

## ENCUENTROS



*Downtown Paradise:  
Reflections on Identity  
in Central America*

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Lecture by

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Cultural programs at headquarters feature new as well as established talent from the region. Recognition granted by Washington, D.C. audiences and press often helps propel the careers of new artists. The Center also sponsors lectures on Latin American and Caribbean history and culture, and supports cultural undertakings in the Washington, D.C. area for the local Latin American and Caribbean communities, such as Spanish-language theater, film festivals, and other events.

The IDB Cultural Center *Exhibitions* and the *Concerts and Lectures Series* stimulate dialogue and a greater knowledge of the culture of the Americas. The *Cultural Development in the Field* funds projects in the fields of youth cultural development, institutional support, restoration and conservation of cultural patrimony, and the preservation of cultural traditions. The *IDB Art Collection*, gathered over several decades, is managed by the Cultural Center and reflects the relevance and importance the Bank has achieved after four decades as the leading financial institution concerned with the development of Latin America and the Caribbean.

## DOWNTOWN PARADISE: REFLECTIONS ON IDENTITY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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*Julio Escoto*

### Introduction

This afternoon, I invite you to get to know a region so large (509,640 sq. km), it is almost five times the size of Iceland. But at the same time, the region is so small that it barely traces a bright serpentine outline on the map of America. With 36 million inhabitants—a little more than the population of the valley of Mexico City 510 years after being discovered and barely 181 after gaining independence, this region has attracted the attention of the whole world in the international media.

The region is inhabited by various ethnic and racial groups, some ancient, like the descendants of the Maya, and others as young as the Garinagus, who arrived on the Atlantic coast in 1796. Central America has been a transportation route for adventurers and travelers from all over the globe, a site of struggle for the great empires of history, a place where all the major languages of the earth are spoken and all the deities worshipped.

It has given birth to martyrs, saints and cardinals, but also to fierce guerrillas and tyrants. In the decade of the nineties of the last century, it gave the world a marvelous example of peace with the Esquipulas Accords; although barely sixty years earlier, in 1932, the region saw one of the worst massacres of peasants of all time, during the dictatorship of Maximiliano Hernández Martínez in El Salvador (Acuña Ortega, 1992).

The region has produced extraordinary scientists, like Salvador Moncada, a candidate for the Nobel Prize; astronauts like Franklin Chang Díaz; as well as workers, professionals and talented soccer players, but it usually exports them to more developed countries, whence they send their families the remittances that sustain large sectors of the economy.

The totality of its marine, forest, mining, and agricultural resources would enable it to feed half the starving people on earth. Yet it continues to be one of the poorest areas in the world.

The region is endowed with all manner

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of natural formations—valleys, volcanoes, seas, mountains, jungles, forests— but every year it suffers droughts and floods, scarcities and hunger. Its hospitality has attracted captivating personalities, among them José Antonio Maceo and Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, later declared “Father of the Fatherland” in Cuba (Antúnez, 1989), and José Martí who was born in that country, as well as the U.S. filibusterer William Walker, who upon arriving in one of our nations, seized the reins of power there. The region gave shelter to the U.S. short story writer O. Henry when he was fleeing his country’s courts, and to the lubricious Colombian poet Porfirio Barba Jacob, and before that to Hernán Cortés, who walked 500 leagues in order to know our lands. We must also mention the pirates Francis Drake, Parker, Morgan, and François L’Olonnais, who destroyed major cities, and Oliver North, who conspired there in 1981 (Woodward, 1987).

After such an extensive introduction, it hardly seems necessary to name this evening’s illustrious guest of honor. Yet the demands of courtesy bestow on me the pleasure of presenting the young Central America, baptized by Columbus as the West Indies, and by the 16th-century Spanish authorities as the Kingdom of Guatemala. For eighteen months it was the Province of the Empire of Agustín Iturbide, Emperor of Mexico (1822); in 1823, during the struggle for independence, it was named the United Provinces of Central America; later, when the liberal positivists were in power, it was called the Federal Republic of Central America (Pinto Soria, 1992); it was called “Poyais” by the mythic king of La Mosquitia and the Scotsman Gregor MacGregor (Flores

Andino, 1989), and described by Pablo Neruda, in his *Canto general*, as “the belt that encircles America.”

What is this isthmus surrounded by lovely seas, sprinkled with Edenic islands, host to the most surprising fauna—trapped in its contours since the cataclysm that formed the Earth—and a flora that could be the source of thousands of medicines beneficial to humanity? It is all that and many other things besides, for Central America today is experiencing one of its most transcendental moments, a great epoch of change or period of transformation, an evolutionary process that is difficult to predict.

It is worth emphasizing that the isthmus has always demonstrated an intense concern about its own identity. Facing strong pressure to integrate itself with the modern mechanisms of globalization, Central America looks out on its future through the optic of its recent and distant past. Like a maiden afraid of leaving her family home to begin an independent life, the region assimilates modern cultures through the lens of its own biography. Each one of its countries emphasizes, nurtures, and takes shelter in its origins from thousand- or hundred-year-old cultures which in their moment established the bases of their respective identities. There is not a single Central American country that does not have a celebration day for its indigenous national hero, be he Tecún Umán, Lempira, Atlacatl, Nicarao, Pablo Presbere, Nicoya, or Urraca. Even the recently established nation of Belize is exploring the coral reefs of its memory in order to know the foundations of its existence, without necessarily throwing off the great weight of its British cultural genesis.

This extremely interesting phenomenon shows how the region perceives, perhaps intuitively, and without disparaging the advances of modernity and post-modernity, that it should not naively cede to the influence of foreign cultures, but rather practice a kind of symbiosis that allows it to reap the benefits of these influences, while retaining its own essence.

### Language

It appears that language evolves in a natural manner. Among the newer generations, for example, it is increasingly common to speak English, but there is also a certain tendency to “nationalize” this tongue. English is a ubiquitous language—and here is the origin of my lecture’s title—and, as such, is subjected to some curious local adaptations.

The *watchman* or guard who patrolled the banana plantations of earlier times is no longer remembered as such; today, he has become the local *guachimán* who surveils urban neighborhoods. In Honduras, we say *chapear* when we mean “cut the grass,” and this comes from the old *shaping*, or pruning, of gardens. After 1850, the railroad had great importance in Central America, and railway workers developed such an exceptionally rich language that numerous experts in universities have dedicated themselves to the study not only of that idiom but of other workers’ idioms, as well. There are exhaustive published studies on the linguistic riches of the banana workers, sugar workers, peasants, and fishermen; needless to say, there are also studies of urban youth, whose speech and other instruments of communication change quickly and express a particular world view.

In the Caribbean, for example, there are still people who call the 10-cents coin a *daime*, for the old North American *dime*; and many very old people still say *cuara* to refer to the quarter, or 25-cent coin; on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, you still hear *grinbac*, from *greenback*, for the dollar bill, whose verso side is green. You still find adults in the street who will ask you for a *búfalo*, or the U.S. coin emblazoned with the head of that animal.

According to the Honduran humorist Armando García, in the time of *Mamita Yunai*, or the United Fruit Company, there was a train that crossed the banana fields every Sunday, whose cars each had a label saying *Merchandise*. People soon re-named this now-mythic train, *el machangai*; similarly, they baptized the employee who raised the brake flag to couple the wagons the *brequero*. The plant fumigator was called the *venenero* (for *venom*, which was written on the product containers), and the gardener was called the *yardero* (for *yard*).

In Limón, Costa Rica; Bluefields, Nicaragua; Bocas del Toro, Panama, and Livingston, Guatemala—though not in Mestizo areas—Afro-Caribbean descendants communicate in a kind of re-invented English, wrought from historical experiences.

On the other hand, urban areas give rise to *Spanglish*, the linguistic phenomenon of the twenty-first century, a hybrid that is gaining vigor in the same way as the romance languages did when they broke off from Latin. This could well lead to the marvelous formation of a new American language. According to scholars, *Spanglish* could be a transitional means of communication, a kind of slang

that becomes a dialect, and that might one day become a new language. In the United States, thirty million Spanish-speakers currently speak *Spanglish*.

But in Central America there are also areas where the Spanish that is spoken is so pure it seems to have been maintained unchanged from the time of the Conquest. In places like the rural interior of El Salvador and Honduras, Matagalpa in Nicaragua, Santa María de Dota in Costa Rica, and the cordillera of central Panama, it is not unusual to hear archaic adverbs like *agora*, basic conjugations like *vide*, and respectful salutations, like *su merced* (“Your Mercy”), long out of use in modern communities.

Although it is increasingly unusual, this fidelity to purity has allowed for the survival of a popular poetry rooted in the mountains, valleys, and sierras of Central America, and which is typically recited to the accompaniment of guitar. It is the poetry of the rhymesters of the markets, of simple Christian communities, the Marians, Evangelists, and Mennonites who sing the classics in verses built on eight, nine, or ten-syllable lines, from Solentiname to Chontales, from Choluteca to Olancho, from Escazú to Guápiles, from Quetzaltenango to Golfo Dulce, from San Miguel to La Palma, and from Farallón to Paso Canoas.

This classic poetry nourishes, with native sap, the provincial literary contests, village squares, and bars where, with or without accordion, stories are told of requited or unrequited love, folk songs are passed down, and local heroes are celebrated. It is an ingenuous poetry in danger of disappearing and poorly documented, in spite of the efforts of two in-

stitutions that research the popular arts of Guatemala and Costa Rica.

#### Linguistic Humor

The examples given above make clear that Central America resists simplistic labeling. Thanks to an imaginative use of language—making it a force for conservation in spite of change—communities use tradition itself to mark the pace of renewal, transforming without drastically changing. Shared language is the anchor that assures that values will endure, that encourages and facilitates interchange, allowing the inhabitants to feel that they are part of a community, which though not precisely defined is certainly vigorous. Language fulfils another vital and therapeutic function, as well: it provides an outlet for the expression of frustration and happiness in a context rife with political ills and other problems.

Few peoples are as skilled as the Central Americans when it comes to linguistic humor, especially in the Caribbean. The approval level of a political leader can often be measured—and with greater exactitude than through a survey—by the number of “political” jokes that are invented about his administration. In the decades of the sixties and seventies of the last century, public ridicule could corrode a president’s power base (this is not the case today). Ydígoras Fuentes in Guatemala, Ernesto Cruz in Honduras, as well as the various military dictatorships, were all weakened, in part, by the multitude of jokes that circulated about them. It is said that José Napoleón Duarte and Rodrigo Carazo regularly asked their friends, with great equanimity, about the latest jokes that had been invented about them.

The philosopher Henri Bergson noted that this type of humor is born from the formal rigidity and ossified outlook imposed, more often than not, by academics, functionaries and political leaders, whose perspective forces them to adopt behaviors that are highly unnatural. Blinded by protocol, these figures become stiff, assume postures of dominance, forgetting that their office is not permanent, but rather a temporary distinction. The people react by making fun of the robotic behaviors and mechanical personalities of their leaders, forcing them to bear in mind their inevitable descent from Olympus, to remember that ultimately they are on equal terms with the people. An anthology of Central American political humor would require hundreds and hundreds of volumes continually brought up to date.

The most recent example I've heard of this type of humor is a joke about a *Sandinista* chief of security who was so severe and rigid, so obsessed with his profession, that one day, in order to distract him, they took him fishing. But frustrated with their paltry catch, he rose up and grabbed the gills of a small fish that had the misfortune to come nibbling at the hook. "Today you will tell the truth," he yelled, "You will confess where the fat fish are hiding..."

This could have happened anywhere in the isthmus, for all a Central American needs to make a joke is a little confidence: we invent incredible nicknames, even for people we barely know; a single joke told among friends gives rise to a whole raft of jokes and anecdotes. The energy gets so intense that one is wise to exercise some caution; in this ludic activity—and everything is essentially a game—we see

irony and ingeniousness, boisterousness and hilarity, jesting and comedy, but also satire and sarcasm, burlesque and ridicule, cruelty and impiety.

It is abundantly clear that language has a vital importance for us. It is the perfect vehicle for containing emotional dramas, for there is always someone who will lighten the most solemn occasion with a bit of humor. Even today, adolescents watching a play will interrupt the climax with some wisecrack, so as to distance themselves from feelings they can't handle.

Language is the antidote for pain and suffering, which can be mitigated with humorous wordplay. And language is a marvelous exercise in itself: it enchants, captivates, mesmerizes, particularly when wielded by talented orators, whose charisma has a special attraction for Central Americans. We cite the civic-military harangues of Francisco Morazán in the nineteenth century (Ortega, 1991); the strategic and poetic proclamations of Augusto César Sandino; the messianic speeches of José Figueres when his revolution was toppled in 1948; the rhetoric of Juan José Arévalo in Guatemala and Ramón Villeda Morales in Honduras in the middle of the last century; the verses of Rubén Darío, which everyone knows by heart; José Martí's poem "The Girl from Guatemala," which, in spite of its testimony to cruelty and betrayal, is recited in schools. In Central America, we have oral language as a medium for intense emotion; political speech that fails to convince but gives rise to the rebellious jokes we all hold inside; refined, well-wrought language that demonstrates our intelligence and superiority. The word is the vessel of a whole complex cosmos, the word—whose magic is to be many words

at once—seduces Central Americans with the irresistible force of a hurricane, making us feel, if only for an instant, that we are the heartbeat of the world.

One of the most famous speeches in the collective memory of Hondurans was given in San Salvador on September 15, 1882, by Alvaro Contreras on the occasion of the unveiling of a bust of Francisco Morazán. That beautiful presentation opened with the words, “We stand in the presence of the personification, in bronze, of the first Central American hero,” and concluded with “Suppress the genius of Morazán and you will have annihilated the soul of Central American history.” This demonstration of verbal deftness instilled in our intellectuals a new concept of language: that it had to be administered, not merely pronounced.

Central Americans in general are singularly keen to the musicality of language, to its marvelous capacity for organizing ethereal subjects in a way that constructs and proposes new worlds; we continue to listen to politicians—the honest ones as well as the liars—in order to discern not what they propose (no one believes them anymore), but how they propose it. Language constructs and “deconstructs” us, expresses our complexity, helps to perpetuate the collective “I.”

Perhaps this is why Central America is creating one of the most provocative literatures in the world. The historical novel, which was believed to be dead, at least in its traditional mode, has returned with great vitality to salvage the atavistic memory that lay, like a latent magma or wheezing geyser, in the collective subconscious (Menton, 2002). Unlike the thick, heavy Russian novel, the chronicle

packed with detail about events and personalities, contemporary Central American narrative is developing a new model. In one form or another, the principal character is the entire perennial community—*el pueblo*—which, in spite of the bruises of destiny, keeps itself alive, recovers and forges on after each traumatic experience in order to pursue its desire for peace and solidarity.

This effort to clarify and demystify history, has produced fine contemporary literary works that deal with recent or distant events: Sandino (Gloria Guardia, *Libertad en llamas* [Freedom in Flames]); the nightmare under Somoza (Sergio Ramírez, *Margarita, está linda la mar* [Margarita, the Sea is Beautiful]); Central American identity (Julio Escoto, *Rey del Albor. Madrugada* [King of the Sunrise. Dawn]); “Caribbean” themes (Lisandro Chávez Alfaro, *Columpio al aire* [Swing High in the Air]); socialized eroticism (Frank Galich, *Devórame otra vez* [Devour Me Again]); compromised revolution (Manlio Argueta’s unpublished, *Los poetas del mal* [Poets of Evil]); ethical chaos (Marco Antonio Flores, *Los compañeros* [Companions]); and the myth that comes from the future (Roberto Castillo’s unpublished, *La Guerra mortal de los sentidos* [Mortal War of the Senses]).

Perhaps I am mistaken, but there are two regions where cultural globalization will find resistance, and these are Europe and Latin America, who have at last become sisters, cousins, and mutual partners. I do not mean there is blind or irrational resistance, but a contentious resistance of a cultural nature. The roots of Central American peoples are so deep and vigorous, and at the same time, so little known, that they evince a natural

instinct for self-preservation so as not to be annihilated. Herein is found the strength on which Central America has sustained itself.

### Music

It would be unjust to speak of the musicality of language without mentioning the language of music. One of the most extraordinary phenomena in contemporary Central America is the great passion for music. If we were to draw a map of the rhythms, melodies, songs, and beats in Caribbean Central America, our eye would probably be unable to take it all in, so large is the territory we would have to draw. Without any pretense to making an exhaustive survey, the Atlantic coast of the isthmus is rocked awake every morning by meringues, boleros, salsas, vallenatos, and reggae. But there is also music that continually circulates on the airwaves, translating itself from one island to another, from one coast to another. With the dawn, radios and sound systems are turned on to greet the day with soul and calypso, or with their combination, soca. In Belize, they dance the parranda; in Nicaragua, they dance around the May Pole; in Panama, there is dancing to small drums. And we must not omit the beguine, pop, and funk. Heads bounce and feet move to the strains of *papiamento*, a new language that comes from Dutch, Portuguese, English, Spanish, and French, and which nobody understands but which everyone dances to. It is redolent of fried fish, a provocative fragrance that once inhaled stays on the skin.

In the evening someone will play a little jazz on the saxophone, or sing some Creole *zouk* whose laments are in the vein

of Negro Spirituals, reminding us of New Orleans. Or they dance to the beat of the Haitian merengue, or the *punta* of the Garinagus, a fiery sound that began as a funeral ritual and that is slowly distilled in the blood like powerful liquor.

### The Theme of Identity

Everything we have discussed above is connected strongly and deeply to the incessant efforts of the peoples of Central America to find their own identity. A simple, but by no means arbitrary, analogy could be drawn between Central America and an adolescent in the difficult stage of education and personality development. Being young, these communities lack a deep and solid knowledge of their respective histories, and so must navigate between the search for and establishment of basic definitions, between what they are and what they want to be. They begin by losing their innocence as they acquire consciousness of their own potential.

This trajectory manifests itself in a most interesting process of salvaging historical values and excavating historical events. For many years, perhaps centuries, the history of the region was written by the victors of political contests and struggles, by the cultural elites who usually belonged to the upper social classes and whose optic was tinted with the colors of the traditional political, if not religious, sectors.

Each new narration of a political event has generated controversy and polemic, since almost immediately the intellectual cadre in opposition would respond with a second interpretation, on some occasions providing documentary evidence,

on others merely hurling insults and libel. A consequence of these centennial ordeals is that the history of Central America has never been written with objectivity, and this has produced great confusion. One of the most respected Central American historians, Lorenzo Montúfar, has been accused of destroying historical documents that oppose his own liberal ideology. To cite just one example, in order to evaluate the case of William Walker in Central America, researchers are obliged to consult sources that contradict each other, depending on whether they come from writers of liberal democrat, or legitimist conservative, bent.

Decades had to pass before scholars could elucidate the factors that led to the independence of Panama, and clarify the motives of the figures involved. In Costa Rica, analysts still do not agree on whether Francisco Morazán was a liberal or a dictator (Cáliz Suazo, 1997). In Honduras, the Partido Nacional (National Party) continues to revere General Manuel Bonilla, while the Partido Liberal (Liberal Party) remembers him for having promoted the coup, with the support and resources of the banana companies, to which he later granted juicy contracts. In El Salvador, Manuel José Arce is still a subject of controversy not only as the first rebel for independence, but also as the first corruptor of the Federation. Yet today in Guatemala, the great Miguel Ángel Asturias is remembered more for having accepted a certain diplomatic mission than for his literary creations. One need only broach these subjects for conversation to explode with arguments, replies, and counter-arguments, and this manner of viewing history through the biases of a particular party, still exercises its effect.

Toward the decade of the seventies, however, the first scientifically-trained historians began returning to our countries, usually after completing their studies abroad. They brought with them better analytic tools, but also—and why not say it?—they were polarized by the ideological combat of the Cold War. While some approached reality with a structuralist vision, for example, others did so through a materialist optic, which turned subjects of study into new battlefields in the wars of intellectual interpretation. Fortunately, professional standards prevailed, and today numerous research institutes, universities, and independent centers are dedicated to putting order to the documentary reservoirs pertaining to the 19th and 20th centuries, so as to establish a commonly accepted base, or point of departure, for the writing of the region's history.

The task is plagued with difficulties. In the first place, the majority of historians in the past relied on oral narrations, or second-hand accounts, of the events they describe. With the exception of Eduardo Martínez López, who is believed to be the only author who studied the archives of the Federal Republic of El Salvador before they were burned in the 1850s, chroniclers depended on earlier works or personal interviews. Testimony and personal narrations are valid, of course, in the rendering of specific events and are accepted today as an element of micro-history, but they must be corroborated by other voices and testimonies that contribute their own level of precision. Unfortunately, such efforts to layer and corroborate sources were rarely carried out in the 19th century.

In the second place, virtually none of

those historians—exceptions were exceedingly rare—provided bibliographical references, documents, or solid sources for their chronicles. Nor, in the elaboration of their syntheses, did they admit of opposing viewpoints. The healthy acceptance of divergent views essentially did not exist in the practice of writing history. A great many of the history books written until the decade of the 1950s were constructed on the basis of personal preferences, forced interpretations and, very often, the cover-up of facts.

It can be said openly that the generations prior to the middle of the twentieth century were educated before the mirror of official history, which contemplated human events anecdotally, through a tight-focus lens, rather than as an unfolding process; reality was seen as essentially chronological rather than social, and the resulting disjunctions perforce have clouded, instead of illuminated the panorama. There was a lack of major, trustworthy documentation centers, institutions on the level of the Archivo de Indias in Spain, or the Library of Congress in the United States, to cite only two places that facilitate the type of regional research to which we are all committed.

As surely must be clear by now, efforts to excavate national memory and regional history constitute an immense task. These are visceral concerns—the petrified magma or underground river—in Central America. The monstrous distortion of history over the last centuries and decades gave rise to myths, and fostered scorn for the brotherhood that should have existed among peoples subjected to a similar destiny: myths, erroneous perceptions, deformations, doubt, and sus-

picion between one State and another, rifts between communities, the loss of the seeds of regional integration. The atmosphere of fear is still so intense that, barely six months ago, the presidents of the Central American nations met in Guatemala to sign a Non-Aggression Pact, in order to declare to the world that we have finally overcome the cruel instincts of nomadic tribes and that we aspire to live in peace.

My point here is that Central American psychology is so complex that, more than a psychiatrist, it needs a spiritual “bread maker,” a master who can knead the separate parts, so that the milk, yeast, and flour come together as a single dough which, in the oven, will rise to become the new Central America of the twenty-first century. And, needless to say, this bread maker is education, the great force or demystifying project capable of crumbling away differences and assimilating us into the great nation we deserve to be, especially as we tread our delicate path toward globalization.

### Myths of Identity

Of course, part of the civilizing function consists in erasing many myths (Sebreli, 1992). Let us begin with the myths of history, since we must know where we come from in order to know where we are headed. One of the most transcendental myths concerns our first heroes, that is to say, the figures we take as our guideposts today. We need to comb through the Archivo de Indias in order to know the leaders of the resistance to the Spanish Conquest, so that we may be inspired by this first expression of autochthonous identity and struggle for freedom. But we

must also acknowledge when and how the conquerors and conquered first mixed their blood, who provided the first semen, and who the first fertilized egg; we must let ourselves be nourished by this virgin example of tolerance and togetherness.

**Indigenous heroes.** The most honest and exigent intellectual effort must be devoted to exhaustive research on this subject. According to historian Mario Felipe Martínez (Martínez Castillo, 1989; Sosa, 1999), the cacique Lempira, the eponymous figure of Honduran identity, was not brought down by the infamous betrayal of the Spanish captains under the command of Alonso de Cáceres (Barahona, 1991), as school textbooks taught for the last two hundred years. Now we know that he died in hand-to-hand combat, that is to say, in a battle with his peers.

In the same way, various Salvadoran intellectuals—including Pedro Escalante Arce—accuse the writer Jorge Lardé y Larín of having invented for the indigenous pantheon a heroic figure he named Atlacatl, who yet today is considered to symbolize the rebelliousness that characterizes the noble people of El Salvador.

Fuentes y Guzmán, author of the lovely chronicle *Recordación florida*, concludes his narration of the death of the Guatemalan hero Tecún Umán at the hands of Pedro de Alvarado in a metaphoric style of high poetic quality but dubious objectivity. According to Fuentes y Guzmán, in the final battle on the plains of Quetzaltenango, Tecún Umán returned to his “natural” state as a quetzal in order to direct the battle from the air, until the Iberian conquistador ran him through

with his lance (Fuentes y Guzmán, 1933).

In the environs of San Pedro Sula, Honduras, one can still visit the ruins of a bastion of indigenous resistance called Palenque (Pastor Fasquelle, 1995), about which another historian has advanced the debatable thesis that it was there that Gonzalo Guerrero, the Spaniard who turned renegade in the Yucatán, took shelter and taught the Indians the art of fighting with sophisticated Spanish weapons.

The Afro-Caribbean Garífuna (Kalinagu) community living on the coasts of Belize, Honduras, and Nicaragua, recount in their legends of having traded with the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua since 1750; it is told that in March 1797, 3,338 members of their community were deported by the English to the Honduran island of Roatán (Leiva Vivas, 1982). The reason given is the 1795 rebellion in San Vicente, directed by their hero Joseph Chatoyer o Satuye (Meléndez, 1987), but there are no documents that prove these illustrious stories.

Finally, we must state that these founding figures of atavistic memory, raised to the level of eponymous hero in each of their countries, were not the only ones to strike out for freedom against European domination. There were many more, perhaps hundreds, who in every region headed groups to defend their endangered territories and peoples; yet their history too has yet to be written.

What all this tells us is that there has been an intense search into Central American social memory and, at the same time, a scarcity of documented history. Until very recently, the citizens of the isthmus had a vision of their region that was based on a more or less condensed assem-

blage of presumably historical references, beliefs, oral accounts, and new findings that often contradicted the typical “official history.” That is to say, we are living in a time of vigorous and fascinating investigations into our common roots, but, at the same time, in a limbo or neutral space in which present values will need to be modified or changed. As the logic of philosophy teaches us, “In order to undertake change, one must first be conscious of that which is to be changed” (Bronowski, 1973). This phase of re-definition and re-encounter is naturally vital for the formation of identity.

**Mestizo heroes.** It is equally crucial to pursue research on the Mestizo heroes—let us use that honorific—in the Colonial period and just after independence. By far the most controversial figure is Francisco Morazán, idealized by Salvadorans, all but deified by Hondurans, but detested by the Guatemalans and especially by the Costa Ricans.

Some recent studies on this important figure of the Central American Federation describe his facility for imposing his own ways and standards, as well as his almost genetic inability to negotiate with conservatives and the Church, his inveterate conjugal infidelity, and revolutionary zeal that went far beyond political need and convenience. Yet even today, 160 years after his death, no one has been able to prove that he committed a single dishonest act. There is still disagreement in the global memory of Central America as to his ethical conduct; even in Costa Rica, where school texts condemn his presence in history, one of the beautiful parks in the capital of San José carries his name, and the rigorous historian Carlos

Meléndez Chaverri has made a public proposal that the figure and influence of Morazán be objectively re-examined.

In Guatemala, the name of Rafael Carrera elicits praise from some, and repugnance from others. Serious analysts like José Mata Gavidia, whose *Anotaciones de historia patria* has been used for decades as a school textbook, vacillate between excoriating his fierce Presidency for Life [*Presidencia Vitalicia*], a dictatorship that lasted thirty years, and praising his dedication to improving material conditions. Some have gone so far as to compare him with Mariano Gálvez, one of Guatemala’s founding fathers. According to Mata Gavidia, Carrera imposed “his iron rule on the reigning chaos” of the time, implying an admiration for an organizational ability dependent on ideological underpinnings, which the leader lacked, and which might have been simple animal virtue (Mata Gavidia, 1969).

We could cite many more opposing opinions, hundreds of them, but we are not here today to compile a catalog of dissensions. In future conversations, we could dwell, for example, on the respective behaviors of antagonists like Estrade Cabrera and Arbenz Guzmán in Guatemala, or Froylán Turcios and Augusto César Sandino, or Sandino y Farabundo Martí, or the “beloved” Costa Rican dictator Braulio Carrillo and Juan Rafael Mora, the virtuous hero he shot in 1860; the Gnostic inclinations of tyrant Hernández Martínez or Juan Lindo, El Salvador’s foreign-born president and founder of its national university; and, of course, the conflicts of that period so close to us today, the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, during which Central America was transformed into the epicenter of the

Cold War when the opposing forces of capitalism and Marxism confronted each other in our territories.

But before I close, I would like to mention two other sources that nourish and enrich us as we progress toward a definition of communal identity, and that help strengthen ideals for integration.

**Heroines.** In Central America, the historical, traditional, and even contemporary, structural foundation is essentially *machista*, and so women lack a social presence. This is due, of course, to contextual causes, and it notable that, in general, men have not only been the authors of the region's history, but its protagonists, as well.

The exceptions are few: a Mayan government that co-founded the Copán dynasty around 300 A.D., and whose royal tomb is presently being excavated (Fash and Agurcia, 1996); La Malinche, who though not Central American, presumably spent time here, leaving her disturbing tracks; the heroine Rafaela Herrera, who at the age of 19, helped defend the fort of San Carlos in Nicaragua (1762); María Manuela Rodríguez Mojica, a Christian captured by a Mesquite chief in Juigalpa, Nicaragua (1782), and whose romance could have changed the course of history (Floyd, 1990); Dolores Bedoya de Molina, brilliant activist and vivacious agitator during the struggle for independence in Guatemala; and the thousands of *vivanderas*, or women from the lower classes who accompanied their men in revolutions and internal wars, and who are still and forever anonymous co-participants in the formation of Central American psychology. In spite of these exceptions, and perhaps a few more besides, I must repeat that our countries

provide but few demonstrations of female action, for the names in the records made prior to the twentieth century are all but exclusively male.

**Religion.** The second element I wish to emphasize is religion. As is well known, Central America was predominantly Catholic until the 17th century, when English agents began intervening in regional life; the Moravian sect imposed itself in a sizable slice of the isthmus, in the villages of La Mosquitia, and began to make notable changes in the Roman Catholic concept of the relation between man and the deity. Thousands of pages have been written about this phenomenon, but for now I wish only to highlight the presence of the religion in the process of identity formation, which is our subject for this evening.

In Central America, religion was an essential force in the Spanish Conquest and in the consolidation of the whole colonial system. Yet early on religion also played a major role in confronting the European establishment: with Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, whose accusations led to the New Laws of 1542, as well as during independence in 1821, when various rebels and autonomist groups—an example is Belén in Guatemala—nourished and precipitated rebel actions. This goes on the positive side of the ledger.

Still, it was the religious sector that radically opposed the liberal federation, and blocked its projects by joining with Rafael Carrera's conservative faction. In 19th-century Central America, the clergy didn't hesitate to bind political astuteness with dogma and theology. In order to destroy the confederation, it was declared *in canonis* that the nun Santa

Teresa de Jesús de Aycinena, sister to the Marqués de Aycinena (in the Guatemala of 1829), was receiving letters directly from God giving tactical directions for how to vanquish the liberal atheist Morazán (Escoto, 1996).

Central American virgins and saints appear miraculously between 1715 and 1747. All of a sudden, as though God suddenly remembered Central America, Nicaragua produces Santo Domingo de Guzmán (discovered by the Indian Juan in the Managua sierra in 1715); Honduras announces Our Lady of the Conception of Suyapa (1747, found by the peasant Alejandro Colindres); El Salvador discovers the Virgin of Peace, in San Miguel; Costa Rica sanctifies its Virgin of the Angels, and Panama the Black Christ of Portobelo and Veraguas (Barceló, 2000).

All of Central America suddenly seems to shine with celestial grace. Tithes increase, congregations are reborn, seminaries and monasteries swell in population, and make ambitious plans to build cathedrals (that of Panama taking the longest, at 109 years). The Catholic religion operates as a both a strong earthly anchor, and as an agent for the dissemination of superstition.

In Nicaragua, in 1983, there was the curious case of “manipulated” zeal. In an effort to rally popular opposition to the government, Church authorities resorted to a most extreme tactic. One night, they secretly placed the ceramic image of the Virgin Mary in a freezer, and left her there for several hours. At dawn, they returned her to her usual niche, visited in the early hours by anxious seekers of her blessing. Logically, the bust of the Madonna started to sweat in Managua’s stifling heat, which the clerics immedi-

ately declared to be a sign that atheism and pagan political proposals were causing the Mother of Christ to suffer. Soon enough, the trick was discovered, but in the minds of many of the faithful, the miracle was never in doubt.

Nonetheless, during the decade of the 1970s, liberation theology provided a religious counter-influence. Promulgating a humanitarian spirit that favors the poor, it expanded consciousness and imagination in millions of the faithful, making them see that there is no theological conflict between God’s love and one’s dignity on earth. But in the 1980s, there was a new wave of superstition. Today, there are more than 380 religious sects, many of them with foreign financial and political backing. These groups occupy not only pulpits, but radio and television stations, as well.

But there also exists another Central America—picaresque and inventive; keen and malicious; whose exploited indigenous groups possess a tricky, double-edged humility; and whose Ladinos, with their dual heritage, are extraordinarily adaptive; whose younger generations idolize Britney Spears and suffer all sorts of caprices, while others suffer from a lack of basic necessities. This world is, of course, like the rest of the world, but at the same time it seeks to occupy a unique place among nations, one of its own creation, and based on its common “individuality.”

Central America is also a place of marvels, where we are often forced to wonder if we’re living in a heaven of logic or a paradise of the strange and incoherent. The first mass in the Americas was celebrated when Christopher Columbus arrived at Punto Caxinas (Trujillo, Dominican Republic) in 1502, and this is the only

place in the Americas with a man-made transoceanic underpass, where judges still wear capes, gloves and wigs when they preside in court (Belize), and where the first capital was established for a whole vast kingdom, that of Guatemala, whose perimeters coincide with those of today's Puebla-Panama Plan, put forth by Mexican president, Vicente Fox.

It is a region of short memory, not given to rancor, that allowed the dictator Tiburcio Carías Andino to die peacefully in his bed; but it is also a region whose currencies—the Balboa, Colón, Lempira, Quetzal, Córdoba—evoke ancient roots, and whose guerrilla movements—Farabundo Martí, Frente Sandinista, Frente Morazanista, Comando Tecún Umán—carry the names of rebel ancestors.

If the banana contracts of the 20th century had been fulfilled, Honduras today would have the most extensive railroad network in the isthmus. Yet Tegucigalpa is the only capital on the continent without trains. Until 1950, persons of the Negro race were prohibited from entering San José in Costa Rica; Belize, however, memorialized them by erecting Central America's only monument in honor of the Garífuna.

In Nicaragua, there is a spring that whistles; Costa Rica has the only poisonous frog in the Americas; in Honduras, every July, it rains fish in the Department of the Yoro. Panama is the only country in America where the sun rises over the Pacific and sets over the Atlantic. In Guatemala, the Black Christ of Esquipulas has as many devotees as the white Jesus Christ. In San Salvador, they built the only monument on earth dedicated to a patron that does not belong to the community of saints: the Savior of the World.

## Conclusion

As you were forewarned, this talk was not conceived to be an academic treatise, but rather an intellectual provocation, since I could not have aspired to give even a partially exhaustive analysis of the simultaneously troubling and hopeful phenomenon that is Central America. There are still hundreds of topics to be explored. Among them, I would cite the vital importance of the interventions of all the modern empires, which in the process of meeting their own objectives, constantly effected changes in the region's identity and destiny; the unjust accumulation of interest on the foreign debt, which limits not only domestic proposals and socioeconomic projects, but chokes off hope, as well; the dream of a revolution that came to Central America but got perverted, just like the governments of rival conservatives; the myopia of a bourgeoisie and of a young generation born without the makings of heroism and who prefer to contemplate reality from the vantage of the television screen, at a distance from life itself.

Nevertheless, there is a Central America that, in spite of the catastrophes and negative influences, has not lost its identity; a Central America of honored professionals and laborers, of thousands of individuals who refuse to accept the corruption of their politicians and who hope to change that dark panorama; a Central America of poets, artists and thinkers who, despite habitual repression and economic discrimination, continue to create; a Central America of millions of children who attend school, despite all manner of hardship, in order to build the groundwork for a new region; and of par-

ents who raise their children with admirable dignity.

Central America is in search of who it was, not in order to repeat the past, but rather to improve upon it. Today this prodigious land is embarked on a process of change that is increasingly rich. This must be the triumph of hope, the vital essence that, day by day, nourishes our natural desire for transformation.

Thank you all very much.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Indira". The script is fluid and cursive, with a prominent loop at the end.

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