also entailed weekends with friends and family in Arlington and Alexandria. Occassionally, friends and family drove to Herndon to visit Adilia and Evelyn, as the woman in the photograph did. I glean from the caption on the Polaroid that the woman is Maleysi, Evelyn's paternal aunt. *I imagine the conversation that took place around that circular kitchen table just moments before the picture was taken, interjecting Spanish into English-speaking homes. ¡Cómo está de grande Evelyn!*" (Evelyn is big!) Maleysi comments as she holds her brother's daughter.

Adilia suggests, “Dejame tomarles una foto” (Let me take a picture), before she grabs the Polaroid camera. With Evelyn and Maleysi at the center of the frame in Adilia’s employer’s kitchen, it reveals the blurred lines between work and family. However, it also demonstrates how Adilia asserted herself in her employer’s space by having family come to her workplace. Within her employer’s home, she was creating familial connections across generations and families in the region. Adilia exercised spatial autonomy by inviting her community into white space, which in other workplaces—such as restaurants—law enforcement could contest because of how she was racialized. Ultimately, in 1993, Adilia legalized her status through her employer.

For undocumented immigrants, the basement was a metaphor for invisibility and represented subservience. However, from the basement, women like Maura and Adilia performed critical everyday care work for the Central American diaspora. They shared knowledge with one another and used their position as live-in domestic workers to legalize their family’s immigration status amid anti-immigrant rhetoric in the 1980s and 1990s. Furthermore, their position helped Maura and Adilia house and host relatives as they transitioned into their lives in the U.S. and attempted to (re)build community state-side. While I focus on Adilia and Maura, countless other undocumented Central American women leveraged their positions and resources to create a sense of permanence and support their micro-communities as they continued to grow throughout the Washington metropolitan area.

Loving Across Borders



Figure 10 Studio portrait of Idania alongside note on the back, which reads: "Elda en esta esta sentadita y fue tomada el nueve de Junio iba a cumplir 15 meses"/Elda here she is sitting. It was taken June 9th. She was going to be 15 months. June 9, 1987.

How can a still photograph reveal so much about transgressing spatial bounds? What does the photograph reveal about community? The child sitting on a chair at the center looks like a doll with her rose-colored cheeks, button nose, and the few light-brown large and loose curls at the top and side of her head. She glares directly at the studio lights behind the photographer with a hint of surprise. You can see their white reflection in her dark, brown, circular eyes. She sports shiny black patent shoes over her slightly pink socks and a white dress with baby blue trim and frills that are decorated with white polka dots. Her ear gleams with ruby stud earrings, and the double-layered white pearls around the rolls on her neck are almost costume-like. Perhaps the pearls were a prop like the giant stuffed animals in the background, adding to her doll-like appearance.

On the back of the photograph is a handwritten note in familiar print that reads, “Elda en esta esta sentadita y fue tomada el nueve de Junio iba a cumplir 15 meses [sic]” (Elda in this one she is sitting and it was taken June 9th she was turning 15 months [sic]). The print looked familiar not because I knew who wrote the note, but because I have noticed the way many campesinos write. The letters they trace with their pen are slightly spaced out within their contained words and have an italicized flare to them. The note describes what the child is doing, when it was taken, and how old the child was at the time. However, missing from its content is the child’s name. The lack of a named subject in the first clause, “Elda en esta esta sentadita” (Elda in this one she is sitting), reads as if the photographic notes are a part of a larger sequence of conversations, between the person who sent the photograph and Elda, the person meant to receive the photograph. The remainder of the note accounts for biographical data, “fue tomada el nueve de Junio iba a cumplir 15 meses” (it was taken June 9th she was turning 15 months). Knowing a child’s birthday in days and months is intimate information. It is often only accrued by parental figures who count the sunrises and sunsets of their child’s existence. The photograph is for Elda and the child in the photograph and referenced in the note is Idania, the daughter she left in Guatemala.

When Elda left her infant child and mother in Guatemala, she found refuge in Maura’s home in Chirilagua. What is it like to be 19 years old and be away from your natal home, the mother who raised you, and the daughter you birthed? Living in her tía Maura’s home provided refuge in the form of shelter, food, connections to jobs, and emotional support. Elda built stronger connections with the cousins who lived

there and those who congregated there, such as Adilia and Natalia. The commonalities between Adilia and Elda's past and their mutual feelings of separation and loss bound them together as sisters in their newly adopted country. Elda and Natalia, however, were bonded because Natalia provided a means for Elda to connect with her daughter and mother while Elda was undocumented. The state of illegality attempts to contest and restrain undocumented people's movement across, and occupation of, space. It is for this reason that Elda could not see her daughter Idania, nor her mother Telma, for ten years. Yet, through kin networks developed in domestic spaces she was able to not only financially support her small family through remittances, but also show affection across the multiple borders that kept them apart.

As previously mentioned, Natalia and her siblings' immigration status set them apart from the rest of their cousins. Because Natalia's mother, Maura, legalized her immigration status in the early 1980s and sequentially filed immigration paperwork for her children, Natalia came to the States as a permanent resident. Unlike most of her cousins, Natalia could legally travel between Guatemala, El Salvador, and the U.S. since arriving to Northern Virginia. Her legal status also allowed her to transport American merchandise and mementos between her undocumented cousins in Northern Virginia and their immediate families in the isthmus. When Natalia visited Guatemala, Elda sent parcels to her mother and daughter. Elda sent American items like baby's formula, clothing, and toys, as well as mementos like letters and photographs. Like a ceremonious ritual, Telma and Idania traveled to where Natalia was staying to receive the things Elda sent them. "Tía Telma siempre llegaba a [Puerto] Barrios con la niña de Elda a su lado" (Aunt Telma

always came to [Puerto] Barrios with Elda's girl on her side). Natalia recalled over 30 years later. When Natalia returned to the Washington region, Elda anxiously asked about her daughter Idania. "Pobrecita Elda. ¿Siempre me decía, 'como esta? Y como la ves?'" (Poor Elda. She would always ask, 'How is she? How is she looking?') Natalia remembered sympathizing with Elda's inability to experience her daughter in-person.

As an undocumented mother, a central way to communicate affection was through sending items and mementos via parcels. The exchange was not unidirectional from the U.S. to Guatemala. Rather, items and mementos were always sent two-ways. Elda's mother, Telma, sent things that her State-side daughter could only get in Guatemala. One of the items Elda received was a stack of duplicate photographs of Idania at 15 months old. Cultural studies scholar Gretel Vera-Rosas argues that for those who were forcibly separated from their families vis-a-vis immigration or deportation, visual and communication technologies, such as photographs and letters, are used to perform emotional labor that constitute a transnational family.³⁴⁷ These technologies allow families to feel like they are together, though the law and geography separate them. Informed by Vera-Rosas, the photographs Elda received of her daughter were a way for her to embrace the child she had not physically embraced since her departure in 1987.

This form of transnational emotional labor required a network of women. Telma coordinated this studio photoshoot of her granddaughter Idania and had several photographs printed so she could send them to Elda with Natalia. Unable to read and

³⁴⁷ Vera-Rosas, "Immigrant Intimacies," 44.

write extensively, Telma asked her youngest sister, Concepción, to detail the day that Idania sat for the photograph and her age when the photo was taken. “Elda en esta esta sentadita y fue tomada el nueve de Junio [*sic*] iba a cumplir 15 meses.” Telma had taken on the role of Idania’s guardian since she was three months old, which is why she could count how old her granddaughter was in months and days. With the support of others, Telma ensured that Elda did not miss a beat in her daughter’s life. The absence of Idania’s name in the note alludes to the ongoing conversations between Elda and Telma about Idania. Despite being multiple countries away, Elda and other Central American women found ways to transcend their spatial bounds.

Elda also relied on her cousin Natalia to intervene in her illegality. Natalia served as a crucial intermediary, traveling between the DMV and Central America. Her transnational movements carried implications for her extended family. For a decade, Natalia was as close as Elda would get to Idania. That is, until Idania or Elda could travel across nations. As a sign of her appreciation for allowing her to get closer to her daughter when the law would not, Elda gifted Natalia a photograph of Idania. More than a token of appreciation, it reveals the interconnected ways undocumented and documented Central American women in multiple countries worked to transcend the spatial constraints of illegality. Together, they could love across borders.

Conclusion

The undocumented Central American was constructed through restrictive immigration policies and visual and linguistic discourse that rendered the figure knowable by drawing distinctions mainly between Central Americans and African Americans. Locally, this occurred during a shift in the region’s political economy in

which Central Americans came to occupy service and manual labor, such as domestic work and construction, which African Americans primarily held previously. In the region's public imaginary, Central Americans were brown, undocumented, and working-class or poor. Law enforcement, politicians, bureaucrats, and local residents substantiated the racial project of illegality by policing the places Central Americans occupied, controlling how they used and moved in public spaces. This included predominantly Latina/o neighborhoods, parks, as well as workplaces like restaurants. Immigration enforcement used language, as well as phenotype, and class signifiers to racially profile Central Americans. The institutional record shows how Central American men were policed in public space. Central American women, however, were seldom mentioned. When they were, they were often relegated to the domestic space, and in particular the basement, because of the type of labor man did. Therefore, it is important to look for Central American immigrant women's experiences in the domestic sphere.

Central American women's personal archives differ drastically from other visual representations of undocumented Central Americans that highlight their illegality. In the personal archive, photographs depict Central Americans stilled in place, as opposed to running away from law enforcement, for example. Some pictures even depicted Central Americans in the basement. As domestic laborers, the basement of their employer's home is where a lot of Central American domestic workers lived—at least initially. Sometimes, they even had family live with them there too. While the media and politicians dismissed undocumented Central American women to the basement, I find that the basement is not a site of submission. Rather, it

is where women like Maura and Adilia leveraged their social resources to legalize their immigration status, house, and support other kin. These acts are what I refer to as intimate illegalities. As a result, it is through—and from within—the basement that intimate illegalities emerged and women-led kin networks were re-built in the diaspora.

Illegality is therefore a racialized condition and a state of spatial contestation. As Central American men were policed in public space, Central America women used their social positions to exceed the spatial constraints the state placed on their racialized and gendered bodies. Their personal archives reveal how undocumented and documented Central American women used intimate illegalities. Along the way, they forged and fortified community in the Washington region. These communities also came to be occupied by their children, who were either born in Central America or stateside. Unlike their mothers, aunts, and grandmothers, who may have worked in domestic labor, children had to navigate public spaces like schools and neighborhoods. For Central American women the basement could become a life-sustaining space from which solidarities across different legal statuses emerged. However, 1.5 and 2nd generation Central Americans, who grew up in the DMV, acquired a different set of solidarities.

Chapter 4: Subtle Solidarities

“They [African Americans] call us Spanish n----- because we’ve been here all these years with the [B]lacks,” said Ricardo, while his two friends nodded in agreement. “For us it’s a compliment. We’re brothers too. They share with us, help us in fights...” he continued.³⁴⁸ Ricardo uttered the qualified racial epithet with a sense of pride and solidarity. His friends nodded in agreement. Along with his friends, Ricardo expressed a shared experience with African Americans that was born out of a shared place and struggle. For them, their shared place was Northwest D.C., specifically, the neighborhood of Mount Pleasant, as well as the surrounding neighborhoods of Adams Morgan and Columbia Heights. For others, this shared experience could have also been borne from neighborhoods throughout the inner-ring suburbs, especially those with a significant African American presence. In these neighborhoods, Black and Latino boys struggled against law enforcement, neighbors, teachers, and school administrators that policed and disciplined their behaviors.

Ricardo’s self-description reminded me of the many times I heard the epithet ricocheting from the mouths of one non-white boy to another, while growing up. African Americans, Arab Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinas/os—the majority on free and reduced lunch, sharing space. Some girls of color would say it too—sometimes. But it was mostly boys of color. Occasionally, they used the word in aggression—after a shove in a crowded public-school hallway. More often than not, they used it in fellowship. The epithet uttered between a dap and a hug, an embrace

³⁴⁸ Betty Medsger, “Latins Form Largest Immigrant Group,” *The Washington Post*, December 4, 1972.

*that begins with the clap of two palms, hooks two sets of fingers, and ends with two fists in between two chests.*³⁴⁹ *They always pronounced it with an -uh and never an -er.*³⁵⁰ *In The Post article, it was spelled with a hard ‘r’. Could this have been how Ricardo pronounced it? Or was the journalist incapable of transcribing the -uh released from the diaphragm? Did she have to edit African American Vernacular English, the language Ricardo might have learned when he immigrated to the neighborhood as a child, to conform to so-called standard English?*

Ricardo immigrated with his family to Washington, D.C., circa 1964. He was only 11 years old. The news article alleges his parents were undocumented, likely making him undocumented as well. As an adolescent he got into fights with African Americans, as well as others. And, by 19, officers had already arrested Ricardo for marijuana possession. We do not exactly know where in Latin America or the Caribbean Ricardo emigrated from. Nor do we know how he was racialized in the day-to-day. Nonetheless, his self-description as a “Spanish n----” was reminiscent of how other working-class Latinos, regardless of race, described themselves. His life experiences also reflected that of many working-class Latinxs a part of the 1.5 or 2nd generation—immigration, juvenile fights, arrests, and incarceration. Nationally, there was an incremental increase in incarcerated Latinxs from 1970 to 2000, growing from 1.5 to 3 percent of Latinxs being incarcerated. In the DMV, Latinos like Ricardo were increasingly being incarcerated throughout the latter decades of the twentieth century,

³⁴⁹ The dap is thought of as a masculine embrace that is more intimate than a handshake. The Dap Project in Washington, D.C., identifies it as a gesture used by Black boys and men to communicate love. However, it is not exclusive to the U.S. It is used across the world. For more on The Dap Project see: <https://www.thedapproject.com>.

³⁵⁰ Geneva Smitherman, “The N-Words,” in *Word From the Mother: Language and African Americans* (New York and London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2006).

some of whom must have been Central American.³⁵¹ Now, to be clear, I do not mean to condone Ricardo and other non-Black people's usage of a word entrenched in centuries of anti-Black racial violence. In fact, some of the boys who referred to themselves as such in their youth now refrain from such language. However, I am curious as to why Ricardo and other adolescents like him saw themselves through this lens. I begin to wonder what it means for a Latino to describe himself with a racial epithet? What does it mean for an African American to describe a Latino as such? What does it signify about their understanding of anti-Blackness in the region?

I use Ricardo to begin exploring African American and Latino relationships through the lens of Central American men who came of age in the region. Those featured in this chapter attended public school in the District between 1960–2000, a time riddled with the crack epidemic, gentrification, increased immigration from Central America, and social uprisings. I question how the media and local bureaucrats represent Central American boys in relation to, and through, African American boys. I also ask how Central Americans understood their own social position in relation to, and through, African American boys. These questions are not necessarily unique to Central American boys. However, Central Americans are good place to begin answering these questions for two reasons. First, they formed among one of the larger pan-ethnic groups in the region. Second, the general American public, as well as mestizas/os, did not imagine Central Americans as Black. The discursive binary

³⁵¹ It is difficult to quantify how many people arrested or incarcerated, either nationally or locally, are Central American. However, with Latinxs' growing incarceration rate and the representation of the Central American population locally, I infer Central Americans were also a part of the criminal justice system. This is conferred through personal communication with Central Americans who were incarcerated.

offered media, politicians, bureaucrats, and Central Americans a way to draw differences and similarities between arbitrarily distinguished groups. Furthermore, I focus on boys turned men, because in my research, they more frequently and explicitly spoke of tense experiences in terms of African Americans and/versus Latinos. Or rather, Black and/versus Spanish, as it is said colloquially in the region. Although I understand Blackness and Latinidad to be inclusive categories, in this chapter I reprint, analyze, and challenge the language interlocutors use to describe the racialized groups. Overall, this chapter examines how the media represents African American-Latino relations, in particular with Central American youth. At the same time, it also examines how young Central American boys make sense of their racialization through African American-Latino relations.

I rely on critical ethnic studies scholars and geographers, who have theorized Black-Latino social relations in conflict and solidarity. Based on her analysis of Black, Latino, and Asian American's radical leftist activism in Los Angeles in the 1960s and seventies, Laura Pulido argues that the different racial meaning ascribed to these groups influenced their respective class position and, in turn, the region's racial hierarchy.³⁵² Their differential racialization affected their leftist politics and how they worked across different racial/ethnic groups.³⁵³ Where there were points of interest convergence, like police violence for example, there was solidarity work among Black and Latina/o organizations.³⁵⁴ Pulido thus highlights the role racialization plays in political solidarity. Moving beyond Los Angeles, John Márquez expands the scope

³⁵² Laura Pulido, *Black, Brown, Yellow, and Left: Radical Activism in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2006).

³⁵³ Pulido.

³⁵⁴ Pulido.

of Black-Latinx relations by examining the Gulf Coast. He argues that the region's history has made it so Black folk and Latinas/os share experiences with state sanctioned racial violence, resulting in a shared subjectivity and political unity.³⁵⁵ Their shared subjectivity and political unity transpires in the form of cultural production and social movements. Overall, Márquez claims that Latinas/os come to understand their own experiences through anti-Blackness.³⁵⁶ His intent in highlighting this place-based subjectivity and political consciousness is that it challenges dominant notions that seek to pose Latinas/os and Black folk, specifically African Americans, in competition with one another over employment, public resources, urban space, and underground markets.³⁵⁷ As Márquez points out, Black-Latina/o conflict narratives obscure the workings of white supremacy. Similarly, Lisa Marie Cacho asserts that these narratives contain “unspoken juxtapositions.”³⁵⁸ That is, in attempting to discursively value one life, results in the devaluation of an Other. For example, in identifying Latinx immigrants as “job stealers” it is identifying others as deserving of jobs because they are citizens, though not making clear how neoliberalism excludes both African Americans and Latinxs from the job market.³⁵⁹

The work of Pulido, Márquez, and Cacho are relevant to the DMV in numerous ways. First, Pulido and Márquez highlight where solidarity has occurred across lines of racial and ethnic different. Importantly, Márquez underscores the way

³⁵⁵ John D. Márquez, *Black-Brown Solidarity: Racial Politics in the New Gulf South*, 1. ed (Austin, Tex: Univ. of Texas Press, 2014).

³⁵⁶ Márquez.

³⁵⁷ Márquez, 23.

³⁵⁸ Lisa Marie Cacho, *Social Death: Racialized Rightlessness and the Criminalization of the Unprotected*, *Nation of Newcomers: Immigrant History as American History* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 18.

³⁵⁹

anti-Blackness forms the foundation from which Latinxs experience state violence, understand themselves, and sequentially express solidarity. The same holds true in the DMV. In the DMV, anti-Blackness and the African American experience, in particular, become a way for Central Americans—Black or brown, to understand their own lives in the region. However, as opposed to considering how solidarity occurs in formal organizing spaces or cultural productions, I consider how solidarity occurs more subtly. Solidarity is often understood as explicitly political actions, like campaigns, protests, or even artistic works that express an alignment or support of a group's demands of the state or vision of the world. I expand the definition of solidarity to also include the small quotidian acts, gestures, and performatives that communicate an acknowledgement of a shared struggle against the powers that be—whether that be police abuse or teacher maltreatment. Read in specific contexts, these gestures, actions, or performatives can include a head nod between former jail mates, participating in an uprising, or a “Yo! What are you doing?” to bring attention to police brutality. A focus on the subtle solidarity among Central Americans and African Americans in the DMV reveals, on one hand, how difficult day-to-day solidarity can be because of the pervasive tools of white supremacy vis-a-vis anti-Blackness and nativism. On the other hand, subtle solidarity brings to the fore the acts that form the seed from which larger coalitional politics can grow.

Second, Cacho and Márquez bring our attention to the ills of Black-Latinx conflict narratives. In Washington, this narrative has its origins in the 1960s, but it became increasingly profuse with the growth of Central Americans in the District and its inner-ring suburbs, especially after 1980. Yet, I continue to wade through these

historical dominant narratives in the press because they are effectively ascribing racial meaning to Latinas/os, specifically, Central Americans in the region. Racial discourse affects how they self-identify, the physical altercations they have with others, and encounters with law enforcement. I analyze the mainstream press: *The Post*, *The Washington Daily*, and the *Star*, as well as the Black press: the *Washington Afro-American* and *The Washington Informer*. While the mainstream press had a diverse readership, the Black press was primarily dedicated to African Americans. Like in other chapters, I discursively analyze the news to determine the racial meaning-making from a mainstream and African American perspective. However, I also find the performances Central Americans enacted in the “official record.” They are found in the quotes young people give the press or in photographs documenting their participation in uprisings. Alongside this, I examine the personal archives of men who grew up in D.C. in the eighties and nineties, analyzing their oral histories and photographs. I find that the press produces Central American and Latino youth as social problems, often at odds with Black youth or the Black political establishment. While the press espouses a simple Black versus Latino narrative, Central Americans’ personal archives intervene in this history by providing an alternative narrative. Central American boys, turned men, explicitly described tensions between Black people and Spanish people, yet also performed a solidarity with them. In so doing, I argue, they are not immune to racist sentiments, but they also demonstrate an understanding of the multiple forms of racism they experience in schools and their neighborhoods as working-class boys of color. These boys navigated interpersonal prejudice among one another, as well as the racist, classist, and anti-immigrant ideas

and practices of white parents, bureaucrats, politicians, police officers, and gentrifying neighbors. In identifying subtle acts of solidarities, we open the possibilities for coalitional political mobilization.

I navigate the complexity of Black and Latino conflict from the late 1960s through the 1990s. I account for how the media ascribed racial meaning onto Black and Latino boys when Lincoln Junior High School opened in 1967—a school that brought together Black and Latina/o, as well as white and Asian students—and the Mount Pleasant Uprising in 1991—when young people took to the streets after a police officer shot a Salvadoran man. I also interweave the stories of Latinos, primarily Central Americans who grew up in D.C. Their stories reveal how they navigated the binary constructed between Blackness and Latinidad and performed subtle acts of solidarity across these categories of difference.

To Be a Black and Spanish Problem

In September 1967, Abraham Lincoln Junior High School opened its doors on the corner of 16th and Irving Street in Northwest Washington, D.C. While neighborhoods are seldom neatly and strictly organized, the new three-story building was at the center of multiple neighborhoods. West of 16th Street was home to many, though not exclusively, Latinas/os in Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant. East of 16th Street was Columbia Heights, home to predominantly African Americans. When the school opened, it was predominantly African American with some Latinas/os. Some newspapers reported it was about 85–90 percent African American, with approximately 70 students “from the city’s growing Spanish-speaking colony, many

of whom know little or no English.”³⁶⁰ A handful of Chinese and white students enrolled in the school as well.³⁶¹ However, it was African American and Latina/o students from Lincoln who were a consistent topic in the local press throughout the late sixties.

Among the earliest of these articles described Latinas/os at Lincoln as coming from a “Spanish-speaking colony.”³⁶² The Post’s use of the word “colony” signifies an ethnic group settling in a territory that is not their own. In short, the article describes Latinas/os as settlers. Critical Latinx Indigeneities calls upon Indigenous Latinxs and Latinxs, more broadly, to be cognizant that the territory that is now the U.S. is the ancestral lands of other Indigenous people.³⁶³ Yet, many of those referring to Latinas/os in D.C. as settlers are not necessarily Indigenous to D.C. themselves. The reference to the “Spanish-speaking” as a colony of settlers seeks to establish a non-Indigenous “native” community and a group of foreign Others. Identifying a group as native and Latinas/os as foreign, destabilizes generations of Latina/o placemaking in areas like Northwest, D.C. It also renders them unassimilable. Latinas/os could not be easily absorbed into whiteness or Blackness because of localized understandings of these categories. The categorization of a native Washingtonian and a foreign Latina/o, reinforces the U.S.’s settler colonial narrative by erasing the Indigenous people European settlers killed and displaced in the

³⁶⁰ Willard Clopton, Jr., “Model School has Rocky Debut,” *The Washington Post*, October 7, 1967; Susan Jacoby, “Language Barrier at Lincoln: Fights Plague Ailing School,” *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1967.

³⁶¹ Jacoby, “Language Barrier at Lincoln.”

³⁶² Clopton, Jr., “Model School has Rocky Debut.”

³⁶³ Maylei Blackwell, “Geographies of Indigeneity: Indigenous Migrant Women’s Organizing and Translocal Politics of Place,” *Latino Studies* 15, no. 2 (July 2017): 156–81, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41276-017-0060-4>.

creation of the nation's capital. In their place, it establishes whites and African Americans as citizens of this place—albeit very unevenly. The narrative of Latina/o foreignness is exacerbated by referring to Lincoln as a “contact point with the rest of the community.” Here, contact point functions akin to what Mary Louise Pratt refers to as a “contact zone.” Contact zones are “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.”³⁶⁴ To refer to Lincoln as a contact point, emphasizes the differences and interpersonal conflict between Latinas/os and the “rest of the community.”

The antagonist in Latina/o conflict at school were not whites, but rather African Americans.³⁶⁵ Multiple journalists reported on the conflicts between African Americans and Latinas/os at Lincoln Junior High in *The Post*. As one Lincoln parent shared with a reporter, “most of the trouble seems to be between Negroes and Spanish-speaking kids.”³⁶⁶ Historically, in D.C., people understood racial tensions to be common between whites and African Americans. In the late 1960s at Lincoln, however, they were understood through the African American majority and the Spanish-speaking minority. With the prominence of African American and Latina/o youth in D.C. Public Schools, the press nearly rendered whiteness marginal from these spaces. The near erasure of whiteness intensifies African American and Latina/o relations because it results in Latinas/os perceiving African Americans as the majority

³⁶⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession*, 1991, 33–40.

³⁶⁵ Clopton, Jr., “Model School has Rocky Debut”; Jacoby, “Language Barrier at Lincoln”; “Students’ Transfers Rejected,” *The Washington Post*; October 25, 1967; “Anarchy at Lincoln,” *The Washington Post*; October 27, 1967; Hoagland, “The Spanish Speakers Are Isolated.”

³⁶⁶ Jacoby, “Language Barrier at Lincoln.”

in power. The limited media on DMV Latina/o thus effectively established an African American versus Latina/o narrative.

Within the first three months of the school opening, there were “a spasm of fights between Negro and Spanish-speaking youths [that] ran through Lincoln Junior High School,” said one article.³⁶⁷ The distinguishing epithets given to the youth in conflict is significant. One is characterized as Black. The other is characterized as Spanish-speaking, or Spanish for short. As demonstrated in an earlier chapter, these characterizations reify racial difference and mark them as mutually exclusive. Under the media’s logic, to be Black and Spanish were at odds tangibly. They suggested: Black people did not speak Spanish. Spanish-speaking people were not Black. And Black and Spanish people were physically fighting one another. It is perhaps no coincidence that to this day, many locals still use Black and Spanish to name their racial and ethnic identity.

While newspapers reified racial difference among young African Americans and Latinas/os, they also did ideological work to group them together as unruly delinquents. Therefore, while whiteness was not physically present in large numbers, white supremacist ideologies were present. In addition to providing news coverage on juvenile fighting, one reporter attempted to depict Lincoln’s unruliness by detailing students running out of classrooms, disrupting class instruction with profanity, wandering the hallways, assaulting teachers, and even detail how a “wiry boy with a Spanish accent” approached her and shook her violently.³⁶⁸ School officials and even

³⁶⁷ Hoagland, “The Spanish Speakers Are Isolated.”

³⁶⁸ Jacoby, “Language Barrier at Lincoln.”

religious leader Rev. Leo Beato, the chaplain for the Spanish-speaking community, agreed that the fights between African Americans and Latinas/os, along with other condemnable acts “were symptomatic of a much larger discipline problem that plagued Lincoln.”³⁶⁹ In this evaluation, journalists, school officials, and the religious leaders suggest that there is a moral crisis occurring among African American and Latina/o young people. According to them, the moral crisis has the propensity to spread like a disease in the school, leading to the degradation of the institution. Here, the problem identified is the pupils: African American and Latina/o youth.

For similar reasons, the State Department pleaded with D.C. Public Schools in October 1967 to allow approximately 14 diplomatic children from Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Yugoslavia, who were assigned to Lincoln, to transfer out.³⁷⁰ Harold A. Pace, the Assistant Chief of the State Department’s Protocol Division, claimed the eastern European children had to deal with “almost daily brutal treatment from other students at the school.”³⁷¹ However, a few months earlier, in June 1967, Circuit Judge J. Skelly ruled on *Hobson v. Hansen* in favor of programs that enforced desegregation and established more equitable education practices in D.C. Public Schools.³⁷² He found that the District had optional school zone policies in places where white families were in close proximity to non-white families. Among these neighborhoods was Kalorama Park, which borders Adams Morgan. The optional school zone policy allowed for white, usually affluent, students to leave the

³⁶⁹ Hoagland, “The Spanish Speakers Are Isolated.”

³⁷⁰ “Students’ Transfers Rejected”; “Anarchy at Lincoln.”

³⁷¹ “Students’ Transfers Rejected.”

³⁷² *Hobson v. Hansen*, 269 F. Supp. 401 (D.D.C 1967), <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/269/401/1800940/>

predominantly Black public schools in their neighborhood boundaries—in this case Lincoln Junior High, in favor of mostly all-white public schools located west of Rock Creek Park. This optional school zone policy, however, was not present in predominantly Black neighborhoods. As a result, Skelly ordered that the optional school zone policy be abolished because it reinforced racial and socio-economic segregation. white students who lived within Lincoln’s school boundaries, therefore, had to go to their neighborhood school. In light of this, acting D.C. Public School Superintendent, Benjamin J. Henley, denied the State Department’s request to have the white diplomatic children transfer out.³⁷³

The Post and The Washington Daily published editorials and articles about the request to transfer the Eastern European students out, emphasizing the juvenile fights, attacks on teachers, vandalism, and general unruliness of the school. While the anonymous writers expressed an understanding as to why Henley rejected the transfers in terms of following court orders, they sympathized with white children’s experiences at Lincoln. “We have the warmest sympathy for the victimized children and for their families...The District owes apologies to the diplomats whose children have suffered mistreatment,” expressed one writer. The prioritization of white students is evident in that the quality of education is a problem that negatively affects them, but not the other students in the school. Cheryl Harris, understands this phenomenon through her conceptualization of “whiteness as property,” where whiteness ensures the allocation and protection of social benefits.³⁷⁴ Here, students’

³⁷⁴ Harris, “whiteness as Property.”

quality of education is protected, whereas that of non-white students is only ensured if they change their behaviors. Moreover, the writer's sympathetic note begs the question, who were the European children victimized by? Who are the culprits? The very same editorial blamed the "Negro majority" for the alleged mistreatment of the white students. Here, Black students are not allowed to be singular. Rather, the entire Black student body is at fault and are perceived as more incriminating and troubling because they make up most of the student population.

Similarly, another editorial explained the conditions the white students experienced by highlighting the "85 to 90 per cent [sic] Negro student body and [the] sizable minority of Spanish-speaking students." Black students were seen as the primary cause of the alleged mistreatment. Yet, the "Spanish" students were also viewed as an additional reason behind the white students' discontent at Lincoln. Incapable of providing a percentage, the anonymous editorial writer uses "sizable" to draw attention to the relatively large and consequential number of Spanish students in the school. Like the Black students, the Spanish students are treated as the problem en masse and grouped with Black students. I am reminded of W.E.B. Du Bois poignant question, "how does it feel to be a problem?"³⁷⁵ What are the internal sensations that arise from being deemed a social issue that is harming whites? While Du Bois asks this question in the context of African Americans, I extend it to ponder on the feelings that arise among Latinas/os because as racialized subjects they too were blamed for the mishaps at Lincoln Junior High. This was the result of what Márquez refers to as "foundational blackness," which in part signifies the ways anti-Black racism effects,

³⁷⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Gorham ME: Myers Education Press, LLC, 2018), 8.

and I add racializes, a minoritized non-Black group.³⁷⁶ Despite who might have mistreated the white students, Black and Spanish students were targeted as the source of issues for the school. The public perceptions of Black and Latina/o students in school, would come to shape how Latinas/os understood themselves racially in the DMV.

Returning to Ricardo

Ricardo is not like the rest of “them.” The vague “them” being the so-called new arrivals. The newspapers reported that most of the newly arrived immigrants were Central American, specifically from El Salvador and Guatemala, and sometimes Nicaragua and Honduras too. The data for this is unclear because Central American countries were not specifically named. However, the 1970 census reports that there were approximately 20,700 people born in the “other America” within the region.³⁷⁷ The “other America” is, of course, Central and South America. The press said, these Central and South Americans were here without papers. Their migratory journeys were not documented by the state. In 1971, INS estimated there was somewhere between 15,000–30,000 undocumented immigrants in the region, with over half being from Central or South America.³⁷⁸ There were also a number of Panamanians immigrating to the DMV around this time, as well. Although they are a part of the isthmus that is referred to as Central America, Panamanians do not get as much attention for their immigration to the region.³⁷⁹ Bolivians, Dominicans, and Peruvians

³⁷⁶ Márquez, *Black-Brown Solidarity*, 51.

³⁷⁷ U.S. Census Bureau, Census 1970. Prepared by Social Explorer.

³⁷⁸ Bancroft, “Many Area Aliens Tread a Tightrope,”

³⁷⁹ For more on who is discursively constructed as Central American see Cárdenas, *Constituting Central American-Americans*.

do not get much attention for their immigration to the region either, though they have all followed migration routes to D.C. and its inner-ring suburbs, establishing populations in the diaspora.

Maybe Ricardo also originally hailed from one of these countries, traveling clandestinely with his parents in 1964. Could he have been Central American? We may never know, but in any case, he emphatically dictated he was not like the others coming from Latin America and the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. Eight years after he immigrated to D.C., Ricardo sat to talk with a reporter from *The Post* in the comfort of his family's Mount Pleasant row home in 1972. The muscles that pull one's lips back tightened as Ricardo spoke English, letting the sharp consonants soften as they slipped from a small opening on the side of his mouth.³⁸⁰ "When they the new people come in [*sic*] they're afraid. It ain't like that with us who been here a while."³⁸¹ I imagine the sounds of his words rooting him in Northwest D.C. Although in 1972, Ricardo had only been in the U.S. eight years, that was almost half of his 19-year-old life. His time in the District had made an impact on how he spoke and how he identified. He did not learn contractions like "ain't," or to say "we been here," as opposed to "we have been," in Latin America or the Caribbean, nor formal English-language classes. He did not self-identify as a "Spanish n----" in his country of origin either. This type of English and form of self-identification is learned informally through social networks. Ricardo's English language and self-identification was

³⁸⁰ While in English syllables end words with sharp consonants, linguist John McWhorter says that African languages spoken by the enslaved in the U.S. often had syllables end in vowels. Similarly, Spanish syllables also end in vowels. John McWhorter, "Why Do We Call It 'The N-Word'?", in *Nine Nasty Words: English in the Gutter: Then, Now, and Forever* (New York: Avery, 2021), 194.

³⁸¹ Medsger, "Latins Form Largest Immigrant Group."

shaped by African Americans in D.C. In his interview with Betty Medsger, a journalist who often reported on Washington's immigrant populations, Ricardo challenged the *Post's* general articulations of the Latina/o population in the DMV.

People local to the DMV referred to Latinas/os as Spanish because of the common language practice among those with origins in Latin America and parts of the Caribbean. Latinas/os themselves also referred to themselves as Spanish too. In fact, local Latinas/os organized around Spanish being a shared language and in the 1960s and seventies local Latino leaders emphasized it as a significant problem between them and the predominantly African American establishment in the city. However, Ricardo distanced himself from those who exclusively spoke Spanish, presenting a key difference among Latinas/os in the region. "We don't have anything to do with those people. Our English is better than theirs. I hear they're putting people up front in the community that don't know how to say thank you in English," Ricardo said with contempt. Although he used "Spanish" to describe himself, it functioned as an ethnic/racial identity. Ricardo did not claim to practice Spanish. Though he might have been able to speak it, it was not something he shared publicly with the interviewer. If he did speak Spanish, it was likely mostly practiced in private with family. Ricardo understood the devaluation of speaking Spanish in public and the social value speaking English had in the DMV. As a result, he distanced himself from Spanish-speaking people with scorn and, judging by his diction, learned African American Vernacular English.

In addition to language differences, Ricardo asserted that Latinas/os did not have homogenous feelings about the local landscape they navigated. "When they the

new people come in [*sic*] they're afraid. It ain't like that with us who been here awhile. Now the [B]lacks are scared of us.”³⁸² The feeling at the center of Ricardo's remarks is fear. What were newly arrived Latinas/os fearful of? While the fear of deportation is certainly a possibility for those who immigrated clandestinely, Ricardo was also likely undocumented. Therefore, the fear of deportability might have been shared among Ricardo and the newly arrived immigrants. Ricardo's comment, “Now the [B]lacks are scared of us,” is revealing. It suggests that experiencing fear was associated with the presence of Black Washingtonians. What exactly Latinas/os feared regarding their Black neighbors is unclear. However, the fear emerges out of anti-Black sentiments. As D. Soyini Madison highlights, Blackness is “a universal signifier of fear, danger, and threat across color lines.”³⁸³ To fear Black people invokes assumptions on Black criminality. Ricardo implies that newly arrived Latina/o immigrants feared their Black neighbors because of their presumed criminality—a ploy of white racism. However, Ricardo alleges that he did not. Or, rather, he did not experience fear any longer because he had “been here [in D.C.] awhile.”³⁸⁴ Ricardo and other young 1.5 and 2nd generation Latinos growing up in the District were no longer scared of Black Washingtonians, but induced fear in them. According to him, the bodily site of fear had changed.

Ricardo claims Latinos like him earned their notoriety by fighting with African Americans. “We fought just about every day,”³⁸⁵ he said. The shoved

³⁸² Medsger, “Latins Form Largest Immigrant Group.”

³⁸³ D. Soyini Madison, “Critical Ethnography as Street Performance: Reflections of Home, Race, Murder, and Justice,” in *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norma . Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005), 540.

³⁸⁴ Medsger, “Latins Form Largest Immigrant Group.”

³⁸⁵ Medsger, “Latins Form Largest Immigrant Group.”

splattered profanity, before the adolescent bodies felt the impact of fist to abdomen and backs to walls and floors between the public streets and schools of Northwest D.C. For Ricardo, the fights started in 1964—when he first arrived at age 11 and went through 1966. “Then it cooled off in 1967.”³⁸⁶ The fights between Latinos and African Americans that Ricardo describes were coming to an end the same year Lincoln Junior High School opened. He likely attended Lincoln when it opened because he lived within the school boundaries. Was Ricardo a part of the fights between Latinos and African Americans the press cited? While Ricardo claimed that the fights were becoming infrequent, local media and politicians continued to call for disciplinary measures. As mentioned in the previous section, African Americans and Latinas/os were deemed a social problem. Although the media represented Latina/o youth as foreign through an emphasis on language differences, which was key to their racialization, Ricardo attempted to distance himself from foreignness and attempted to mitigate it through his speech patterns. However, he was still identified as a delinquent alongside African Americans and likely treated as such in school. In short, the press and school officials defined African American and Latino youth as either Black or Spanish but both delinquents that needed to be disciplined. While Ricardo alleges that juvenile fights bonded him to African Americans, those fights also resulted in them being categorized as delinquents—young people prone to criminality. I cannot help but consider how a fear of Black and Spanish youth criminality also forged a commonality between African Americans and Latinos.

³⁸⁶ Medsger, “Latins Form Largest Immigrant Group.”

Perhaps it was not just that Ricardo garnered a fear from his African American peers, but also a fear from African American and white authorities in D.C. as well.

In his interview with *The Post*, Ricardo said he was not like the new Latina/o immigrants in D.C. and that African Americans came to fear him, and others like him, because of the juvenile fights they got in. He racially and socially distinguished himself from multiple groups. Ricardo does not racially identify as Black because he rhetorically positioned himself in opposition to his Black peers when describing who he would fight. Instead, he implied he identified with a Latinidad that is not Black, but a presumed brown. At the same time, he also socially distinguished himself from the newly arrived Latinas/os because of his abilities to speak English and their different affective dispositions. Ricardo was not scared of his Black neighbors, whereas the others were. In drawing these multiple distinctions, Ricardo is complicating Muñoz's notion of "feeling brown." Muñoz builds on W.E.B Du Bois' question of "how does it feel to be a problem" and develops the concept of feeling brown to index a collective affective understanding of being deemed an issue to the dominant order.³⁸⁷ Muñoz does not contain brownness to a particular ethnic identity. He understands brownness to be a marker of devaluation.³⁸⁸ Therefore, it contains multiple group identities that allows for those deemed a problem a way of "belonging in difference."³⁸⁹ The media and school officials, among others, deemed African American and Latino youth a problem. However, finding belonging as oppositions to

³⁸⁷ Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 8; José Esteban Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, ed. Tavia Nyong'o and Joshua Takano Chambers-Letson, *Perverse Modernities* (Durham London: Duke University Press, 2020), 39–43.

³⁸⁸ Muñoz, *The Sense of Brown*, 40.

³⁸⁹ Muñoz, 43.

the dominant order came with sharp edges. Ricardo did not easily feel belonging with newly arrived Latina/o immigrants, nor his African American peers. However, that is not to say there were not any shared commonalities. Identity descriptors that allowed young people to recognize their similarities and differences emerged.

“The [B]lacks call us Spanish n-----. For us it’s a compliment. We’re brothers too. They share with us, help us in fights...” As noted previously, this is a qualified racial epithet. The racial epithet carries with it a history of anti-Black ideological and material violence from the British and Spanish colonies through the contemporary history of the U.S. Linguists trace the etymology of the word from Latin (*niger*), to its iterations in Spanish and Portuguese (*negro*), and French (*negre*).³⁹⁰ In all the languages it signifies black or a person with a darker complexion. In English it came to be pronounced with a hard -r, particularly by white people because in African American Vernacular English the -r’s are often omitted.³⁹¹ African Americans, however, have appropriated it as an in-group identifier.³⁹² As linguist Geneva Smitherman puts it, the word “is from the lexicon of the counter language African Americans have created over the centuries, turning the white mean’s language upon its head.”³⁹³ Smitherman outlines eight meanings to the word that are dependent upon “who is saying what to whom, under what conditions, and with what intentions.”³⁹⁴ She explains that it can refer to: 1) a close friend, 2) a rootedness in Blackness, 3) an African American, 4) a Black woman’s romantic partner, 5) a Black man who is

³⁹⁰ Smitherman, “The N-Words,” 54; McWhorter, “Why Do We Call It ‘The N-Word’?,” 176–177.

³⁹¹ McWhorter, “Why Do We Call It ‘The N-Word’?,” 194.

³⁹² McWhorter, “Why Do We Call It ‘The N-Word’?”

³⁹³ Smitherman, “The N-Words,” 51.

³⁹⁴ Smitherman, 51.

rebellious or fearless, 6) someone conforming to negative African American stereotypes, 7) someone rooted in Hip Hop and Black culture, regardless of race, and 8) any person engaging in negative behavior, regardless of race.³⁹⁵

Ricardo uses the qualified racial epithet to describe himself and African Americans also use it to describe him. Growing up among mostly African Americans in D.C., Ricardo's usage signifies, per one of Smitherman's definitions, a rootedness in Blackness and the Black experience. However, "Spanish" stands as the qualifier because Ricardo does not self-identify as Black, nor do African Americans identify him as Black epidermally. Yet, there is a nod to a shared experience. How can a non-Black person share in a Black experience? Here, Márquez's critique of how Blackness is often only used to signify the corporeal is helpful.³⁹⁶ Through his concept of foundational Blackness, Márquez calls us to examine how Latinas/os come to develop an anti-racist critique through the Black experience because of how anti-Black racism comes to affect Latinas/os, as well.³⁹⁷ Latinas/os' proximity to Blackness in D.C. shaped how Ricardo experienced school. Ricardo, and other young Latinos like him, were deemed juvenile criminals alongside their Black peers. Ricardo's usage of the qualified racial epithet acknowledges that albeit racially different, him and African Americans are treated as a societal problem under a white supremacist gaze. This is reminiscent of what Salvadoran immigrant Jess Rogar proclaimed. "A lot of white Americans out in the county just think of us as a different kind of [B]lack race," he observed in Montgomery County.³⁹⁸ Rogar's observation

³⁹⁵ Smitherman, 52.

³⁹⁶ Márquez, *Black-Brown Solidarity*, 51–52.

³⁹⁷ Márquez, 51–52.

³⁹⁸ Ronbert F. Levey, "Spanish-speaking Residents Briefed on Opportunities," *The Washington Post*,

concisely expressed how, in 1970, non-Black Latinos did not fit the molds of Blackness and whiteness understood in the region. whites did not racialize them as whites, rather, they were “a different kind of [B]lack,” signaling Latinas/os’ proximity to Blackness in the region. Altogether, there is a recognition among some Latinas/os, that how they are treated in the DMV is inextricably linked to how African Americans have been treated. Ricardo, and others like him, expressed a shared, though nuanced, experience with African Americans that emerged out of being categorized as delinquents in school.

You Spanish Now?

It would not be accurate to say that young African Americans and Latinas/os stopped fighting after 1973 and that thereafter they existed in state of solidarity, acknowledging their shared struggles. Interpersonal conflicts persisted and Central Americans even cite them as formidable memories of their youth. At the same time, with the growth of the Central American population in the region, the racialized line between Blackness and Latinidad continued to solidify through dominant ideas on language differences and illegality. Young people replicated these dominant ideologies, where to be Black meant to be American and Spanish meant to be a foreign Latina/o. Afro-Central Americans like Timothy navigated this social terrain in various spatial contexts, from Southeast to Northwest.



Figure 11 Timothy poses for his school portrait at a Catholic school in Southeast, Washington, D.C., late 1980s.

“Timothy Fabrega!” I imagine the photographer’s assistant call out to the group of children dressed in school uniforms. Timothy steps up to take his school portrait. He takes a seat on the wooden box that serves as a makeshift stool. The photographer directs his body. “Point your knees to the left, turn your torso—only your torso—towards me. Don’t look at the camera. Look at my hand over here! Alright, big smile...” Timothy, still had his baby teeth intact. He closes them tight and opens his mouth wide to smile. It is a compulsory smile. Many children do this, force their facial muscles to express jubilee when they are in front of a camera. Sometimes they smile at the behest of an adult, other times they are just programmed to do so when they see a camera. Despite the child’s smile and the innocence in his eye, his attire was mature. He wore a camel-colored corduroy blazer with a coordinated sweater vest and a white button up underneath it, and a white bow tie to

match. Uniforms attempt to disguise what makes pupils unique—for better or for worse. Economic inequalities and countercultural aesthetics covered up with blazers and sweater vests. The photographer counts, “1, 2, 3...” and the flash sounds. The next student is called and the ritual of picture day continues. The same photograph with a different person gets reproduced, over and over again. What might a school portrait conceal and/or reveal?

School portraits, like this one of Timothy, are not unique. They are among the most common photographs found across people’s personal archives—even if they are the free copy with the studio’s watermark on it. These portraits form part of a subgenre of school photographs, visualizing individuals, classes with their teachers, and classroom instruction, often in deliberately posed frames. Perhaps it was the formality and ubiquitous character of these photographs that made me initially uninterested in school pictures. However, they can begin to tell us much about young people’s experiences in school. In Timothy’s case, his experience as an Afro-Central American, growing up in D.C. in the 80s and 90s. Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, memory scholars and historians, claim that school photographs visualize the institution’s socialization that seeks to erase difference and produce citizens in the image of the state.³⁹⁹ And while they are intended to be homogenous, demonstrating “formal knowledge,” Hirsch and Spitzer also profess that school photographs cannot hide the “implicitly communicated academic, social, economic, and cultural messages

³⁹⁹ Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, *School Photos in Liquid Time: Reframing Difference*, The Samuel & Althea Stroum Lectures in Jewish Studies (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2019), 26–31.

conveyed at school.”⁴⁰⁰ What were the implicit messages that Timothy was receiving? What was he communicating in this school portrait?

Timothy was born in Northwest D.C. to an African American mother and a Panamanian father. Although born in D.C., Timothy spent his early childhood in Panama City. At about seven years old, he permanently returned to the city where he was born, his mother was born, as well as his grandmother, and great-grandmother. Timothy’s mother, Robin, enrolled her son at a Catholic school in Southeast D.C. “I didn’t want people to know I was from Panama cause I wanted to fit in. You know, being multicultural, it wasn’t a thing.”⁴⁰¹ Timothy reflected on his transition to living and going to school in Southeast. While the whole city was predominantly Black, and namely African American, the Southeast quadrant of the city has historically had a very low percentage of foreign-born and Latina/o residents. In 1980, most of the census tracts in Southeast had less than two percent of Latinas/os within them.⁴⁰² In 1990, the population in some tracts in Southeast increased to be between two to five percent Latina/o.⁴⁰³ Similarly, the foreign-born population in Southeast also remained low, only reaching between two to five percent in some tracts in the quadrant by 1990.⁴⁰⁴ In this sense Southeast was different from Northwest, where Adams Morgan, Mount Pleasant, and Columbia Heights came to have sizeable foreign-born, as well as Latina/o populations.⁴⁰⁵ He was one of very few Latinas/os in the quadrant, according

⁴⁰⁰ Hirsch and Spitzer, 27.

⁴⁰¹ Timothy Fabrega, oral history by author, Washington, D.C., January 21, 2024.

⁴⁰² “MapUSA: A Human Mapping Project (1940–2010),”
<https://s4.ad.brown.edu/webgisnew/webgismapusa/> (February 21, 20224)

⁴⁰³ “MapUSA: A Human Mapping Project (1940–2010),”
<https://s4.ad.brown.edu/webgisnew/webgismapusa/> (February 21, 20224)

⁴⁰⁴ “MapUSA: A Human Mapping Project (1940–2010),”
<https://s4.ad.brown.edu/webgisnew/webgismapusa/> (February 21, 20224)

⁴⁰⁵ “MapUSA: A Human Mapping Project (1940–2010),”

to Census data, and the only one he knew of. Moreover, attempting to explain that he was both Panamanian and African American was difficult for him because multicultural families were not as common.

Timothy was navigating a slightly different social landscape than many Latinas/os in Northwest or even some suburbs, which by the eighties and nineties had significant and still growing Latina/o populations. Where Black Latinidad was marginal in these spaces, it was almost inconceivable in Southeast. Timothy shared that his house felt very Central American, especially when his father Rene was there. A key reminder of his Central Americanness was the food. He recalled stacks of frozen plantains in the freezer. However, this cultural expression was largely contained within the domestic sphere. “I feel like in Southeast, I couldn’t express my other side...when you left [the house] you had to be Black...I had to be what I look like.”⁴⁰⁶ Timothy articulated a dominant understanding of Blackness, one largely defined by American experiences. Moreover, he implies that Latinidad was not understood as Black, stating, “I had to be what I look like.” Timothy, therefore, assumed a more African American identity in public. It was what allowed him to “fit in,” as he said repeatedly throughout the interview. However, he was not entirely resistant to claiming a Latino identity either. “I remember one time; I had something on. It could have been a bracelet or something. And I remember this little girl, she was like, ‘what you think you Spanish now?’...And, I was like, ‘yeah, I actually am.’”⁴⁰⁷ Just below the frame of the school portrait, was Tim hiding a bracelet

<https://s4.ad.brown.edu/webgisnew/webgismapusa/> (February 21, 20224)

⁴⁰⁶ Timothy Fabrega, oral history by author, Washington, D.C., January 21, 2024.

⁴⁰⁷ Timothy Fabrega, oral history by author, Washington, D.C., January 21, 2024.

underneath a cuff of his uniform blazer? Was the bracelet something his father brought him from Panama? His peer contested whatever it was that Timothy had on that signified Latinidad to her. Perhaps the little girl said it in jest, not expecting Timothy to respond affirmatively. However, that's just it. She may not have expected his affirmative response because a Black Latino was inconceivable in Southeast.

Things changed for Timothy when he moved to Northwest D.C. West of Rock Creek Park, as mentioned, was—and remains—overwhelmingly white. Most Census tracts were above 80 percent white. A sharp contrast from his previous schooling in Southeast, in his new neighborhood were also the only majority white schools in the city. Despite the white majority, there were also groups of Black and Latino students from within and outside the neighborhood boundaries. It was within these schools that Timothy felt he became very conscious of race. He identified white kids as the majority and everyone else as an allied minority. As he got older, Timothy felt even more comfortable moving between Black and Latina/o social groups. While Timothy moved fluidly between his Black and Latina/o peers, the perceived divisions between Blackness and Latinidad remained.

The divide was present in interactions during casual football games. Timothy recalled that on a Friday afternoon the boys divided into two teams: Black kids versus Latino kids. “I had to choose a side. I had to choose [the] Latino side or [the] Black side, which was a really significant moment in my life,” Timothy remarked.⁴⁰⁸ Timothy chose to play on the Latino team because he thought he had a better chance of winning. He remembers hearing others call out, “What you doin’ over there?” and

⁴⁰⁸ Timothy Fabrega, oral history by author, Washington, D.C., January 21, 2024.

“What’s going on here?” Others were confused about why Timothy would select the Latino team. Yet again, his racial and ethnic identity seemed to be in conflict. Despite his peers’ initial confusion, the game started. However, it ended abruptly after a fight broke out against the two opposing teams—the Black kids versus Latino kids.

Although the fight was broken up by schoolteachers, students made plans to resume the conflict after school. After the initial fight, Timothy recounted his Black peers saying, “You know what,” as if they arrived at new a conclusion, “you on the Latino side, we’re gonna jump you too.” The way Timothy retold the story, was as if his Black peers collectively decided to disassociate him from their shared Blackness. In his retelling, Timothy also sounded surprised by that decision. Because of his team selection, he was implicated. He was not able to easily move between Black and Latina/o social groups during moments of juvenile conflict and the binary that he thought had dissolved became ever present.

Amid this tension, Timothy felt what he described as a “hug” when a girl they called Quintanilla went up to him and said, “we’ll protect you.” The news of the fight had spread, and the rumor was that a local Latino gang was going to partake in the afterschool conflict. Quintanilla may have been affiliated with the gang and promised Timothy their protection. Decades later, he attempted to invoke Quintanilla’s sentiment, “You’re one of us...it’s obvious.” Even if these are not the precise words Quintanilla used many years ago, Timothy recalled how it made him feel “held by community.” As an Afro-Central American, who primarily grew up with his African American mother, he was seldom seen as Latino. Quintanilla’s words provided reassurance that he also belonged among Latinas/os, despite the divisions that had

been drawn between Black and Latino students at times. The final school bell rung, and the local gang was outside. Their presence was enough to quail the second part to the fight.

Between Southeast and Northwest, Timothy toggled between Blackness and Latinidad. At times, he conformed to dominant understandings of Blackness, not wanting others to know he was Panamanian. Other times, he contested the dominant understandings of both Blackness and Latinidad, by claiming “Yeah, I’m Spanish” or choosing to play football on the Latino team, despite people not racializing him as such. Going back and forth between Black and Latino social groups, sometimes came at Timothy’s expense. However, he found solace in people making space for his Black Latinidad—an identity that was continually placed at odds with one another interpersonally, as well as the city at-large.

The Uprising

On the evening of Sunday, May 5, 1991, Daniel Enrique Gómez stepped out of Don Juan Restaurant onto Lamont Street with his two friends. By all accounts, the 30-year-old Salvadoran immigrant was intoxicated. Meanwhile, officers Angela Jewell and Grisel del Valle, who were new to the police force, were patrolling the area by foot. At the time, the Mount Pleasant Advisory Neighborhood Commission (ANC)—a hyper local body of elected officials—were applying pressures on law enforcement, city boards, and local businesses to eliminate what they deemed an issue of public intoxication. Alice Kelly, a neighborhood commissioner from 1986–1992, claimed that the “alcohol issue” was a city-wide problem. In Georgetown, it was underage drinking. In Mount Pleasant, however, Kelly suggests “it was Latino, and it was

African American.”⁴⁰⁹ The African American and Latina officers proceeded to arrest two of the three individuals on Lamont Street for drinking in public. They called for backup. Officers Irwin Harris and Tymia Prince arrived on the scene. Officer Harris began to arrest the third person, Gómez. As Harris begins to handcuff Gómez, a fourth person runs from 17th street and jumps on Harris’ back. Jewell says Gómez lunged towards her. She shoots. That is the police officer’s account.

Some members of the community say that Gómez was fully handcuffed. Others say he was only partially handcuffed. They say he broke free from the police officer’s restraint. Some claim to have seen him pull out a knife. “Drop the knife,” said Officer Jewell. Others question, whether there was even a knife. “He took off his belt,” some proclaim. She steps back, pulling her revolver out. “He just didn’t know English,” the others say.

“¡Bótalo!” (Drop it!)

“Deja eso, vos!” (Leave it!) Some say they yelled in Spanish, as people began to form a crowd.

An ambulance transports Gómez’s wounded body to Washington Hospital Center, where he was in critical condition. Meanwhile, back in the neighborhood, rumors ran rampant. “He died.” People are upset and then enraged. The MPD attempted to contain the growing crowds.

The Mount Pleasant uprisings—also known as the Mount Pleasant disturbances or riots, depending on who you ask—were led by Latina/o youth and

⁴⁰⁹ Alice Kelly, oral history by Patrick Scallen, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2018, Mount Pleasant Riot Oral History Project, D.C. Public Library.

garnered the support of Black youth, as well. It lasted three nights, leading to approximately 230 arrests and hundreds of thousands of dollars in property damage and loss.⁴¹⁰ Despite its relatively low cost to the city, it received significant media attention locally, as well as nationally.⁴¹¹ In fact, the uprising was the first notable news coverage the local Black press gave to local Latina/o issues.⁴¹² In this section, I am less interested in the “facts” and instead seek to understand the racial meaning that the media and local politicians articulated about the uprisings and Latinas/os vis-a-vis Central Americans, who were specifically named in the press.

After two nights of young people taking to the streets, the local press described the physical effects of the uprising and had several readers opine on young people’s choices. “What began Sunday night as a disturbance involving Hispanic youths...evolved into a rampage of Hispanic and black youths, much of it aimed at property,” reported the *Post*. In other words, what began as an inconvenience turned into a night of uncontrollable violence that destroyed property. Much like it had done before, the *Post* named the perpetrators of the problem: Latino and Black youth. Here, however, it was Black youth—who were perceived to be not Latino—that were implicated by association. Specifically, Central Americans were named in the media because the conflict with Gómez incited the uprising and by 1990, Central Americans had grown to be nearly half of the Latina/o population in D.C.⁴¹³ “My Central

⁴¹⁰ Christopher Spoler, “Painful Lessons of Mount Pleasant,” *The Washington Post*, May 12, 1991.

⁴¹¹ Spoler, “Painful Lessons of Mount Pleasant.”

⁴¹² The first coverage I found of Latinas/os in the DMV in local Black presses was in *The Washington Informer*, pertaining to economic development in Adams Morgan. Latinas/os were simply mentioned as participating in the meeting. See “Adams-Morgan Community Pulled Together,” *The Washington Informer*, December 11, 1969.

⁴¹³ According to the census, the total population of D.C. Latinas/os in 1990 was 31, 358. Of those, 14, 243 were Central American. See U.S. Census Bureau, Census 1990. Prepared by Social Explorer.

American friends were horrified at what they saw,” Fran Hoyle of Washington wrote in a letter to the editor. “They want the public to know that those who participated in the riots are not the ones who work in the restaurants, clean homes or take care of children,” she added.⁴¹⁴ Hoyle implicated Central Americans in her attempt to distinguish those deemed “good citizens” because of their work ethic and those deemed “bad citizens” because of their destruction of property.

The Post published multiple articles listing the damage.⁴¹⁵ Reporters noted that young people robbed several grocery stores and convenience stores, including Safeway, Giant, People’s Drug, and 7-Eleven, among other small businesses. The press also reported that the enraged young people damaged vehicles and set establishments on fire. Thirteen police vehicles were damaged, with another six completely destroyed. Witnesses reported fires to private vehicles, a Metrobus, Lincoln Junior High School, and Church’s Chicken. Reporters said the enraged young people left the scene with money, food, liquor, clothes, and other sorts of merchandise. This destruction and theft concerned homeowners, who were attracted to the neighborhood’s relative diversity if the diverse neighbors comported themselves accordingly. As Mike Mills reasoned, “The property owners want to ‘improve’ Mount Pleasant Street, and hope to make changes that will help their housing investments appreciate.”⁴¹⁶

⁴¹⁴ Fran Hoyle, “Letters to the Editor” *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1991.

⁴¹⁵ Carlos Sanchez and Rene Sanchez, “Dixon Imposes Curfew on Mount Pleasant Area As Police, Youths Clash for a Second Night” *The Washington Post*, May 7, 1991; “Letters to the Editor” *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1991; Linda Wheeler, “The District’s Storm From the Inside Out,” *The Washington Post*, May 12, 1991; Skip Kaltenheuser, “How to Kill a Neighborhood,” *The Washington Post*, May 12, 1991.

⁴¹⁶ Mike Mills, “Class Warfare,” *Washington City Paper*, May 17, 1991.



Figure 12 Latino and Black boys run past liquor store during second night of the Mount Pleasant uprising on May 6, 1991. Photograph by James A. Parcell, The Washington Post.

While many protestors covered their face to prevent being identified, the above image by *Post* photographer, James A. Parcell, depicts the facial profile of a couple of young protestors more clearly than others printed in the press. The image was taken on the corner of Columbia Road and 18th Street. The subjects of the image include a non-Black Latino boy and two Black boys, all of whom appear to be teenagers, perhaps even minors. Their bodies lean slightly forward, as their hands propel them, while they use the power from their legs to move from the base of their heel to the balls of their feet to run swiftly down the road. With one person slightly behind the other, they sprint away from the police and attempt to sprint away from the

media's lens. What I find to be most striking about the image is the second of the three boys. He was grinning with his mouth wide open as he and his companions swiftly ran past their observers. What could this boy have been smiling about?

Op-ed columns and letters to the editors expressed the wider public's disgruntlement with the way young people protested after the non-fatal shooting in Mount Pleasant. Robert D. Bell of Washington wrote,

I am concerned about the amount of press devoted to the opinions of a few predictable demagogues... I am referring to those who characterize the rioting and looting that have stricken these neighborhoods as a form of community political action. The photos of grinning youths sprinting away from a pillaged liquor store should go a long way toward dispelling this myth.⁴¹⁷

For Bell, the boy in the photograph's grin gave reason to condemn young people's actions, as if political protest could not be enjoyed. Similarly, Skip Kalteneheuser wrote in an editorial titled, "How to Kill A Neighborhood,"

As I watched neighbors fail in their attempts to stop the looting of the 7-Eleven, a boy of about 12 picked up a full soda bottle and heaved it like a fastball into a crowd by a police line. I grabbed his arm, pointed out that someone could be killed and got only an ecstatic grin as he ran off. No sense of consequence, no conscience. Tell me again of his "frustrated political voice," if you like, but keep him off the streets and underpasses.⁴¹⁸

What does it feel like to destroy glass windows, kick doors down, and hurl and steal merchandise that is valued more than your own life? I wonder if these thoughts crossed the grinning boys' minds. Is that what animated his large smile? That is, the euphoria of righteous revenge. In response to young people's property damaging protests, some Washington area residents wanted them to be "gone after, prosecuted,

⁴¹⁷ Robert D. Bell, "Letter to Editor: Riot, Outrage, and Individual Accountability," *The Washington Post*, May 10, 1991.

⁴¹⁸ Kalteneheuser, "How to Kill a Neighborhood."

and held accountable.”⁴¹⁹ This can look a number of different ways. Some, like Kalteneheuser, assert that they want who they see as problematic youth removed from their neighborhood “streets and underpasses,” which may mean imprisonment. Area residents utilized a “tough-on-crime” rhetoric. However, because this uprising was one caused by Central Americans, both born in the U.S. and outside of it, some were questioning their belonging in Mount Pleasant and D.C. at large. Among them was council member H.R. Crawford of Ward 7, who said, “If they don’t appreciate our country, get out.”⁴²⁰ Despite protester’s actual citizenship status, Crawford dismissed Latina/o grievances and political demands by telling them to leave.

MPD went as far as consulting with INS during the multi-day protests. MPD claimed they wanted INS “to help determine the community ties of a few people it had arrested, and to help explain the tactics that a few others used in spreading violence through the Northwest neighborhood[s].”⁴²¹ This comment implies that MPD believed the protesters were undocumented Central Americans. The implications of the comment are drawing on the particular historical moment, in which Salvadorans, Guatemalans, and Nicaraguans had left civil wars in the isthmus. This suspicion weaved its way into the reporting of local Black presses like the *Washington Afro-American* and *The Washington Informer*, where local Latinas/os had made front-page news for the first time.

“I was scared to death...for a moment it felt like I was in the middle of a battlefield about to be massacred. The young Latino crowd behind me decided to

⁴¹⁹ Brian Moore, “Letter to Editor: The Mount Pleasant Riots,” *The Washington Post*, May 16, 1991.

⁴²⁰ Christopher Spoler, “Painful Lessons of Mount Pleasant.”

⁴²¹ Rene Sanchez and Debi Wilgoren, “D.C. Police Consulted INS During Disturbances,” *The Washington Post*, May 11, 1991.

challenge the police with rocks. They responded with tear gas and guess who was in the middle?”⁴²² Hamil Harris recollected to *Afro-American* readers. His opening line is important for the characters it outlines and the metaphors it uses. Like other Black and mainstream presses, Harris describes the setting like a war zone in which Latinos and police officers are at odds. In his account, Latinos are the antagonizers that provoke police officers. Police officers, on the other hand, are positioned as the defenders of Mount Pleasant. As such, police officers are deemed responsible for protecting the investments in a place.

The war metaphor is further elaborated when Harris claimed that “[i]t appeared that the individuals who waged the war had experience in guerrilla warfare.”⁴²³ Similarly, the *Washington Informer* proposed that protesters were “employing what some observers described as tactics some of them possibly perfected as guerrillas [*sic*] in the jungles of their native countries in Central America.”⁴²⁴ Guerrilla warfare is characterized by an armed struggle that uses irregular tactics to attack a state military in attempt seize political power.⁴²⁵ As mentioned, coalitions in El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua were in fact engaged in guerrilla warfare against right-wing governments that were supported by the United States. Therefore, guerrilleros were viewed as dangerous to the U.S. polity. To claim that the protesters, learned their tactics as guerrilleros seeks to amplify

⁴²² Hamil Harris, “Hamil’s personal account of riot,” *Washington Afro-American*, May 11, 1991.

⁴²³ Harris, “Hamil’s personal account of riot.”

⁴²⁴ Oswald T. Brown, “Law and Order Restored in Adams Morgan Area,” *The Washington Informer*, May 9, 1991.

⁴²⁵ Che Guevara, “Guerrilla Warfare: A Method,” accessed February 19, 2024, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1963/09/guerrilla-warfare.htm>.

xenophobia. It instills the idea that Central American protesters have the capability to seize Mount Pleasant, as well as the nation.

One editorial reinforces the notion that Central Americans belong elsewhere by citing the Federation of American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an organization that is concerned with reducing all forms of immigration, legal and otherwise.⁴²⁶ Using the organization's public relations director, Dave Ray, as a reference the editorial questioned how Salvadorans were encouraged to engage in civil disobedience because they had recently been granted Temporary Protected Status (TPS). Ray claimed that protesters showed off their "protection" cards when police approached them to ward authorities off and evade legal punishment. The "protection" cards Ray and the anonymous editorial writer referenced were likely employment authorization documents, a credit card-sized document that proved immigrants granted TPS could work in the United States. Whether protesters brandished their "protection" cards or not, Ray and the editorial writer were attempting to instill fear of Central American immigrants, cautioning that the civil unrest in Central America could be "transferred to American streets" without repercussions.⁴²⁷ This assertion assumes that protesters were all Salvadoran immigrants and that deportation is not an ongoing threat to immigrants, despite their legal status.⁴²⁸ Regardless of who was protesting in Mount Pleasant, the editorial claims that "these are the types of problems that arise when you have a large number of illegal immigrants in a

⁴²⁶ "The Riot: Putting the blame in the right places," *Washington Afro-American*, May 11, 1991

⁴²⁷ "The Riot: Putting the blame in the right places," *Washington Afro-American*, May 11, 1991

⁴²⁸ For more on the precarious nature of immigration statuses like TPS see Cecilia Menjivar, "Liminal Legality: Salvadoran and Guatemalan Immigrants' Lives in the United States," *American Journal of Sociology* 111, no. 4 (January 2006): 999–1037, <https://doi.org/10.1086/499509>.

community who do not speak English.”⁴²⁹ The Black presses’ coverage of the Mount Pleasant uprising suggests that the root of the uprising lies in the “illegal” immigration of Central Americans, who are bringing with them the civil unrest of their countries to the streets of D.C. and causing havoc to African Americans.

Moreover, Harris positions himself as the ultimate victim in the conflict between protesters and police. When protesters allegedly agitate the police officers and they respond with tear gas, Harris rhetorically asks, “and guess who was in the middle?” In his personal account, it is Harris who endures the physical pain of the conflict. He claims it does not only affect him individually, but also his family. “After four hours [in Mount Pleasant] I had had enough and so had my wife, who broke into tears when her husband came home with tear gas dust all over his body. In describing the physical and emotional harm the Mount Pleasant uprisings caused him and his family, Harris is alluding to the effects that the conflict between Latinos and police will have on African Americans as a whole.

⁴²⁹ Harris, “Hamil’s personal account of riot.”

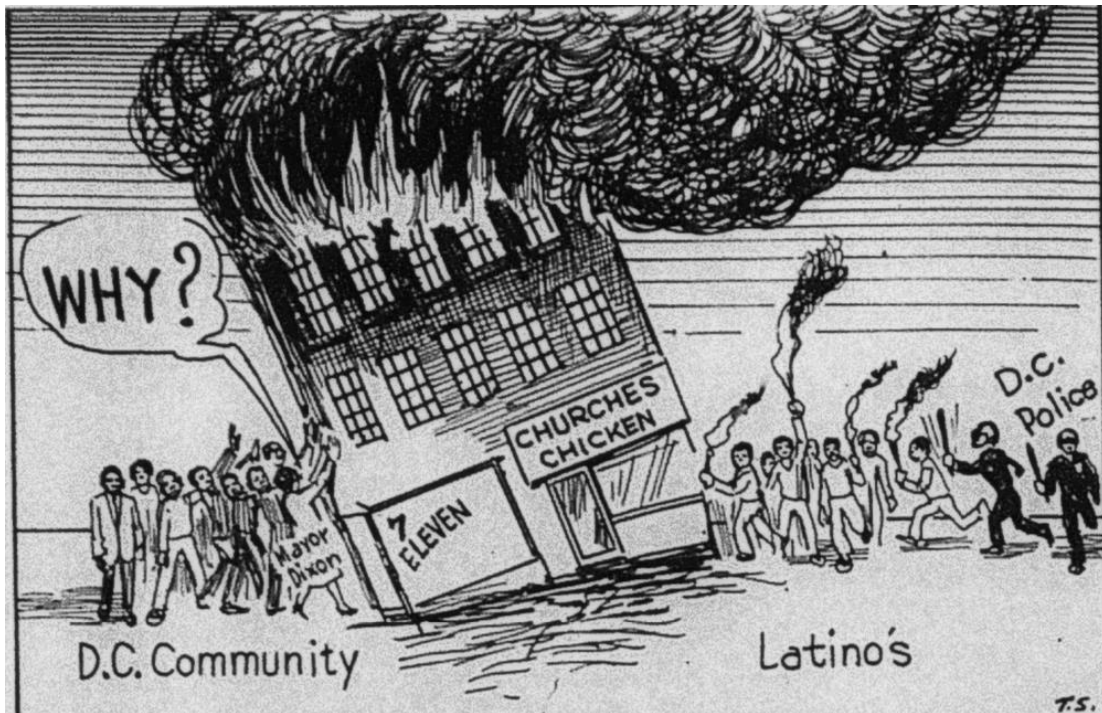


Figure 13 Illustration of Latinos burning businesses, while the D.C. community holds the building up. Illustrated by T.S., *Washington Afro-American*, May 11, 1991.

In a more concrete fashion, another editorial claims, “The predominantly Black residents of Washington, DC are asking a lot of questions about the handling of the Mt. Pleasant rioters who tore up our city for almost two days leaving taxpayers with a huge bill for repairs to streetlights, fire trucks, police cars and businesses...”⁴³⁰ The Black press therefore was claiming that this is an African American city that was destroyed by outsiders. This phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated in a cartoon. The cartoon depicts a group of men with torches labeled “Latinos,” setting fire to a building with “7 Eleven” and “Churches [sic] Chicken” signage on the front as D.C. police chases them. On the other side of the enflamed building is a group of people labeled “D.C. Community” and “Mayor Dixon” attempting to keep the building from falling.

⁴³⁰ “The Riot: Putting the blame in the right places.”

The cartoon demonstrates that Latinas/os were not seen as a part of the D.C. community. Instead, they were blamed for destroying it. This claim is like that made by many white business owners and civic groups of Black people during the 1968 Martin Luther King uprising.⁴³¹ Black protestors were generally blamed for the property loss and financial debt the city accrued. However, in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement was gaining traction and D.C. was becoming a symbol of that. While some Black residents disagreed with the uprising, many more understood why it took place as a demand for liberation that had been denied and perpetually deferred. In the aftermath, Asch and Musgrove attest that Washingtonians “pushed for self-determination, community control, and participatory democracy.”⁴³² The uprising brought in a new era in the city, where it came to be revered for its Black leadership and predominantly Black residents. Fast forward to 1991, Latinos and their allies took to the streets in similar ways to the 1968 uprisings. The Latina/o population in the region had grown exponentially, in part due to Central American immigration. Now, however, Latinas/os were not seen as being from D.C., but were categorized as criminals, guerrilla members, and undocumented immigrants. Collectively, their claims to place were largely dismissed.

⁴³¹ Asch and Musgrove, *Chocolate City: A History of Race and Democracy in the Nation's Capital*, 358.

⁴³² Asch and Musgrove, 360.

The Head Nod



Figure 14 Brothers Walter and Billy sitting on the hood of a car in Adams Morgan, circa 1979.

Walter brings out his cell phone at the Beltsville public Library in Prince George's County to show me some of the photograph he has in his digital possession. "That's us two on a '72 Corolla," Walter said.⁴³³ It was a photograph of Walter and his twin brother Billy. The way their legs seem to have just taken any shape, with one twin's feet awkwardly going in the same direction, reveal that they are still learning how to use their limbs. They couldn't have been any older than two years-old when they took this picture on top of the red Toyota Corolla with D.C. license plates. Where in D.C. was not necessarily clear upon first sight. "This is Champlain Street going downhill,"

⁴³³ Walter Escoto, oral history by author, Beltsville, Maryland, January 13, 2023.

Walter quickly pointed out. “Here, that’s Columbia Road.” His brief description of the photograph demonstrated not only Walter’s car expertise (he became an auto body mechanic and a Toyota aficionado, even having his vintage cars featured in magazines), but also his knowledge of place. That of the Adams Morgan neighborhood in Northwest D.C.

As is typical for twins, Walter and Billy wore matching tank tops and shorts at the behest of their mother, Francisca, in the photograph. Walter believes she is the one responsible for creating this image of her toddlers that warm day in the city. However, she did not conspire alone. Her brother Rufino also partook in creating the photographic scene. By the time the photograph was created, circa 1979, most of Walter’s family had already emigrated from El Salvador to the District. Rufino, had been in the states long enough to purchase a car of his own. His mother—Walter’s grandmother—helped him immigrate. The twins sat on Rufino’s Corolla and he was the one who put the cigars in their mouths, which are beginning to fade into the other colors as the photograph ages. The cigars became the only way to tell the siblings a part. Billy was on the right with the cigar tilted upward, while Walter was on the left with the cigar angled downward. The careful arrangements of the image reveal the multiple people involved in its creation. More importantly, however, it places multiple generations of Central Americans in the District before 1980.

The year 1980 often marks the turning point in Central American immigration to the U.S. Central American immigration did in fact grow in the 1980s and the decades that followed. However, amid discourse that attempts to uproot Central Americans from D.C. this photograph and others like it are significant because they

contest the nativist tropes that represent them as what Yajaira Padilla refers to as “forever illegals.”⁴³⁴ The photograph of Walter’s family—both depicted in the frame and present beyond it—thus offers a distinct entry point to understanding D.C. in the latter decades of twentieth century. Walter was born in Southeast Washington, D.C. in 1977 and grew up in Adams Morgan, experiencing the social relations of the city, and more specifically, his neighborhood evolve.

Walter grew up in a 30-unit apartment building on Champlain Street. The photograph of Walter and his brother on top of the Corolla was taken directly outside of that very building. His extended maternal family lived there also. Different units housed Walter’s grandmother, aunts, uncles, and cousins. As he recalls it, the building was almost entirely Latinas/os, with only a few African American residents, one of them being the resident manager. While Walter’s building was mostly Latina/o he lived adjacent to African Americans. “Our neighborhood was mostly Hispanics, and the adjacent neighborhood was mostly Blacks,” he described.⁴³⁵ The neighborhoods Walter refers to are streets within Adams Morgan. Walter described Champlain Street as mostly Latina/o (understood as non-Black) and Ontario Street as mostly Black (understood as African American). While boundaries are contestable, these parallel streets are generally considered to be within the limits of a singular neighborhood. They run parallel to one another and are only apart. However, Walter’s use of “neighborhood” to distinguish parallel streets is important because it reveals that Walter experienced Washington, D.C. on a block-by-block basis. Where one

⁴³⁴ Padilla, *From Threatening Guerrillas to Forever Illegals*, 8.

⁴³⁵ Walter Escoto, oral history by author, Beltsville, Maryland, January 13, 2023.

block was Latina/o, the other was Black. Geographer Neil Smith reminds us that “[b]y setting boundaries, scale can be constructed as a means of constraint and exclusion, a means of imposing identity.”⁴³⁶ Walter is establishing scales to impose a Black identity on others and assume a Latina/o identity for himself. By creating these spatial differences, Walter is explaining that as he walked the streets of Adams Morgan, he experienced racial difference.

Walter organized space primarily as either Black or Latina/o. However, these scales were often converged in school or in the shared streets, corners, and empty lots of the neighborhood. Tensions arose at the meeting points of these spatial boundaries. As children this most often looked like taunting and teasing. Walter recollected the sort of conflicts that he experienced as an adolescent, “we [would] play soccer outside in the parking lot and you [would] see the Black kids coming from the alley, trying to steal the ball. So, you made friends in your neighborhood that were your kind, your color, your background because they experienced the same thing by the same guy...the same kids bullying the Hispanics.”⁴³⁷ Here, “we” is a pronoun for Latinas/os. Like many others, Walter also constructs Blackness in opposition to Latinidad rhetorically but also experientially, by naming Black children as the ones to bully the Latinas/os. These interactions might seem like typical childhood behavior. And indeed, Walter did say, “I don’t think we saw it as race as much, just thought it was bullying.” However, Walter is naming what he perceived as a sort of power struggle within a children’s paradigm. Someone was attempting to take something

⁴³⁶ Smith, “Contours of a Spatialized Politics,” 78.

⁴³⁷ Walter Escoto, oral history by author, Beltsville, Maryland, January 13, 2023.

from him forcefully. In response, his defense mechanism was to be friends with people who were “his kind.” Walter then reifies racial meaning onto Latinidad, claiming that they share the same skin color and are victims of bullying at the hands of their Black peers. This notion draws on his own lived experiences, which were primarily segmented into Black or Latin/a/o, as well as the anti-Black discourse that associates Blackness with criminality at different ages. As a result, Walter understood his social life as existing as separate from his Black counterparts. To put it simply, the Spanish kids hung out with the Spanish kids and the Black kids with the Black kids.

Walter did not name many shared experiences with Black people. However, he did acknowledge the shared class condition many of those in the neighborhood experienced. In this sense, there were ongoing paradoxes in Walter’s narration about the stark differences between Latinas/os and, at the same time, and acknowledgement—albeit mostly implicitly— of a shared condition. “A lot of people were poor, but I think we didn’t notice that because we were all the same,” he said. At the same time, Adams Morgan was undergoing gentrification, a process that began in the 1970s and expanded in the decades that followed.⁴³⁸ Sociologist Tanya Golash-Boza argues that in order for gentrification to occur in Washington, D.C. there has to be a disinvestment in public schools, city services, and public housing, and an investment in the carceral system.⁴³⁹ The disinvestment in places like Adams Morgan and the investment in the carceral system has made it possible for public and private

⁴³⁸ Gale, *Washington, D.C.*; James M. Lloyd, “Fighting Redlining and Gentrification in Washington, D.C.: The Adams-Morgan Organization and Tenant Right to Purchase,” *Journal of Urban History* 42, no. 6 (November 2016): 1091–1109, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0096144214566975>; Amanda Huron, *Carving out the Commons: Tenant Organizing and Housing Cooperatives in Washington, D.C.*, *Diverse Economies and Livable Worlds* 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

⁴³⁹ Golash-Boza, *Before Gentrification*.

funding to “revitalize” these places for white residents.⁴⁴⁰ As agents of the carceral system, police officers patrolled Adams Morgan at the behest of many white residents, ensuring the transition of the neighborhood happened.

Police presence in Adams Morgan was so pervasive, Walter said that “D.C. Music was ambulance or police sirens every second of the day.” The police were not simply something he heard, but an entity he encountered on stoops and sidewalks. In one instance, circa 1993, he recalled, his African American neighbor drinking a beer on the steps of their apartment building on a summer day. The District prohibits the consumption of alcohol in public spaces. This include streets, alleys, parks, and parking areas.⁴⁴¹ While it is unclear to me whether apartment stoops are considered “public,” it did not matter in this case. At the time, neighborhood commissioners were pushing police to enforce the law that prohibited drinking in public.⁴⁴² While the neighbor was enjoying his beer outside, two police officers—Harvey and Harrington—drove by and issued him a warning to stop. The neighbor verbally challenged it, initiating a careful dance between resistance and repression. The police officers responded by getting out of their car to show their force. The neighbor then slipped into the building with his beer in hand. He laughed through the glass door at his momentary victory. Without cause, the cops could not enter the building, so they rescinded into their car and drove away. The neighbor stepped back out and joined

⁴⁴⁰ I do want to acknowledge that Adams Morgan did have successful tenant organizers. However, gentrification was the general trend. For more on tenant organizing in the District see Huron, *Carving out the Commons*.

⁴⁴¹ D.C. City Council, 25–1001. Drinking of alcoholic beverage in public place prohibited; intoxication prohibited,” <https://code.dccouncil.gov/us/dc/council/code/sections/25-1001>.

⁴⁴² Alice Kelly, oral history by Patrick Scallen, Washington, D.C., February 2, 2018, Mount Pleasant Riot Oral History Project, D.C. Public Library; Alice Kelly, “A Step Toward Curing D.C.’s Alcohol Dependency,” *The Washington Post*, February 13, 1994.

Walter on the stoop, who had been laughing at the taunting performance from his place on the steps the entire time. “They ain’t coming no more,” said the neighbor triumphantly to Walter. All of a sudden, a police officer on his bicycle is peddling down Champlain Street. He drops his bikes and grabs the African American neighbor, berating him with profanity. Walter responds, “Yo! You’re doing all this for a beer.” He verbalizes the absurdity of the situation to the cops. However, it makes no difference. The neighbor gets apprehended and processed at the station by Officers Harvey and Harrington. All this for a summertime beer.

The next day, Walter and his brother Billy stepped bare foot onto the sidewalk to wash their mother’s van. They played music from the car stereo as they lathered and rinsed it. Officers Harvey and Harrington pull up in front of them and claim they go a complaint for excessive loud noise from Walter and Billy’s address. Along with the campaign to prosecute drinking in public and public intoxication, there was also a coinciding effort to eliminate “noise pollution.”⁴⁴³ While the Noise Control Act was primarily targeted at alcohol-serving establishments, many of which were owned by Latinas/os, individuals of color were not exempt.⁴⁴⁴ The policing of sound becomes a way to make a place more pleasant for newer, more upper class residents.⁴⁴⁵ Indeed, Walter recalled the racial and class demographic changes occurring at the time, mentioning white people moving into the new condominium down the street. Billy

⁴⁴³ D.C. City Council, District of Columbia Noise Control Act, <https://dob.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/dob/Noise%20Regulation%20Handbook.pdf>

⁴⁴⁴ Gabriella Gahlia Modan, *Turf Wars: Discourse, Diversity, and the Politics of Place*, New Directions in Ethnography 1 (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007), 137–138.

⁴⁴⁵ The examples in Adams Morgan and Mount Pleasant are eerily similar to the noise control enforcement of go-go music, which pushed bands to perform in the suburbs. In 2019, a Metro PCS store in the gentrified Shaw/Howard neighborhood of Washington, D.C., was forced to stop playing go-go music from their outside speakers. This sparked a movement called #DontMuteDC.

contested the officers' accusation. "What loud noise? Who called to complain?" He retorts, "Ain't no fucking noise violation." Again, the dance of resistance and repression commenced. The police officers ordered the 16-year-olds to put their hands on the fence in submission. When Billy did not comply, Officer Harvey pushed him onto the fence. The force of his intimidating words, complimenting the force in his hands. "You know what I do with smart asses?" Harvey said. Billy resisted and the scuffle ensued. Walter physically intervened in an effort to stop the chaos but was ultimately thrown on the ground by an officer who came as reinforcement. For Walter, most cops—regardless of race—were "dirty," meaning that they were corrupt and violent. However, he surmised that interactions like this aggravated and contributed to Black and Latina/o relations because the majority of the police force was Black.⁴⁴⁶

Walter and Billy ended up in jail for assaulting a police officer. Walter's cellmate was Adrian, an African American peer he had homeroom with in high school. While going from seeing Adrian in the classroom to a cell may seem coincidental, it is not necessarily surprising considering that policing and incarceration had expanded in D.C. during Walter and Adrian's upbringing.⁴⁴⁷ Both of them became victims of the state's investment in mass incarceration. Despite this, Walter did not see any commonalities between him and Adrian. The lack thereof commonalities, according to Walter, prevented them from becoming friends. They were more like acquaintances. For Walter, Adrian was someone he would greet with

⁴⁴⁶ Metropolitan Police Department, *2000 Annual Report*, https://mpdc.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/mpdc/publication/attachments/2000ar_pdf.pdf.

⁴⁴⁷ Golash-Boza, *Before Gentrification*, 99–109.

a casual: “what’s up,” accompanied by an upward head nod. In my interview with him, Walter reenacted this greeting and gesture. The upward tilt of the chin signaled an acknowledgement of Adrian’s presence. They were present with one another in the classroom and the jail cell, a harsh reality of many Black and Latino boys. Although Walter did not exclaim that they shared experiences with structural violence, I like to think a gesture as banal as an upward head nod acclaims otherwise. It subtly says, we know each other, I know what you’ve been through.

Conclusion

The media, politicians, and bureaucrats portrayed African American and Latino youth as delinquents that were simultaneously at odds with one another. First, they depicted African American and Latino boys, fighting one another at public schools, allegedly threatening the well-being of their white peers. Second, they blamed Latino youth, and namely Central Americans, for causing havoc in Washington, D.C. At the time, D.C. remained a predominantly Black city, but was also beginning to experience gentrification during the wake of the crack epidemic. Unruly Central Americans, were therefore perceived as a threat to revitalization. Both the mainstream and the Black press described Central Americans and Latinos as “criminals” and “looters.” Interestingly, similar descriptions were used to identify African Americans both historically and contemporarily in the region. Despite the use of similar descriptors, Black and Central American were used as mutually exclusive categories, reifying the the arbitrary binary between Blackness and Latinidad.

Central Americans personal archives demonstrate how they inherited dominant understandings of Blackness as being American, and Latinidad as being

non-Black. In doing so, they were in many ways building on the racializing legacy of language and illegality. For example, young Afro-Central American boys embraced signifiers such as “Black” to nod to their racial identity, while “Spanish” referred to their heritage language practice and familial immigration history. Non-Black Central American boys, on the other hand, used Spanish to refer to their heritage language practices, family immigration history, and their racial identity. As such, dominant understandings of race were still present among Central American boys and they saw themselves navigating Black and Latina/o spaces.

At the same time, however, Central American boys also articulated an understanding of Black and Central American mutuality, as well as solidarities across difference. Put differently, racism attempted to position Blackness and Central American as oppositional, but Central American boys interjected otherwise. This came across in what I refer to as subtle solidarities. These include Afro-Central Americans’ claiming, “I am Spanish,” or gestures like head nods between brown Central Americans and African Americans after becoming friendly in juvenile detention centers. Central American boys understood the inability of racism to contain their identities and related struggles. They exercised subtle solidarities, highlighting through their acts how their fates were interlinked. Paying attention to minor acts of solidarity point to the coalitional possibilities between African American and Latinx young people, challenging education, mass incarceration, and gentrification.

Conclusion

This project was borne from grief. Amid loss, I had a deep desire to find ways to value the life of Central Americans who have been devalued through structures of racism, sexism, and classism. They were the Central Americans who were erased because of their Blackness, subordinated because of their illegality, incarcerated for their presumed criminality, and unnamed and marginalized because of their gender. I traced their pasts in the limited literature and archives. When Central Americans were written about, they were subjects of racist histories—civil wars, genocide, imperialism, illegality. Central Americans were defined by the oppressive structures that shaped their lives, instead of agents within these structures who were attempting to find a way.

My own family history, however, hinted at a more complex narrative. For my family, their way finding led them to the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. The DMV, as I lovingly refer to it, is a place that holds at its center the seat of national and global power. It is also a place that has been shaped by white supremacy, as well as Black power. For much of its history, the region has been primarily African American and white. In more recent years, it has also been changed by the growth of Central American and Latinx populations, as well as African, Arab, and Asian populations, in the city and its suburbs. I excavated institutional archives to understand how Central Americans came to be racially defined in their new landscape, a tri-state area that was held together by the economic machine that is the federal government.

Central Americans came to be ascribed racial meaning by using African Americans as their comparative foils. The media, politicians, bureaucrats, and others

drew similarities between Central Americans and African Americans, emphasizing their relationality. These included tropes of criminality, as well as poverty. However, at the same they also established an arbitrary binary between Blackness and Latinidad. This was emphasized through distinct language practices and varying immigration statuses. These were the meanings and social relations that racially heterogenous Central Americans in the region navigated in the latter half of the twentieth century. I identify how Central Americans were agents in their lives and how they created belonging amid dynamic racial structures by performing archives. That is, I read for—and alongside—embodied knowledges within their personal archives. Performing archives allow me to understand Central Americans with more complexity, prioritize their embodied knowledges, and emphasize the importance of place, relationality, and the production of space. Central Americans' performances reveal the ways they formed community among and alongside African Americans in the DMV.

Central Americans have been largely discussed insularly or, at times, in relation to Mexicans. However, I call for a more relational and performative approach that exceeds the boundaries of Latinx studies. One cannot understand the Central American experience without grappling with localized understandings of Blackness. While racism, sexism, and classism attempted to define and isolate groups, Central Americans' performances within their personal archives demonstrated they resisted these modes of confinement. Their embodied knowledges, or racial performances, matter because they demonstrate the beautiful, difficult, and mundane ways Central Americans came to survive and find belonging in a region, despite being generally

designated a sonic, legal, or economic problem. They (re)created relations in diaspora to include Central Americans, as well as people across racial and ethnic differences. In the DMV, Central Americans' racial performances highlight the linked pasts and present between African Americans and Latinx folk.

I expand upon African American-Latinx relationality. That is, I expand upon their shared knowledges to imagine and create futures in which the lives of the racially devalued are equally valued. One particular photograph I found in my research points to their shared fates.



Figure 154 Photograph by Rick Reinhard, Washington, D.C., April 1992.

It is a photograph by Rick Reinhard, a freelance photographer who documented the Mount Pleasant uprising. It depicts eight people with small frames and the shadows of facial hair, signaling a transitional period between boyhood and manhood. They are lined in the front of a multi-racial crowd holding a banner. The boys in transition have

their mouths curved into a smile or rounded to yell a chant. Most of their feet are stilled in the middle of Mount Pleasant Street NW, the central corridor of the neighborhood. They are on their way in protest to the John A. Wilson building on Pennsylvania Avenue NW, where the offices of the mayor and city council are housed. It was April 1992. As Reinhard snaps the photograph, one of the boys reacts quick enough to point to the lettering on the hand-painted, cloth banner that proclaims, “Justice for Gomez and King.” The boy’s name is Juan López. “Gomez” refers to Daniel Gómez, the mestizo Salvadoran man who a police officer shot in Washington, D.C., in 1991. “King” refers to Rodney King, an African American man who Los Angeles police officers beat nearly to death the same year.

In April 1992, many in Los Angeles were outraged after a jury acquitted the cops who brutalized King. The people in this photograph marched in solidarity with Angelenos, reminding others of D.C.’s own protests in Mount Pleasant just a year prior. The photographer made the boys, most of whom identify as Central American, the main subjects of the image. They were at the front of the march as the masses behind them become more obscure in the distance. After all, Central American boys were named as the culprits of the Mount Pleasant uprising. Yet, Juan’s pointed finger redirects the viewer to focus on the banner in their hands, gesturing towards the presence and plight of Central Americans in Washington and the similarities with African Americans. Their struggles were not isolated. Juan’s gesture communicated that there was a greater power they were fighting against. In this case, it was the police.

Juan's performance encourages the question: what political possibilities unfold when we read Central Americans' performances in the archive? For example, how might people like Juan gesture towards eradicating police violence or gentrification. *Central Americans in the DMV* pushes Latinx studies to examine Latinxs in relation to Blackness, regardless of Latinxs' racial or ethnic identity, and to outline a future for minoritized people who have been devalued. In using performing archives to expand on this relationality, I outline the possibilities of solidarities that exist among non-Black Latinxs, Afro-Latinxs, and African Americans.

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