

## Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

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# Borders Manifest: Racializing the Nicaraguan Refugee in Costa Rica

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## **Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities**

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# Borders Manifest:

## The Evolving Racialization of Costa Rica's Nicaraguan Other within a Continental Context

*Theodore Bennett Twidwell*

### Introduction

"I'll say this again to Daniel Ortega," begins Lesly Antonio Mayorga in an article for *The Tico Times*, "I am not afraid of you. I am not afraid of you, you dog, and I will never be afraid of you. And if they gave me a gun to go and kill you, I would do it." Mayorga speaks from a refugee camp in northern Costa Rica to Alejandro Zúñiga and Alexander Villegas, reporters for the English-language Costa Rican newspaper. As Zúñiga and Villegas explain, two refugee camps have sprung up along Costa Rica's borders as Nicaraguans like Mayorga flee state-sanctioned violence in their home country.

Since late April, a quasi-civil war has evolved within the Central American nation of Nicaragua. Daniel Ortega, the president-dictator of the country, announced in April that the government would be instituting social security reforms which would increase the amount Nicaraguans pay in taxes, while drastically decreasing the pension and benefits one would receive once eligible for social security. These reforms, coupled with the government's slow response to a fire in a nature reserve in southeastern Nicaragua earlier in the same month, sparked a wave of protests throughout the country. The

protests, largely student-led and located on university campuses, were met with violent repression by the government's police forces. Within days, the protests evolved from an outcry against specific social security reforms to an outcry more broadly against Ortega and the corruption, violence, and repression his government has engendered since his ascension in 2006 (Awadalla). Within a week, the violence against protestors turned mortal, and the state-sponsored paramilitary group *la juventud sandinista*<sup>1</sup> ramped up its active participation in the repression (Gonzalez). Student protestors, now joined by their mothers and fathers, by *campesinos*<sup>2</sup>, began creating strongholds, tearing up the patchwork brick streets and using the rubble to construct barricades (Phillips). Entire cities, such as the sprawling urbanity of Masaya, a city one hour south of the capital, declared their independence from the Ortega government, electing a municipal government to manage their needs, a civil city-wide rebellion spurred by the resistance in Monimbó, the city's indigenous neighborhood (Anderson). Most of these strongholds, including Masaya, have fallen to government and

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<sup>1</sup> The Sandinista Youth (The Sandinista political party is the political party of Ortega)

<sup>2</sup> Peasant farmers, someone from the countryside

paramilitary forces (“Nicaragua Forces...”). The protests and unrest continue, but more clandestinely (Awadalla). As of late November and the writing of this piece, over 300 people have been killed in the violence (Matalon), with some claiming a death toll as high as 500, noting there are further over 1,000 people still missing, or intentionally disappeared (Awadalla). More than 2,000 individuals have been arrested over the months of unrest, with between 200–400 activists and protestors remaining in these jails, now facing charges of terrorism from the government (Franco). One protestor, Gabriela, a student, describes for DW.com her detention by members of *la juventud* at a protestor-constructed barricade as the strongholds crumbled, “She tells how her tormentors ordered her to leave Nicaragua if her life is dear to her. Gabriela doesn’t want to and has now gone underground.”

Not all Nicaraguans have decided to stay in their country like Gabriela. Others, like Mayorga, chose to flee the violence and repression by crossing the southern border of their country into Costa Rica. As Joshua Partlow quantifies in a September article for *The Washington Post*, since the beginning of civil unrest in Nicaragua “more than 24,400 Nicaraguans have expressed their intention to apply for asylum in Costa Rica, compared with 58 asylum applications from January to August 2017.” This number, he recognizes, includes many Nicaraguans already living in Costa Rica who wished to legalize their residence in the country as their nation of origin descended into

violence. In late October, in another article for *The Tico Times*, Zúñiga and Villegas expand on this number, informing that, since May of 2018, 23,000 newly arrived Nicaraguans have applied for asylum, in this number not counting those Nicaraguans already present in Costa Rica before the violence began. Most recently, George Rodríguez reported for *El Periodico CR* that la Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos<sup>3</sup> (CIDH) has counted that over 40,000 Nicaraguans have petitioned for asylum in Costa Rica since the beginning of the violence. None of these numbers account for the Nicaraguans who have fled to Costa Rica and do not intend on petitioning for asylum.

Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, arriving across the border in increasing numbers, encounter another form of repression; that of racism. Carlos Sandoval-García, in his book *Threatening Others: Nicaraguans and the Formation of National Identities in Costa Rica* points to the idea that Costa Rica, through its construction of a national identity, has imagined itself as white, as the whitest country in Central America, and thus has imagined Nicaraguans as non-white. Costa Rica is an ethnically diverse country, with established and prospering indigenous, Afro-descendant, and East and Southeast Asian populations (“Costa Rica Demographics Profile 2018”). In order to assimilate this unignorable ethnic and cultural diversity with a national

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<sup>3</sup> The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights

identity which clings greatly to a perceived *europiedad*<sup>4</sup>, the Costa Rican identity has been constructed in relation to a foreign other: in this case, the Nicaraguan other, an other which, in the Costa Rican national imagination, is inherently less civilized, less educated; more brown, more indigenous, more black. In fact, within Costa Rica, Nicaraguans have been imagined as a distinct race, and one inferior to white Costa Ricans (Sandoval-García).

This same process can be seen in the United States. In his article “Inventing the Race: Latinos and the Racial Pentagon”, Silvio Torres-Saillant describes how the US state has managed to categorize Latinxs<sup>5</sup>, of incredibly varying ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and economic diversity, as one singular race. This has been accomplished, he argues, by equating nationality with race. This essentialization of nationality and race is important to recognize as Costa Rica has engaged in similar process, homogenizing Nicaraguans as a distinct and singular race from the peoples of Costa Rica based on their nation of origin, an origin on the other side of Costa Rica’s northern border. With the new refugee crisis evolving on this border and within Costa Rica, the influx of Nicaraguans into the nation has lead to steadily increasing tensions

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<sup>4</sup> Europeanness

<sup>5</sup> “Latinx” here is used to mean anyone of Latin American descent living in the United States (Torres-Saillant). “Latinx” is used rather than “Latino” to affirm the complexity of gender present in this and all racialized groups (Steinmetz).

between Costa Ricans and the Nicaraguans seeking safety and opportunity within the nation. Nicaraguans arriving in Costa Rica right now face rising sentiments of nationalism, racism, and exclusion; in fact, it can be said, the racialization of Nicaraguans and their placement on the othered side of an imagined racial border is becoming only more salient in Costa Rica as the refugee crisis continues.

### **Towards a Methodology**

Borders, here, must be understood as more than imaginary lines demarcating the geography of political entities (such as the US and Mexico, Nicaragua and Costa Rica) from one another. As Gloria Anzaldúa elaborates in her groundbreaking book *Borderlands: La Frontera*, borders are further social constructions which divide people along lines of perceived difference, such as the social construction of a border between the sexes, men and women placed on opposing sides of an imaginary line delineating sexual characteristics. These borders can be racial, gendered, sexual, abled; what they require is an imbalance of power. One side of the border receives privileges and power within social institutions and society writ large, while those on the other side, considered deviant or othered from the norm of the privileged side, do not receive this power and privilege. For Nicaraguans currently arriving in Costa Rica, the border they

confront is racial. White-racialized<sup>6</sup> Costa Ricans are placed on one-side of an imagined social border; Nicaraguans, conceptualized as non-white, are placed on the other.

A white-racialized identity, which would grant such privilege and power, is contextual. Whiteness is vastly different from region to region, from country to country; whiteness is greatly different in Costa Rica from whiteness in the United States. Those classified as white in Costa Rica can be entirely European in ancestry, but are usually any individuals descended from a mixture of European colonizers, enslaved africans and their free descendants, and the peoples indigenous to Costa Rica. These individuals are *mestizo*, or of mixed-ancestry, and are considered white (Carlos Sandoval-García).

Whiteness itself is not an individual identity, but rather a part in a system of privilege and oppression. Steve Martinot, in his book *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization*, describes whiteness in the following manner, “White racialized identity is not a psychological identity. It does not answer the question, ‘Who am I?’ Instead, it concerns what one is in a social framework or system of social categorizations. It encompasses one’s ethical possibilities, that is, what is permissible socially” (43). Whiteness in the Americas is further inherently connected to colonization and statuses of

settlement. In the Americas, whiteness operates through the process of settler-colonization, in which indigenous populations are displaced by those institutions and peoples conceived of as white, and thus superior. La Paperson, in his book *A Third University is Possible*, expands on and clarifies this concept when he writes:

The ‘settler’ is a site of exception from which whiteness emerges. Whiteness is property; it is the right to have rights; it is the legal human; the anthropocentric normal is written in its image. Not all settlers at all time enjoy the full privileges available to the ‘settler’; rather, settler supremacy is constructed and maintained by a number of technologies: citizenship, private property, civil and criminal innocence, normative settler sexuality, and so on.

Essentially, there is no intrinsic state of whiteness based on genealogy or heritage. Whiteness, instead, is produced and created through access and familiarity to institutions, and thus wealth and power. It is a person’s position on the white-racialized side of a border that grants one such access and familiarity, and it is through these institutions that privilege and power are born. Institutions, as Martinot elaborates, determine what ethical possibilities exist for different racialized groups, and maintain the

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<sup>6</sup> Not all Costa Ricans are racialized as white

technologies Paperson speaks of, which in turn moderate whiteness. In the case of the creation of a foreign other, as with Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, this is often done through the creation of a geopolitical national border. National borders are used to define territories for nation-states, and, often, determine who receives citizenship in which country. The otherness of Nicaraguans as perceived by Costa Rica has been created and maintained by the border between the two countries (Sandoval-García). The transgression across this border is characterized by Costa Rica as a transgression against the nation, and it is the maintenance of this border that allows it to other Nicaraguans both within and outside of Costa Rica's territories (Sandoval-García). In this way, it is easy to see how the national borders of nation-states, such as the one which delineates Nicaragua from Costa Rica, are often inherently connected to the borders of race within countries.

To place two peoples on different sides of a racial border is not a natural, intrinsic occurrence: rather it is a purposeful and meticulous process. This process is known as racialization and is a process of "social differentiation" by which populations are constructed as racially different (Martinot). Nicaraguans have only been considered non-white in Costa Rica so long as they have been racialized as non-white. The constructed non-whiteness of Nicaraguans is what allows for the construction of a white-racialized identity for *mestizo* Costa

Ricans, as Martinot explains, "whiteness and white society can constitute themselves only by racializing, by dehumanizing and dominating other people they define as non-white for that purpose" (66). A racial border is necessary for whiteness, for the maintenance of power and privilege designated to specific populations, and as Nicaraguans search for safety in Costa Rica, they will be confronted with the process of racialization which creates this border. Those racialized as Nicaraguan in Costa Rica are also *mestizo*, as indigenous, Asian, Arab, and black Nicaraguan nationals face a different form of racialization in Costa Rica (Sandoval-García). How, then, is this Nicaraguan *mestizo* population socially differentiated from the Costa Rican *mestizo* population? How is the border between the two constructed? And how is the current refugee crisis affecting the process of racialization?

The study of racialization, and, thus, the study of race and ethnicity, is an important aspect of contemporary scholarship emerging from the field of American Studies. American Studies concerns itself with the interdisciplinary study of American culture, politics, and literature. As Jay Mechling puts it, American Studies "seeks the connections between cultural systems and between texts." Those in American Studies can have a variety of specializations, from folklorists to queer theorists to students of culture and media. American Studies has long been a field that embraces evolution, and, recently, this evolution has been

expanding the scope of the field beyond the nation-state of the United States. As Macarena Gómez-Barris and Licia Fiol-Matta elaborate in the introduction for the 2012 issue of *The American Quarterly*, the official publication for the American Studies Association<sup>7</sup>, an Association meeting in Puerto Rico in 2011 has opened up conversations about what American Studies can be, conversations spurred by the work and activism of Latinx and Latin American American Studies scholars. Gómez-Barris and Fiol-Matta write:

The conference site of Puerto Rico opened up tangible and proximate locales and contexts of South-South dialogues, palpable in the encounter between geotemporal configurations that did not easily nestle into the familiar North-South axis of hegemonic power. The participation at the meeting and geographic nexus by more than four thousand, mostly US-based scholars stretched the meaning of American studies within the hemisphere.

The conference allowed members of the American Studies Association to grapple with the breadth and grasp of American Studies scholarship, challenging members to question what it is American Studies can encapsulate, based in critiques of a focus on a solely US-based *americanidad*, or Americanness. The 2012 issue of *The American Quarterly* was renamed *Las Américas Quarterly*, or *The Americas Quarterly*, for this reason, to allow a grander conceptualization of “America”.

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<sup>7</sup> The official organization for academics within the field of American Studies

The issue maintained a focus on Latinx and Latin American scholarship, acting as an issue dedicated in its entirety to redeveloping notions of American Studies. Examinations of the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border engage in a similar process by providing a focus on South-South relations, eschewing, in some manner “the familiar North-South axis of hegemonic power.” The scholarship in *Las Américas*, and all American Studies scholarship with a focus on Latin America, call for an American Studies that examines “transhemispheric” relations between the nations and people of the Western Hemisphere; the American Hemisphere (Gómez-Barris and Fiol-Matta). The Nicaraguan refugee crisis in Costa Rica will be positioned within a continental context, connecting the experiences of refugees and migrants across the North American continent. It is my hope that this study continues to follow in this tradition, and can ask us what it is American Studies can be.

My own positioning within the continent is important in understanding the context and subjectivity from which this study comes. I am racialized as white in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua, as well as my home country of the United States, a nation within which I was born into citizenship. My own capability to navigate and cross borders is facilitated by my citizenship and racialized identity. I studied in both Nicaragua and Costa Rica as the unrest in Nicaragua broke-out and the refugee crisis was initiated: my ability to leave Nicaragua for Costa Rica, and

thus avoid the escalating violence, was in stark contrast to the relative ability of most Nicaraguans. I boarded a plane to San José, Costa Rica on a one-way ticket; conversely, our study abroad program's student coordinator, a Nicaraguan woman, was forced to purchase a return ticket before being allowed entrance into Costa Rica by the Costa Rican government; and Lesly Antonio Mayorga describes for *The Tico Times* escaping paramilitaries through the tropical rainforests of Nicaragua's mountains, crossing the border on foot. It can be seen here how race and nationality, often conflated, exist in reference to the borders of nation-states, and vice versa. In Costa Rica, I directly saw the ways in which Nicaraguans are treated as an other in the country, particularly in contrast to my own social positioning as a white *estadounidense*<sup>8</sup> student, treated often as a tourist, a position that holds much power in Costa Rica due to the nation's economic dependence on tourism (Dyer). The methods of racialization I will discuss here are methods I witnessed, and in this way my own lived experience in the country directly shapes the study itself. This study is with no doubt colored by my own relations to borders as informed by my social, political, and economic positioning within a continental context, and any discussion I create of borders and the racialization of a Nicaraguan other in Costa Rica as the refugee crisis continues

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<sup>8</sup> One who resides within or has citizenship in the United States

to develop is inherently entangled with these same relations.

### **Creating a Race: The Delineation of *Mestizo* Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans**

The constitution of a South-South relation can be examined in the racialization of the Nicaraguan other in Costa Rica. These South-South relations are defined by their interactions between countries of the Global South, such as Costa Rica and Nicaragua, countries which have been traditionally "economically disadvantaged", or "spaces and peoples negatively impacted by contemporary capitalist globalization" (Garland Mahler). I look, then, to how these neighboring and coexisting peoples of the Global South have been racialized as distinct and unique races by the Costa Rican nation-state, and four of the main methods employed in this process: skin color/phenotypic difference, language use, criminality and dependence, and spatiality.

#### *Bordered Skin: The Phenotype of Race*

Phenotype, a term for the physical expression of one's genes, and race are hopelessly intertwined. As Cynthia Feliciano explains in her research study "Shades of Race: How Phenotype and Observer Characteristics Shape Racial Classification", the categorization of individuals into distinct racial groups is often accomplished by the perception of physical characteristics, such as hair type and eye shape, but most clearly skin color. In this study, she found that, within the US, this is clearest within the racialization

of black populations. Darker skin has become, in the United States's national imagining, inherently connected with blackness. Phenotype, unlike many other modes of racialization, does not require any interaction between two people beyond sight, which has made it such an insidious tool for racialization. One must only see another to racialize another. Phenotype has become a method for the instant recognition, or perceived recognition, of the race of others.

This racialization based within perceived differences in the expression of physical characteristics is palpably present in the social delineation between *mestizo* Costa Ricans and *mestizo* Nicaraguans. *Mestizo* Costa Ricans and Nicaraguans can be said to truthfully share much of the same genealogical ancestry, that of the Spanish European colonizer, enslaved and free Africans, and indigenous populations of the region. However, whiteness in Costa Rica has still become connected to the phenotype and, thus, skin color of its populations. As Carlos Sandoval-García elaborates, the Costa Rican national imagination assumes that *mestizo* Costa Ricans are the lightest-skinned inhabitants of their country. This light-skinned-ness has been attributed to the state of being Costa Rican; to be Costa Rican is to be light-skinned. Nicaraguans, conversely, are not seen as having the same complexion as Costa Ricans. Sandoval-García writes of Costa Rican imaginations of Nicaraguans, “the Nicaraguan other is defined by dark-skin.” Here, we see the manifestation of a tool

used to demarcate *mestizo* Nicaraguans and *mestizo* Costa Ricans: phenotype and physical characteristics, primarily, skin color.

For any student of race, it is blatant that phenotype is much too permutable and vague to accurately racialize an entire population of people. This is a particularly salient difficulty in the racialization of Nicaraguans within Costa Rica, for, again, despite the respective constructed brownness and whiteness of these peoples in Costa Rica, the two populations share much of the same genealogy. There is some validity to Costa Rican claims that *mestizo* Nicaraguans have, on average, darker-skin than *mestizo* Costa Ricans. As Sandoval-García elaborates, there was generally less *mestizaje*, or racial mixing, in the mountainous country of Costa Rica during the early processes of colonization when compared to the *mestizajes* in other Central American countries, such as Nicaragua. However, this generalized assumption of perceived skin color of *mestizo* Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans does little to elucidate the inherent complexity and nuance present in phenotypic racialization. In her study “Constructions of Difference and Deficit, A Case Study: Nicaraguan Families and Children on the Margins in Costa Rica”, Victoria Purcell-Gates, a US researcher, examines the ability of Nicaraguan-descendant children to navigate public schooling systems in Costa Rica. To do this she observes three classes at different schools throughout the urban region of San José. In these classrooms, she

makes the intentional choice to attempt to use Costa Rican stereotypes to determine which students in the classes are Nicaraguan, relying mostly on the skin color differences she was told by Costa Rican contacts would be a dead giveaway of national origin. As she explains in her paper, this inevitably fails, and when she asks the teachers of the respective classrooms to confirm who in the class is of Nicaraguan descent, she finds that all the children with darker skin were in fact Costa Rican. She explains further, “There was a range of skin tones among the children in all three classes, from blond and blue eyed to quite dark. It turned out that the blond child was Nicaraguan as was the brown-haired one with the freckles.” This is but one example of how generalizations based on perceived phenotype tend to be shortsighted; race is much more complicated than the color of one’s skin, and individual phenotypic presentation can fly brazenly in the face of stereotype.

This does not mean, however, that skin-color and, accordingly, perceived race, does not play a significant role in the racialization of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica. In her 2017 article “The rise of anti-immigrant attitudes, violence and nationalism in Costa Rica”, Caitlin Fouratt explains the barriers Nicaraguans face in access to healthcare, education, and legal status in Nicaragua. Cecilia Gustafson, in her research “‘For a better life’... A study on migration and health in Nicaragua”, illuminates the story of Rosa, a Nicaraguan migrant in Costa Rica. Rosa

believed “that part of the reason for her good experiences from working in Costa Rica was related to her ‘whiteness’ – that is, her pale skin colour made her look more Costa Rican than Nicaraguan, which meant that she did not have to endure as much xenophobia as other Nicaraguans.” In this way, we can see that skin color mediates the discrimination and institutional barriers Nicaraguans face in Costa Rica as described by Fouratt, and determines who gets to be considered “white” in the country through, as Martinot describes it, “ease and familiarity within institutions”, which Rosa had respectively more of than many of her Nicaraguan peers due to her skin color. Narratives of skin color and phenotype, infinitely complex and nuanced, are used as a tool of racialization whose express purpose, despite its varying level of success, is to divide Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans into distinct racial categories. Nicaraguans currently fleeing violence in their country will cross a geopolitical border into Costa Rica and be confronted by this phenotypic stereotype; their ability to access institutions, as with Rosa, will be in part determined by the color of their skin.

*¿Cómo estás tú? or ¿Cómo está’ vo??: An Accented Border*

Language has oft been a marker which moderates the racialization of a population. As Anne Hudley writes in her study “Language and Racialization”, “Language is a fundamental characteristic on which race is determined and

characterized.” The human experience is predicated on our interactions with one another, in our capacity to communicate and care for one another. By rendering another culture’s method of communication as lesser, as undesirable, is to render the people themselves as lesser, as undesirable. How, then, have Nicaraguans been racialized along a linguistic line within Costa Rica, given *mestizo* Nicaraguans and *mestizo* Costa Ricans both primarily speak Spanish?

In their study “Jokes About Nicaraguans: Symbolic Barriers, Social Control Mechanisms, and Identity Constructors” Karen Masís and Laura Paniagua note that Costa Rican jokes about Nicaraguans are pervasive in their mockery of a Nicaraguan way of speaking, “imitating the accent attributed to the Nicaraguan other” and often “highlighting the use of certain words, expressions, or crutches to emphasize the otherness [of Nicaraguans]” (294). As this suggests, there are words and grammatical concepts which Nicaraguans use that Costa Ricans do not. For example, and most blatantly, in most Spanish dialects throughout the world, the word *tú* is used as the informal singular second-person pronoun, but in Nicaragua, as with various other countries like Argentina, the somewhat antiquated *vos* has remained the primary word for this pronoun (Ovando & Locke). Costa Rican Spanish, a Spanish which used to use primarily *vos*, has been changing, and more often now makes use of *tú* (Michnowicz, Despain, & Gorham). Spanish that uses *vos* (*voseo* Spanish)

further has different patterns of conjugation than Spanish that uses *tú* (*tuteo* Spanish). In this way, the words Nicaraguans use to refer to those close to them, for whom the informal singular second-person would be appropriate, becomes a linguistic marker of their racialized identity in Costa Rica.

Further, as Carlos Ovando and Steve Locke explain in their article “Finding and Reading Road Signs in Ethnographic Research: Studying the Language and Stories of the Unwelcome Stranger”, Nicaraguans are noted in Costa Rica for their tendency to drop the “s” from the end of many words, a practice that is considered non-standard Spanish in Costa Rica. Accent, coupled with the use of *voseo* Spanish, can make strikingly different manners of speech. Nicaraguans are further noted in Costa Rica for having a distinct vocabulary. As Ovando and Locke describe, “Nicaraguan vocabulary is very colorful and words such as *jodido* (screwed up) and *verga* (slang for male genitalia) are commonly used by the Nicaraguan immigrant” (244), in contradiction to a perceived Costa Rican Spanish vocabulary. By alienating these linguistic differences in grammar, vocabulary, and accent in an otherwise shared tongue, language becomes another tool in the racialization of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica.

The racialization of Nicaraguans along a linguistic border inherently locks Nicaraguans out of Costa Rican institutions. Fouratt describes the fear many Nicaraguans have of speaking in

public, terrified their accent may reveal their racialized identity and place them in the danger of discrimination and xenophobia. Nicaraguans, explain Ovando and Locke, often attempt to change their accent, to traverse this linguistic border, in order to access better jobs or succeed in school; to create a greater ease in their navigation of Costa Rican institutions. This linguistic border becomes once more a method for moderating whiteness in the country, deciding who within the nation may navigate the country's institutions as a white individual.

As Ovando and Locke illuminate, the age at which a Nicaraguan arrives in Costa Rica greatly impacts the degree to which one adapts to a Costa Rican accent. Sandra, a student who arrived in Costa Rica at the age of nine, described having so fully assimilated to a Costa Rican accent that she could no longer recall her Nicaraguan one. Conversely, Evert, who arrived in Costa Rica at the age of 14 and now owns his own construction company, speaks of code-switching between the two accents when needed, using a Costa Rican accent at work with his clients and a Nicaraguan accent with his friends. Vastly over-represented in the Nicaraguan refugees arriving currently in Costa Rica are college students, as it was on university campuses that protests against the Nicaraguan dictator began, it was student action that galvanized and sparked the social insurrection; and, thus, it is students who are targeted by the government's acts of terror (Awadalla). These students arriving in Costa Rica will

be faced with this linguistic border based on their accent. At a closer age to Evert, these students may be able to adapt to this border, and learn quickly to code-switch in order to navigate Costa Rican institutions. However, Ovando and Locke speak of many other Nicaraguans in Costa Rica, those who refuse to change their accent due to their pride in their national origin. It is possibly that many in this new wave of refugees, characterized by activists of all ages, who are fleeing their country after fighting tooth and nail to change it, may not adapt their accent to transgress this linguistic border; rather, many may continue to hold dearly to their Nicaraguan identity and claim pride in their existence on one side of this accented border. Borders are not always transgressed; when faced with a linguistic border, many Nicaraguans in Costa Rica choose to find pride and empowerment in that which racializes them as an "other", finding strength in the accent and dialect of their heritage.

#### *Narratives of Criminality and Dependence*

La Paperson, in defining the maintenance of white/settler supremacy, mentions as an explicit technology of racialization "crime and criminal innocence". In Costa Rica, this technology of criminalization, the process of associating crime and deviance with a population in popular narrative and institutions, is vibrantly blatant. Carlos Sandoval-García explains, "the Nicaraguan community as a whole is blamed for the rise of criminality" in Costa

Rica. This criminalization of Nicaraguans has its roots in the history of both nations. Costa Rica has been likened since the mid-to-late 1800's as a "Central American Switzerland", a country with little violent political strife and little involvement in the wars of other nations. The mythos of a peaceful Costa Rica has been bolstered by the country's decision to eliminate their military in the fifties, a choice that remains in effect today (Sandoval-García). Conversely, Nicaragua has long been involved in a history of struggle characterized by violent revolution, oppressive dictatorship, and imperial meddling. Nicaragua's history of strife is exemplified in the Sandinista revolution of the 1960's and 70's which ousted a dictatorship that had dominated the nation for over forty years. The following US-supported counter-revolution decimated the countryside and left tens of thousands dead (Walker). As Nicaraguans fled this violence, the specter of this history of revolution followed them into Costa Rica. The Costa Rican national imagination has positioned this history not as a result of geopolitical and imperial influences, but rather as something inherent to the Nicaraguan people. Any refugees arriving in Costa Rica were feared to be bringing this presumed disposition for revolution and violence into the country, and it is this historical narrative which has helped to racialize the Nicaraguan other as violent, as inherently criminal (Sandoval-García).

This narrative, is, of course, lacking in its understanding of the political

situations that have entrapped Nicaragua in this cycle of state-repression and revolution. Nicaragua has been historically destabilized by the frequent imperial actions of the United States since the Central American territory's conception as a nation. From 1856 to 1857, Nicaragua was ruled by William Walker, an American mercenary who reinstated slavery in the nation as an attempt to annex the territory as a part of the US. The country was further occupied by US marines from 1909-1924 and 1925-1933 in order to stop Nicaraguan attempts to build a canal through the country that would economically vitalize the region but compete with the US-controlled canal in Panamá. The Somoza dictatorship, which controlled Nicaragua with an iron fist from 1933 until 1979, was installed by the US. The US further funded a war against the democratically elected Sandinista party from 1982-1990 through what has become popularly known as the Iran-Contra scandal. This war eventually diluted support for the Sandinistas, resulting in the 1990 election of a broad coalition party unified by meddling from the US (Walker). Conversely, Costa Rica has been able to fend off US intervention for the past 70 years, despite several attempts at coups and assassinations on the part of the CIA. In fact, it can be said that it is the United State's history of intervention in Nicaragua that has resulted in its instability, while Costa Rica has been able to remain stable from a lack of this intervention, thus creating the power dynamic and migration patterns seen

today (Burdo). The Costa Rican national imagination, however, has constructed a narrative wherein this instability and violence is inherent to the nation of Nicaragua and its people; a people that is naturally, *racially* violent and revolutionary, and, thus, criminal. Seen as political threats, it has long been the fear that Nicaraguans will bring their perceived penchant for violence and revolution to Costa Rica and undo its status quo (Fouratt “Those...”).

In this way, as Caitlin Fouratt explains in her 2014 study “‘Those who come to do harm’: The Framings of Immigration Problems in Costa Rican Immigration Law”, Nicaraguans and their immigration to Costa Rica have been constructed as a national security threat. The narrative becomes one of the violent Nicaraguan revolutionary, arriving to destroy the peaceful, capitalist governing of Costa Rica. This immigration itself becomes criminalized, she explains. Characterized often as “illegal” immigration, the transgression of Nicaraguans into Costa Rica is perceived as in and of itself an illegal act, one which aids in “[eroding] respect for authority” in Costa Rica. As all Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are either migrants or the descendants of migrants, this label of “illegal”, whether an individual immigrated through proper institutions or was even born within the country, becomes an aspect in the racialization of Nicaraguans (Fouratt “Those...”). In this way, the citizenship of Nicaraguans in Costa Rica is constantly in negotiation;

regardless of one’s actual legal status, as Nicaraguan one will be racialized as a noncitizen; citizenship itself a technology Paperson mentions in the technologies of whiteness and settler supremacy, as ability to claim citizenship is a necessity in navigating many institutions of the state. These conceptions of the Nicaraguan other as illegal and violent by default lead to the racialization of Nicaraguans as criminals and threats to a Costa Rican way of life, and continue to present obstacles in the ability of Nicaraguans to access institutions in the country.

Connected quite intimately to the criminalization of Nicaraguans, Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are presumed to be overwhelming the nation’s social services (Fouratt “Those...”). The argument follows as this: Nicaraguans, hailing from a much poorer country than Costa Ricans, arrive in the country in numbers which overwhelm educational, medical and other social services. This narrative is codified even more aggressively through conceptualizations of Nicaraguans as poor, a construction created through an essentialization of the economic problems that the country is known for (Sandoval-García) as one of poorest country in the Western Hemisphere (Anderson). Nicaraguans are racialized as naturally poor and criminal, which creates the common narrative that Fouratt elaborates; Nicaraguans come not only to take advantage of social services, but to abuse them, to steal from them. This racialized narrative makes it difficult for Nicaraguans in Costa Rica to access

social services; this lack of access and familiarity within institutions, seen through the lens of Martinot's theories of whiteness, is an integral aspect in the racialization of *mestizo* Nicaraguans as non-white and *mestizo* Costa Ricans as white.

Nicaraguans arriving now in Costa Rica are fleeing another flare of violence and dictatorial oppression; most of those fleeing are those most in danger, those who initiated and supported the protests and continue to advocate for dissent against the government. These Nicaraguans seeking safety are those most likely to be seen as riotous, as revolutionary and a danger to the Costa Rican nation-state based on the racial narratives in the country. Current news and media in Costa Rica reporting on the migration continues this process of racialization, confirming Costa Rican preconceptions of Nicaraguan proclivities for violence. *The Tico Times* articles mentioned earlier, written by Alejandro Zúñiga and Alexander Villegas, only provide quotes and stories from Nicaraguans like Mayorga who wish to return to Nicaragua and fight. While this voice deserves to be heard, the overemphasis on Nicaraguans who wish to engage once more in war continues to racialize Nicaraguans as genetically driven to violence, continues to uplift narratives which criminalize the Nicaraguan other. As Almudena Barragán reported for the Spanish newspaper *El País* in August of 2018, fake reports of Nicaraguans initiating violence in Costa Rica have

been swirling across social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook in recent months. Specifically, the article mentions a photo that claims to depict two young Nicaraguans burning a Costa Rican flag; the photo, it turns out, is from a 2016 punk rock concert, and actually depicts two Costa Ricans. Nicaraguan refugees currently arriving in Costa Rica will be confronted with criminalization and accusations of being dependent on Costa Rican social services, accusations that will be emboldened by the violence still plaguing their country of origin.

#### *Precarios and Parque La Merced: The Spatiality of Race*

"The lived experience of race has a spatial dimension, and the lived experience of space has a racial dimension," explains George Lipsitz in his study "The Racialization of Space and the Spatialization of Race: Theorizing the Hidden Architecture of Landscape". Race and space are intertwined and construct one another. As Lipsitz continues, "The racial demography of the places where people live, work, play, shop, and travel exposes them to a socially shared system of exclusion and inclusion." Space, in this way, becomes integral in the racialization of populations, for our positioning in a space determines what other spaces, and, thus, institutions, we have access to.

Lipsitz posits a theory of race and space in relation to blackness and whiteness in the United States, looking to housing policies which segregated and continue to segregate black United States

residents. In Costa Rica, a similar-in-effect process has taken place. *Mestizo* Nicaraguans in Costa Rica live overwhelmingly in *precarios*<sup>9</sup> (Camacho), neighborhoods characterized by poverty and poor housing and infrastructure, situated primarily around major urban areas (Purcell-Gates), particularly San José, the capital city and most populous region in Costa Rica (“Biggest Cities in Costa Rica”). These *precarios* were originally squatter-communities of Nicaraguan immigrants arriving in the country in the late 1900’s, particularly in the 1990’s (Rico). Unlike the policies of the United States, which segregated black populations through housing policy which discriminated against black individuals and through acts of white terrorism discouraging black individuals from moving into certain spaces (Lipsitz), a study by Gilbert Brenes Camacho entitled “Segregación residencial de los inmigrantes nicaragüenses en Costa Rica en 2000”<sup>10</sup> found that these communities have been created through immigrant networks which encourage migrant Nicaraguans to move into spaces where other Nicaraguans already live, likely motivated to do so in attempts to avoid xenophobia, live in areas that are economically affordable, and create support networks and places for cultural expression.

These spaces wherein Nicaraguans live are denied access to institutional

support and public services. The most notorious *precario*, La Carpio, is noted for its geographic isolation on an island formed by two rivers on the outskirts of San José. Only one road provides access in and out of the neighborhood. The *precario* is over fifty-percent Nicaraguan and is dominated by a large landfill (Rico). Attempts to develop the *precario* have been stalled by bureaucracy and lack of governmental enthusiasm. As the pseudonym “Rico” reports in reference to these development projects for *QCosta Rica*, “public agencies responsible for work ‘have done little to advance [the development plans], noted for blocking plans and to roll back what progress has been made.’” These *precarios* in which Nicaraguan immigrants often find themselves living are purposefully underdeveloped and under-resourced. Space, in this way, has become a way to relegate the Nicaraguan other to areas which lack institutional support and access to public services, further racializing Nicaraguans as non-white.

Other, non-residential spaces within Costa Rica have been likewise racialized. The urban park Parque La Merced is of particular interest in recent months, an urban park in the center of San José (Mojica). As Sandoval-García explains, the park “was formerly known as the drunks’ park, a space in which marginalized people used to stay during the daytime. The ‘drunks’ left it when the park was refurbished in the 1990’s”. The park, he continues, has become a place for Nicaraguans to meet, conduct business,

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<sup>9</sup> shantytowns

<sup>10</sup> “Residential Segregation of Nicaraguan Immigrants in Costa Rica in 2000”

sell goods and food, and socialize. A 2006 article for *La Prensa*, a Nicaraguan newspaper, reports that Nicaraguans began visiting the park during the 1980s, as thousands of Nicaraguans fled violence in the Contra War (Walker), because a Catholic church overlooking the park allowed Nicaraguans to practice *la purísima* within its walls, a religious ritual honoring the Catholic patroness of Nicaragua, *la Virgen de la Concepción*. The park has been codified as a Nicaraguan space, Costa Ricans often referring to it as “Managua<sup>11</sup>” (Sandoval-García) or “Little Nicaragua” (Mojica). Sandoval-García posits that the claiming of this park as a Nicaraguan space is an act of “reterritorialization” for Nicaraguan immigrants looking to find and create a space wherein their identities can be fully embraced and supported. He further argues that this “reterritorialization” in Parque La Merced was only permitted by Costa Rican institutions because of its location in the center of the city, away from the suburbs where the majority of business, leisure, and commerce are partaken in by middle-class white Costa Ricans; regardless, he notes, the park has often been heavily policed. It can be seen here, though, that space for racially marginalized folk like Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica is more than an area one is relegated to in a process of racialization and can be as well a place for the claiming and strengthening of identity

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<sup>11</sup> The capital city of Nicaragua (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica)

as well as the creation of community and sites of resilience.

The ramifications of racialization, of course, still permeate these spaces. Parque La Merced dominated the Costa Rican news throughout the month of August, 2018. On August 18th, a group of approximately 400 Costa Ricans, waving Costa Rican flags and emblazoned in Costa Rica’s colors, descended on the park. They carried molotov cocktails, baseball bats, knives, machetes, and other improvised weapons, shouting “*Fuera Nicas!*”<sup>12</sup> (Partlow). Yamlek Mojica reports for the *Tico Times* that those who descended on the park could be heard yelling “We want Costa Rica free of bastards!” and “Let’s fly the flag for our country and kill these Nicaraguans!”. Fighting broke out between Nicaraguans and those inciting the violence. Fortunately, no one was gravely injured. Over 40 of the attackers were arrested by police, and the park was closed for a day and a half (Mojica). This vehement xenophobic attack against the Nicaraguan community in Costa Rica indicates the importance of space in racialization. The park had been converted in recent months into a base-camp of sorts for arriving refugees, a place to receive food, drink, and support (Partlow). Many refugees were actually using the park as a place to sleep, and one Nicaraguan woman of many years in Costa Rica expressed her distress for these individuals after the attack to *The Tico Times*, “It hurts...that

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<sup>12</sup> “Get out, Nicas!” (Nica is a colloquial Latin American term for Nicaraguan)

young people came here to sleep because they were running away from Daniel Ortega and didn't know anyone here. They haven't showed up here anymore. What happened to them? We don't know" (Mojica). The park, historically a safe haven for Nicaraguans fleeing violence in their home country, has become a space of fear. Though Nicaraguans continue to frequent the park, its assurance as a space of welcoming has been lost, and refugees no longer feel safe sleeping within it. Rather than attacking a *precario*, Costa Rican nationalists attacked this public space for what it represented, a manifestation of Nicaraguanness in a public place, the "reterritorialization" of a Nicaraguan identity in the heart of their capital city. These nationalists were emboldened by the racialization of Nicaraguan refugees as intrinsically violent, as a threat to Costa Rican nationhood, and chose to attack and endanger a space codified as Nicaraguan. A notably Nicaraguan space, and one heavily impacted by the current refugee crisis, it came to be seen as exemplary of the perceived "flood" (Masís and Paniagua) of Nicaraguan immigration. As Lipsitz stated, race is spatialized and space is racialized, and here it can be seen how Nicaraguan agency in the claiming of space can become racialized as an attack against Costa Rican nationhood.

### **Borders in Conversation: Placing the Nicaraguan Refugee Crisis in Costa Rica in a Continental Context**

It must be understood that the evolving Nicaraguan refugee crisis in Costa Rica does not exist in isolation. This crisis exists in conversation with migrant and refugee movements throughout the world, particularly throughout the continent of North America. Looking to borders, across which refugees and migrants must flow, can provide insights into the ways in which nation-states are responding to these movements of peoples, how racialization and the maintenance of borders are evolving and changing. Of particular interest in regards to the movement of Central American refugees and migrants emerge three borders: the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border, the Guatemala-México border, and the México-US border.

#### *The Nicaragua-Costa Rica Border*

Along the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border, understanding of space can once more be seen changing and adapting. The Costa Rican government, in response to the incredible increase in refugee arrivals in their country, have created two refugee camps for those Nicaraguans arriving in the nation. One is located near the northern border with Nicaragua, the other near the southern border with Panamá. Together, according to Luis Antonio Hernandez for the *Miami Herald*, the camps are capable of housing 2,000 people. This number accounts for just five percent of the asylum applications the Costa Rican government has received, but remains a significant number. The camps are modest, with 60 tents found in the

northern camp near La Cruz, Costa Rica, for about 15 people per tent (Kahn). In this way, government response along Costa Rica's borders is changing space by the creation of refugee camps in these small towns near the borders of the nation.

#### *The Guatemala-México Border*

Within November of 2018, upwards of 10,000 migrants and refugees from Central America, primarily from Honduras, have crossed the Guatemala-México border in an attempt to reach the United States and petition for asylum, fleeing instability and gang-violence in their home countries (Volpe and Semple). This "caravan" of refugees, as it has been denoted, faced a terrifying militarization on the border of México and Guatemala. As explained in an article for *The Independent*, when the caravan reached a bridge spanning the river dividing Guatemala from México, they were faced by two walls of riot police, a wall of Guatemalan police on the Guatemalan side of the border and a wall of Mexican police on the other. The refugees were forced to wait on the bridge for days in the sun, hoping to be let into México. Some groups chose to jump into the river below to attempt a crossing by swimming, only to be confronted by police on the other side. This militarization of the border between Guatemala and México is another response by a government to the flow of refugees over its border.

#### *The México-US Border*

The México-US border has similarly been militarized as the caravan has made its way to and camped out along the border. As of November 27th, 5,000 Central American refugees have made their way to Tijuana, México to attempt to apply for asylum in the US (Domonoske). As of November 30th, 2018, there are 5,600 deployed US troops along the border, there to halt the entrance of these Central American refugees seeking asylum (Rodrigo). On November 25th, 2018, refugees attempting to cross the border in protest of the policies allowing only 40-100 refugees into the country per day were attacked with tear-gas by US troops. 98 refugees were arrested by Mexican police, with approximately 42 arrested by US police (Domonoske). This blatant militarization of the México-US border follows a similar pattern to what occurred at the Guatemalan border, but migrants are seeing much less success in crossing into the United States.

#### *Connecting Border Crossings: A Continental Refugee Crisis*

Borders, both geopolitical and racial, have been created by nation-states to separate, to divide people who would otherwise be considered neighbors. It is then pressing that, rather than examining borders as they desire to be examined, as accurately divisive technologies, borders are analyzed in the transnational, transcontinental, transhemispheric lens American Studies presents, as so articulated in *Las Américas Quarterly*; it is

important to show how borders, against their very purpose, are connected. These discussed movements of people across borders in North America are not unrelated processes. The current instability of the Central American region of this continent, specifically the countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, and Nicaragua, did not occur in a vacuum. In fact, it was their continental neighbor that sewed and spurred this instability for decades, if not centuries.

As mentioned, the United States has had an expansive history of imperialism within Nicaragua. From attempts at annexation, marine occupations, imposed puppet dictatorships, and proxy wars, the United States has long led a crusade against the sovereignty and stability of the Nicaraguan nation. This history of US interventionism is present throughout Central America. Of particular interest in this history, US foreign policy during the Cold War is known to have decimated the region.

In Nicaragua, the Reagan administration, stunned to see the US-installed Somoza dictatorship ousted by a populist revolution, funded an illegal war against the democratically elected revolutionary socialist party, a war which destroyed much of the infrastructure of the nation, killed hundreds of thousands, weakened the economy, and divided the populace of the nation along ideological lines. Most importantly, this war led to the creation of complex party politics within the nation after US personnel helped to

broadly unify a right-wing coalition party to defeat the revolutionary party in the 1990 election. These complex politics led, eventually, to the moral corruption of the revolutionary party, the current party of the dictator-president, who changed the constitution to win the 2006 election (Walker). The party has only maintained power with the embrace of US-friendly neoliberal policies (Walters). The current political crisis, and general political instability within Nicaragua, is directly linked to the actions of the United States.

This pattern of destabilization incited by US interventionism in the name of halting communism during the Cold War is just as palpable in the so-called “Northern Triangle” countries of Central America: El Salvador, Honduras, and Guatemala. As Cole Kazdin explains in an article for *Vice*, in 1954, the US initiated a coup in Guatemala as the democratically elected Guatemalan government attempted to institute land reforms to halt the exploitation of indigenous Mayan workers, land reforms which threatened the business interests of US companies. This coup led to a civil war in Guatemala that lasted from 1960-1996. US military personnel trained the Guatemalan army well into the ‘70’s in what was, essentially, a genocide against farm laborers and Mayan peoples. During the same era, explains Kazdin, in El Salvador, the US funneled billions of dollars into fighting a socialist revolution whose goal was to end the oppressive policies of the El Salvadoran government. Xochitl Sanchez of the Central American

Resource Center so plainly puts it in the article, “The United States is complicit in creating the rampant and bloody gang violence, dire poverty, displacement and migration from El Salvador.” The country of Honduras was used as a base of operation for the US during these interventions (Kazdin), supported by the US-installed dictatorship of Policarpo Paz Garcia (Zunes). The United States further expressed support for a military coup in Honduras against democratically elected leftist leader Manuel Zelaya in 2009, a coup instigated by a military junta lead by a man trained in the US Army training program School of Americas. The US “played an important role in preventing Zelaya’s return to office and the junta consolidating its power in the face of massive nonviolent protests” (Zunes). The repression on the part of this junta has resulted in soaring murder rates, now the highest in the world, and has instigated the mass migration from the state that is currently being seen (Zunes).

A more traditional examination along this North-South axis of power is incredibly important in contextualizing the migration patterns present in the continent. These migrations are connected through the common denominator of US interventionism. A continental understanding of migration and borders must recognize how these migrations are so interwoven; the instability present in Central America has been instigated by its continental North American neighbor, the United States of America.

### *Borders as Racialization: A Geopolitical Border Meets a Racial Border*

The migration patterns of refugees are, as noted, being met with varying responses along the borders of receiving nations, from the militarization of the Guatemala-México and México-US borders, and the refugee camps along the Nicaragua-Costa Rica border. Looking to these border responses allows a unique understanding of the processes of racialization occurring in the receiving countries. These actions are implicated greatly in the process of creating a racial other; in fact, it can be said, border actions are directly manifesting this racial other.

Within México, Central American migrants arriving in the country are facing rising sentiments of xenophobia. Many Central American migrants arriving in México decide to stay in the country, rather than push on to the United States, particularly settling in the southern border state of Chiapas. As Lindsey Carte explains in her study “Everyday Restriction: Central American Women and the State in the Mexico-Guatemala Border City of Tapachula”, Central American migrants in the country are consistently locked out of institutional access. She relays the story of a Honduran mother, Raquel, attempting to secure birthright citizenship for her Mexican-born daughter. The bureaucratic official tasked with helping her did not give her daughter this citizenship, assuming, as Raquel says, that her daughter of Honduran ancestry had crossed the border with her mother and

thus was not in the country legally. In Tijuana, local residents recently staged a protest against the migrants arriving in their city. As Yesica Fisch and Amy Guthrie explain in an article for *Spokesman*, on November 18th, 2018, Tijuana residents took to the streets, demonstrating against those currently waiting and applying for asylum in the US. The residents cited fears of criminals arriving in their community with the migrants, anxious they will bring the violence of their home countries with them. This perceived inherent illegality and criminal nature of Central American migrants in México mirrors the same narratives present in Costa Rica in regards to Nicaraguan refugees and is bolstered by actions of the Mexican state along their southern border with Guatemala. By militarizing the border with the deployment of riot police ahead of the caravan, the Mexican state continued to reify narratives which criminalize the Central American other in their country. The state sent the message to its people that Central Americans are people to be feared, violent criminals who can only be controlled by riot police, and the images of Central Americans trying to find a way past these police only emphasize this conceptualization, and give rise to the ways of thinking which birthed the xenophobic protest in Tijuana. The border policies of this state continue the racialization of a Central American other in México. The Tijuana protest itself took place exactly three months after Costa

Rican nationalists descended on Parque La Merced.

The US's militarization of the México-US border engages in a similar process. As Victor Rios explains in his book *Human Targets: Schools, Police, and the Criminalization of Latino Youth*, Latinxs in the United States are seen inherently as criminals, inherently as illegal, just as Central Americans in México and Nicaraguans in Costa Rica are perceived. One can look simply to the current president's comments on Latinx populations to see this, as he refers to Latin American immigrants as "Drug dealers, criminals, rapists" ("Drug Dealers..."). The deployment of troops and police along the border, and the firing of tear gas at those attempting to cross, positions Central Americans (racialized in the context of the US as "Latinx" [Torres-Saillant]) as inherently criminal, a population only the army can control. The images emerging from these confrontations reiterate what images emerging from the border of Guatemala and México did for Mexican citizens: the intrinsic criminality of Central American immigrants. Once more, actions along the border act to racialize a population and create a Central American, or Latinx, other.

Refugee camps along Costa Rica's borders do much the same. They confirm stereotypes outlined by Fouratt, that Nicaraguans arriving in the country will take advantage of Costa Rican services and become dependent on the state. Rather than settling Nicaraguans within the

country, the Costa Rican government chooses to isolate 2,000 Nicaraguans away from urban centers, away from possible jobs and work (Kahn), making them inherently dependent on the Costa Rican state, confirming this narrative of the dependent Nicaraguan other. These camps, located far from San José, prevent Nicaraguans from accessing institutions such as healthcare and education, as well as legal institutions. It is necessary to reach San José to apply for asylum in Costa Rica, and Nicaraguans in these camps, unless they can pull together the money for a bus ticket, cannot reach the city, and thus apply for asylum (Kahn), locking them in a perpetual ambiguous legal state. Once more, Nicaraguans are not to be seen as citizens in Costa Rica, are *de facto* illegal. This border action confirms detrimental narratives of Nicaraguans which continue to place them on one side of a racialized border. This is the creation of race.

The deployment of troops and riot police on the México-US and the Guatemala-México borders, the construction of tent-city refugee camps on Costa Rica's borders, all of these actions are a part of a continental racialization project which others the migrant, the refugee, the transitory. Geopolitical borders construct whiteness through exclusion in the access to nation-states and thus the institutions of a nation-state; racial borders allow the construction of whiteness in relation to a racialized other within the territory of the state, which limits access to institutions for the racialized other. Nation-states like Costa

Rica employ a variety of methods to distinguish and racialize populations they wish to other, such as phenotypic and linguistic difference, criminalization, and spatiality. This allows for the construction of national racial imaginings which permit the exclusion of non-white racialized peoples from institutional access and familiarity as well as the necessary identification of racialized others in order to exclude them from this access. Actions against migrants attempting to cross geopolitical borders are excused and explained through these racialized imaginings of the other, and these actions along the geopolitical border then inform and support the maintenance of a racial border and thus racialized imaginings. In this way, geopolitical borders and racial borders construct one another and maintain constant communication in their perpetuation of whiteness. With the continued migrations of Central Americans both North and South in search of safety, it is possible to see racial borders being constructed in real time by the actions of governments on their geopolitical borders. Nicaraguan refugees currently arriving in Costa Rica will face a long-established racialization process as it incorporates them and adapts to their presence. The responses of governments to current refugee movements across the México-US, Guatemala-México, and Nicaragua-Costa Rica borders on this continent *are* the process of racialization, and as migration continues and nation-states act upon their national

borders to slow it, this racialization will only be fortified.

### **Concluding: Beyond Borders**

The taxi driver was lost before we knew where we were. From our vantage point in the car, parked momentarily on the top of a hill, we could see the tin roofs of San José stretching to the ends of the Central Valley. Our state of misdirection, however, as stories of this nature so often go, was but temporary, and soon, faster than we remembered being lost, we were there. Zoilamérica Narváez welcomed us into her house warmly as the taxi pulled away, her dog yapping excitedly at our feet. Already present in the white, graciously sunlit living room were her friends, two young gay men from Honduras, having arrived in Costa Rica fleeing the political violence so frequently targeting LGBT people in the Northern Triangle country. An older woman was also present, another friend and a local of Costa Rica; a woman I supposed of few words, she smiled as we entered. Zoilamérica informed us, quite excitedly, that her friend would be cooking us a traditional Costa Rican dish, and motioned for us to find somewhere to sit. Soon, the other members of our study abroad group arrived in their taxis, and the process of welcome, of introduction, of sitting repeated itself, the dog growing ever more excited before all of us, twenty-one in total with the inclusion of our student coordinators, had finally made their way to house. Weeks earlier, we had arrived a group, twenty-one stumbling as

one into Costa Rica, leaving Nicaragua after months of study within the nation; the protests had erupted, the violence had escalated, and before a breath could be drawn we were boarding a plane, gone to finish the semester in a different country.

Conversation in the house rose and fell with the ebbing of a tide, various voices competing for space over swapped stories. Humidity clung to me like a blanket, sweat beading down my back, and I chuckled at Kyle's words, my friend, seated from where he was on the floor, cradling the dog. Politics stole in and out of conversation a thief, laughter gone in its wake: did we discuss the evolving violence in Nicaragua? Did the whisperings of refugees slipping across the border, as of yet unquantified as anything more than rumor, slink from conversation to conversation? Did any recognition of our own luck, lifted from the country as protests bloomed and flowered within Managua, León, Matagalpa, Bluefields, *el campo*, Rivas, did this specter of our guilt raise its head? Unsure, I only remember the voices of the two young men discussing their hurried, frantic flights from farther North, Honduras but a glimmer in their eyes, a stumbled word in their stories. Zoilamérica had met them through her work at Comunidad Casabierta<sup>13</sup>, an LGBT rights organization in Costa Rica. Between moments of swift, raunchy humor and sage advice, she herself alluded to her own story, of her own flight. She left Nicaragua behind in

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<sup>13</sup> Directly translated, Open-house Community

the grasp of her mother, of her step-father; the daughter of the Vice President Rosario Murillo and step-daughter of Daniel Ortega, the ruling dictatorial couple, Zoilamérica fled to Costa Rica after revealing the years of abuse she faced at the hands of her step-father. Beyond a fierce dedication to activism, to continuing to denounce her family's grip on power, it is Zoilamérica's laugh, which rings like a clap of thunder at several miles distance, that is most notable; a charisma and open-heart that seems to encompass hungrily all those in her sight.

Borders wish to divide, to separate, to create unbridgeable chasms that leave us isolated from one another: To put it lightly, they are often successful. The violence present along the borders of the North American continent is despicable, and racial borders do much to maintain internal division within nation-states. But borders are not fixed. They can be changed, can be fought against, can be destroyed. In this era of mass migrations, in a world brought ever closer through processes of globalization, this truth is even more salient. As Dominican-American author Julia Alvarez rights in her essay "Doña Aída, With Your Permission," "We're a mobile world; borders are melting; nationalities are on the move, often for devastating reasons." Pakistani and British author Mohsin Hamid characterizes the melting borders of nation-states in the face of migration in his novel *Exit West*, "Reading the news at the time one was tempted to conclude that the nation was like a person with multiple

personalities, some insisting on union and some on disintegration, and that this person with multiple personalities was furthermore a person whose skin appeared to be dissolving as they swam in a soup of other people whose skins were likewise dissolving" (158).

Despite a geopolitical national border intended to limit one's mobility, despite a racial border intended to relegate one to a state of inaccess and exclusion, Nicaraguans have made and continue to make resilient and thriving communities within Costa Rica, just as other Central Americans have done and continue to do in México, in the United States; borders are melting, and the choices of individuals to maintain their Nicaraguan accent, the reterritorialization of a Nicaraguan identity in Parque La Merced, are proof that borders are not fated, that they can be resisted and fought against. Nation-states are recognizing this, are responding with the increased militarization of borders and rising nationalist sentiments (Rachman)(Duara); however, migrations, undeterred, continue. Borders are changing as the flow of people, ideas, and products across them increases, something that is ever so palpable on this North American continent; in this moment in a house in San José, Costa Rica. It was the organization Comunidad Casabierta that helped bring Zoilamérica's friends from Honduras and secure them asylum, it was Costa Rica which opened its arms to Zoilamérica as she fled both the violence of her nation and her family, and it was Zoilamérica who opened her home to

nineteen *estadounidense* students who felt lost in a brand new city, the friends they had made in Nicaragua left in danger most of them could not comprehend. Borders, geopolitical and racial, construct one another; and if they are constructed, so can they be deconstructed.

I leave you with this image, of this transnational meeting of souls in one house on one hot day in the largest city of a small country on the continent of North America. We sat, nineteen *estadounidense* students of varying ethnic and racialized identities, three Nicaraguan activists in the form of Zoilamérica Narváez and the program's student coordinators, a grinning and accomplished Costa Rican cook, and two young Honduran activists, all smiling, the smell of lime, of pork, of untold stories perfuming our shared air. Borders, both racial and geographic, are not destiny; how do we imagine a continent beyond them?

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