



Washington History in the Classroom

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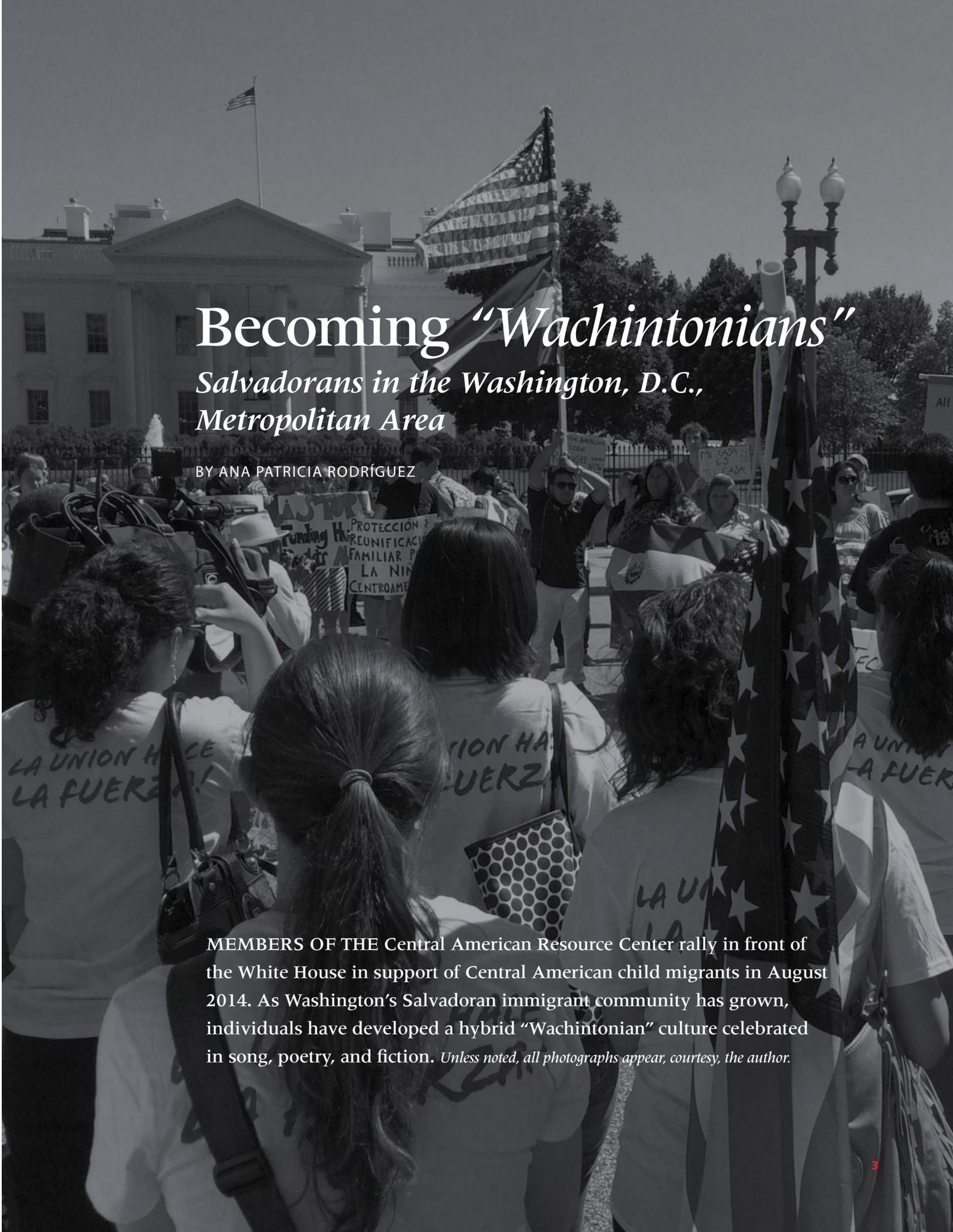
“Washington History magazine is an essential teaching tool,” says Bill Stevens, a D.C. public charter school teacher. “In the 19 years I’ve been teaching D.C. history to high school students, my scholars have used *Washington History* to investigate their neighborhoods, compete in National History Day, and write plays based on historical characters. They’ve grappled with concepts such as compensated emancipation, the 1919 riots, school integration, and the evolution of the built environment of Washington, D.C. **I could not teach courses on Washington, D.C. history without *Washington History*.**”



Bill Stevens engages with his SEED Public Charter School students in the Historical Society’s Kiplinger Research Library, 2016.

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Becoming “Wachintonians”

Salvadorans in the Washington, D.C., Metropolitan Area

BY ANA PATRICIA RODRÍGUEZ

MEMBERS OF THE Central American Resource Center rally in front of the White House in support of Central American child migrants in August 2014. As Washington’s Salvadoran immigrant community has grown, individuals have developed a hybrid “Wachintonian” culture celebrated in song, poetry, and fiction. *Unless noted, all photographs appear, courtesy, the author.*

Salvadorans, wrote the revolutionary poet Roque Dalton, are a resilient, “*hacelotodo*” (can-do-everything) people who, despite experiencing great repression, violence, and exclusion in their homeland and elsewhere, persevere in and outside of their country. They also are the largest immigrant group in the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area. In 2013 the U.S. Census Bureau estimated that 21,276 Salvadorans resided in the District, representing 34 percent of D.C.’s Latino population and more than 3 percent of the city’s population overall. Yet few Washingtonians know their history or recognize their important demographic, cultural, and economic presence in the region.¹

Often mislabeled “El Salvadorans”—generally, the preferred terms are Salvadoran, Salvador-eño/a, Salvadorian, or Salvadorean, without the article “El”—they fill every niche of the local labor market. They are students, teachers, professors, doctors, engineers, scientists, entrepreneurs, writers, artists, performers, activists, and specialists in the nonprofit, construction, hospitality, health-care, homecare, daycare, and security industries, among many other fields. As their poems, short stories, music, and other creative works attest, Salvadorans have forged a sense of belonging, home, and cultural identity in the D.C. metropolitan area.

Salvadorans first began coming to the Washington area in the late 19th century as part of Central American political and cultural delegations. From October 1889 to April 1890, for example, Dr. Jacinto Castellanos represented El Salvador at the first Pan-American Conference, also known as the First International Conference of American States and subsequently as the Summit of the Americas, which was held in Washington. Later, the city also attracted artistic sojourners such as Salvadoran writers Salvador Salazar Arrué (Salarrué) and Claribel Alegría, who lived in Washington respectively in the 1910s and 1940s. Best known for his 1933 *Cuentos de Barro* and his 1945 *Cuentos de Ciptotes*, Salarrué trained as a painter at the Corcoran School of Art between 1916 and 1919; Alegría, author of more than 40 books of poetry, short stories, and *testimonios*, earned a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy and Letters at the George Washington University in 1948.²

Like their Central American counterparts, Salvadoran embassy personnel began to travel regularly and/or settle in the District of Columbia in the early 20th century. Early *pioneras/os* (pioneers) of D.C.’s resident Salvadoran community, how-

ever, did not arrive in great numbers until the 1960s and 1970s, when U.S. and home country diplomats, government employees, and international agency personnel sponsored Central American, including Salvadoran, female domestic workers and childcare providers. These mid-century migrants established a primarily Salvadoran enclave within the increasingly Latino neighborhoods of Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, and Columbia Heights in Northwest Washington, especially along the Columbia Road and Mount Pleasant Street corridors. These areas offered relatively affordable housing, immigrant services and support, and proximity to jobs in the city and nearby Maryland and Virginia suburbs. Women predominated in the migration of the 1960s and 1970s, but the economic growth of the 1980s made more construction, hospitality, and service industry jobs available for both immigrant men and women. Salvadorans gravitated to jobs held or formerly held by African American, Latino, and other immigrant workers.³

In the 1980s the local Salvadoran community grew significantly after a civil war erupted between El Salvador’s right-wing government and left-wing guerrillas organized as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front (FMLN). U.S. military aid to government forces prolonged the war, which lasted from 1979 to 1992. During the war El Salvador received \$6 billion in U.S. military and economic aid, the third-largest beneficiary in the world. At its International Police Academy in northern Virginia, the U.S. Agency for International Development trained Salvadoran Roberto D’Aubuisson, the founder of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), the right-wing party of El Salvador. D’Aubuisson also founded and headed the brutal death squads responsible for countless disappearances and assassinations such as that of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero on March 24, 1980. By war’s end, more than 75,000 Salvadorans had died and more than 25 percent of the country’s population was displaced.⁴

As the war intensified, many Salvadorans fled to surrounding Central American countries, Mexico, Australia, Europe, and the United States, particularly to cities with existing Salvadoran communities such as Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Houston. As the site of much political activity and activism, Washington and its surrounding suburbs also drew a large number of Salvadorans, though they were rarely granted political asylum. Church-affiliated refugee centers, solidarity networks, and service providers soon opened offices in Adams Morgan,



Latino community members march down 16th Street NW toward the Capitol to support immigration reform, March 21, 2010. Their banner reads, “No Human Being is Illegal.”

Mount Pleasant, and Columbia Heights, locations accessible to the newly arrived immigrants. Many Salvadorans also settled in northern Virginia, particularly in Alexandria city and Arlington and Fairfax counties, forming enclaves, social networks, and hometown associations that linked their diasporic communities to El Salvador. With its established military and security industries, the area attracted immigrants precisely from countries where the United States intervened militarily, politically, and economically in the 1980s.⁵

Many Salvadorans settled in the District’s economically depressed and racially stratified Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, and Columbia Heights neighborhoods, exacerbating racial tensions that erupted in May 1991 in the so-called Salvadoran-led Mount Pleasant Rebellion (also known as the Mount Pleasant Riots). The disturbances began when an African American female police officer shot a Salvadoran man, Daniel Enrique Gomez, who allegedly was drunk after the Cinco de Mayo (May 5) celebration in Adams Morgan. For three days, Latino and African American youths con-

fronted police, damaging buildings, looting stores and businesses, blocking traffic, and setting fire to police cars and buses. To stop the violence, Mayor Sharon Pratt Dixon declared a state of emergency and set a 7:00 p.m. curfew in Mount Pleasant, Adams Morgan, and Columbia Heights. One thousand police officers patrolled the largely poor Central American and African American neighborhoods, where residents had long experienced increasing racial tension, discrimination, police harassment, crime, and violence.⁶

In the aftermath of the riots, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights drafted its Mount Pleasant Report. The report found that Latinos experienced abuse at the hands of the D.C. Metropolitan Police Department as well as neglect by the D.C. government, which failed to recognize the growing Latino population and provide adequate social services. City officials responded by establishing a Latino Civil Rights Task Force, headed by long-time D.C. resident Pedro Avilés, to study the situation and make recommendations for improved community relations. The city created



Front page of the "Departamento 15" section of El Salvador's *La Prensa Gráfica*, dedicated to news of Salvadorans in the diaspora and reporting on immigrant remittances. Courtesy, La Prensa Gráfica

a bilingual police unit and a number of social services agencies to serve Latinos.⁷

The D.C. area's Salvadoran population continued to grow in the 1990s and early 2000s. After September 11, 2001, the newly created Department of Homeland Security generated new jobs for employees directly or peripherally attached to the area's military and security sectors. Entwined and offshoot industries produced employment not only for highly skilled attorneys, engineers, architects, and bureaucrats, but also for immigrants who worked in landscaping, construction, housekeeping, and childcare.⁸

Throughout the D.C. metropolitan area, Salvadoran culture manifested itself in neighborhoods, businesses, churches, schools, community centers, public clinics, service providers, and cultural activities. Salvadorans participated in local Latino festivals and art scenes, and they popularized their cuisine, including the *pupusa* (cornmeal tortilla stuffed with cheese, beans, pork, and other items). Salvadorans became an important part of the local labor force, paying sales and income taxes as well as contributing more than \$4 billion annually in remittances to the Salvadoran economy.⁹

In 2014 the D.C. metropolitan area began receiving another influx of migrant families and children from the "Northern Triangle" (El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras), all seeking refuge from conditions of extreme poverty, scarcity, and social and political violence. In 2014-15 Maryland and Virginia each admitted almost 5,000 unac-

companied immigrant minors, and D.C. almost 400, figures that do not account for migrant youths who arrived alone and undetected by immigration services. Few of these migrants have received refugee status, and many have been deported back to their home countries. From 2008 to 2010 the U.S. government denied 90 percent of all Salvadoran political asylum cases, much as it did for asylum seekers fleeing the Salvadoran civil war in the 1980s.¹⁰

Hoping to reunite with relatives and find better living conditions in the D.C. area but without the foreseeable possibility of attaining legal resident status, many Salvadorans have remained undocumented or under Temporary Protected Status. A renewable United States Citizenship and Immigration Services permit, TPS allows qualifying immigrants to live and work in the United States while conditions of armed conflict, environmental disaster and/or epidemic, or other extraordinary and temporary conditions persist in their home country. In the case of Salvadorans, TPS originally was granted on March 9, 2001, in response to a series of devastating earthquakes in El Salvador. According to the Census Bureau, in 2010 there were approximately 228,045 Salvadorans in the metropolitan area; however, it is difficult to arrive at a precise figure due to the large number of undocumented immigrants.¹¹

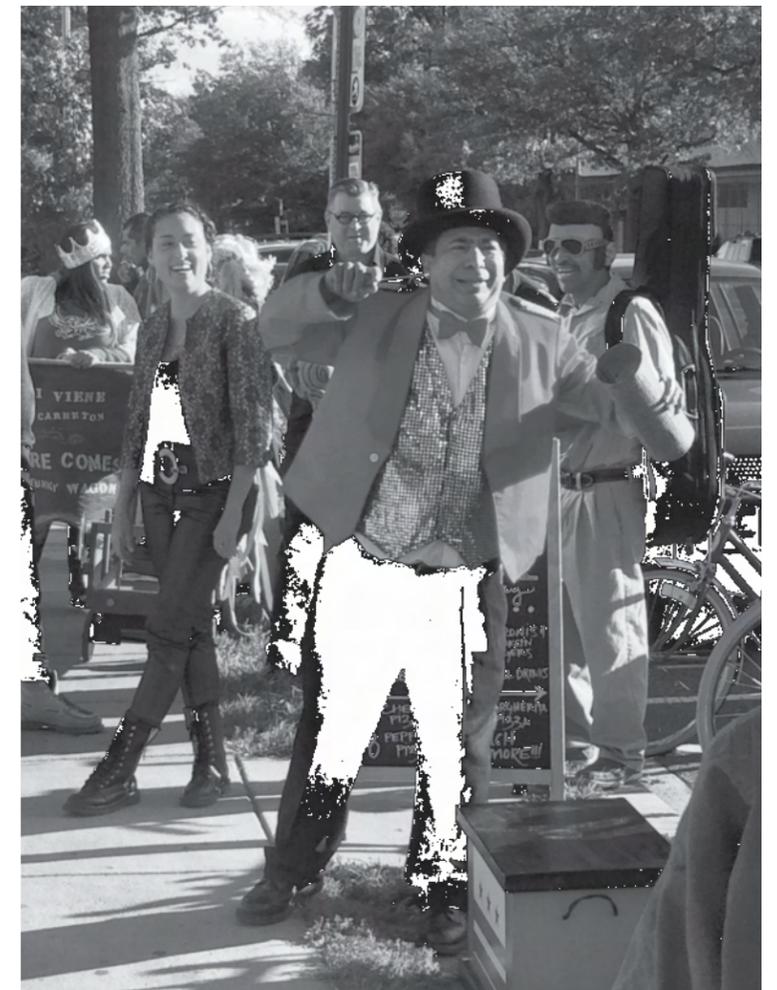
Despite their growing number and their significant contributions to the area's economy and culture, Salvadorans generally have lacked political representation and participation in local government. As of 2016 there were no Salvadorans on the D.C. Council and minimal representation in D.C. government committees and boards, including those of education, business, planning, parks, and other public services. In the suburbs of Virginia and Maryland, Salvadoran political representation also has remained limited, although delegates of Salvadoran heritage Ana Sol Gutiérrez and Victor Ramírez have served in the Maryland General Assembly.

Cultural critic Arturo Arias has argued that Central Americans, including Salvadorans, are "nearly invisible within the imaginary confines of what constitutes the multicultural landscape of the United States." Although they became the largest immigrant group in the Washington metropolitan area in the 1980s, Salvadorans have remained politically invisible and under-represented for a variety of different reasons, not the least of which is the white/black racial binary structuring much of D.C. politics. Salvadorans in the region also

have adopted strategies of invisibility, or passing unperceived in response to their experience of violence, trauma, forced migration, and lack of legal resident status in many cases.¹²

Though relatively invisible in local politics, Salvadorans in the Washington area have used artistic representation as a means to preserve their culture, traditions, and customs and to make their presence, needs, and struggles known. They have actively engaged in various forms of "cultural citizenship," which political scientist William V. Flores and oral historian Rina Benmayor define as "the use of cultural expression to claim political rights in the larger culture while maintaining a vibrant local identity." Indeed, Salvadorans in the D.C. metro area not only have filled important economic niches in restaurants, supermarkets, money transfer centers, and informal markets, but also elaborated local cultural identities through media, music, performances, artwork, festivals, customs, traditions, and other cultural practices that recreate elements of their homeland and speak to greater issues faced by Salvadorans in El Salvador and the United States. Artists such as musician Lilo González, photographer and Corcoran College of Art professor Muriel Hasbun, and writers Mario Bencastro, Mayamérica Cortez, Daniel Joya, José Vladamir Monge, Carlos Parada Ayala, and Grego Pineda, among others, have not only represented the history of Salvadorans but also documented their presence in the D.C. metropolitan area. Through their artistic and cultural productions, they have sought to represent the lives of Salvadoran "Wachintonians."¹³

Among the most notable Salvadorans to capture the process of how Salvadorans have made D.C. home and become "Wachintonians" is Quique Avilés, a longtime D.C. poet, performer, cultural activist, and graduate of the Duke Ellington School of the Arts. Avilés arrived from El Salvador in 1980 at the age of 15, along with others fleeing the civil war. He soon began to write, in English, Spanish, and Spanglish, about his own experiences and observations as a Salvadoran immigrant. He gave public performances with other artists about life in the "Latino barrio" of Mount Pleasant, making visible a community that went largely unperceived by the general population. Avilés co-founded, directed, and/or participated in a number of art collectives, including LatiNegro, Sol & Soul, Para Eso de la Palabra, and the youth program Paso Nuevo at the GALA Hispanic Theatre, bringing his wry satire to bear on



Quique Avilés and friends performing "Here Comes the Funky Wagon / Aquí viene el carretón" on 11th Street NW in Columbia Heights in October 2014 to protest gentrification in D.C.'s Latino neighborhoods.

social issues such as racism, war, migration, identity, and gentrification. His performances have included *Latinhood*, *Chaos Standing*, *Caminata: A Walk through Immigrant America*, and *The Children of Latinia*, and he published a collection of poetry, *The Immigrant Museum*, in 2003.

In his poem "El Salvador At-A-Glance," Avilés comically explores the image of El Salvador from the distance of resettlement in Washington and parodies official country profiles that provide soulless statistical information.¹⁴ Avilés turns the data into poetry, redrawing the geographical and cultural map of the country to include the diaspora and to point out the more poignant features of a country and people gravely affected by years of civil war and social violence:

El Salvador at-a-glance
 Area: the size of Massachusetts
 Population: Not much left
 Language: War, blood, broken English,
 Spanish
 Customs: Survival, dance, birthday parties,
 funerals
 Major exports: Coffee, sugar, city builders,
 busboys, waiters, poets . . .

El Salvador's major cities:
 San Salvador
 San Miguel
 Santa Ana
 Los Angeles
 San Wachinton, DC . . .

El Salvador in Wachinton
 little question mark
 little east of the border
 migrant earthquake
 wet back volcano
 banana eating
 tortilla making
 mustache holder
 funny dressing

forever happy
 forever sad
 forever Wachintonian Salvadorean.

The poem explains the making of the Salvadoran labor diaspora, or “Wachintonian Salvadoreans” and throws light upon the stereotypes and idiosyncratic caricatures often used to describe Salvadorans in the District. But Avilés shows that for every “banana eating / tortilla making / mustache holder / and funny dressing” Salvadoran, there is also a “wet back volcano” and “migrant earthquake” filled with dreams, desires, struggles, and potential in Wachinton, D.C. Elsewhere in the poem, Avilés further ponders how was it that Salvadorans ended up “in the strangest cities/under the strangest circumstances,” especially considering the history of U.S. intervention in El Salvador. But even more critically, Avilés draws attention to the containment, effacement, and silencing of Salvadorans into a docile labor force in Washington: “You were supposed to clean carpets / not ask for time out and dialogue,” and certainly not seek fair wages, rights, and recognition.

In numerous other poems, monologues, and performances presented in community centers, schools, jails, and the streets, Avilés brings to light important issues affecting D.C.’s disfranchised and marginalized communities. In “Barrio,”

Avilés poignantly struggles to describe life in the city’s Latino neighborhoods.

Trying to write things
 without naming names
 not pointing the finger
 not saying what the throat wants to
 say
 in these arrogant times
 in this arrogant place. . . .¹⁵

For Avilés, the “arrogant place” was the nation’s capital, where foreign and domestic policies were made, where monuments hid the daily inequities experienced by local residents, and where Latina/o residents, especially Salvadorans, had little political representation or voice.

Like Avilés, painter and Adams Morgan resident Karlísima Rodas explores how Salvadorans adapted to life in D.C. She based her 2005 “Indigenous Lament II” (“Lamento indígena II”) on a poem by her mother, Mayamérica Cortez, about a Salvadoran immigrant woman’s difficult adjustment to life here. The painting depicts not only the image of a Salvadoran woman in migration but also that of the Salvadoran diaspora in its middle passage into the gray city of Washington. Looking back to her native land with grief and ambivalence, an indigenous woman (a self-portrait of Karlísima) is captured in motion, one foot in a sandal, another in a high heel, moving into unknown terrain. The painting suggests hard times ahead and a point of no return to a home/land that exists only in nostalgic memory.

Likewise, musician Lilo González represents the Salvadoran diaspora in Washington. A guitarist, songwriter, and educator, González migrated with his family to the area in the 1980s and worked as a dishwasher while studying at the Gordon Center (now Carlos Rosario International Public Charter School) in Columbia Heights. He composed music and lyrics about the life of Salvadoran immigrants. In 1989 he won the Iberoamerican Television Organization prize for his song “Amor sin papeles” (Love without Papers), and in 1994 he released his first CD, *A quien corresponda . . .* [To Whom It Corresponds]. Recorded with his band Los de la Mt. Pleasant, the CD features a cover of folkloric images of El Salvador overlaid on landmarks of Mount Pleasant, and it offers a compilation of songs, mostly in Spanish, about Salvadoran life in D.C. Songs describe mothers forced to migrate without their children (“The Border Crossed My Land”), undocumented residents living in fear of deportation (“No Human Being is Illegal,” “Love

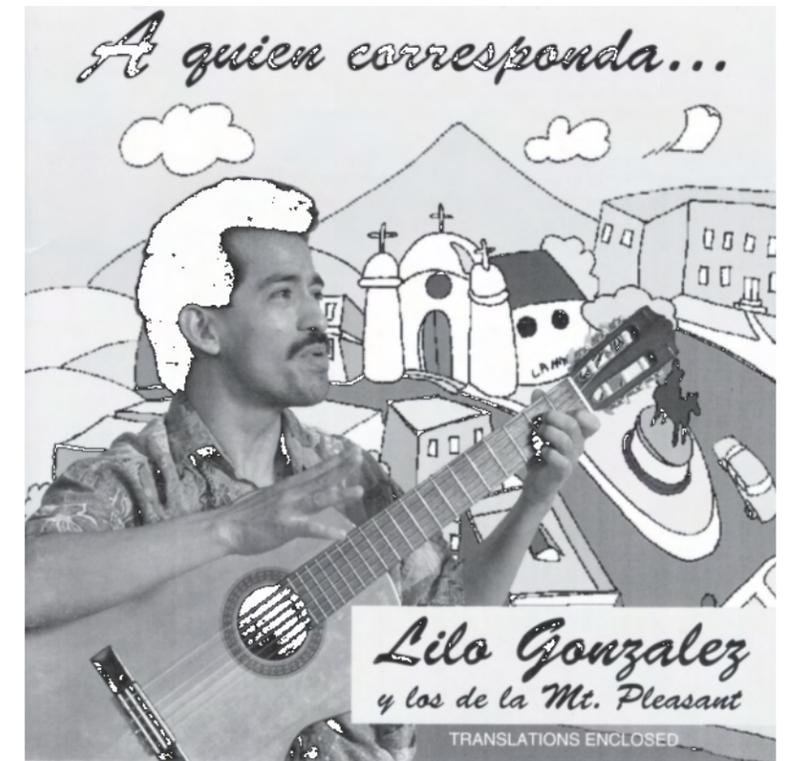


“Indigenous Lament II” (“Lamento indígena II”) by Karlísima Rodas-Israel, ©2005.

Without Papers”), and the difficulties of immigrant adaptation and the consequences of cultural assimilation (“Mount Pleasant Street”).¹⁶

In “The Forbidden Tales of Pedro and Tyrone,” González and his band tell the story of two youths living in “the shadow of the White House.” Tyrone, an African American, is “dying every morning and every night,” while Pedro, a Salvadoran who arrived in the District at the age of six without parents, papers, or resources, is homeless and addicted to crack. Set to a reggae beat, the song bemoans that both youths are subject to violence, poverty, and a general lack of opportunities. For both, “the Statue of Liberty . . . was too much too high” and the “universe of hopes, made from mangos in bloom” is out of reach, yet the refrain calls them to break the cycle of violence and to join the “struggle for peace in America.”

Writers also have explored the struggles of Salvadoran immigrants in the Washington area. One of the most well known local Salvadoran authors is Mario Bencastro, who lived in Northern Virginia for more than 20 years. His novels and short story collections, written in Spanish and translated into French, German, and English, include *A Shot in the Cathedral* (1996), *The Tree of Life: Stories of Civil War* (1997), *Odyssey to the North* (1999), *A Promise to Keep* (2005), *Paraíso Portátil/Portable Paradise* (2010), and



Musician, educator, and activist Lilo González appears on the cover of his band’s CD. Courtesy, Lilo Gonzalez

La Mansión del Olvido/The Mansion of Oblivion (2015), focusing on Salvadoran history from the beginning of the civil war and the assassination of Archbishop Oscar A. Romero to the postwar era following the signing of the Salvadoran Peace Accords in 1992. *Odyssey to the North* focuses on Salvadoran migration to Washington through the story of a migrant named Calixto, who flees the violence in El Salvador, and resettles in the neighborhoods of Mount Pleasant and Adams Morgan in the 1980s.

In “Juana’s Dreams,” a short story from the collection *Paraíso Portátil/Portable Paradise*, Bencastro offers an allegory for Salvadoran life in Washington. In the story, Juana is a Salvadoran who migrates to northern Virginia in the 1980s. She travels religiously each year to El Salvador during the *Fiestas de Agosto* (August Festivals) to see her family, whom she supports with regular remittances. On one visit to her sister’s house in San Salvador, she celebrates her birthday with a lunch overflowing with *comida típica*, typical food that could not be found or made in the United States, at least not to meet Juana’s demanding palate: “*gallo en chicha . . . steaming rice with chipilines, rellenos de huisquil, crema, cheese, flor de izote with egg, tortillas, and tamarind drink.*”¹⁷ Becoming fixated on the *aguacates* (avocados), the biggest she had ever seen, Juana succumbs to her immigrant nostalgia, yearning for the avocados and all things from home.

Juana looked at the slice of avocado for a second. Immediately, she cut a piece, sprinkled it with salt and put it in her mouth. She savored it, taking her time, and when she experienced the pleasure of the creamy, vegetable meatiness, she closed her eyes and exclaimed, “¡Dios mío! How delicious! It’s the best avocado I’ve ever eaten!”¹⁸



Writer Mario Bencastro speaks about his book *Mansión del Olvido* at the Embassy of El Salvador, June 5, 2015.

To everyone else at the table the avocado is an item of everyday consumption, and “they didn’t understand why Juana was so excited about that fruit that for them was something as normal as day and night.” The avocado is a dietary staple, a common and ordinary part of their *salvadoreñidad*, their everyday cultural identity. The *aguacate*, so central to Salvadoran culture, symbolizes Juana’s Salvadoran national identity. To be *aguacaterola* (avocado-to-the-core), means to be typically Salvadoran, as defined by certain markers such as language, history, racial and ethnic composition, socio-economic class, and popular social behaviors.¹⁹

In “Juana’s Dreams,” the avocado, however, becomes a metaphor of not only Salvadoran identity but also the Salvadoran diaspora, because the fruit is both a native of Mesoamerica (i.e., Mexico, Central America, and northern South America) and a transplant cultivated in Europe, the Caribbean, and the United States. In the 21st century avocado horticulture and production extends across the world (including Australia, Brazil, Chile, Dominican Republic, Guatemala, Israel, Mexico, South America, and the United States), making it an apt metaphor of transculturation and diaspora as a well-traveled and transplanted fruit. Like the *aguacate* of Juana’s dreams, Salvadoran immigrants often recreate, re-root, and adapt elements of Salvadoran-ness in other soils, producing mixed *aguacaterola* identities through the reconstruction of Salvadoran popular idioms, customs, traditions, “native” costumes, and cultural practices far from home.²⁰

For Juana, the avocado symbolizes her desire for memory, family, and homeland—all of which she believes she has sacrificed by moving to the United States, where she has worked many years cleaning other people’s houses. While she has acquired material goods, she loses her family, friends, and community. So it is no surprise that upon her return to the United States, Juana breaks Immigration and Customs Enforcement regulations and smuggles a *maleta* (suitcase) full of Salvadoran products, among them three clandestine avocados to be savored and transplanted in Virginia.

Once back in Virginia, Juana takes meticulous care of her potted avocado seedlings, telling them stories of El Salvador and revealing how her two eldest children were killed in the civil war, one serving in the army, the other in the guerrilla forces. She recalls how she, her husband, and her daughter fled to the United States and settled and found work in Washington with the help of friends. Like many immigrants, she and her hus-



Salvadoran folkloric dancers entertain at the D.C. Latino Fiesta parade on Mount Pleasant St., September 25, 2011.

band worked endless hours while her kids grew up, married, and moved away. In the end her husband leaves her for another woman, and Juana never returns to El Salvador “to our family, to our roots,” although “none of us wanted to stay forever in this strange country.”²¹

Though the avocado seedlings flourished while indoors in a pot, they die soon after Juana replants them in the yard. Outdoors, alone, without strong roots, in foreign soil, the avocado plants cannot survive, much as Juana withers away while living in her northern Virginia apartment by herself and yearning for her annual trips to El Salvador, her regular phone calls to her sister, and her memories of her people and country. The avocado, Bencastro writes, “wasn’t just another plant; for Juana, it was a symbol of identity. It was a constant and crisp reminder of her beloved faraway native country.” Like Juana herself, the plant could not take to the new environment without the elements that had made it whole and preserved its *aguacatero-ness*, its Salvadoran-ness. The story suggests that not all things can take root in new soil, or must at least adapt to new environments in order to survive.²²

Mourning the death of her avocado plant and her dream of returning to El Salvador, at the end of the story Juana calls her sister to relay the sad news of the *aguacate*’s death and to explain her decision not to visit El Salvador the next summer. With the avocado’s passing, Juana feels compelled to give up her illusions of returning to El Salva-

dor—her “avocado dreams”—and instead settle for living in the United States.

Mario Bencastro’s “Juana’s Dreams,” like the work of other Salvadoran poets, artists, and musicians, explores questions of home and belonging, as well as the struggles experienced by Salvadorans in the Washington area as they adapt to their new environment and construct new *aguacatero* immigrant cultural identities in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. For many Salvadorans, migratory status, financial conditions, and family separations have meant that there are no easy returns to the homeland, nor are there easy cultural adaptations or transplantations in their new lands. Capturing the moment of passing into Washington and leaving behind the nostalgic “avocado dream” of their home country, Quique Avilés, in “El Salvador at a glance,” writes that it is only in the replanting in other soils that immigrants can make a space, if not home, for themselves amid the ambivalence of feeling “forever happy / forever sad / forever Wachintonian Salvadorean.”

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NOTES

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