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### Finding Safe Haven: Church-Centered Communities and Cultural Persistence Among Central American Migrants in Los Angeles

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Finding Safe Haven: Church-  
Centered Communities and  
Cultural Persistence Among  
Central American Migrants in  
Los Angeles

Swarthmore College Department of Sociology and Anthropology  
Undergraduate Senior Thesis Advised by Professor Edlin Veras



# Si me deportan...

te aseguro yo te llevo,  
en el alma de mi guitarra,  
te aseguro yo te quiero,  
como quiero a mi guitarra.

...

Por eso quiero cantar,  
por eso quiero reír,  
por eso quiero llorar,  
soy ilegal.

—Lilo González y los de la Mt. Pleasant, Amor Sin Papeles

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# Introduction

Framing Central American Migrant Communities in the  
United States





# Positionality

As the son of two Guatemalan migrants, I have experienced the centrality of the church in the lives of my parents. Growing up in this space, I have witnessed how folks congregate and support one another during times of need. Having left my home to come to Swarthmore, my appreciation for this community and the people within it has grown—inspiring me to undertake this research project and share what I have learned.



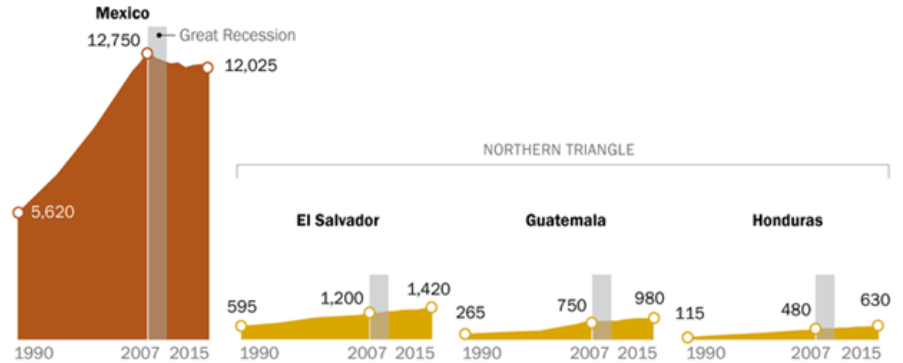
# Number Game: Precedent

In recent decades, Central American populations have grown considerably in the United States, emphasizing the increased importance of studying this group—considering the difficulties they face here.

- An estimated 2.5 million hispanics of Salvadoran origin resided in the United States as of 2021.
- The number of immigrants in the U.S. from the Northern Triangle rose by 25% from 2007 to 2015.

## Since recession, U.S. immigrant populations from Northern Triangle rise as number from Mexico declines

*In thousands*



Note: All numbers rounded independently are not adjusted to sum to the U.S. total. See methodology for details. The Great Recession began in December 2007 and ended in June 2009, according to the National Bureau of Economic Research.

Source: Pew Research Center estimates based on adjusted 1990 census, augmented 1995 and 2000 Current Population Survey and augmented 2005-2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS).

"Rise in U.S. immigrants From El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras Outpaces Growth From Elsewhere"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

# Contemporary Otherization of Central American Migrants

## 1 Trump Suspending TPS

In January of 2018, the Trump administration moved to terminate protections that had allowed over 200,000 migrants from El Salvador who have been living in the United States since 2001 to remain in the country by calling for the elimination of the Temporary Protected Status exemption.

## 2 President Biden

Since May of 2023, Biden officials have deported or returned roughly 500,000 people to Mexico and other countries yearly, exceeding Trump's totals, which averaged roughly 500,000 annually. Further, Biden's use of the term "illegal" to describe undocumented migrants contributed to the alienation of migrant communities.



# Literary Framework

## Harald Bauder

The concept of “illegality” is heavily debated by legal and refugee scholars who posit that the terminology influences material outcomes that surpass semantics, such as legal decisions, policies, and legislation that affect migrant communities. (Bauder 2014)

## Cecilia Menjivar

Describes the liminally legal state that many Central American migrants are forced into by complex and oppressive systems of documentation and how this state negatively affects their livelihoods. Furthermore, Menjivar elaborates on the role of the church as a source of support and community. (Menjivar 2006)

## Cadge and Ecklund

The role of the church in migrant communities can be to act either as a vehicle for assimilation to American culture or as a buffer against it. (Cadge and Ecklund 2006)

# Historical Background and Sanctuary

## 1 Churches as Physical Sanctuaries

The Sanctuary Movement of the 1980s was a combined front between religious institutions and social activist networks who fought to provide refuge for Guatemalan and Salvadoran migrants fleeing deportation and life threatening violence in their home.

## 2 Temporary Protected Status (TPS)

The movement eventually helped strongarm the government into granting legal asylum for refugees of the conflicts in El Salvador and Guatemala as, in 1990, the House and Senate approved a bill granting temporary protected status (TPS) to Central Americans fleeing violence in their home countries.

## 3 Spaces used as strongholds for communities

The establishment of additional extra-religious mutual aid centers, such as CARECEN in 1974, has further enriched the support network available to Central American migrants.

# Methodology

## Informal Interview Construction:

Developed a list of questions to ask during my semistructured, meetings with fellow community members and aimed to capture their emotions in response to operations of resource sharing and mutual support.

## Snowballing Method:

Snowballing method: Asking participants for references to other members of their community who they thought would be willing to share their time and thoughts with me.

# Descriptive Stats

## Age

42-55

## Gender

Five women, one man

## Race & Ethnicity

Latina/o, Guatemalteca/o,  
Centroamericana/o.

## Documentation Struggles

Five of six of my participants have achieved full citizenship or have achieved residency status. Every single one has experienced illegalization during their time in the U.S., and every person has undocumented family members.

## Connections to Community

Iglesia Centro-Americana, Guatemalan Community in Lawndale California.

# Research Questions

- 1 What are the challenges faced by Central American migrants, and how do they navigate issues of documentation status and cultural preservation?
- 2 How do the emotional experiences of Central American migrants within church - centered communities in the United States shape their sense of belonging and social support networks?
- 3 How do these communities foster connections with their homelands and maintain transnational ties?



# Chapter Breakdown

## A Migrant's Burden

Discussion of the challenges that afflict Central American migrants in the United States. Starting with the hostile context of reception. What are the material and emotional hardships shared by my research participants?

## Centering Community

Methods of mutual aid and functions they have in the social networks of these communities. Discussing my experiences with these community functions.

## Building Bridges and Buffers

Emotions of the people who make up these communities in response to experiencing simple aid or more spiritual support. What does this *mean* to them?

# Findings Regarding Church - Centered Spaces

## Social Networks for Survival

Stories regarding being “recién llegados” and how folks turned to community for support and survival resources.

## Connections to Home

Discussions of longing for home. Many Central American migrants struggle to find a place in the United States.

## Creating a *buffer*, not a vehicle.

Through the retelling of stories and connections to homeland, these community spaces function as a buffer to assimilation and a recreation of home.



# Chapter 1

## A Migrant's Burden



# Hostile Reception

## 1 Stories of hardships upon arrival

Participants related stories of the hardships they faced upon arrival. El “recién llegado” is a motif that was mentioned by 5 of my 6 participants. Language barrier was mentioned by all of my interviewees.

## 2 **Amelia, 53, Lawndale Community Member**

‘Les cuento a mis hijas que cuando yo agarré mi primer trabajo, yo sólo esperaba que llegara la noche, yo me metía a mi cuarto a llorar. Que yo decía “qué estoy haciendo aquí?” “¿Por qué me vine?” Y yo lloraba, así, desesperada, que si yo hubiera podido me regreso porque, pues sí, es que [uno] se siente tan fuera de lugar, porque en primera no habla el idioma, y no conocen las costumbres de tanta gente..y pues se siente uno totalmente fuera de lugar.’

# Familial Separation

## 1 Hermana Lola, 55, Iglesia Centro-Americana

In response to a personal anecdote I shared about my mother having to wait 8 years to be able to afford to go back home to Guatemala to see her family, Hermana Lola said : “Yo 14 años...14 años. Deje mi Hijo de cinco y [lo] fui a ver de 17, no, 19. Estaba en el colegio cuando lo fui a ver. Lo deje de baby... Es duro. Es duro.”

## 2 How do other community members relate to this?

In this same interview, Hermana Lola mentioned the *misioneros* branch of the church that fundraises for the construction of churches in the home countries of the members of the congregation. She shared her ideas of the impact this has on the Central American community in Los Angeles.



# Other Difficulties

## Language Barrier

- Three of six Participants cited issues accessing medical attention due to a language barrier. These experiences have happened to them and to strangers they have witnessed,
- *El miedo* repeated as a reason for not seeking help.
  - Reporting to legal authorities.
  - Repeated instances of shame.

## Mobility

- Carpooling: “Muchas no manejan en la iglesia... “Y es lo que digo yo; yo siempre he ofrecido *rite* porque, si en mi está el poder ayudar para que estemos congregados, estemos unidos, mejor.” (Hermana Samantha. 47)
- In an interview with my father, he mentions the pianist for the church *grupo de alabanza* who he brings to church every Thursday and Sunday.



# Chapter 2

# Centering Community



# What are the functions of Community

## 1 La Cundina

Community oriented method of alternative banking. Leaders of smaller familial units or businesses pool money together in a round-robin collection style and receive a certain predetermined quantity during their turn in the cycle.

## 2 Kermes for Funerals and Sick People

Fundraising events where individuals buy food and ingredients to prepare traditional Central American dishes for sale. The money raised from these sales are then gifted to members of the community who are in need; typically to cover funeral bills or medical expenses.

## 3 Los Misioneros

Have built a church in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico.

# Participant Observation

## Elmer Castillo

- When I was six years old, my father fell victim to Guillain-Barré syndrome, a rare immunological disease that rendered him paralyzed from the neck down.
- The community of Guatemalan migrants in my hometown as well as the congregation from my church stepped in to aid my family.

## Kermez for my Uncles





# Gendered Labor Disparity

## Women at the forefront

- Women organizing Cundinas, Kermeses, and carrying the brunt of planning efforts for fundraising events.
- Relaying personal and vulnerable experiences regarding hardships within a family or community.

## Facebook Organizing

- Greater outreach: “...no alcanzaríamos a abarcar todo. Sí, porque así como es Facebook, alguien, postea uno de una kermes y lo comparten con alguien más y con alguien más. Entonces hay grupo, se vuelve...(mas grande) y la gente que se informa ya es mucho más que uno no hubiera podido contactar con un mensaje.” (Amelia, 53, Lawndale Community member)





# Chapter 3

## Building Bridges & Buffers



# Spiritual Connections

## 1 Hermana Samantha, 47, Iglesia Centro- Americana

When relaying her experiences going through a devastating time in her life, Hermana Samantha compared her situation to that of Moses in the book of Exodus stating: “Como la historia de Moisés... Así es la comunidad. Que te sostiene cuando tu ya no aguantas, tu desmayas la comunidad te ayuda a sostener tus manos y tus pies a firmarse en la tierra para seguir adelante.”

## 2 Feelings and Emotions of Support as Religious.

*Goza* as a religious theme was mentioned by five of my six interview participants, denoting a religious joy that surges when experiencing community and its support.

## 3 Hermana Yolanda, 42, Iglesia Centro- Americana

“Creo que es importante el ayudar a nuestro prójimo de una o otra forma”

# Emotional Bridges to Homeland

## 1 Hermana Lola, 55, Iglesia Centro-Americana

When describing the recent construction of a church in Honduras that was funded by her church in Inglewood California, she describes how several Honduran community members mentioned that, despite their inability to return home, 'se sienten contentos porque dicen "sus hijos van a ir!"'

## 2 Amelia, 53, Lawndale Community Member

When I asked her why she finds joy in hosting *cocinaditas* in her home, she explains that this is what she wants to be remembered for. Further, she describes how she wants Lucas, my young cousin, to remember what it is like to celebrate Christmas and other holidays like she did when she was young.

# Implications

## Mending Severed Connections to Homeland

As the United States has proven to be hostile to the cultural preservation of these migrant communities, these church-centered spaces function to preserve culture and provide hope of “return” for many families.

## Community as a Microcosm for Society

These community spaces skew to benefit members that are non-American since birth. This opens up discussions regarding the effects of these spaces on younger, more Americanized community members.


## Dual Roles of the Church

Understanding the church as a safe haven and a buffer against assimilation.



# Main Takeaway

“Church - centered communities function as an essential tool for survival and safe haven for Central American migrants while also serving to create a buffer against assimilation and a space to recreate their culture and memories from *home.*”








# Thanks!

Do you have any questions?



Special shout out to all of my friends who are here today, to my family at home, and to my community for all its support!