Recuerdos: Queer Central American Identity Formation in/through Photography

Kevin Calderon

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Faculty Advisor: Jonathan Rosa, Graduate School of Education

Secondary Reader: Jerome Reyes, Institute for the Diversity in the Arts

Graduate Student Advisor: Nestor Silva, Department of Anthropology
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Introduction

When thinking about my family, I often return to a very salient memory: my mother pulling out two large duffel bags full of pictures. These duffel bags consist of almost 40 years of family histories, genealogies, and moments immortalized by kodak paper and ink. Taken on disposable cameras that cost no more than $10 at the local CVS pharmacy, these images became my core understanding of family and being Salvadoran: telling the story of my mother and her life, that of her cousins and siblings, and her parents and grandparents, a community in the mountains of El Salvador, people I had only ever met through phone calls and sparse holiday gatherings.

Growing up on stolen Lenape land, (also known as South Queens) being Salvadoran felt almost non-existent. To identify as “Central American” was unheard of to me until I was 17. In
Queens, I grew up around public performances of ethnic identity claims, such as national independence day parades and other cultural festivals from across the Caribbean, African, as well as Italian and Irish communities. There were salient understandings of food, language, and culture around these communities, cultural understanding and visibility that I did not experience in South Queens. There was no popular narrative that was publicly celebrated around Salvadoran-ness, Honduran-ness, or any other Central American country. In the era of PBS childrens’ television era, I grew up internalizing what Jodi Melamed in their work *Represent and Destroy* termed the most recent phase of Race-Liberal Hegemony. Melamed describes in their analysis of historical-material production 3 different waves of political understanding that reify and reinforce structural racial marginalization. Neoliberal multiculturalism is the phase of racial capitalism that not only utilizes superficial representation of marginalized people as a form of inclusion meant to distract from the politic of race addressed in the wave of Racial Liberalism, but also “coded the wealth, mobility, and political power of neoliberalism’s beneficiaries as the just desserts of multicultural global citizens while representing those neoliberalism has dispossessed as handicapped by their own monoculturalism or other historico-cultural deficiencies” (Melamed, 72). When engaging with only this silence around any popular narrative regarding Central American culture and peoplehood, incorporation of the “other” through these forms of public celebration are as validating as it gets. In respect to this understanding, if one is considered part of the “monocultural” dispossessed, and if the discourse of identity was not happening on such a public level, what did it mean for interpersonal/community discussions of identity?

I think about the sites where Central Americans are seen and how we are understood. Often it was through American news media in both English and Spanish: sensationalized stories
of gang violence and crime, and repeated waves of media covering the immigration from the isthmus (most recently the caravans of the 2010s). Central American art historian Kency Cornejo describes this lens as an *aesthetic of violence,* building on photojournalist Susan Sontag’s understanding of photographic consumerism in US media/journalism in which “to take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are…to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing—including, when that’s the interest, another person’s pain and misfortune” (Sontag). Cornejo connects the nation-state project of the media and these desires to engage in violent voyeurism to Central American bodies, in which Central Americans only exist in these sites of violence to the popular American imaginary. So then, how does a generation of the Diaspora raised in the United States at the turn of the century understand, and then express, national/ethnic identity? In my search for an answer, I oftentimes found myself in conflict with any essentialization of a “Central American” and even “Salvadoran” identity, as the narratives that I found were oftentimes contested in complex layers. In meeting and being in conversation with artists and community members in the Bay Area, Houston, New York and other parts of the United States, I heard and learned from narratives of how different our experiences as a Diaspora have been, yet how similarly invisibilized and hyper-visualized we are in different lenses.

Grounded in these realities, I turned to the body of knowledge that I knew best: my family’s photography. This personal archive of photographs and other materials tell the stories of my family; my mother’s quinceñera, my sister’s bautizo, and my kindergarten graduation ceremony among these memories. However, it also holds moments that may seem mundane/unimportant; my abuelos sitting together on their porch, my mom’s primos playing soccer. These are the narratives that I knew of Central Americans, in stark contrast with those in the American imaginary. When considering the importance of personal family photography
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(particularly print photography) as a form of counter narrative through a transnational personal archive, Central-Americanness can be named in the tension between self, community, and societal understanding of the Diaspora. This is even further complicated by Queerness, oftentimes flattened through identarian politics, is a phenomena of orientation that has been both embodied and performed by Central Americans in ways that contest heteronormative ideas of gender and sexuality both in Central America and the US. Queerness is usually framed as a quality of beinghood that scrambles gender and sexuality. My framework for understanding queerness brings Viet writer and poet Ocean Vuong into conversation: “Being queer saved my life. Often we see queerness as deprivation. But when I look at my life, I saw that queerness demanded an alternative innovation from me. I had to make alternative routes; it made me curious; it made me ask, ‘Is this enough for me?’ ” (Vuong). Queerness is then understood as a framework through which we can understand the navigation of structural and cultural marginalization within Central America and the placed-based satellites of Diaspora across the country. By elevating my family’s photography as the central narrative, and approaching my analysis with these structures in mind, I can begin unpacking the ghosts and living realities of Central Americanness, and the possibilities in this tension in staking a claim to existence as Queer Central Americans in the 21st Century.

*Queer Central American Latinidad in Contestation*

Central Americans in the United States are situated within a broader, multivalent ethnoracial identity marker that we know as Latinx. Latinidad as a political project obscures the complexities of race in Latin America, where anti-Indigeneity and anti-Blackness (which are forms of racism and violence that are imposed by structural forces) are just as prevalent as in the United States. Latinx people are biologized with this flattening of race biopolitics and hierarchies
in Latin America: that of the Mestizx. In their work, Juliet Hooker highlights work of José
Vasconselos, the author and political thinker of *La Raza Cosmica*, a book that describes the
Mestizx person as a mixed race futurity, as part of a political framework of race with aims:

“(1) that Latin American identity has been defined by long-standing and widespread
practices of cultural and biological mixture; (2) that the principal result of a process of
mixing that began in the colonial era has been a national population that is homogeneous
in its mixed-ness, to the point that the various groups that contributed to the mixing
process (Spaniards, Indians, and Africans) disappeared as separate racio-cultural groups
per se; and (3) that as a result of a racial system that blurred the boundaries between races
and did not include legally encoded racial segregation, Latin America avoided the
problems with racial stratification and discrimination that plagued other countries,
particularly the United States” (Hooker, 156)
This work is rooted in a sentiment of Anti-US Imperialism, and was used by the
governments of many Latin American countries as a unifying force to resist US intervention by
homogenizing the population under a racial futurity that, as Hooker discusses, is still predicted
on racial hierarchies and biopolitics that are still rooted in coloniality. Countries in Central
America, namely the Northern Isthmus (El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala) participate in a
cultural and political project that centers Mestizaje as a unifying force. Coming to the United
States, the “Mestizx” is then further reified with the racialized US imaginary of what is
considered the “Latinx body.” Taking this into account, Latinidad can be critically defined as “A
fabricated geopolitical identity that contains the complexities of immigration, colonialism, legal
status, class, some nations, one language and erases Black and Indigenous experiences”
(Salazar). It is an identity marker that has been imposed on migrants and Diaspora members of
nation states south of the US-Mexico border, a form of othering that aims to racialize
communities and people through homogenization.

With this understanding, we can begin to contextualize the realities of sociocultural
perceptions of “Central Americanness”—that is, an essentialized understanding of Central
American food, culture, language, and people. In the neoliberal project of mass media
consumption, Central Americans are viewed first and foremost as part of the nearly 1 in 5 people that identified as Hispanic/Latino on the US 2020 census. This oftentimes means the evocation of being part of a “population boom” that is attributed to undocumented migration into the country, as well as higher rates of fertility, both part of a broader narrative/stereotype of the “Latino Threat” and “Latino Spin” that both posit Latinx communities as threats and only in their future value/worth through assimilation. When evoking Central American people in popular public discourse, two very common narratives include conversations of gang violence and undocumented migration (both of which are in line with Cornejo’s posit of an aesthetic of violence). Those who may be more familiar with Central American Diasporic communities may evoke other essentializing narratives; cultural markers such as Pupusas and Baleadas, food traditional to indigenous Nahuat Pipil and coastal Afro-Indigenous communities (respectively) are popular to Latinx and non-Latinx folk alike. Many would also cite the dialect of Spanish spoken across much of Central America known as Caliche, demonized as the dialect of campesinos (poor rural farmers). Yet, there is not a cohesive narrative defining Central Americans outside of violence/broader Latinidad within the American imaginary.

These layers are further complicated when considering the historical context by which Central American Diasporas came to be. Many Central American-Americans are experiencing the outcome of state-sponsored historical amnesia. In their work with cultural memory studies, Karina Alvarado describes historical amnesia in the context of when there is a period of extreme violence and conflict, and the nation state reconstructs or erases these narratives. In the Central American context, there is a loss of knowledge about personal histories from our elders caused by civil war and migrational trauma, and typically government/hegemonic forces engaging in violence to silence marginalized people. It is not often that my mother or grandmother are
willing to talk about their experiences in these instances of their lives. There is a disruption in the oral genealogy when these personal histories are not shared through storytelling because of harm. This culture of self-censorship and trauma, rooted in historical events of punishment that targeted marginalized people who spoke out, continues within the American nation state, and the dynamics of power evoked by structures of immigration and labor. Combined with popular media narratives that endorse imagery that centers violence, Central Americananness is structurally evoked in a way that removes power in the agency of communities affected. There is an invisibilization of situated perspectives that corners Diaspora members to the questions: what does it mean to be Central American-American then? How do we embody an identity that is produced for us through hegemonic narratives? How do we begin to contest a culture of trauma?

This is especially evident to Queer US-Central Americans. Already disposed to the marginalization of being ascribed to a category invisibilized within Latinidad and hypervisualized through violence, Central Americans also experience the villainization of embodied and performed Queerness. Central American cultural and social values are largely tied to the structural forces of patriarchy and homonormativity. Christian (namely Roman Catholic) beliefs and theology are powerful tools used by the nation state to enforce the social control of gender and sexuality. Many Queer and Trans Central Americans have no choice but to migrate, the alternatives being to perform gender and sexuality heteronormatively, or to die. These beliefs are perpetuated in families and communities in the diaspora as well, with many Queer US-Central Americans experiencing homophobia and transphobia. Queer Central Americans are also subject to many degrees of violence with the United States as ethno-racialized figures that embody subversions of gender and sexuality, and also ascribed to narratives created for Queer Latinx people. In their work *Queer Latinidad*, Juana Maria Rodriguez discusses the image of
deviance and shame that is painted in Latinx communities around Queerness and Transness. How many ancestors have been silenced in their Queer/Transness, in an environment where Queerness is not given the power to enact agency in popular narratives?

Photography, therefore, is not just about two duffel bags full of pictures. It is a mode of analysis by which we can take these social historical forces and contextualize them as part of a situated identity formation for Queer Central American-Americans. It is the reclamation of subjectivity that returns the power of narrative to a generation of Central Americans born and/or growing up in the United States in mixed-status and transnational families/networks. Through this project, I hope to engage my mother’s personal archive of our family as a form of counter-narrative, one that subverts popular media and US understanding of Central Americanness as inherently violent and “other.” By rendering my family’s photography through a Queer framework of interpretation, I am able to contextualize the ways in which my family has navigated gender and sexual normativity, and elevate that interpretation to move Queerness from the tacit to an explicit existential phenomena. My own photography stages Queer Central Americans, people in my community that I consider my chosen family, parallel but also in conversation with moments in my blood family’s lives that evoke an understanding of Queerness as inherent to my ancestry. I engage Jose Esteban Muñoz’s concept of disidentification, a framework of understanding that I use to destabilize popularized conceptions of Central Americans, and render queerness at the forefront of this mode of expression and archive. This project is not just about representation and the telling of “underrepresented” narratives, but rather about creating a space to understand and talk about my experiences as a Queer Central American, situated and contextualized by historical-structural forces that creates a tension that I explore in my work.
Understanding “Central American”

Understanding invisibility and hypervisuality means unpacking the layers of subjectivity that comprise “Central Americanness”. In this analysis, I follow Martiza Cardenas’ framework of Central American as an ethnoracial identity marker that is, under this context, a broadly defined diasporic positioning of fragmented, multidimensional histories of political, economic, and cultural identity and oppression. Cardenas explains further in their work Constituting Central American-Americans:

U.S. Central American identity is produced via the articulations of three textual spaces: the Central American national imaginary, the translocal landscape of the U.S. diaspora (particularly Los Angeles), and the, at times, “nonspace” that Central Americans occupy within Latinidad. I contend that these three discursive spaces have together produced a particular kind of U.S. Central American subjectivity, one that is connected to and yet simultaneously disconnected from the primary tropes that define these spaces. (Cardenas, 6)

The Central American imaginary refers to the common understanding of Central American diaspora members that there are similar effects of US imperialism on their communities, across many borders. Cornejo also makes it a point to emphasize the transnational scope of this identity and how Central Americans are commonly living economically, socially, and politically in two nation states. The “nonspace” refers to the positionality of abjection that Central Americans are placed in, particularly in comparison to Mexicanness. Inherently, defining Central Americanness will always be a flawed political project, as it asks us to consolidate narratives and positionalities that share these contexts. By giving name and power to the unmarkedness of Central Americanness within Latinidad, a form of strategic essentialism must be practiced that both acknowledges and complicates these geopolitical conceptions of nation and belonging. It is a gendered, racialized subjectivity that calls on what Cardenas describes as a “politic of dislocation” (that is, one where beinghood is marked in the ways that it is invisibilized) that many Central Americans in the United States experience daily.
Historical Background: A Culture of Trauma

To understand the nature of silence in Central-Americanness, one must understand the shared histories of the isthmus as a whole. Many would contextualize the year 1823 with the declaration of the Monroe Doctrine by the United States, which declared all of Latin America as “protectorates” of the United States, imposing American imperialist economic practices on the geographies of Central America. However, many US-Central American scholars such as Maritza Cardenas and Karina Alvarado foreground their work with 1823 as marking the beginning of the colonial independence of the Federal Republic of Central America, their following dissolution and eventual creation of 7 different nation states (Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama). This is where, according to Cardenas and Alvarado, Central Americanness as a political project traces its origins.

Contextualizing Central Americanness also means acknowledging that Central American nations have experienced imperialist pressures since their independence from Spain. In their work Salvadoran Transformations, Beth Baker-Cristales discusses the formation of a Salvadoran class and ethnic consciousness through the imperialist practices of the United States in the region as part of the global, extractive structure of multicultural neoliberalism, which serves as an extension of racial capitalism. One of the largest imperial projects of the twentieth century, according to Baker-Cristales and Alvarado, includes the construction and militarization of the Panama Canal. The United States actively supported the independence of the Isthmian nation from Colombia in order to further their own economic gains. A canal through the narrowest connection between North and South America meant the cooperation of the Colombian government in allowing US corporations to begin construction, which the Colombian government did not support. The United States both funded and supported Panama’s movement
for independence, and subsequently benefitted from their cooperation with building a canal. The other large imperial project was the injection of US corporations into the agriculture-based economies of Central America. There is a historic relationship of inequitable distribution of land to a handful of wealthy families (Tilley, 120). Campesinos (“peasant farm workers” in the words of archaeologist Virginia Tilley, many of whom were also indigenous) owned a much smaller share of that land, and were usually living and working on what their families lived on for generations. Much of this land was forcibly taken from campesinos, and handed over to American corporations, namely the United Fruit Company, to be converted for the purpose of growing coffee beans, bananas, and other products that would be shipped back to the United States and other Western imperial cores. As part of “the third world,” Central American countries today still produce coffee beans and various forms of factory work for products that then get shipped to the United States (Cardenas).

Because of the economic and political subjugation practiced by the United States and other Western powers in Central America, there was an increased level of essentialization that occurred culturally across the region, focusing on the proliferation of a hegemonic sociocultural narrative. El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras strengthened national identity through Mestizaje as a national project, which evoked racial mixing to the “cosmic” Ladino (or Mestizo). By creating this national narrative that was based in Vasconcelos' political ideology of being a stronger “people” through this racially mixed identity, there was a greater sense of security in identity. Some of these nation states furthered this political project by removing racial categories from the census (only recently reintroduced in El Salvador) and minimizing the number of Indigenous-identified people legally by using markers such as language or dress to police legal identification when census takers counted families (Baker-Cristales). Should you ask almost any
Salvadoran in the country today, they would answer their racialized identity to be Ladino, Mestizo, etc. By strengthening a dominant narrative about the nation state, which would include institutionalized mestizaje, that also meant that the nation state would have to respond to dissent, usually violently, and especially towards communities marginalized in this structure.

In the early twentieth century, Indigenous/Campesino led resistance movements began to form against wealthy landowners and American companies on their ancestral lands. One prominent example of these uprisings and subsequent systemic silencing of La Matanza in El Salvador. In January of 1932, an estimated 30,000 people were murdered by government forces (Baker-Cristales). La Matanza was a government organized response to a peasant uprising that was organized by the Salvadoran Communist Party, an outcome of months of strikes and demonstrations from the political turmoil that came from (a sham election of) President Maximiliano Martinez coming into power. Led by Abel Cuenca and Farabundo Martí, the uprising was an attempt to return land to the campesinos, and to redistribute this land and food to the poor. Martinez sent a quick and brutal military response not only to crush the uprising against him, but to create a form of legitimacy to the international community (Tilley). Because the international community condemned Martinez’s established authority through force, Martinez saw this as his chance to legitimize his dictatorship to a world that at the time was experiencing the first wave of a “Red Scare” (namely the United States). La Matanza largely affected indigenous communities, as traditional clothing and language was equated to communism. Mass burial sites to this day are still being unearthed, with the remains of women and children being prominent (Tilley, 68). By silencing largely indigenous communities to further the needs of the nation state, the government established dissent as synonymous to death and destruction. This is what Keney Cornejo terms as a “culture of trauma and silencing,” one where dissent is frowned
upon, making disagreement with the nation state a question of immediate physical safety for many. This is not out of the ordinary for the history of the region, as prominent voices such as Rigoberta Menchu, Maya K’iche spokesperson, have spoken out against similar violence occuring over a prolonged period of time in Guatemala against Indigenous people in works such as their biography.

We can see the perpetuation of a culture of silencing through traumatic violence by analyzing the states’ response to continued movements of resistance that were led by campesinos, progressive religious leaders, and Communist and Socialist influenced guerillas during the mid twentieth century. It was through this civil unrest between resistance movements and US-backed governments that led to various civil wars breaking out throughout the 70s and 80s. These civil wars killed millions of people, many of whom died at the hands of government torture, mass executions, and displacement (Tilley). One notable instance of US-backed government violence was El Mozote massacre, which led to the murder of hundreds of (mostly indigenous) people in communities across the Morazan department of the geographic region El Oriente (which is also a predominantly Afroindigenous region of El Salvador). Government sponsored forms of violence continue to further the needs of the nation state, perpetuating a culture of silence and self-censorship that results from speaking out. The wars led to the first and one of the largest waves of Central American migration to the United States as refugees.

It is key to understand this history as part of an ongoing relationship between the United States and Central America. Part of that ongoing relationship is the NAFTA agreement of the 90s, which completely destabilized the economic activity on the isthmus that was in repair after these wars (Zilberg). The agreement led to depreciated prices of farmwork and cash crops, meaning many no longer could live off the land as their ancestors had, and local economies were
no longer viable for people to live. Another mass migration of people to the United States occurred in the 90s and early 2000s, influenced largely by these economic forces. Central American migration, which was largely undocumented, led to the deaths of many people, and it a particularly traumatizing experience that many migrants prefer not to think or speak of, as evident by literature such as Oscar Martínez’s *The Beast*, which tells the stories of migrants that use dangerous transnational rail systems to cross. My mother was one of these migrants in the late 90s, coming to the United States at 18 with the expectation of helping support her entire family in El Salvador as part of a transnational economic network. Today, there is the continued destabilization of Central American economies with the proliferation of US economic imperialism such as the rise of Bitcoin in El Salvador, as well as the ever present reality of gang and police violence. This has particularly affected Queer/Trans people, women, and children (all of whom experience gender and sexuality based violence). Many migrants continue to flee the region today, the US imaginary following along with the sensationalized lens that we see evoked in the news and other forms of media (Alvarenga).

The United States has continuously involved itself in the economic and political issues of the isthmus. It has created an instability that has perpetuated a need for violence by US-backed nation state governments to maintain control over mostly indigenous rural campesinos, the institutionalization of mestizaje in their respective political projects to strengthen hegemonic narratives of race that erase Black and Indigenous Central American identity, the establishment of a culture of silencing due to the risk of this violence, and waves of migration that have created a Diaspora trying to understand and process these realities in the midst of historical amnesia and a culture of silence. The flattening of this narrative always leads to more violence.
Mestizaje and Being (In/Out)side of Mexicanness

It is important to emphasize that Latinidad is a US-created construction of racialized geographies and people. Latinx people are only Latinx as they are in relation to “Otherness” in the United States. Therefore, Latinidad is invoked with phenotypes and cultural ideologies that popularly center Mexican, Puerto Rican and Cuban narratives based on the geopolitical makeup and history of different parts of the United States. What may be considered as Latinx in the American Southwest will be very different from how it’s understood in the Northeast, but always oriented around these three national cultural projects for their varied colonial and imperial relationships with the US. Mexicanness is the predominant identity form that is circumscribed to Central Americans because of the centering of phenotypical mestizaje to those racialized as “Latinx.”

The Central American Diaspora in the United States is rendered invisible because of this conflation, Latinidad rendering Central America...
to abjection, because not being Mexican within Latinidad is inherently devoid of significance in the American imaginary. Therefore, it is in this context that we can see how Latinidad practices erasure towards the Central American Diaspora. Not only does it imply erasure of national cultural identity, but it also totalizes said geopolitical identities to Mestizaje, as Black and Indigenous Central Americans are still rendered illegible in the US imaginary of Central America. There is a dual-meaning to a circumscription and invisibilization to Mexicaness. The first is in which Central Americans are subject to the same discrimination and racial logics imposed on Mexicans. This reflects that oftentimes Central Americans will also feel the brunt of Latino Spin and Latino Threat narratives. The Latino Threat narrative, discussed by Leo Chavez, is the constructed idea that Mexicans in particular are going to reconquer the American Southwest, and viewing undocumented migration from Mexico (and by extension other geopolitical areas such as Central America) as “invading forces” of people ready to destabilize American society and culture because of their resistance to assimilation. Latino Spin narrative as discussed by Arlene Davila explains how Latinx people are fit into the American Imaginary of the future as an extension of Neoliberal Multiculturalism, one where Latinx people will assimilate to whiteness which is when they will finally be “valid citizens” and Americans.

The second meaning of invisibilization in Mexicaness is the strategic “adoption” of Mexicaness that can assure safety. “Passing” as Mexican, in other words, is adopted as a survival tactic. Central Americans face a large amount of prejudice from other Latinx communities, particularly Mexican/Mexican American communities. This prejudice begins in Central American migrants’ journeys across the Mexican nation state. It is very common for migrants to experience violence to many degrees, evoked because of perceived Central Americanness. A process of othering occurs with food, dialect, and skin color, oftentimes coded
as inherently different from hegemonic Mexicanness. Gendered violence is also common, and Queer migrants are oftentimes unsafe because of homo/transphobia. In the United States, these prejudices persist, with violence being common between Central American and other Latinx communities, oftentimes placed in close contact in growing ethnic enclaves in urban centers like New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and the DC-Metro Area. It is through this difference-making violence that led to the formation of MS-13 and other gangs that had originally aimed to protect communities from violence. Therefore, Mexican hegemony and “passing” are not just about food, flags and music, but rather part of the broader structure of Latinidad that erases Central Americaness, but still subscribes a Diaspora to the hypervisualities of violence, and continues the culture of trauma and silencing that occurs in the shadow of homogenization.

It is also crucial to acknowledge the structural erasure of Blackness in the framework of race in Central America. Oftentimes when people evoke “Central Americaness” they refer to Mestizx-identifying Central American subjectivity, oftentimes evoking what used to comprise The Kingdom of Guatemala (Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Costa Rica). As mentioned before, this is in part because of the history of Latinidad being imposed on Central Americaness through Mexicanness as the dominant lens, as well as the nation states themselves perpetuating racial myths of Mestizaje to bolster national identity. When Panama and Belize are evoked within Central Americaness, it is through a lens of anti-Blackness, as it is usually to refer to their Black populations since “the other five Central American countries to perpetuate the myth that African participation in mestizaje did not transpire within their own territorial limits” (Cardenas, 106). Blackness, therefore, has geographic boundaries in the Diasporic imaginary for many people. However, Black communities across Central America continue to push for recognition and the expansion of Central Americaness outside of Mestizx identity.
Garifuna communities in Guatemala and Honduras continue movements of resistance against nation states projects of anti-Blackness. Black communities in El Salvador continue to fight for political and social recognition in a country where the vast majority of people still identify the nation’s population within Mestizaje.

In these understandings of Latinidad as an ethnoracial marker, we can see the ways in which Latinidad as a panethnicity takes up many forms; there are the neoliberal notions that attempt to essentialize Latin American communities, nation state government projects that reify colonial racial caste systems, commodifying embodiments that focus on the parts of Latinidad that create economic gain. However, what makes Latinidad still relevant in the conversation of Central Americaanness is the ways in which it as a structure has formed communities of resistance. In their book *Hispanas de Queens*, Milagros Ricourt discusses Latinidad and Latinx panethnicity from the perspectives and experiences of working class Latina women living in Corona, Queens. Milagros discusses how:

“working-class Latin American women in Corona solved the everyday problems of finding housing, getting jobs, supplementing their incomes, and locating child care. Kinship and home-country ties were important when women first arrived from their homelands, but as they settled in Corona and turned to these practical concerns, their "informal informational networks" begin to broaden and cross Latino nationality lines. This convivencia diaria became the source of an emergent Latino panethnicity.” (Ricourt, 24)

In other words, while Latinidad has served as a violent project in many other contexts, it is important to acknowledge how this framework of identity has created opportunities for community as resistance to the material realities of the very project that structurally imposed the creation of said communities. Moving forward in the conversation, Latinidad is acknowledged in it’s multitudes and is taken into account when discussing Queer and Trans Central American subjectivity.
Queer-Trans Central American Subjectivity

Queer and Trans Central Americans experience invisibilization in their ethnoracialization, and are hypervisualized not only through a lens of violence, but in their Queer/Transness. Because of their positioning as colonial nation states that traffic in patriarchal heteronormativity, there is an inherent “Otherness” within Queerness and Transness that structurally invisibilizes and criminalizes marginalized positionalities in a Central American context. The biopolitic of gender and sexual performance is a strong component of Queer/Trans performativity both in Central American and in the diaspora. My family is from a very rural mountain village, where religiosity and cultural performances are one in the same. Every Christmas, for example, a play is performed by the same 6 families that describes the nativity, which has been occurring for over a century (according to my community elders). In their work, Anna Peterson discusses the ties of Catholicism and politics in the region. Central American nation states have strong ties to the Roman Catholic church because of colonial histories, and have used these institutions as weapons of the state (Peterson). September 15th, for example, is not only the independence day of most Central American nation states, but also El Dia del Salvador del Mundo (the Day of the Savior of the World), tying religious practice to nationalist practice of identity. While there was a practice of liberation theology (that was espoused by Monseñor Oscar Romero who was later assassinated for doing so) that advocated for the redistribution of resources to the campesino class and the end of the civil wars in the 80s, this sector of the catholic church experienced the same repression and violence that many guerilla fighters and resistance movements did historically. It is important to note that even in the sector of the church that advocated for a theology of liberation, Queer and Trans people were not included in that vision. The catholic church of El Salvador continues to espouse anti-LGBT
rhetoric and beliefs, and affect the opinions/perspectives of the government and mass media, that oftentimes translate to social and physical violence towards LGBT Central Americans. These social forces create conditions where many Queer Central Americans have to migrate in fear of losing their lives in their homelands, a journey which has even more dangerous implications as they usually cross through an equally homophobic and transphobic Mexican landscape.

This is not to say Queer and Trans people are subject to liberation by coming to the United States or migrating to other popular hubs of Queer migration, such as Mexico City. Within the United States, the neoliberal project of inclusion has incorporated Queerness as a weapon of assimilatory violence, meaning that oftentimes the only real difference is that Queer and Trans people are invited into the trap of representation that is created by neoliberal multiculturalism. That does not make the United States any better in this context. Queer Central Americans experience Tacit Subjectivity across borders, as conceptualized by Carlos Ulises Decena. Decena argues that conventional “coming out” in queer communities has real legitimacy in white, middle class queer communities and serves their needs best. However, for many Queer Latinx, one’s social and economic well being are closely tied to the understanding that while those around them may understand their performance of gender and sexuality as Queer, that it would never be brought up/talked about because that would mean no longer being complicit in the sustaining of these rigid notions of gender performativity. Decena expands on this in his work:

“In a neoliberal world that exalts the atomized and unmoored individual and in LGBTQ communities that celebrate self-making by clinging to the promise of coming out as the romance of individual liberation, tacit subjects may make us more aware that coming out is always partial, that the closet is a collaborative social formation, and that people negotiate it according to their specific social circumstances.” (Decena, 355)

Even within the neoliberal project of representation, Cardenas also argues that “symbolic gestures of ‘claiming’ space not only reify a view of sexuality that renders them abject within a
Central American national imaginary but also do little to alter the materiality of their everyday existence where, for many, public space continues to be a hostile space” (Cardenas, 100).

Connecting Decena’s framework of Tacitness with Ricourt’s understanding of Latinidad(es), it is then possible to read Central Americanness as part of a Queer dynamic. This seems contradictory to the rendering of Queer Central Americans as invisible within Central Americanness. However, understanding Central Americanness as part of a Queer dynamic asks for the engagement of understanding Queerness as not just an embodied, individualistic identity marker, but rather a phenomena. In their work *Queer Phenomenology*, Sarah Ahmed discusses understanding Queerness as “ways of inhabiting and being inhabited by space” (Ahmed, 67).

Sexual orientation as an embodied concept is a modern one, influenced by individualist identity politics of neoliberal multiculturalism. Ahmed visualizes this by describing it in terms of orientation—how one resides in space, which means sexuality is a matter of residence within a space. In their work, Ahmed discusses a spatiality of sexual desire, one that every person “orients” themselves with. This analysis posits the self to inhabit space and for space to inhabit a self, that one’s understanding of self affects the space that they inhabit and that they space they inhabit affects the understanding of self. Queerness as an orientation, therefore, occurs when falling outside of what is considered the “straight” or “right” path (heteronormativity). This is to explain the phenomena of different people experiencing different things in similar settings, because we inhabit space differently as gender and sexuality are constantly in concert with other forms of identity such as race and class. Therefore, by performing gender and sexuality outside of these normative understandings, one then embodies Queerness. Queerness is no longer reduced to a form of identity marker/differentation, but rather is understood as a non-normative habitation of space. Central Americans act and perform Latinidad non-normatively.
(Mexicanness), and therefore, can be caught up in this Queer, tacit dynamic. In other words, everyone knows Central Americans exist, but pretend that they don’t outside of the dynamics described.

We can easily marry this with the framework of intersectional identity presented by Kimberle Crenshaw, wherein it is impossible to separate race from class, gender, and sexuality. All of these positionalities work in conjunction to inform and create Queer Latinx identities and orientations across different geopolitical contexts. Queerness in the US-Central American context is predicated on social-historical forces of Catholicism that espouse anti-LGBT sentiment, and then translated into the creation of a culture of silencing Queerness and Transness, as well as the continued perpetuation of violence against Queer Central Americans. However, even after migration, Queer Central Americans experience tacit subjectivity and risk alienation in their communities for their gender and sexual orientations. There is a tension in Central American Queerness with double-meaning: invisibilization and hypervisualization. Central Americans are invisibilized in the United States as they are denied recognition and folded into Mexicanness by the American Imaginary, and hypervisualized through an aesthetic of violence that perpetuates stereotyping. Queerness as a non-normative orientation is invisibilized by heteronormative structures, while hypervisualized for gender and sexual “deviance.” It is in this tension that I want to situate my creative work with my family’s personal archive: by naming these invisibilizations and hypervisualizations, and applying this Queer analysis, as a way to highlight the realities of a Queer Central American identity based in these historical social realities.
Visualizing Queer Central Americanness

What does it mean to understand a Queer orientation then, in this tension? Queerness and Transness are hypervisualized because of the performance of gender and attraction that is oriented outside of heteronormativity. The beginning of understanding that tension can be named in the abjection of Central Americanness. Abjection refers to the intentional exclusion and derecognition of an identity or positionality for the sake of furthering other goals or means usually rooted in coloniality. In the case of Queerness in Central America, non-heternormative gender and sexual performance then is viewed as rupturing the national imaginary of these structures:

“Inconvenient bodies are those that were abjected in nation-building projects but continue to reappear, disrupting nationalist narratives by ‘never allowing the nation to be quite as it would like to imagine itself.’ If the nation likes to imagine itself as modern, Ochoa argues that queer racialized bodies, which are conflated with ‘the failure to be modern,’ interrupt this vision. Like ‘flies in the national ointment,’ inconvenient bodies trouble and rupture national imaginaries.” (Cardenas, 103)

When the abjected ethnoracial subject is not afforded a form of existence outside of violence, and Queer/Transness is hypervisualized to further the political and social projects tied to cultural values that stem from institutional/systemic homo/transphobia, a troubling reality emerges.

US Media and the Aesthetics of Violence

These histories have informed a very present reality that US Central Americans today contend with in popular imagery and narratives regarding the communities from the isthmus. This imagery endorses what is known as an aesthetic of violence, that is, the implicit association of violence and violent characters with Central Americanness (Sontag, Cornejo). These aesthetics of violence are perpetuated through two specific narratives already mentioned: Migration and Gang Violence. These two narratives, while scoped as issues that prescribe
Central American bodies as inherently dangerous, are interconnected with each other and the histories crafted in popular media.

To fully understand the aesthetics of violence, we must also complicate the narrative around gang affiliation and activity in Central American communities. One of the most publicized of these organized gangs is La Mara Salvatrucha (also known as MS-13). MS-13 began in the 80s in the midst of one of the largest waves of Central American migration during the period of civil wars, and had originally been organized as a form of protection against the xenophobic violence that Central American communities faced by Mexican and Mexican American communities in Los Angeles. It was also during the late 80s that public sentiment of wanting to reduce crime rates nationally (also known as “the war on crime”) led to mass deportation efforts against Central American gang members. These gang members would return to Central American countries, particularly El Salvador and Honduras, and began to recruit more members in the country at a time when the civil wars had recently ended and many people were still left with little to no resources and experienced police violence frequently. For many, maras offered a form of support that the nation state failed to serve. However, it was through these events that a transnational network began to form, and maras began to engage in other forms of criminalized activity. From the early 90s onwards, waves of sensationalized coverage of gang violence from MS-13 and other Central American gangs have permeated the national imaginary around Central Americans.
Left: Gang members in a Salvadoran prison (image provided by the Guardian) Right: A Caravan in southern Mexico (image provided by the Atlantic)

The second narrative regarding migration is one that as of recent has been particularly salient. News and media coverage for much of the 2010s has regarded the recent wave of migration, many of these refugees being women, children, and Queer/Trans Central Americans. The reasons behind Central American migration can be conceptualized in 3 big waves. Older migrants in the Diaspora may have immigrated during the wars in the 80s as the US accepted refugees from the region. A steady, second wave of migration occurred during the late 90s and early 00s at a time when economic opportunity was subjugated by imperial influence, leading to many people needing to come to the United States and form part of a transnational economy and network of people sending money (and photography) between two countries. The third large wave of Central American migration is continuously occurring, as thousands of migrants that are majorily Indigenous children and Queer/Trans people and women continue to travel in large groups that have popularly become known as “caravans.” These caravans experience extreme violence crossing Mexico, because of anti-Indigenous and Anti-Blackness that is ascribed onto Central Americans, violence out of fear of possible gang affiliation, gendered violence against women, and Homo/Transphobia being prevalent in violent encounters with local communities these caravans have to pass through.
This compounds with the broader understanding of Central Americans as constituting part of the “Latino Threat” narrative as discussed by Leo R. Chavez. Chavez discusses that in the overarching historical narrative around Mexican migration in particular, “specific themes of threat emerge, become elaborated, and are often repeated until they attain the ring of truth” (Chavez, 23). Mexican migrants have historically been prescribed to the narrative of illegality, failure/unwillingness to assimilate, and other stereotypes that are discussed and reinforced in popular media. This relates to Central American communities in that the Latino Threat is also a gendered, racialized subject, and phenotypically would be understood as “Latino” (in other words, Mestizo/Ladino). Through the American Imaginary, racialized ideas of Central America as a “Mestizo” region devoid of Indigeneity and Blackness positions Central Americans as being within Mexicanness, associating both the violence within “Latino Threat” narrative to Central American bodies as well as logicizing violence done unto them as well.

US media consistently frames Central American migration from this lens of violence, which is part of a broader history of photojournalism and photography that Susan Sontag discusses in her work “On Photography” (1977). In this work, Sontag discusses how photography and journalism in times of conflict and violence from “the western gaze” are acts of voyeurism that traffic in looking/understanding violence as both forms of self-absorption and self-absolving in the US imaginary. We can see this in historical coverage of the Central American civil wars in the 80s in US media, which popularized images such as Molotov Cocktail Image by Susan Meiselas that portray Central American bodies in times of conflict. We see this today also in coverage of violence and war in other areas that are considered part of the global south, such as Southwest Asia and Northern Africa.
With these histories of migration and gang violence in mind, we can then understand popular imagery and understandings of Central Americans to be essentialized to an ascription of violence that perpetuates ideas of the “Latino Threat”—that is, a Mestizo, transnational figure which is inherently violent because they are of an ethnoracial population (Chavez). Illegality and narratives of violence are further perpetuated/amplified by instances of transnational migration and gang violence as sensationalized by US media about Central Americans. These images and media coverage of Central Americans traffics in logics of conflict voyeurism that creates a cycle of media that views Central American subjectivity as part an ascribed narrative of violence onto Latinx bodies, one in which the abjection of Central Americanness in the American imaginary leaves little room for any other way of understanding the Diaspora. It is crucial to remind ourselves that these forms of hypervisuality are problematic in that they limit Central Americanness to stereotypes—that is, the attribution of structural forces on peoples’ lives as individual decisions. Central Americans don’t actively choose to leave their homelands, and do
not actively choose to engage in gang activity if it were not for the aforementioned historical structural forces.

*State Control Through Visualities*

It is important to not only contextualize the culture of visualities that Central Americans have experienced in the United States, but also the historical realities of visualities in Central American nation states as part of a broader culture of silencing and trauma. We can begin to unpack this visual culture by talking about two notable instances of violence and genocide in Salvadoran history: La Matanza of 1932 and El Mozote Masacre of 1981. La Matanza was a rebellion that was led by Indigenous Pipil campesinos and members of the Community Party of El Salvador against the Salvadoran military, and led to the killing of between 10,000 and 40,000 people, many of whom were not soldiers, but rather those that were described to be in allyship with communism, which were people who spoke indigenous languages or wore clothing described as “tipico” (to describe indigeneity). The El Mozote Massacre of 1981 happened during the civil war of El Salvador and led to the death of over 800 civilians with no proof of their involvement in the war. This was another instance in which campesinos were criminalized and targeted as part of a broader communist/left-wing movement. In both of these instances, and in many other instances of the war, bodies were oftentimes left out in public areas for people to see, dismantled and defiled. This was done as a form of psychological warfare, a warning to those who dare to speak out and support left-wing guerilla fighters and dissent with the government as a whole. With this as part of the visual landscape and experience of many Central Americans, we can see how a culture around silencing dissent and trauma is evoked in visual language. This silence is then translated to other forms of dissent, such as dissent from heteronormative performances of gender and attraction. By creating a culture of silence and
trauma through images of violence in the everyday that is then spread through mass government-sponsored media, Central American nation states were able to create a mode of social control.

The criminalization of the campesino body through visual markers of criminality that were extrapolated to indigenous clothing or language is part of a longer continuous legacy that is embodied today through the marero, according to Cornejo. The Marero as understood by popular media and the American imaginary is in reference to a gang member, oftentimes portrayed as a Mestizo man with many tattoos, in large groups, baggy pants, and the demeanor of a machista man (that is, a man invested in the performance of hypermasculinity). In El Salvador and other Central American countries, it has become commonplace for large sweeps by the police state to include innocent young men, perceived to be threats/mareros by an authoritative institution that criminalizes youth. Kency Cornejo discusses this subjectivity, in that “the region’s aesthetics of violence have also morphed in its appearance with this new criminal face, but remains fixed in a logic of coloniality that uses visual tactics to deem certain bodies criminal, disposable, less than human” (Cornejo, 66). It is very common in Salvadoran newspapers such as El Faro and El Diario to see whole pages blocked off to talk about recent arrests and busts. By doing so, the police state participates in the visual landscape to create a sense of anxiety that translates to the culture of fear and the silencing of dissent in the face of the nation state through the criminal image of the dissenter (in all of its current and historic forms).

**Artistic Approach and Framework**

One then questions whether Queer/Transness as orientations can be understood outside of gendered subjectivities of violence ascribed to Central Americans, both by the US imaginary as
well as through the visual culture of violence created to perpetuate a fear and silencing. It asks of those with political, social, and cultural stake in the rendering of Queer Central Amerianness to understand the self outside of these subjectivities situated in coloniality. When understanding Queer Central American visualities, there must be a consideration for both the cultural silencing of dissent from the nation state project, as well as the silencing that occurs within Central American communities around Queerness and Transness. When you google search archives of Salvadoran newspapers and media, there is very little coverage of LGBT+ issues, and the coverage that does exist usually espouses rhetoric of the Roman Catholic Church. Therefore, in Central America Queer people experience cultural and institutional silencing by limiting what is talked about in popular media, and then further invisibilization from the underdetermined, tacit understanding of Central Americanness in an imaginary of violence.

Being Queer Central American, when contextualized with these understandings of colonial histories and an imaginary of violence that affects the Diaspora transnationally, there is an understanding of how the overarching structures interconnect to form the dominant narrative. We begin to see the ways in which power is removed from the community’s narrative, and used to further harm against it. In my work, I am aiming to engage this idea of narrative and through which lenses/orientations we can understand it. With a Queer analysis, I find that there exists an expression of identity in a double-meaning of invisibilization and hypervisualization, rendering itself visible through a strategic essentialism that I evoke to draw a voice in that conversation. I question the space of Queer Central Amerianness and what constitutes a generationally informed understanding of self through personal archival work. I make Queerness an explicit part of my ephemeral genealogy by engaging in photography as a mode of analysis for these social-historical forces that speaks to Queerness and Transness as not just embodied forms of
identity, but rather orientations that can help recontextualize my family’s personal archive. I hope to be part of a broader dialogue with artists also attempting to claim a stake and disidentification with and through Queer Central Americanness.

*Disrupting The Narrative With Queerness*

Disrupting the hegemonic understanding of Queer Central Americans within abjection is inherently constructing a counter narrative. A counter narrative is broadly defined into one that subverts or opposes another narrative, that opposing narrative being the dominant/hegemonic one. In narrative there is agency and perspective. However, when discussing the experiences of marginalized people, the dominant narrative is one that ascribes violence. In their defining of counternarrative, Molly Andrews posits that “When, for whatever reason, our own experiences do not match the master narratives with which we are familiar, or we come to question the foundations of those dominant tales, we are confronted with a challenge” (Andrews, 1), that challenge being how one decides to shape their lives around (or even within) those dominant stories. It is important to note that counter narratives have oftentimes been used in furthering the neoliberal project of inclusion and representation in order to benefit the needs of the nation state in late stage racial capitalism. If I am not careful for example, this project could easily become an example of it. However, agency can still exist in the narrative with an intentionality of dismantling rather than reifying coloniality. The question must be asked, then: when a platform is given to Queer Central Americans to do this work, how do we decide to understand ourselves and our communities and actively form collective and individual counter narratives?
I think back a lot to this image of my great grandmother, the mother of my mother’s mother. It shows her with her granddaughter (my mother’s cousin), happy to be with a loved one in front of a typical suburban home in the capital state of San Salvador, her original home before she had moved to the rural mountains with my great-grandfather. Based on the oral tradition of storytelling that my mother and her mother have shared, she was the first campesina woman in the canton to have started wearing pants, at a time in which a culture closely tied to religiosity dictated that women should wear skirts or fajas. According to the oral retelling of my mother, my great grandmother was influenced by the women in the capital who wore pants as part of the everyday work force and were influenced by American styles of fashion of the times. This is where the application of Queerness as a framework of analysis becomes key in developing the counter narrative. A queer rendering of this photograph, an act of gender non-comformity in Central Americanness’ orientation of gender performance, allows the viewer to understand this as an act of resistance to rigid campesino social structures that preclude women from wearing
pants normally. Ahmed discusses this in their framework of Queer Phenomena in the context of compulsory heterosexuality as a material reality within sexual and gender orientation:

“Compulsory heterosexuality shapes what bodies can do. Bodies take the shape of norms that are repeated over time and with force. Through repeating some gestures and not others, or through being orientated in some directions and not others, bodies become contorted: they get twisted into shapes that enable some action only insofar as they restrict the capacity for other kinds of action.” (Ahmed, 91)

With this understanding, the viewer can acknowledge the normativities that my great grandmother was navigating at the time. To wear pants put her at risk of violence in her every day environment because of her performed Queerness. In this way, I am able to personally connect with her as an ancestor who has performed Queerness as an act of resistance to gender normativity. By doing so, I begin to move Queerness from the tacit into the explicit in my analysis of my family’s photography.

In understanding queerness as the refusal to conform to heteronormative patriarchy and it’s notions of womanhood, usually seen as deviant because of it, I connect my great grandmother to a Queer lineage that is too often precluded from even the personal archives. In the reframing of her narrative through photography I engage Disidentification, posited by Jose Esteban Muñoz as “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continually elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (Muñoz, 4). That is, an object/subject that is so charged with meaning is then reformed to be understood from the intersectional lens of being that occurs at the space of Queer Central Americaness. I view my family photography as a counter narrative that engages these concepts, as it is photographs like these that show a story which acknowledges the history of a campesino family that experienced a civil war, but continued to live and exist during and after it as well.
I also use disidentification in accompliceship with Queerness as a phenomena to de-exceptionalize Queerness as something that must be embodied explicitly through identarian politics. By acknowledging the performed ways in which ancestors like my great grandmother navigated normativity, I refuse the erasure of my family’s Queerness in the personal archive. Through this framework I am also able to refuse the temptation of representation politics that flatten the issues of Queerness, which Ahmed also discusses in *Represent and Destroy* as an essentialized, commodified, individualistic embodiment and understanding of self. Muñoz describes the utopian nature of Disidentification, stating “Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even risk utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld” (Muñoz, 25). While these forces have left untold queer ancestral stories shrouded because of colonial forces that paint Queerness as an orientation for Central Americans as deviant, violent, and dispensable, I want to give light to these performances of gender and sexuality in my own family archive.

Part of this project is to return the power of that archival space to Queer Central Americans in forming narratives for ourselves through photography as a modality through which we navigate these historical structural dynamics. Forming an identity that is both informed by yet moves to expand from the boundaries of coloniality is a tension that can only be worked through using a framework of Queer phenomena and disidentification. Disidentification is a centering point in making Queerness an explicit component of my family’s personal archive as:

“Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message’s universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a
disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture” (Muñoz, 31)

By taking photos of Queer Central Americans with the same disposable cameras that my family (and many other transnational families) have used to record and memorialize parts of our history, I used Disidentification as an organizing concept to recontextualize photography as a mode of analysis for Queerness and Transness in a world that has rendered them only in sites of violence.

Engaging in this practice of photography that helped facilitate transnational connections as the medium by which families exchanged important and personal memories (such as quinceañeras or portraits), I am asking that we not only acknowledge Queer Central Americans outside of the narratives of violence and trauma that are oftentimes the only ones afforded to us, but also to begin thinking about Queerness as an orientation that is already embodied in certain forms by the archive. In their work, visual analyst and scholar Ann Cvetkovich discusses what is at stake in work like mine, as “the materiality of the object makes more immaterial relationships and cultures tangible or visible (what I have called sensationalism in Mixed Feelings), including feminist and queer ones that are often socially marginalized” (Cvetkovich, 279). Cvetkovich’s work around the ephemeral quality of photography as a form of preservation for Queer memory and identity grounds my work as a way by which I attempt to make Queerness an explicit component of my family’s genealogy. By using similar poses form family photographs, and performing Queer/Transness in non-heteronormative orientations that are villainized in different Central American and US contexts, I consider this performance of identity through this intergenerational reality.
This work is in conversation with art and artists from the isthmus that have been questioning and engaging Central American and Queer positionalities with these histories and realities in mind. One artist that had a particularly important influence in how I understood and balanced the material cultures of Central American Diaspora with meaning-making in this culture of silence is Oscar Diaz. Diaz situates himself in a generation of increased visibility for
Central Americans. He understands the voyeuristic glances into the lives and histories of transnational Central American families and communities, and in response focuses on the material culture of domestic settings in Salvadoran Diasporic homes. One particular piece is *Happy El Salvador* (2015). This art installation consists of an orange wall (in reference to the style that homes in El Salvador are painted in), videos of Salvadorans performing *Happy* by Pharell Williams (to center Central American joy), family birthday photos (in acknowledgment of transnational families and moments of joy), and a biblical wall hanging (to discuss religiosity and family mourning practices). In an interview about this piece, Diaz stated that:

“I have a lot of other people who misread my work as ‘elevating’ these objects and framing it about mixing ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ and I definitely am opposed to that binary. My foremost concern is preservation. Coming from a refugee family and having U.S. trained forces scorch earth my dad’s village and losing everything has made us develop this anxiety with empty homes. I think also it’s abstract and it’s a preservation of emotions, of screams, of isolated resistance, of bittersweet interactions with these objects.” (Diaz)

My work is in conversation with this artist in the sense that we are both contending with the material culture of a transnational family and community. During the era of kodak disposable cameras, photography like this, which took weeks or sometimes months to reach you, was one of the few connections Diaspora had to the visualities of one's family and homeland. I also resonate with Diaz’s attitudes towards not seeing this work as one that attempts to create “high art” for the consumption of others, but rather as a form of preservation for a narrative that has been invisibilized.
I also put my work in conversation with the artistic approach and methodology of photographer Coyote Park. Coyote Park is a 2Spirit Trans photographer and artist with Korean, German, and Yurok Native ancestry. Born and raised in Honolulu, Hawai‘i, Park’s photoseries entitled *All Kin is Blood Kin* (an ongoing project since 2020) aims to center themes of chosen family, rebirth, and intimacy. Park in their photography explores the Trans identity of Indigenous Queer people of color, and the nonheteronormative biopolitic of transness and intimacy. Park’s goal is to disrupt the archive’s notions of Queerness and Transness by using Queer Ephemera (i.e. photography) to record the trans body outside of the visualities of deviance and sexual objectification/desire.

Coyote Park’s work is very much tied to the work that I am doing. Park has described this genre of photography as “Queer World Building,” that is, creating worlds by and for Trans and
Queer people of color. What is particularly influential about Park in my work, however, is their methodology and approach to photography itself as a reciprocal relationship of care. Park in talks and interviews discusses the relationship that many people of color have with photography. A genre that has historically centered the white, cisgendered heterosexual man as the photographer, there is a difference between “taking a photo” and “making a photo.” Park highlights how settler colonial ideas of ownership have created this relationship with photography wherein the subject has no agency in the production of a photograph. Park, however, employs the strategy of thinking about photography as a form of community care and shared memory. In their photography they work with their subjects (oftentimes part of their chosen family) to produce images in a collaborative setting that centers the subject as a person and not an object. I center this approach in my own work, and ask the subjects present in my photography to lean into the creative direction of the photography to express and explore their own Queerness and/or Transness.
Exhibition Plan

Initial layout of family photos on a table in the exhibition space, with a linoleum and plastic covering that mimics the Central American family dining table.

My exhibition will be an installation of photography from my mother’s familial personal archive that has been kept in the aforementioned duffel bag, as well as photography that I have co-created with members of my chosen family within the Queer Central American community. The photographs shown in the exhibition are all intentionally chosen as part of a transnational, intergenerational narrative that explains my family’s journey in Central America and in the United States through a Queer orientation. It is an acknowledgement of the material realities and counter narrative to social historical forces that have influenced my understanding of Central American Diaspora, connected to the acknowledgment of the narrative that I have constructed as a direct continuation of my ephemeral genealogy.
One practice that my family engages in keeping this photographic archive is the annotation/captions on the back of most of these photographs. This speaks to the necessity of these photographs in the time that they were taken. In the late 90s and early 2000s, much of the ways in which my family has kept in touch is through this captioning of photography, where snippets of life in both countries were offered through snapshots of moments that were often candid, sometimes staged. Explanations of these images are often included in the back, scrawled in pen by the family members sending them. As part of the exhibition, I let the photographs (literally) speak for themselves by integrating a wall with images such as the example offered above, the images blown up and the text offered in both english and spanish. My family builds their narrative through these captions, as they actively record their lives from their perspectives.
In my own photographic process and choices, I am also choosing to highlight/isolate specific photographs for re-performance/creation. The first of these images is that of my Tia Norma on stolen Tongva land, also known as Carson, a neighborhood in Los Angeles (where she has lived for over 30 years). This portrait of my Tia reflects a demeanor of strength and style that is oftentimes shunned in my family, wearing pants and embodying strength in what could be termed “masculine” posing, as this kind of photo is usually practiced by men. My Tia performs a Queerness that orients her as someone who defies those notions of gendered photography, and chooses to perform masculinity. The image to the right is a co-recreation/performance of the image. Lidia (24, they/them) stands with the same stoic stance and demeanor of my Tia, embodying an energy that demands respect and acknowledgement, in a color scheme and setting/car that they chose. This image, taken on stolen Muwekma-Ohlone land (Stanford campus), reflects a moment in time for a Queer Central American in their early 20s. Lidia as a
non-binary person performs masculinity and femininity in their subjectivity, making Queerness an explicit and centering point in this image.

*Left Image: My mother at the age of 12 dressed as the Virgin Mary holding baby Christ for the annual Nativity play in my village on Nahua-Pipil Land (El Paredon, El Salvador). Right Image: Becca posing with a commemorative photo of Saint Oscar Romero at Lake Lag on Stolen Muwekma Ohlone Land (Stanford campus)*

The second image that I co-recreated/performed is that of my mother as a child dressed as the virgin mary for the Nativity play that is thrown every christmas. This Nativity play is particularly important to my family and community in El Paredon, my family’s village. According to the elders in my community, the same 6 families have been performing this play intergenerationally for over 100 years. My cousins in El Salvador today play the role of performing the nativity play every year. I want to highlight through the use of this image just how intertwined culture and religiosity is in my village, and in the culture of many campesinos across the country. It highlights an understanding of Central Americaniness that can only be understood by engaging with Central American subjectivity outside of the sites of violence of the US imaginary. I put this image in dialogue with that of Becca (19, any/all). Becca in this image wears a white dress akin to the costume of my mother, and stands in the field that comprises
Lake Lag on campus. They hold an image of Saint Oscar Romero, the bishop who had advocated for the end of violence against poor, rural campesinos at the hands of the US-backed and trained Salvadoran government military. Centering Oscar Romero, who held a dissenting opinion within the Catholic Church and the country at the time (as being against the government was conflated with involvement with the guerillas/communism), we highlight histories of resistance that are part of this broader counter narrative. We also recontextualize the meaning of the Virgin Mary and claim a Queer reading of religiosity by centering a Queer Central American in this setting/performance of wearing a white dress outside of normative contexts. We recontextualize the relationship between religiosity and a culture of silence that invisibilizes Queerness.

Right Image: “Aqui todas despeinadas porque el carro ba en marcha // bamos a Ilobasco” (translated: “Here with our hair blowing all over the place because the car is moving // going to Ilobasco”) Left Image: Lidia and Becca, posed in the back of Clifford (my truck) on stolen Muwekma Ohlone Land (Stanford campus)

The last image I chose shows my grandmother and aunts in the back of a moving truck, an image that was annotated on the back with “Aqui todas despeinadas porque el carro ba en
marcha // bamos a Ilobasco [translated: ‘Here with our hair blowing all over the place because the car is moving // going to Ilobasco’].” It shows my grandmother and 3 of my mother’s cousins in the back of my grandfather’s truck. I want to note the looseness of the use of term “cousin” in my family’s community. While in a normative US context the term cousin would be used to describe the adjacency of direct blood lineage, in my family’s village the term is used as a way to describe communal kinship. El Paredon is situated in the mountains, and as a small community that has been around for over 100 years, anyone within your age group/generation can be your “cousin.” I reflect a lot on the connected nature this has with the Queered concept of chosen family. Chosen family is particularly important in Queer communities and spaces, and is oftentimes the only form of solace for a lot of Queer and Trans folks. In the image that we co-produced, Becca and Lidia sit in the back of Clifford (my truck) as our friend Miza drives down winding roads. They hold hands, Lidia holding a stoic gaze similar to that of their other picture, and Becca smiling as the sun smiles back on their face. Both of these people are part of a Queer Central American community at Stanford that in our context feels intergenerational, as Lidia is the oldest Queer Central American undergraduate on campus, and Becca is one of the youngest. This image is a celebration of both of these people, as they are part of my chosen family and are now in direct conversation with my family’s photography.

What does it mean to disidentify and resituate your family’s performances of identity within the intervention of Queerness? By applying photography as a mode of analysis to answering these questions, I hope to allow the images to speak for themselves, and to evoke a sense of melancholia with the use of kodak single-use cameras in capturing these images, as well as to engage with the possibilities of Queer Central Americaness in our current understanding of it. I attempt to engage different points of tension that I have found in my personal experience;
gender performance, culture and religiosity, and the idea of who is family. My photography takes into account the social and historical forces that have brought me to where I (and in very similar ways many other Queer Central Americans) situate myself in my identity. It is my response and contribution to the counter narrative that Central Americans are building continuously. These images in their physical form as kodak pictures will be added to my mother’s duffel bag, the family archive, where they will not only become part of my family’s ephemeral genealogy, but also move Queerness to the forefront of the archive in conversation with these contexts in mind.

Another component I include is a monitor on the ground with a video loop; the first scene is of water rushing over the rocks in the river that my family has lived next to for generations, the second is me opening the archive itself (the duffel bag, which will be present in the exhibition as a physical representation of what familial archival work looks like), and the third being waves crashing over sand in the most recent destination of my family’s narrative, stolen Lenape land, also known as Rockaway, Queens (where I grew up). This video that cycles through 3 imperative moments in my personal geospatial context is a conversation between these geographies that
have been captured by my family’s archive. In many ways, that transnational journey that my genealogy has experienced mimics the nature of the river in El Paredon. My mother has shared that the elders have told stories of how the river was formed by a giant snake that was attempting to reach the Pacific Ocean from the mountains, which explains the winding nature of the river itself. The snake goes from river to sea, much like my family’s journey to New York. This video loop serves to offer context and bring another layer of my experience to the exhibition.

Part of my exhibition will also include the incorporation of a physical copy of this written thesis to engage the production of knowledge that was putting the exhibition together. This thesis is now part of my family’s ephemeral genealogy, as it builds on the labor of the counter narrative that my family has created with our personal family archives. Part of the exhibition is also a booklet with blown up versions of all the photography on exhibition. This is in order to protect the physical photography and to respect/preserve a level of the intimacy that is putting my family’s genealogy on exhibition. In the way that it is a privilege to be able to elevate my family’s personal archive as part of the broader conversation of building a counter narrative with a Queer framework of analysis, it is also part of that privilege to consider what I want to show and how to do so in a manner respectful to my family’s struggles and realities.

**Conclusion: Queer Intervention**

Being a Queer Central American, and learning to “embody” that positionality is not a simple, linear form of understanding identity formation and expression. Central Americaness is already a subjectivity laden with invisibilized understanding of self, one that is centered in the American imaginary as part of a lexicon of violence that is perpetuated by popular media in the US. This is dubiously compounded with a culture of fear through trauma and silencing using violence as a tool of the nation state to enforce social control, which includes their investments in
patriarchal heteronormativity. The visual culture of Latinx and Central Americaness in the US and Central America alike evoke these notions of otherness that can make it hard for Queer Central Americans to understand their subjectivity outside of. It was through this photographic exhibition that I crafted a way to analyze the effects of these social historical forces on my identity formation.

I cannot answer every question through my work. Through this project, I am participating in forms of strategic essentialism that aim to understand Queer Central Americaness through a specific generational context. I situate my family’s personal archive within the broader histories of Central America and ask us to view it as a form of counternarrative that subvert popular narratives of our communities. I ask the viewer to rupture their heteronormative understandings of my family’s personal archive, and to understand Queerness not just as an embodied subjectivity, but as an existential phenomena that allows us to render these family photographs from a perspective that can acknowledge their non-normativity and connect them to a broader struggle against the cis-heteropatriarchy. I engage forms of disidentification that allow me to understand my family’s context in conversation with ideas and understandings that they may never engage with because of this culture of silencing that has rendered Queerness illegible outside of its’ deviant nature inherent to the patriarchal imaginary of the nation state project. I open the conversation by recreating this photography to envoke Queerness as something that can be rendered legible by my ancestors, and to begin the conversation around Queerness in a space and culture that does not have that conversation often. I give space to Queer Central Americans that are understanding themselves in the context of Latinidad in the United States today, a growing understanding of Central American Diaspora, and the unapologetic Queerness and evocation of gender and sexual performance that is inherent to all our family’s genealogies.
For a very long time, I did not think it was possible to see Queerness in my lineage, and because of that I could not be included in said lineage. It can be really isolating when Queerness feels so lonely. However, through this project I have learned that Queerness exists everywhere, and has always existed as such. To be Queer is to subvert normativity, to exist in an alternative understanding that can produce love, joy, and care. Including the photography of my chosen family into my family’s personal archive has allowed me to begin a conversation with my family in an intergenerational context, one in which I call my ancestors into as a practice of love and care for that genealogy, to acknowledge their struggles and connect them to my own. My hope is that this project completes the same objective for, or at least creates space for the beginnings of, other Queer Central Americans trying to understand themselves within tension.


