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FROM CENTRAL AMERICAN WARRIORS TO SAN FRANCISCO LATINO DAY LABORERS: SUFFERING AND EXHAUSTION IN A TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT

Many Central American day laborers seeking work in San Francisco, California are here mainly as a result of past and present political, economic, and military US policies practiced throughout the Central American region. However, this social fact, largely unacknowledged throughout the body politic in the United States, neither explains their current status nor detracts from coercive social and state efforts to demonize and exclude them. Instead, there has been cultivated a popular perception upon which an active political campaign has been built that views Central American day laborers as part of a larger mass of so-called illegal aliens who fundamentally threaten the integrity of US society. In this essay, Central American discourses of social suffering are juxtaposed to an official Californian measure that employs a counter-discursive nativist construction of social suffering. Taken as whole, we are witnesses to a particular contest of suffering which obfuscates the common concerns and structural forces that bind Central Americans to the United States.

KEYWORDS: Central Americans, Proposition 187, contests of suffering, polarization, social exclusion.

Everyone knows that suffering exists. The question is how to define it.

— Paul Farmer (1996:261)

Central America today is peopled by wounded souls. A sense of injury pervades. Many of these wounded souls have landed in the United States seeking means to better their lot. This paper focuses primarily on Central American men, mainly El Salvadoran and Nicaraguan, *ex-combatants of working-class, artisan, or peasant backgrounds, who more often than not shield their pain and hide their vulnerabilities. Their suffering is not always so readily apparent beneath the more visible displays of macho posturing, seeming resignation, electric abandon, quick wit, and temper. It is only over time that the memories of personal losses and unjust deeds are pricked and become a touchstone, the basis for individuals and collectives to speak about their present conditions and current stances.*

The concerns and stories of many of these men who fought on one side or the other in the conflicts that raged like wildfire through Central America for the last twenty years are remarkably similar (stylistically and

substantively), regardless of whether *I* recorded their stories in their own countries or here in the United States, where they find themselves unwanted and scapegoated new immigrants. Their personal accounts tend toward stories of suffering that lay the ground for how they view and understand the recent past and their present condition. In addition, these tales of suffering provide meaning and significance, indeed hope, to their precarious life projects (Aron 1988, hooks 1994:230, Pinn 1995:44). Their accounts often revolve around personal sentiments of having been the recipient of injustice(s) perpetrated by others, whether by intimates, people they hardly knew, social institutions, so-called popular organizations, or simply through the brute actions of the state.

However, to understand their accounts it is absolutely necessary to situate their experiences in the United States and in their home countries (here and there) “in a space that crosses over the borders of micro-politics and macro-politics” (Chavez 1997:61). Their experiences are truly transnational in that their very sense of identity and loyalty, social understandings and practices are neither bound by national borders, single communities, nor one all-encompassing discourse — the discourse of suffering notwithstanding (Glick-Schiller et al 1995, Rouse 1991). The fact that latino day laborers belong to multiple communities renders them vulnerable to being considered less deserving, dangerous, or an affront and a challenge to a singular American (a.k.a. USA) national culture (Brimelow 1995, Schlesinger 1991).

Many Central American day laborers in San

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Francisco are caught within a “triadic economy of suffering” (Feldman 1996, personal communication) in which their life experiences in their home countries, among their Central American migrant brethren here in San Francisco, and within the dominant public culture of the United States amount to a cultural response to the effects of transnational economic and geopolitical forces. However, it is impossible to accurately situate and comprehend their discourses of suffering, that is their personal life histories and stories, without also contending with opposing discourses of suffering that strive to minimize or cancel the validity of the suffering of Central Americans who are considered to be in the United States “illegally.”¹

CONTEXT: HERE AND THERE

During the 1980s, the popular US perception of Central America was of a region wracked by violence, social disruption, and polarization that thrust the whole region, particularly Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, onto the world stage drama of the Cold War between the United States and the former Soviet Union. Geopolitical machinations (Blasier 1979, Council for Inter-American Security 1980, Dulles 1954, OAS 1979, US State Department 1980) so colored North American popular thought, regarding everything from the etiologies of the respective conflicts to the role of international mediation, that what were often minimized or altogether conveniently forgotten were the historical and economic conditions that originally led to the region’s explosion into full-scale war. A cursory review of relevant literature on Central America (Adams 1956, Burns 1972, Dunkerley 1988, Helms 1982) illustrates that poverty and hardship for the vast majority of people living in the region was and is nothing new.

An interesting sidenote is the debate of scholars and pundits trying to primarily identify the sources of misery throughout the region. The crux of this debate is whether the difficult socio-economic conditions that cause daily adversity are mainly produced internally or externally. Who to blame and where the locus of control actually lies, individually and collectively, are at the heart of the matter. This side issue is important since a primary reliance on either side of the debate contributes to another contest of suffering that establishes contending grounds of assumptions and explanatory logics (Douglas 1994). The contest of suffering often begins with terms, concepts, and understandings resting on contested epistemological grounds, which is why foes so often react to one another by suggesting that the other side does not know what it is talking about or that they are unintelligible (Lakoff 1996). This

is quite apparent in assumptions about how economic development strategies are linked with flows of undocumented immigration (Dunn 1996:163–164). For ordinary Americans who have lost jobs or find themselves underemployed, it is easy to see immigrants as job threats (Feagin 1997).

Recent US foreign and economic policies toward Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America, from the Caribbean Basin Initiative to the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), frequently imply that strengthened economic development in each country would minimize the “push” for natives to immigrate. Yet, even though US trade and congressional advocates tacitly and unilaterally asserted that NAFTA would stem undocumented immigration from Mexico, the US government concomitantly insisted that immigration policy be withheld from bilateral negotiations (Feagin 1997:64, Sassen 1995:282).

My historical review will be brief and deliberately biased to project two issues: first, the knotty relationship between regional and local conflicts, macro- and micro-economic processes, and transnational migration; and secondly, people’s lived experience as the basis for understanding how decision-making and rationale operate for those who live under chronic conditions of hardship and misery. All of this contributes to the production of a transnational, yet fractured, triadic economy of suffering for Central American migrants in the United States who are not only pitted against one another, but are pitted against counter-claims of suffering, fatigue, and intolerance by US citizens as well as the state. The intention is to operationalize how “the flow of labor is directed by supra-market institutions ... [and other significant social processes and actors] beyond the control of an individual or even a group of migrants” (Burawoy 1976:1051). Here the point is to view transnational labor migration from Central America to the United States as a “system of migrant labor... in its broader social, political and economic contexts or where the flow of labor *is* regulated to a greater or lesser extent to suit dominant political and economic [and, I would add, cultural] interests” (Burawoy 1976:1051, Graham 1996).

On the first point, even Ronald Reagan had the temerity to provide a cogent analysis of the interrelationship between economics and migration, in contradiction to the very set of international foreign and economic policies he sanctioned, when, in a 1982 speech to the Organization of American States, he said,

At the moment, however, these [Central American and Caribbean] countries are under economic siege. In 1977,

one barrel of oil was worth five pounds of coffee or 155 pounds of sugar. To buy the same oil today, these small countries must provide five times as much coffee (nearly twenty-six pounds) or almost twice as much sugar (283 pounds). This economic disaster is consuming our neighbors' money, reserves, and credit, forcing thousands of people to leave for other countries, for the United States, often illegally, and shaking even the most established democracies. And economic disaster has provided a fresh opening to the enemies of freedom, national independence, and peaceful development (1982).

Yet such clarity was often embedded in another (or perhaps not so "Other") darker view and understanding of the region, which expressed nationalist concerns and personal anxieties shared by many North Americans. This became especially pronounced when the Central American conflict appeared to be intensifying and at a stalemate. Reagan asserted on national television the link between the Central American conflicts and terrorism when he claimed how Nicaraguan "terrorists and subversives are just two days driving time from Harlingen, Texas" (Dunn 1996:3). As United States interventionist policies in Central America escalated, Reagan also predicted that, if US military assistance to anti-Communist forces were halted, the result would be "a tidal wave of refugees and this time they'll be feet people and not boat people swarming into our country seeking safe haven from communist repression to our south" (Gomez 1984:9).

The fear of invasion from the south held historical saliency for people living in border states (Acuna 1988, Martinez 1988, Weber 1973:204), but in the 1990s it became an increasingly national preoccupation. Since the late seventies, there was a growing popular perception that immigration seemed out of control, even though the actual number of people who crossed the US-Mexican border was transcended by the inward flow of other nationalities. Yet it became convenient to finger Latinos, even though their seeming over-representation indicates a present-day deluge rather than a historical constant. The number of Southeast Asian immigrants from Vietnam and Cambodia, along with the 1980 Mariel Cuban boatlift joined with Haitian refugees later that same year, helped to shift the terms of border control from control of undocumented labor (Barrera 1979, Zucker and Zucker 1996), to national security and terrorism, and later drug enforcement and interdiction (U.S. Congress: House 1991a, 1991b). With the terms of refugee policy and the immigration debate dramatically altered in the early 1980s, combined with powerful visual images and media portrayals

of exiles and "illegal aliens," a rich brew of US xenophobia was in the making.

However, the predominantly Mexican-Latino presence, particularly in the southwest, is ubiquitous. Although most Mexicans arrived in the United States after 1900, "events involving those Mexicans who lived in the Southwest before that year are of considerable significance for more recent immigrants" (Weber 1973:7). This is for the simple reason that twentieth-century migrants from Mexico and, I would add, Central America, were:

incorporated into an already thoroughly structured, thoroughly defined, social situation... they did not and could not have the individual freedom that other immigrants could have in trying out new roles. It is a travesty to consider post-1900 migration as comparable to immigration by other people in the United States without a careful historical or intellectual understanding of the unique pre-1900 creation of the Mexican-American [*and for that matter all Latino.*] (Weber 1973:7; author's emphasis).²

In other words, latino presence in the United States and particularly in the West has always been conspicuous, regardless of whether it has been socially valued. Why Latinos have been variably regarded as an invisible mass or as a stigmatized horde has much to do with macro-structural and geopolitical forces influencing popular imagination, public debates, and domestic and foreign policy (Takakai 1993, 1994; Zinn 1995). The burst of social debates that surround and spin off the issue of immigration is manifest in numerous public policy debates, for example, the efficacy and justice of affirmative action, mobilized sentiment for English-only amendments, and measures for means testing and eligibility criteria for state-subsidized assistance (Perea 1997). US citizens concerned about latino immigration often have a perception that Latinos take advantage of their border status and use the United States for their own self-interest at the cost of legal, tax paying citizens, although this point has been persuasively countered (Fix and Passel 1994, Passel and Edmonston 1992). It is no wonder then that native sentiments that amount to a social desire to keep potential migrants from even leaving their homelands are evoked.

Yet the reason for persistent latino immigration has much to do with untenable life conditions in their own countries. It is interesting that, in spite of state terror, civil strife and wars, and endemic poverty, which have regionally beset Mexico and Central America in recent times, there has been a revitalization of a bucolic, touristy view of the region by North Americans. This is

abetted by Central American states striving to reconstruct their economies by attracting foreign investment and tourist trade. However, a popular image has remained of Central America as a rural society made up of craftspeople, subsistence agriculturists, and small landowners. This popular perception could not be farther from the truth.

Already by the latter part of the nineteenth century, and especially after 1920, the majority of the labor force had become increasingly mobile and reliant on wage earning from large export agricultural concerns (Bourgois 1989, Bulmer-Thomas 1986, Williams 1986). Prior to this time, most of the agricultural labor force was engaged in rural-to-rural migration, from one site of production to another. As people became more dependent upon export agriculture, reliable social systems of land access, let alone land ownership, became increasingly difficult to maintain. By mid-century, rural migration patterns flowed to where "the growth of agricultural exports created new zones of attraction for permanent migration." However, "these rural zones were the most important for all republics except Nicaragua and El Salvador" (Bulmer-Thomas 1986:161), where migration patterns flowed to the capital cities. The changes in agriculture transformed the agriculturist sector into a class of landless, highly mobile, wage earners.

As subsistence agriculture declined and agriculture in general became more mechanized, Latin American internal migration has been decidedly to the city, where urban growth has spiraled. Half of all Latin Americans now live in cities with populations of more than 100,000, and by the year 2000 half will probably live in large metropolitan areas of more than one million (Angotti 1995:216). Accurately or inaccurately, cities were identified with economic growth and became the primary places to start new lives and new beginnings.³

With estimates that, by the year 2000, seven out of ten Latin Americans will not be able to meet their basic daily nutritional needs (Vilas 1996:15), the establishment of neo-liberal structural adjustment programs and policies by international lending institutions that virtually rule national economic policies throughout Central America appears to continue largely uncontested. Central American governments and ruling elite, who project themselves as pro-NAFTA and pro-GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs), promise to alleviate poverty with foreign investment opportunities and free-market economies. Unfortunately, such policies insure that poverty will continue unabatedly upward (NACLA 1996, Nation 1996, Rosen and McFadyen 1995), and the incentive for people to keep

physically moving to places of economic opportunity and stability will also continue (see also, Portes and Rumbaut 1996:282-284).

While the history of economic development and migratory processes between North America and Central America provides the proper context for understanding latino migration, the everyday fact and lived experiences of conflict, terror, violence, lawlessness, and war from within and without have dominated Central American lives in the latter part of the twentieth century. The war in Central America during the eighties might, for brevity's sake, be consigned to a category of "postmodern war" (Cooke 1993). Besides the various facts, that the conflicts were often of an insurgent/counter-insurgent nature where "cultures of fear" are purposely produced (Cooke 1993, Green 1994) and civilians and civilian targets deliberately attacked (Franco 1985, Nordstrom and Robben 1995), the original reasons for taking up arms and engaging in tremendous sacrifices exploded into a "catastrophe of meaning" (Corradi 1988).

This misfortune was in part an intended result of the US strategy of waging low intensity warfare or conflict (LIW or LIC, see the work by Klare and Kornbluh 1988) in the region. It was in Central America in the 1980s that the United States implemented LIC-measures with strategic precision and that, by the nineties, had become an institutionalized doctrine in the US military-security establishment (Dunn 1996). LIC-measures involve the use of "diplomatic, economic, and psycho-social pressures," to achieve "political, social, economic, or psychological objectives" (Klare 1988:53). It is this latter objective that bears some consideration as a causal factor to Central American migration.

Psychological war seeks to rend and break the social fabric of a society and to split its social cohesion (Martin-Baro 1988:10). One's sense of security (personal, emotional, economic) under conditions of low-intensity warfare is tampered with while one's sense of certainty becomes paralyzed and everyday life becomes militarized and fearful (Martin-Baro 1988:10-12). The war is low intensity for North Americans but certainly not for Central Americans. The outcome of the threat of ongoing violence and conflict that appears indiscriminating, continuous, total, and unabashedly brutal, is that a social anomie is produced, which, while it may "complicate outcomes, however decisive, does ensure some end through exhaustion" (Cooke 1993:180-181).

By the early 1990s, Central Americans were exhausted. The historical and physical manifestations of this exhaustion were concretely displayed in the cere-

monial cessation of warfare, regionally supervised military demobilization, showcase democratic elections, transfers of local and state power, and ready acceptance of internationally decreed neo-liberal structural adjustment economic development policies. Social exhaustion was manifest not only in the ready acceptance of internationally brokered political and economic policies but also in the general popular understanding that such acceptance was for expediency's sake and not actual resolution of long-standing disputes. The pragmatics of state capitulation did not assuage local, long-lived social concerns for just resolution, whether they be for property rights, political amnesty, or access to previously denied financial assistance or compensation. These same local concerns were often put off till some indeterminate later date, if not sacrificed altogether by the immediate parties involved for the elusive promise of peace, stability, security, and reconstruction. Yet the post-war trauma of these combined outcomes appears to have had an unsettling countervailing effect on civil society by "creating more uncertainty and instability in the region" (Jonas 1995:10). Certainly this post-war outcome has not been uniformly distributed or felt throughout the region. Nicaragua, which voted out the Sandinistas and consequentially suffered the vicissitude of post-revolutionary social change, is markedly different than El Salvador and even Guatemala wherein the end of armed conflict established a space for revolutionary socio-political forces to remain engaged in the national life. There emerged new blocs of victors and vanquished, relieved and scared, the hopeful and the depressed, the enterprising and the scavenging in the aftermath of armed conflict and the inauguration of economic reconstruction, all a consequence of the dislocating reverberations of war. Even though each of the Central American countries had formally ended their respective civil wars by the mid-nineties, the long term effects and ongoing daily uncertainties have resulted in a weary and wary people.

A combination of needs is what fuels contemporary Central American migration to the United States. For most people in Central America, even those that still want to believe in a better tomorrow, whether through such means as embracing NAFTA and the free market, the desire to totally eliminate godless communists, or the ready acceptance of strong populist governments, it is exhaustion and pragmatics that contribute to a clear understanding that one's basic daily needs are poorly supported and one's life and livelihood increasingly tenuous. With the future bleak, aspirations thwarted, and a set of viable life options extremely limited, an attempt to "make it" in the United States does not seem

all that bad (Cordova 1995, Lancaster 1992).

"By the end of the 1980s, more than 1.3 million Nicaraguans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans had migrated, legally and illegally, to the United States" (Vilas 1995:161). Migration, in effect, has become a viable option rather than a remote dream. I cannot recall how many times I have been asked in Central America about all aspects of migrating and "making it" in the United States, from the best entry routes to issues of sponsorship and shelter. As the "gringo" relative to an extended clan of Nicaraguan cousins, aunts, and uncles, I was both peripherally and directly involved in assisting members of my family to relocate here to the United States. My relatives, like many of the "escapees" (Zucker & Zucker 1996) who arrived to the United States and came of age in the eighties, tenaciously hold to the idea that the United States is a place where dreams can still be realized. Compared to their cousins, uncles, and aunts they left behind, this is certainly true. For a great number of Central Americans the United States remains paradoxically still a land of promise (Sassen 1995:282), in spite of views by the very same individuals that the US is and was the primary supporter of reactionary governments and policies that contributed to their daily hardships and cause for their leaving. Migration to the United States remains a popular option for many and, in fact, may have become even more popular following the end of warfare and the advent of structural adjustment programs throughout the region. This outcome is in part a measure of the success of propaganda and images the US government, Hollywood, and popular advertising campaigns engage in that tout explicitly or subtly how the United States is actually "a place where economic well-being is the norm and well-paying jobs are easy to get" (McAnany and Wilkinson 1996, Sassen 1995:282). Yet Central Americans still carry and embody their histories, and once in the United States, Central American immigrants find themselves on a new local socio-cultural and political-economic playing field that is not entirely of their making.

This is certainly evident at one field site I am familiar with where Latino day laborers, many of whom are undocumented, congregate. Our corner is located in the San Francisco Mission district, which is the primary Latino barrio in the city (Pinderhughes et al 1996, Vlach 1992:140-144). At least twenty-five percent of Latinos in the Mission district live in poverty, and as a group, Latinos are younger, less educated, more concentrated in low income service occupations, disproportionately poor, and less likely to own their homes than Whites and much more likely to live in overcrowded

conditions. Moreover, “in the late 1970s and early 1980s large numbers of Central Americans fleeing civil wars and political repression in their homelands settled in the city, predominantly in the Mission district” (Pinderhughes et al 1996:89). Actual numbers of Central Americans living in San Francisco are most likely conservative estimates, since the number of undocumented Latinos (Pinderhughes et al 1996:96), whether Mexicans living here for decades or Central American refugees fleeing violence in their homeland (Aron 1988, Pinderhughes et al 1996, Vlach 1992), are underrepresented, if represented at all. On this site, an economy of suffering “can be characterized as a cultural response to the effects of transnational economic and geopolitical forces” (Feldman, personal communication 1996).

Conventionally, social suffering is measured by degrees of social dislocation and environmental destruction, or incidence and prevalence of morbidity and mortality rates, or any particular contrastive system that differentiates, proportions, and depicts consequences that are humanly unsettling and painful. At the same time society determines who its sufferers are — that is, those who have been broadsided by external forces, unanticipated events, or sheer contingency. Such socially acknowledged sufferers are distinguished from those who are considered to have brought about their own suffering. Suffering becomes a matter of social choice whereby sufferers are deemed either worthy or unworthy, deserving or undeserving of acknowledgment and perhaps assistance. Innocence and culpability are often popularly debated. Society engages in valuing and trading in suffering and sacrifices “by virtue of the simple fact that we choose one act, one victim or one moral story in preference to another” (Amato 1990:20).⁴ What animates our modern society, from talk shows to national policy debates, and preoccupies both civil society and the state is exactly how to determine who are legitimate victims of suffering and who are culpable perpetrators.

CONTESTS OF SUFFERING IN CENTRAL AMERICA

One day Fernando greeted me on the street. After a while he placed a hand on my shoulder, slowly shook his head and said quietly, “Brother, I’m so tired. Some days I just want to escape, jump on a plane, and go to Cuba, Spain, Brazil, anywhere far from here.” Fernando is an Association of Agricultural Workers (ATC) union organizer, whose frenzied work pace, virtually non-existent social life, and strong political commitment have left him, when he is not quixotically talking about

politics and revolution, talking about physical and psychic exhaustion and the strains of having sacrificed so much for so little. His concerns always revolve around issues of social justice and sustaining the revolution even if that is no longer measured by the singular goal of the acquisition of state power.

The same day I ran into Fernando, I interviewed a rich landowner, Don Enrique. Don Enrique is a fifty-two year-old gentleman cattle rancher who owns property in Florida and Matagalpa.⁵ Although he had some land confiscated during the Sandinista revolutionary period, he had still retained 1,500 manzanas (3,980 acres) of prized pasture land. His concerns, like Fernando’s, are also about social justice, and as a member of the Superior Council of Private Enterprises (COSEP) and the Committee of the Confiscated (CDC), he is obsessed with having his land returned to him. When he isn’t engaged in diatribes against the Sandinistas, he confides to me how he can’t sleep from worry, has no appetite, has ulcers, and is always restless and ready to explode. He travels frequently between Matagalpa and Florida and is so frustrated and perplexed by contemporary Nicaragua, he seriously considers leaving for good and making his permanent home in the United States, saying “...and can you imagine, this is after we won and got our country back from the communists.”

Their situations are made more poignant by the fact that the two are locked in a battle over property rights. Fernando’s ATC offices are housed in the former mansion of Don Enrique. I have witnessed Don Enrique, flanked by burly ex-Contra⁶ combatants enter the ATC offices and confront Fernando and others with the demand that they vacate the premises or otherwise expect the worst. Fernando, an ex-EPS officer and “historic combatant”⁷ who has had his own share of fighting under his belt and keeps an “AK” (Soviet-made AK47 automatic rifle) under his desk, told them where they could go. This occurrence, I came to find out, was neither rare nor simply a manly performance⁸ but precursors to actual assassination attempts and court trails.

It is interesting how these two men, who are poles apart politically, mention as one way of dealing with or reacting to the privations and adversity of everyday life, their desire to physically leave: Fernando to Cuba, Spain, or Brazil and Don Enrique to the United States. While emigration to escape poverty and lack of opportunity in Nicaragua is nothing new (Lancaster 1992), here we see a desire to emigrate because of the stress derived from sustained participation in political causes, such as fighting for social or distributive justice or basic human rights (Aron 1988, Glick-Schiller, Basch, and

Szanton-Blanc 1995).

Desire to emigrate because of the stress derived from trying to realize principled causes enters into the mix of rationales that eventuate into actual emigration. What are some of the mixed rationales, present hardships, and felt threats that compel one to move? It may be that the various contests of suffering, whether Central or North American, produce a general consciousness of anarchy, breakdown, and a seemingly endless series of senseless acts. Moreover, the sheer range and permutation of local and national dramas that register in popular consciousness in Central America or the United States produce a general sense of disorder, general defensiveness, and specified disdains. The end result is that suffering, regardless of being produced or experienced in Central America or North America, often results in suspended equilibrium and forced parity. Ultimately, everyone ends up with an individual or collective feeling of being a victim. The feeling of having suffered or of presently suffering is affectively experienced as exhaustion and fatigue, which induce general intolerance and social resentment.

Of even greater social consequence are the competing claims of suffering and exhaustion that lead to social polarization. Polarization, to a large extent, is the result of strategies, whether intentional design or side effects of grand schemes, that have been employed to insure the socio-economic positionality or status of the powerful. Polarization, in effect, highlights the local manifestations of social hierarchies and competing interests. Thus, polarization within and between all social sectors and classes becomes a sign of suffering when the very will of individuals and groups under duress are "structured by historically given (and often economically driven) processes and forces that comprise, whether through routine, ritual, or is more commonly the case, these hard surfaces, to constrain agency" (Farmer 1996:263).

The feeling of being wronged, of feeling like a victim becomes publicly visible when everyone begins making a similar claim or set of claims (Lettiere 1995:5, Spector and Kitsuse 1977:75-76) that amount to a contest of who has suffered more. Often the contest of suffering refers directly to who has been harmed or maimed the most. But not all suffering is the same. Suffering includes so many experiences and feeling states — from minor skin irritations to epileptic fits; to overwhelming feelings of failure, humiliation, despondency, sadness, loneliness, anguish, torment, loss, and discomfort; to having been attacked, wronged, deprived, or tortured; to the more publicly expressive displays of suffering, like shrieks, laments, and mourn-

ing — that it becomes impossible to hierarchize. All these various felt states and socially shared manifestations provide, wittingly or not, an idiom of distress (Nichter 1981). I have been present on numerous occasions when a contest of sorts ensued of who suffered more and where the limits of sympathy are tested. It is precisely where the limits of sympathy are tested that suffering and exhaustion discourses express dissatisfaction with the present, both interpersonally and socially.

For instance, one day in Nicaragua I was hanging around the ATC (Association of Agricultural Workers) office talking to a number of women union organizers and friends. I knew some of the women quite well and was familiar with their current life situations. Gloria was in hock up to her neck, had no income, three children, been out of work for almost two years, and lived with her mother and brothers just outside of the small central highland city of Matagalpa. Her mother was the sole income provider, who fed Gloria and her children with money she earned by making and selling fresh tortillas. Gloria was deep in debt to her growingly impatient brother-in-law, who had lent her money to start up a cantina on the outskirts of Matagalpa that was nowhere near ready to be open.

As we hung around the entrance of the ATC office in the late afternoon, Maria del Carmen happened upon the scene. Maria del Carmen, another woman with whom I was familiar (see Quesada 1998 for an analysis of her familial situation), was also out of work and lived with two sons on the top of a hill in an illegal squatter settlement that was constantly in threat of being bulldozed. Both women had been recently thrown out of work since their previous employment was associated with the revolutionary government that had been voted out of office. Maria was always looking for work, and when she began to speak of her problems to the assembled group, Gloria hardly let sixty seconds go by until curtly dismissing Maria by telling her to quit complaining, and "...look, I had a baby in one hand, a baby in the other, one in the oven, and then my husband left me, and I had nowhere to go, and yet I made it. Don't come to me with your problems. At least you have a house." Maria's house was actually a dilapidated wood, cardboard, and plastic sheeted shack, which was continuously being improvised upon to withstand the physical elements it was so nakedly exposed to, as it sat on top of a windy hill. A moat was dug around the shelter to minimize rain from turning the dirt packed floor to mud. Maria had no job, no income, no electricity, no running water, a dirt path led to her house, and perhaps more importantly, she had no close kin group, no social

support system or reliable social network on which to fall back. Without an extended family or steady partner to help her, she was left with her two pubescent sons to survive.

By contrast, Gloria, living in her mother's small modest ranchita house while being provided with a modicum of material, instrumental, and I imagine, emotional support, still did not have a place of her own. Property ownership alone was enough for Gloria to dismiss the wretched conditions of Maria del Carmen's situation. Obviously, the issue of property ownership means a great deal to her (as for many Nicaraguans and, for that matter, all Central Americans) and raises a set of interlocking concerns about agency, control, and desire. A house, an autonomous living space, means so much for people who have so little. Be that as it may, and of particular relevance to the subject of suffering, this dynamic of the lack of empathy for the harsh life conditions of others is increasingly common and generates an implosion of sorts that manifests greater divides between people.

Certainly not everyone talks about suffering in the same way, nor is there a common recourse to use the term "suffering" as a way of describing one's plight and series of insults one has endured. However, in the end, the conclusion drawn from the cacophony of complaints, indictments, and resentments is the unmistakable claim that one has been wronged and is entitled to compensation. The imposition of the "category of suffering" on all these claims may, at first glance, appear to be rather trite and ultimately a disabling way of presenting discordant life stories. However, the use of "suffering" is necessary since it ultimately refers to how the very people themselves tell their stories, justify their claims, and hold fast to their intransigent positions.

Yet there are innumerable problems with evoking the idea of suffering as the basis upon which to read, if not judge and proportion, the stories of each individual and collective. It seems, if not impossible, downright obscene to even attempt the construction of a standard, a measure of suffering. It is by definition "meaningless" (Scheper-Hughes 1992), and it seems that generalized attempts to imbue suffering with meaning evoke serious questions about ethics, representation, and distributive justice. This is because the fused experiences of suffering and exhaustion often go beyond the immediate effects of strained social relations. Such experiences shape individual life choices and social memory, as well as revise historical apprehension and fuel ideological polarization. Yet discourses of suffering appeal to a shared sensibility of having been wronged and having

endured concrete losses. Writ large, these national or collective sensibilities transcend issues of personal accountability or socio-political affiliation, since it appears to be a sentiment that competes virtually for everyone who has shared some sense of exhaustion, intolerance, or outrage. The somatics of suffering sometimes produce an amorphous generalized sharing, regardless of the specificity of the story or the nature or the circumstance. Moreover, the current socio-political conditions typically experienced as mounting uncertainty rest on a collective desire for things to be better. Yet, because of the very unevenness of social, economic, and political development in the region, sharpened heightened expectations or deepening despair become glaring manifestations of a shared sense of suffering throughout Central America.

Obviously, suffering is neither uniformly experienced nor consistently felt. And since generalized harsh conditions are uniquely confronted, a privileging of one's experience, sense, and meaning of suffering over the similar experiences of suffering by others occurs. Furthermore, the fact that people do imbue their suffering with meaning, regardless of how they live it, feel it, or speak about it, often leads to demands for some sort of social acknowledgment. Particularly *when* the consequences of suffering are mortal, morbidly irreversible, or seemingly intractable and when civil society or the state has some responsibility in addressing and remedying the condition or conditions that perpetuate such suffering.

In a place like Waslala, Nicaragua, a rural hamlet bordering the central highlands and the tropical Atlantic coastal zone, the dividing lines between people follow not only vertical ideological splits, such as between Sandinistas and anti-Sandinistas, or horizontal class lines, such as between *haves* and *have-nots*, but a whole combination of opposing forces. Here the social, ethnic, and political splits and factions are extremely visible and palpable, whereas elsewhere such polarization is perhaps less perceptible. Of course, this does not mean that it is any less charged or potentially explosive. A hospital setting, like a church or library, is often popularly associated with being a sanctuary, a place of refuge. However, under conditions of charged polarization, even such spaces are not immune to violence. In the early nineties, several months before Dr. Martin Condenga was brutally tortured and killed by a *re-contra* band, he summarized to me the problems of health care delivery in and around the municipio of Waslala by saying, "We have the will but we don't have the resources" (Quesada 1994). To many ex-*Contras*, the hospital stood as a bastion for Sandinismo that had

openly discriminated and deliberately withheld care and treatment to all anti-Sandinistas, even after the Sandinistas no longer remained in power.

Regardless of the legitimate claims and counter-claims of poor health care, Dr. Condega, in large part, was killed because he personified all the negativity and ill will that the hospital had symbolically accrued. For people who had suffered, whether as a victim of war, a parent of a recently deceased infant, or an outpatient who felt slighted and insulted because he was certain his unfilled drug prescription was an anti-Contra conspiracy, the hospital symbolized all that was wrong, past and present.

In Waslala, many former Contras are vociferous in their animosity, disdain, and total distrust for anything or anybody related to Sandinismo. Yet it would be a mistake to homogenize all ex-Contras living in Waslala. There are rival cliques of ex-Contras whose displays of distrust are visible in the open exchange of harsh glances and accusatory gestures. It is common to witness arguments and fights, especially at night in the cantinas. Once I participated in an outdoor assembly at the CIAV (International Commission of Assistance and Verification) post where at least two hundred ex-Contras were in attendance. For the most part they were impoverished *campesinos*, many of whom had arrived by foot or horseback, miles and hours from remote homesteads and hamlets. Some arrived expecting that this rare meeting with Managua based ex-Contra *commandantes* would bring news of forthcoming government credit, land titles, distribution of seeds, machetes, zinc for roofs, or recent political news from Managua. It did not help that the ex-Contra commanders swept into town in a convoy of new, air conditioned jeeps and that they clustered among themselves while underlings served them coffee and tacos and nothing was served to the rest. I heard murmurs such as, "This is just like the war, when they sat apart and told us to do all the shit work while they never got their hands dirty," or "They still think we are their army and that we will snap to attention." These sentiments escalated into outright anger and indignation when the group was told that the reason they were asked to assemble was for them to inform the local CIAV office of comrades who were severely disabled and therefore eligible for free medical care at the newly refurbished hospital for ex-Contras at la Trinidad near Esteli. Murmurs escalated into shouts as ex-Contras began demanding to know about their credit loans or unfulfilled promises of wood, zinc, and land. The assembly devolved into an unruly crowd as the men rose to their feet and pressed in on the ex-Commandantes and CIAV officials. It was a wonder

it did not deteriorate into violence. The previous solidarity that brought these former comrades together frayed into the old fracture lines of subordinates and commanders, friend and foe, reminiscent of the former actual military hierarchy of which they were a part. With suffering felt and old memories evoked, palpable polarization is easily produced.

SUFFERING IN THE MISSION

While suffering entails levels of pain, uncertainty, and instability, the very attempt to hierarchize it seems contemptuous.⁹ However, this recognition does not mitigate the fact that this is exactly what occurs in everyday life or in *real politic*, whether in families, legislative halls and courts of law, on the street, between ethnic groups or nation-states. These are simply the various social arenas where the contest of suffering gets played out.

The contest of suffering becomes widely manifest as a social dynamic when, for instance, the cumulative effect of individual and collective experiences of injury, insult, or disdain generates a society quick to blame others for the latest episodes of tragic misfortunes or callous disregard (Enzensberger 1993: 42-48). The contest poses the questions of who has suffered more, why, and who is responsible. The problems that arise out of not being able to adequately resolve or adjudicate suffering, formally or informally, ensures that the contest of suffering becomes, in effect, a chronic condition. Under such conditions a community of mistrust arises wherein accidents or misfortune, oversights or ineptness are construed as deliberate acts of harm or roguery. The results are increasing levels of intolerance and practices of exclusion. The contest of suffering as a social dynamic always has the potential of implicating everyone in terms of the ways people popularly regard one another and socially interact. This dynamic becomes visible when an event or issue precipitates a set of social actions that follow from a sensibility shaped by particular identity constructs, social memories, and public claims. The social actions are logical extensions of a sensibility that are not so much determined as they are contingently attached to history, place, and people.

Such public events as the 1992 Los Angeles riots, Iran Contragate, the killings of North American journalists or clergy in Central America are often reduced to simplistic, palpable explanations and truth-claims (Enzensberger 1993: 52-55, Feldman 1994, Norris 1992:Chapter 7) of racial tensions, cold war machinations, or brute savagery. The contest of suffering entails tension and competition between social sectors that are

not merely nominal equals, as found in Central America (poor landless peasants who happened to have been recruited into competing ideological camps fighting each other), but also between distinct social sectors as found in the US (economically and ethnically distinct, stratified social sectors).

As an example, I remember how absolutely useless and out of control I felt when I observed, over the course of a few weeks, how the night scene of one of our principal ethnographic sites underwent a total transformation. Our street corner was a highly visible and publicly-known site where undocumented laborers hung out, day and night. Night, of course, was a different scene, since the obvious reason for congregating, the search for work, was negligible. In fact, it was at night when we began to understand how the corner was indeed more than a job-seeking site, but a rich social domain for people to network, talk and communicate, get loans, give tips, share food, strategize, cry, drink, sing rancheras, roll dice, and just hang. Night proved an opportune time to learn about the lives of the laborers, here and in their own countries. However, there was another social reality that also inhabited this space, this corner... another social scene that sometimes seamlessly commingled and sometimes clashed.

On the corner where day laborers collect, a street culture of latino youth, many of whom are first and second generation Central Americans themselves, also presides. These youths do not identify with the day laborers (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995:66-67), although they share common cultural, biographical, and socio-economic characteristics. These latino youths are street toughs and refer to themselves as "homies," in direct contradistinction from gang membership (Vigil 1988). "Homies" refers to anyone who lives on the block or in the vicinity (Quesada 1996), and they maintain a fierce loyalty to their street and ensuring that their corner remain free from the dominion of others, whether gangs, day laborers, or the police.¹⁰

During the summer of 1995, the relationship between "homies" and the day laborers turned ugly. I did not discover any particular precipitant or flashpoint but rather an escalation of clashes that culminated in the "homies" ousting the laborers from their corner at night. This was accomplished through the steady, if unpredictable, use of intimidation, muggings, and violence. During the day, the corner remained a prominent site used by day laborers, but at night it reverted to the domain of "homies."

Here the clash between "homies" (most of whom are Latinos) and day laborers (almost exclusively

monolingual Spanish-speaking Latinos) can also be relegated to the same sort of irresponsible, self-serving, self-exculpating explanations that dominant society offers up when lamenting what to do about black-on-black or latino-on-latino violence, as if it is purely an intra-ethnic problem. "Homies," while sharing similar backgrounds with day laborers, are also in the United States, where cultural expectations to be American relegates them to the subordinate status of "ethnic," and not model ethnics at that. As ethnics, thrown together with the even more stigmatized group "aliens" (Rodriguez 1997:230-232), they are in a cultural process of becoming American, which entails staking claims for occupational status and a sense of community. They are caught in a hierarchy of status. It is the "homies," these unemployed or lowly wage, native-born workers, who are directly affected by immigrants and see little recourse but to compete with them the most effective way they know how, through violence.

The violence between these two social sectors, so similar yet so apart, represents a highly localized instance of a contest of suffering. However, the fact that the clash between homies and day laborers occurs at all requires that another level of suffering be considered. While we ought to study suffering as a local phenomenon (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991:281), we now must consider, the comparative method notwithstanding, that what we once viewed solely as local is now, in actuality, global (Rouse 1991).

A Salvadoran day laborer hanging out along this San Francisco corridor, where latino day laborers congregate in hopes of finding day work, explained why he left El Salvador. He had fought with the Farabundo Marti Front for National Liberation (FMLN) for more than eight years. Following the cessation of armed conflict in 1992, it was not long before he realized that basic issues of social justice and economic revitalization would amount to little more than pretty rhetoric and empty promises. For him all the fighting was for naught, the whole struggle had been essentially useless: "No one really won. The rich are still rich, and the poor get poorer. So what choice does someone like me have but to look for work where there is work. That's why I'm here."

Interestingly, his opinion was seconded by another slightly older Salvadoran day laborer who had been listening. He turns out to have been a member of the Salvadoran military, which had been generously supported by the United States government to fight "communist insurgents," that is, fight against the younger man's FMLN. The older army fighter had his side of the story and talked about having been completely

betrayed by the Salvadoran army. He echoes his former foe's rationale that all the fighting was for absolutely nothing.¹¹ Both he and the guerrilla say there is no "rencor" (rancor in English) between them and that what is past is past, that there is no reason to be tense with each other. Yet tension does remain, if not for their former statuses, then for their present status as "illegal aliens." It is not that interpersonal and ideological enmities miraculously vanish, as much as that they now find themselves thrown together sharing similar fears and uncertain fates. In the United States their former status as warriors either fighting capitalist imperialism or godless communism is made less significant in comparison to the hardship of their current condition as undocumented laborers. Yet, while there appears to be a leveling of status now that they find themselves sharing a common ground and task and spending their days on the same stretch seeking scarce day jobs, they are also in an intensely competitive setting.

The irony is that these former combatants, now located and operating in a totally "Other" cultural context, are considered more alike than different, which is contrary to their own personal and social identities. They have been compressed (Harvey 1995) into a stigmatized social category of "illegal alien" and are, therefore, singled out for scapegoating, repression, and stark exploitation by contractors and homeowners (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco 1995:35-46, Zucker and Zucker 1996). This phenomenon of having been homogenized, lumped, and thrown together, requires modes of accommodation on their part and dynamic adjustments of their former statuses to their present states in order to, wittingly or unwittingly, band together to withstand the hardships and threats they individually and collectively experience. The move from warrior status in their home countries to the status of "Latino," "illegal alien," "day laborer" in the United States, in itself, results in a lesser status, whereby they are made vulnerable to unique forms of manipulation and exploitation. They are segmented into marginal and unskilled jobs, from working in a Jordanian-owned corner store to a Farolito taqueria, which freeze them at below minimum wage jobs (Betancur 1996:1316) and open them up to employer abuse, lack of labor mobility, lack of job security, residential exclusion, and segregation (Betancur 1996, Melendez et al 1991, Omi and Winant 1994).

What are some of these present hardships and threats they endure on an everyday basis? A few instances and examples should suffice to indicate how ceaseless and multiple they are. A current major source of tension (not only between the two aforementioned

Salvadorans but throughout the ranks of Central American day laborers waiting to get available jobs) has to do with how much, or more accurately, how little money per hour compatriot day laborers are willing to accept for work. Another source of daily tension and pressure has to do with their social and economic relations with "Raza," primarily Mexican-Americans, Chicanos, and Mexicans whom they feel are condescending to them.¹² Such tension does not detract from a general understanding that, in fact, it is *raza* who are the principal ethnic group that provides a political fire wall between them and *la Migra*, (INS, Immigration and Naturalization Service officers). Finally, tension is especially acute regarding their vulnerability to *la Migra*¹³ or INS authorities who can, at any time, engage in street sweeps or late night raids.

Although in San Francisco it is rare that the INS undertake consistent sweeps, it is the mere idea and general threat that they can that serves to regulate labor practices and everyday survival strategies. Even though a good majority of San Francisco day laborers never get arrested by *la Migra*, mainly because the INS is inefficient, highly selective, and politically deliberate, the fact that they can whenever the INS wants to is sufficient to produce a frightened and disciplined body politic of day laborers (Heyman 1995).

With respect to the issue of wages, from our corner site in the Mission district, to in front of the paint store, down several blocks east along the day laborer corridor, a social topography of latino nationalities, work skill levels, language and cultural facilities, and willingness to work for varying levels of hourly wages mark the distinction among day laborers. These socio-spatial distinctions become a primary stock of knowledge for day laborers along the length of this corridor. One way these distinctions are made visible is to observe who immediately accosts vehicles of prospective employers slowing down along the street, and who hangs back. A van driven by a couple of Spanish-speaking Latinos asked for four people to place leaflets under car windshield wipers. They were offering forty dollars a day. The Salvadorans I knew did not immediately jump at the opportunity to work. One older Salvadoran laborer said, "Only forty dollars and no lunch". While reasons varied for their lack of enthusiasm, from not knowing whether the job meant having to work in an unsafe part of or entirely outside the city (a dangerous proposition for the unexperienced undocumented), or that some were holding out for more lucrative painting or roofing jobs, talk always seems to come back to pay.

While the norm often appears to be numerous day laborers indiscriminately hailing prospective employers

and converging upon their vehicles should they slow down, a first-come-first-serve ethic, it was also the case that day laborers engage in immediate calculations. Their calculations, phenomenologically determined even before they spoke with prospective employers, involved evaluations of type of work, work conditions, type of employer, and amount of money to be made, all of which figured in whether one instantly tried to get hired or held back. For instance, a former-army Salvadoran day laborer, who had been coming to the corridor for a year or so, complained that people who accept jobs at four dollars and fifty cents or five dollars are too "conformista" (conformist) and contribute to the overall effect of lowering the wages for everyone. While he complained openly (a complaint often publicly voiced in the more popular and lucrative job seeking site in front of the paint store a couple of blocks away), another younger, unseasoned Salvadoran who had been coming to the site for less than six months, an ex-FMLN guerrilla fighter who preferred to keep his past secret, confidingly made fun of people who would not work eagerly: "So much hunger here and no one wanted to go and work for five dollars." He was referring to his fellow Salvadoran buddies and day laborers, yet he had, like the others, walked slowly and unenthusiastically to the aforementioned van.

In the San Francisco day laborer scene, the choice spot is in front of the block-long paint store where one is likely to get shoved in the bustle to approach pick-up trucks and prospective employers. Here one finds mainly Mexicans and a few Central Americans who have been in the US at least a year and are fairly savvy about the work scene and how to negotiate. Along the corridor the further east from the paint store one goes, the more common it is to see groups of latino day laborers break into small cliques of compatriots or recent arrivals usually willing to work for less than those found in front of the paint store.

Work stories are a popular, consistent theme among day laborers. Stories of how much money one made circulate with people talking about making eight or twelve dollars an hour or getting ripped off by Mexican, Chinese, or "moreno" (African American) contractors. Their stories of labor and toil often revolve around who they can trust and who they can't, whether they be co-workers or employers. Their stories belie the misgivings and misconceptions that they carried with them from their homelands and that become complicated and intensified in the United States. Chavez (1992) asserts that it is necessary to delineate the plural nature of latino immigration. It is among day laborers that distinctions come through. For example, one source

of tension among day laborers is similar to that found between people of differing nationalities: Central Americans dislike being lumped as Mexicans (and vice versa); a Salvadoran wants to make sure he is not mistaken as a Nicaraguan, and so forth.

A Nicaraguan day laborer was adamant about distancing himself from Mexican workers: "They connive among themselves not just to cheat their bosses but other workers." The singling out of Mexicans by Central American day laborers was not uncommon, even though on the job-seeking site, they were surrounded by Mexican co-day laborers. A Salvadoran looked around to make sure Mexicans were not within earshot before going off on a diatribe against them: "They are lazier and *mas sacon* (feigning overt compliance)." He talked about how Mexicans band together against other Central Americans. While working with Mexicans, he was replaced by another Mexican who was a friend of his Mexican co-workers, not only because he wasn't Mexican, but because he worked too well and hard, which made the others look bad. He bragged about how he was doing the work of three Mexicans.

The general aura of distrust is not restricted to co-workers but also prospective employers, contractors, or anyone with whom they have contact, irrespective of nationality. A couple of Salvadoran, ex-guerrilla fighters talked about a roofing job they had after being hired by a Mexican foreman who worked for a white contractor. At the end of the day the foreman told them that he would come by and pick them up the following morning and did not pay them because there was still one more day of work. The contractor never showed up. Later in the week, he drove by, and they ran to grab him, but when he saw them he sped away. Such work stories of co-workers and employers often reveal not only their personal present state of rage and suffering but also their polarizing view of others, often tinged with racist sentiments, nationalistic chauvinism, and a justification for remaining wary of others.

The negative sentiment of many Central American day laborers toward Mexicans became evident with the disdain and ridicule that preceded and followed the successful 1995 campaign to change the name of their job-seeking site street corridor (formerly known as Army Street) to Cesar Chavez Avenue (in the city of San Francisco). If asked whether they knew anything about Cesar Chavez (Griswold del Castillo 1995) and his devotion to changing the legal and human rights status of rural migrant laborers in the United States, it was clear that almost all the Central Americans I spoke to knew nothing about the man and his labor struggle.

However, it was interesting to note how the disdain or lack of interest for Cesar Chavez and the bitter city-wide San Francisco street-naming campaign was not only associated with Cesar Chavez just being “another Mexicano” but produced the same kind of political cynicism many Central Americans maintained about prominent figures and movements in their own countries (from Christian Democrats to the Sandinistas, from Arnoldo Aleman to Joaquin Villabos).

On the other hand, there was acknowledgment of the political weight Mexican Americans wielded in San Francisco. San Francisco is a place of sanctuary for Central American day laborers fleeing from other parts of the state where INS authorities are much more present and menacing. Even though many Central Americans used the word “*raza*” (popularly understood as referring to all Mexicans and Mexican Americans or Chicanos) jokingly, there was acknowledgment that *raza* provided a protective shield. “La Migra doesn’t come here (San Francisco) because ‘*mucha raza*’ are too strong here,” one Salvadoran told a colleague of mine collaborating on the fieldwork. And even though an old, Salvadoran ex-army fellow sort of deprecatingly said, “Tengo mi *raza* aqui” (meaning “I have my people [or community] here”), he conceded that the reason the INS did not bother them in San Francisco was because there is “*mucha raza* aqui, *demasiada raza*” (“many Mexicans here, too many”).

The fear of the “*migra*” (INS), however, remains a constant concern. Many Central Americans had not set out to the United States specifically to end up in San Francisco but ended up here after numerous trials and tribulations. San Francisco was a viable alternative to cities or rural areas that, while more lucrative in the short term as relates to work, are extremely dangerous because of raids by immigration services. The reality of *actually getting caught* (see Dunn 1996 and Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995 for statistics related to actual latino deportation) versus the *fear of getting caught* is obfuscated by the current US political climate and ethos that have singled out immigration as a primary source of the social and economic ills that beset US society. Let’s examine one prime example of a state discourse that directly asserts a variety of suffering presently afflicting US citizens: The popular passage of California State Proposition 187 in 1994.

IN CALIFORNIA TODAY

The rising tide of xenophobia, or more precisely, third world phobia, throughout the world, especially in Western Europe and the United States, indicates a simultaneous fear and lowered frustration tolerance of

foreigners (Enzensberger 1993, Fierman 1994, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995, Wacquant 1993). However, there are also historical and cultural specificities and trends that mark the particularity of each instance of national xenophobia. Hence, latino immigration to the US reflects the latter’s domination over Latin America (Sassen 1988, Teitelbaum 1985). There are numerous reasons for such a large and growing latino presence in the US. One merely needs to begin with the forceful annexation or purchase of Mexican territory and people by the US in 1898, the distortions related to US investment in Latin America, the structural use of convenient or temporary solutions to so called labor shortages, and the use of migration as an escape valve for explosive social conditions (Betancur 1996:1301). This last reason not only relates to local socio-political conflicts purely of a domestic nature but refers to socio-political conflicts that reflect the direct geopolitical policies and interventions of the United States in Latin America. The influence of US foreign policy on the region has shaped the domestic and economic conditions of each of the Central American nations and exacted tangible costs in terms of the daily survival strategies and future life options that Central Americans are actually able to put into action.

The personal tales of Central Americans, which directly or obliquely refer to their reasons for migrating to the United States (Behar 1993, Hart 1997), sharply contrast with predominant US national discursive concerns, fears, and preoccupations in their evocation of suffering as the consequence of unchecked or illegitimate immigration. This is nowhere better exemplified than in the text of the popularly electorally-passed Proposition 187 in the State of California, which was on the ballot in 1994. The language of the text strives to establish some kind of leveling or parity in terms of the hardship and sacrifice of the suffering visited upon Californians by the pernicious presence of “illegal aliens.” It is constructed to exclude mention of the reasons why many of the undocumented are in the United States in the first place and to obscure their quality of life relative to US citizens¹⁴ and how much more they provide rather than take away from their local communities (Fix and Passel 1994). Here is a prime example of a contest of suffering that pits the permutation of Central American tales of individual and collective experiences of violence, abuse, and personal narratives of suffering against North American official stories, produced by state agencies and publicly re-elaborated by multiple mediums of mass communication that serve to contextualize, contain, and ultimately minimize or dismiss the dramatic “*testimonio*” (testi-

mony) of first person, Central American accounts (Zucker and Zucker 1996:81-103). Central American testimonials, when they occur, are usually only shared with compatriots who know about exactly what is being told or under circumstances where a Central American willingly entrusts past experiences that are more often than not reluctantly recollected and gingerly retold to sympathetic ears (Aron 1988, Golden and McConnell 1986). Their tales are disfigured and contorted by the slew of US official stories of counter-suffering and disinformation that the State Department and INS (Dunn 1996) slickly produce for maintaining official positions and establishing popular support for exclusionary practices.

Proposition 187 caught the imagination of Californians and, in fact, the whole nation by addressing a pointedly public explosive obsession: What to do about all those "illegals" taking jobs away from natives and taking advantage of our education system, health care, welfare system, food stamp allocations, and permissive criminal justice system. Californians were presented with an opportunity to decry what they were persuaded to believe was a great brown tidal wave of uncontrollable immigration from south of our border. Here the language of suffering is evoked clearly and deliberately. The text of Proposition 187, or the Save-Our-State initiative, clearly asserted how all Californians,

have suffered and are suffering economic hardship caused by the presence of illegal aliens in this state. That they have suffered and are suffering personal injury and damage caused by the criminal conduct of illegal aliens in this state. That they have a right to the protection of their government from any person or persons entering this country unlawfully. Therefore, the People of California declare their intention to provide for cooperation between their agencies of state and local government with the federal government, and to establish a system of required notification by and between such agencies to prevent illegal aliens in the United States from receiving benefits or public services in the State of California (Proposition 187 1994: Partial text of Proposed Law).

The language and usage of the suffering concept evoked in this passage refer to legitimate worries and concerns many Californian residents sustain, reinforced by popular media portrayals and racist political electoral commercials. Here, Californian collective and individual suffering leaves little room to consider, let alone empathize with, the plight of others. This has been popularly referred to as "compassion fatigue" (Ehrenreich 1995:160-165) but may, in fact, be more indica-

tive of how docile and anti-sympathetic (and anti-intellectual) many have become in the face of daunting social problems that plague North American society. Popular US perceptions and understandings of contemporary transnational migration, legal or illegal, to our country is often reduced to economic opportunism or, in the case of latino immigration, myths and stereotypes that they resist learning English, are unwilling to assimilate, are taking jobs away from natives, or that they blithely use social and health services for which they do not pay. The tenacity of such beliefs is frightening, particularly when US culpability can be shown and then easily dismissed.¹⁵

Rather than understanding how the US is reaping the reward (or fallout) of foreign and military policies in Central America, of which Central American immigration (legal or illegal) is one exemplary sequela, a studied ahistoricism takes hold that radiates with righteous nativist indignation, legal reductionist arguments, and images of limited good (Foster 1965). The reward, of course, is a below market price labor force, highly disciplined and willing to work. In California this concretely augments the quality of circulating goods and cheapens the cost of fruits and vegetables (Wells 1996), general construction, and custodial and child care. Migration in the US is accepted or rejected by US citizens according to whether it is perceived to worsen or alleviate one's daily worries and immediate problems (Muller 1997). Here, the distinction in the tales of suffering by Central Americans and North Americans is not simply the obvious differences in discursive constructions or empirical validity but, for our purposes, the differences in the uses of suffering to establish or maintain implicit moral and legal positions. Here, the language and political ethos (Jenkins 1991) produced by Proposition 187 deals specifically with questions of Californian economic survivability and personal security. In these respects there appears little difference between such Californian constructions of loss, woe, and worry and themes one hears from Central Americans in their tales of suffering, which deal substantively with the same issues. One primary result of these similar tales and rationales, whether in the official US stories of economic hardship and national security or the personal stories of Central Americans who have directly experienced personal losses and pains, is the consequent contests of claims and counter-claims that have established definite patterns of social polarization.

POLARIZATION

Perhaps the most blatant consequence to occur as a result of the contest of suffering, as I previously noted,

is the ragged and sharp cultural, socio-political, and spatial constructions of social polarization. The social fact of polarization has a history of its own, which sometimes becomes manifest in violent conflicts and sometimes in tenuous social homeostasis. However, the everyday fact of polarization, in all its varied manifestations, spawns a popular consciousness of woundedness, resentment, and wariness. Polarization throughout Central America is easily traced at macro-national levels where political realignments following the cessation of armed conflict and the triumph of showboat democracy have resulted in the decompositions of former political and military foes and their respective social bases along class, ethnic, regional, ideological, and strategic lines. The Sandinistas enter into alliances with UNO (Union Nacional Opositora) to offset new Liberals; the Salvadoran FMLN ally with ARENA to ensure international loans; the URNG (Union Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala) negotiate a peace treaty with the Guatemalan state with minimalist demands for native indigenous rights. The petty bourgeois, ever so vigilant to better their lot, struggle for opportunistic power. In such a region-wide political climate heightened by increasing economic despair and instability (Behar 1993, Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 1995, Vilas 1995, Vlach 1992), the result has been an intensification of social polarization.

Polarization exacerbates differing social values, survival strategies, and group interests and contributes to undermining the basis for daily interaction and social consensus (Martin-Baro 1990). The polarization of Central America today is more exacerbated than during the 1980s, in spite of the ironic and, indeed, paradoxical fact that the killing has appreciably declined. This is for simple fact there does exist a consensus among all the Central American governments and ruling elite to fully comply with the dictates of international capital (Enzensberger 1993, NACLA 1996), which has intensified economic hardship for the vast majority of Central Americans. The new international economic landscape (Bello 1994) "tears down national barriers" (Enzensberger 1993:110-111) and ultimately places the vast majority of the respective national citizens of Central America, with the shaky exceptions of Belize and Costa Rica, under extreme economic and social duress. A set of life demands that individuals and social sectors find increasingly difficult to manage or overcome is not abstractly and indirectly sensed but directly experienced and must be contended with.

Social polarization in the US, however, manifests itself in entirely different ways (Bourgeois 1995, Omi and Winant 1994). In spite of a general North American

cultural ethos of rugged individualism that frames much of the contours and shape of public discourse around social problems, there is clearly a philosophic rationale for placing the interests of the state before individuals. This is in spite of anti-statist popular sentiment that calls for a smaller state, cutting the fat out of state bureaucracy, and getting the state out of private lives. This is born out of how the state is engaged in the systematic application of political domination that tends to deny the social nature of human beings (Femia 1993). It is also exemplified in how debates on such contemporary social issues as abortion rights, public schooling, and welfare, as well as immigration policy ultimately become framed around the relationship of social versus individual responsibilities (Gan 1995).

Social polarization, which includes multiple oppositions and not simply binary opposition, reflects the sharp divisions and splits between the various social sectors that comprise a society and that are precariously held together more by coercion than by consensus (Caulfield 1974, Van den Berghe 1967). Although consensus implies the acceptance of a social contract presumably between equals, it appears more the case that the tacit and expressed forms of individual and social consent that undergird contracts and appear as consensus in fact function "as a sign of legitimate subordination" (Brown 1995:162-163). Hence, where polarization in Central America has significantly contributed to increased economic duress and compelled many to migrate, polarization in the United States has contributed to an increasingly intolerant body politic that insists that individuals discipline themselves or suffer state sanctions (Cohen 1998). In spite of the popular touting of economic triumphalism in the US today, there remains a strong current of social and economic ill ease. This ill ease is manifest in growing polarization between social sectors in the US, marked by intolerance and scapegoating. Central Americans compelled to migrate to the US for reasons largely owing to US involvement in their home countries, find themselves scapegoated for contributing to the ill ease and social suffering of US citizens who are themselves increasingly unsure of their very own social and economic footing.

CONCLUSION

Everyone, it seems, has a story of suffering and sacrifice. Such stories are not merely statements or litanies of insults, losses, exile, injustice, injury, domination, and repression. They are, in addition, claims of worthiness and value, claims that sometimes demand some mode of redress. Claims of suffering are incorporated

into larger cultural discourses of embodied resistance and if necessary, commitment to continued public struggle. Yet this does not ensure a resolution of suffering. In fact, it appears that fractures, fissures, dislocations, and separations, with more insult and more injury, become the common ground of collective suffering. Once, a Nicaraguan architect pointed out to me how eight fault lines converge under the capital city, Managua, virtually guaranteeing another catastrophic earthquake someday. In a similar vein, the fact that all have suffered the effects of war and polarization guarantees that fractures and fissures will persist in tearing and rending the social body of Nicaragua for the foreseeable future. The most apparent manifestation of this process is the degree of polarization in Nicaraguan society and, for that matter, throughout Central America as well as within the minds and communities of many Central Americans in the US today.

Yet, whether through national or local coercion or consensus, the fact remains that in Central America the social fabric is torn by divisions nominally held together by a collective desire to ward off greater instability and a general desire for better days to come, especially since the memory of conflict, oppression, and unceasing misery remains fresh. If there is a fragile peace in the region today, it is because people have become exhausted by the threat of escalating violence and conflict that is indiscriminating, continuous, total, and unabashedly brutal (Cooke 1993, Dunkerley 1994).

In the United States, a general socio-political climate that makes imperative a national collective need (with class exceptions, of course) to accommodate to imposed scarcity has made immigrants an easy scapegoat for this distasteful outcome. Rather than wallow in the end-of-history victory over communism and an internal perception of world supremacy, people still contend with the the tenuousness of daily life. The underlying lack of security comes from corporate and public sector downsizing, high cost of living, and the logic of imposed scarcity that essentially means the withdrawal of state responsibility in addressing the seemingly intractable hosts of social ills (e.g., expensive health care, the poor public school system, rampant street crime) that afflict our modern society and have made for a very anxious populace. It is an anxiety almost taboo to mention in face of the trumpeting of macro-economic indicators that asserts that life has never been better in America; yet it is an anxiety that still courses as an underlying giddy current throughout US society. One result of this anxiety is a consequent xenophobic impulse concomitant with a generalized ignorance of how US hegemonic processes (from

foreign policy initiatives to multinational corporate meddling) have significantly contributed to the harsh everyday life conditions of foreign countries and a correspondingly anxious citizenry, all making for a volatile transnational situation. In times of actual or perceived crisis, it is not uncommon for US society (or any society for that matter) to seek a scapegoat (Scheff 1994).

In US society we have had our host of scapegoats, both officially and popularly whipped up in the form of numerous moral panics: the tramp scare, the Red scare, the gang scare (Davis 1990:270), the drug scare, the AIDS scare. Today in the mid- to late 1990s, a primary contender for a new scare, that is, an identifiable social sector that can be blamed for many of the social ills that afflict US society, are "illegal aliens," particularly those from south of the border. Yet many of these "illegal aliens" are former warriors, fighting for self-determination in the face of US imperialism, or are former warriors who were supported and egged on by it. Now post-conflict, many of these same warriors find themselves here, for whatever reason, as unwanted guests. Yet their suffering and our's continues. Rather than see our mutual suffering as indicative of a common history, indeed from common structural sources, it becomes a contest whereby divisiveness rather than unity reigns.

NOTES

This article is based on fieldwork carried out from September 1995 to the present, funded by a research grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (RO1-DA10164-01) and additional funding from the College of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the San Francisco State University, as well as the San Francisco State University Urban Institute. I am appreciative of the support services of SFSU BSS Computing Services. I am especially thankful for the generous collaboration and inspiration of my colleague, Philippe Bourgois, with whom I collected a significant portion of the data in this article. I also wish to thank individuals who provided insight, support, and encouragement for my research and the analyses I am continually cultivating. I thank Tito, Anselmo, Mario, Tarik, Issa, the B/25 homies, Jose Arguello, Nadine Khoury, Carlos Cordova, and Jeff Schoenberg, as well as the host of day laborers I came to know ever so briefly, Allen Feldman for his support for this article and thoughtful feedback, and the anonymous TA reviewers for their constructive criticism and valiant editing.

1. The public debates and popular depictions of the "illegal aliens" issue in California, from radio talk

shows to op-ed pieces, often initially frame the immigrant issue around the legal argument that they have come to the US without going through the proper official procedures and, hence, are here illegally. This renders moot all other grounds for being here.

2. I have relied on Weber's 1973 anthology, *Foreigners in the Native Land: Historical Roots of the Mexican Americans*, and have slightly altered his use of Alvarez's succinct observation as to the historical ground that subsequent post-1900 migrants from south of the border found themselves (Alvarez 1971). I deliberately posit (in italics) that the same was true for all "Latinos", from Central America to Tierra del Fuego, as well as all intergenerational and acculturative levels living in the United States, whether Puerto Rican, Nicaraguan, Colombian, Chilean, Cuban, etc.

The point is, putting aside the questions of cultural production, hybridity, globalization, and transnational history, that all latino immigrants enter into a world not of their making, and especially the latino-US world, from Miami to Boston, New York to Los Angeles. The latino-US world many latino immigrants enter and become immersed in — whether by embrace, envelope, circumstance, or whirlpool — never ever really resembles life, homes, and customs they were familiar with in their native land.

3. It has not turned out so idyllic.

In 1980, 118 million Latin Americans, about a third of the region's total population, were poor. By 1990, that number had increased to 196 million, or nearly half the total population. Eighty percent of these 78 million "new poor" live in cities, which helps explain the congestion and deterioration of many Latin American capitals. This 42% growth rate of the "new poor" between 1980 and 1990 was almost double the 22% population growth rate in the region during the same period (Vilas 1996:16).

4. A classic contemporary example in the United States of the valuing and devaluing of those who suffer yet are publicly stigmatized, both institutionally and popularly, is the convenient labeling of social groups as the "underclass" (Gan 1995). This convenient label is a wide umbrella that, besides being a code word to hide anti-black, anti-latino, or other racist sentiments, variously includes public housing tenants, the poor, single-parent families, teenage mothers, panhandlers, the welfare dependents, the foreign born, criminals, the insane, the homeless, and, for our purposes here, immigrants who are particularly of the Latin American "illegal variety" (Gan 1995:61).

5. Matagalpa is the capital of a northern central

highland state in Nicaragua. Matagalpa was the primary site of urban and clinical ethnographic research I conducted principally between 1990 and 1992 (Quesada 1994).

6. The term "*contra*" is a popular designation to indicate one's former status as an anti-Sandinista combatant and stems from being a counter-revolutionary. The *Contras* were a US-supported Nicaraguan insurgency military force mainly composed of ex-Somoza Guardia Nacional military as well as peasants and laborers who were, for numerous reasons, either disaffected by the Sandinista revolution or kidnapped and forcibly inducted into the counterrevolutionary military. All were military trained and financially supported by the US government who used them throughout the 1980s as a proxy military force to destabilize and overthrow the Sandinista government.

7. EPS translates to Popular Sandinista Army, of which Fernando was an ex-officer. He is also a "*historic combatant*," which is a popular term that describes anyone who voluntarily participated in the armed insurrection against the Nicaraguan dictator, Anastasio Somoza, that eventually resulted in the triumph of the Sandinista revolution.

8. I would like to paraphrase Gutmann and render it to shed light on the performative significance of the confrontation between Fernando and Don Enrique. Gutmann writes,

With regard to violence associated vaguely or explicitly with notions of machismo, we must also be especially careful to distinguish symbolic rationalizations from actual sources of violent conflict. Arguments by men cannot be accepted at face value, but must serve as starting points for discovering deeper causes and consequences of violence than some so-called cultural attribute. Because if we take violence to be the physical struggle for political power, in families as much as nation-states... (1996:199),

one can therefore view the confrontation between Fernando and Don Enrique as not simply between two individuals but representatives of opposing classes, ideologies, hegemonic blocs, indeed symbolic of one of the more clearly defined dividing lines that socially polarize contemporary Nicaraguan society.

9. For an illuminating example of the profound problem of trying to establish a hierarchy of suffering let's examine a seemingly self-evident and obvious act of human atrocity, the phenomena of genocide. The complexity of defining genocide indicates how the nature of suffering becomes differentially qualified (see Porpora 1990:Chapter 5). In modern society, it is clear

as people become more cognizant of world events as they happen that socially produced suffering and consequent victims of such suffering become matters of central political and moral preoccupation. Modern witnesses to such suffering are overwhelmed with claims of suffering, which seem to be daily affairs, and in effect, overwhelm contemporary conscience to a point where clearly proportioned evaluations and mobilized sentiment and acts are often neutralized, if not paralyzed.

10. For many of the latino youth on our corner, the "street cultures of resistance," as Bourgois notes, while perhaps offering

an alternate space for resisting exploitation and for subverting the ideological insults and hierarchies of mainstream society, [are also] the site where drugs are purveyed, boys kill one another, infants are battered, and young women gang-raped. At the same time that street culture represents a creative response to exclusion by creating new forums of dignity, it also guarantees exclusion by requiring participants to be semiliterate, expressively aggressive, unexploitable, and enmeshed in substance abuse and violence (1996:250-251).

11. I am indebted to Philippe Bourgois for providing me access to his extensive unpublished field notes. Bourgois and I are engaged in research that includes fieldwork with latino day laborers in San Francisco, California and are currently supported by a grant from the National Institute on Drug Abuse (ROI-DA10164-01). As part of our research, we are examining multiple aspects of the Central American diaspora as it relates to issues of war survival and immigration, labor, violence, and substance abuse.

12. Racist sentiments among latino day laborers appear more directed toward prospective employers, whereby employers are categorized not only according to a racialized or ethnic designation but also by such qualities as generosity, work ethic, negotiability, and cultural respect.

13. Although my analysis derives from association with and literature pertaining to refugees and the psychosocial dynamics they endure, the "fear of discovery by the Immigration Service" (Aron 1988:28) is a broadly felt source of anxiety and defensiveness that is shared by numerous categories of non-citizen residents like undocumented immigrants from Central America. However, it is imperative to point out particular distinctions, since a clinical construction of *Migrapobia* requires that there be "a genuine fear of persecution if returned" (Aron 1988:27). Aron elaborates the distinction of sentiments and reactions associated with migra-

phobia between Mexicans and Salvadorans in the late eighties by rightly pointing out the differences in human stakes:

Were there not a genuine fear of persecution if returned to El Salvador, the '*Migrapobia*' endemic in the latino barrios would be as much a joking matter as among undocumented Mexicans, who endure the expense and inconvenience of deportation, only to return to their homes in the United States within weeks and days after their unceremonious removal. For the Salvadorans, fear of discovery and deportation becomes the post-migration equivalent of earlier fear of detention, torture and death, which precipitated their migration and which bred then, as it does now, a chronic anxiety (1988:27).

14. The quality of life of the undocumented are distorted vis-a-vis US residents. It is especially difficult for low-income US citizens to empathize with the plight of the undocumented when they believe that the undocumented take advantage of free health care, free schooling, and so-called easily accessible social services, in addition to the popular notion that the undocumented steal legitimate low-income jobs as well. Many undocumented Central Americans acknowledge these charges and will not use available social and economic resources even if they have a legitimate right to or need for them.

15. I was in Nicaragua in 1991 when the US threatened to withhold financial aid unless the newly inaugurated government of President Violeta Chamorro dismissed the 1987 World Court ruling against the US that held it responsible for war crimes against the then revolutionary state of Nicaragua. In hindsight, the symbolic importance of having Nicaragua dismiss this unprecedented World Court ruling appears of importance mainly for US domestic consumption and self-image, as well as the geopolitical need on the part of the United States to wipe out any international legal precedent and social memory of such misdeed.

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