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U.S. Central Americans: reconstructing memories, struggles, and communities of resistance

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**U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance.** Karina Oliva Alvarado, Alicia Ivonne Estrada, Ester E. Hernández, eds. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2017. 256 pp. 978-0816534067

*U.S. Central Americans: Reconstructing Memories, Struggles, and Communities of Resistance* is a long overdue, illuminating collection of work on Central American communities in the U.S. by immigrant and U.S. born Central American scholars. Since the 1980s, the Central American population in the U.S. has grown exponentially, but has remained invisible in larger conversations about Latinidad and Latinx<sup>1</sup> education issues (Lesser & Batalova, 2017; Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017; Torres 2004). Historically, the instances where Central Americans were visible in scholarly work, it was only within discussions of violence, trauma, and death. *U.S. Central Americans* (2017) brings forth a collective of powerful, scholarly voices that highlight the unique histories and experiences of Central Americans living in the U.S. by “[shifting] beyond civil wars and political factions to community emplacement and social justice within the United States,” therefore making a significant intervention to the ways in which Central Americans have been studied and written about in the past (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017, p. IX). The contributing authors and editors present readers with critical examinations of the U.S. colonial and neo-colonial projects that have displaced hundreds and propelled migration to the U.S.; and within a U.S. context, the scholars interrogate questions of identity, memory, cultural production, gendered experiences, and transnationalism for members of the Central American diaspora (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017). By providing the language and critical analysis necessary to begin to understand the complexities and heterogeneity of Latinxs in the U.S., this volume, although not grounded in the field of education, is a significant contribution to the knowledge base of any scholar and advocate interested in the complex experiences of Latinx students.

In the preface, the authors discuss how this volume was born out of conversations amongst each other “as Central American-born scholars writing on intersected Central American and U.S. communities” who are attempting to build a community of U.S. Central American scholars to “[provide] an alternative framework for analysis for Latina/o studies through its inclusions of U.S. Central

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “Latinx” with an intentional use of the “x” for the purposeful erasure of the heteronormative gender binary. Please see *Why We Say Latinx: Trans and Gender Non-Conforming People Explain* (Reichard, 2015) for more information. For further information on the use of “Latinx” in higher education see: Salinas Jr, C., & Lozano, A. (2017). Mapping and recontextualizing the evolution of the term Latinx: An environmental scanning in higher education. *Journal of Latinos and Education*, 1-14.

Americans” (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017, p.IX). Alvarado is a visiting lecturer in the Chicana/o Studies department at UCLA, as well as a contributing poet in *The Wandering Song: Central American Writing in the United States* (2017). Estrada is an associate professor in the Chicana/o Studies department at California State University, Northridge and a collaborator with *Contacto Ancestral*, a Maya radio program (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017). Hernandez is a professor of Chicana/o and Latina/o studies at California State University, Los Angeles and has also served on the executive board for the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights of Los Angeles. The contributing authors for this volume are established professors and current doctoral students, and come from a variety of disciplines and fields, such as Sociology, English, Chicana/o Studies, and Spanish -to name a few. The interdisciplinary backgrounds of each of the contributors and editors of this volume make for a robust body of knowledge and perspectives on Central American experiences in the U.S.

Aiming to “[unsettle] the ways in which scholars, media, and other Latina/os perceive the U.S. Central American condition,” the ten essays, based on research by the contributing authors, are divided into two major sections. The first of these is on the “Generational Oral Histories of Education and Gendered Labor and Resistance Literature” (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017, p.37). In this section, scholars are interrogating and discussing the realities of migrating to the U.S. as well as, the power of memory in the U.S. Central American experience (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017).

In the second section of the volume, “Diversity and Memory: Creating Counter-Hegemonic Spaces and Practices in Public Places,” the authors take the concept of memory discussed in section one, but place it in the context of the public space (Alvarado, Estrada, & Hernandez, 2017, p.123). In other words, contributing scholars to this section discuss how Central American celebratory parades, street artists, and community centers interrogate experiences of oppression, colonialism, and hegemony, and challenge the state, nationalism, and existing systems of power.

One of the most significant contributions of this collection of essays is the final chapter authored by the editors, where they put a call to action for other scholars to continue the necessary work by bringing visibility to the U.S. Central American community and move towards institutionalizing U.S. Central American Studies in universities. In offering suggestions for future areas of study, the editors acknowledge their own shortcomings in this volume and constructively urge scholars to continue complicating the conversation on U.S. Central American experiences.

An area of improvement for this book, which is recognized by the editors, is the importance of further diversifying the Central American voices represented. This volume mostly contained chapters focused on Salvadorans and the Los

Angeles community. This volume and subsequent volumes would greatly benefit from the inclusion of Black Central American and Indigenous narratives. Although *U.S. Central Americans* brings forth voices that have traditionally been at the margins in discussions of Latinidad and immigration in the U.S., we, as Central American scholars must be cautious to not further perpetuate homogenization when discussing Central American histories and experiences.

Not only does *U.S. Central Americans* highlight the legacies of resilience, survival, and community building by Central Americans living in the U.S., but it also challenges researchers of all fields and disciplines to confront the ways we frame conversations about Latinidad and immigrant populations to an asset-based perspective rather than one that is culturally deficient. *U.S. Central Americans* reminds us that trauma and resilience are not mutually exclusive when speaking and writing about Central Americans, there is a responsibility to maintain a space for both realities. For education scholars who are interested in building and sustaining equitable conditions for Latinx students, it is imperative to understand that they are not a monolithic population and that different Latinx students have similar but quite possibly also very different needs (Torres, 2004). As education scholars, it is important that we inform ourselves of the distinctive lived experiences of our student populations.

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