CALIFRONIA STATE UNIVERSITY, NORTHRIDGE

From Middle Class Guatemalan to U.S. Gay Latino Activist:
Roland Palencia and Queer Oral History

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in
Chicana and Chicano Studies

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Dedication

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Abstract

FROM MIDDLE CLASS GUATEMALAN TO U.S. GAY LATINO ACTIVIST: ROLAND PALENCIA AND QUEER ORAL HISTORY

By

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Master of Arts in Chicana and Chicano Studies

This thesis documents Roland Palencia’s voice, thoughts, and experiences growing up during the Civil War in Guatemala, immigrating to the U.S., and participating in LGBT and Latina and Latino community activism. The oral history spans Palencia’s life from 1957 to 2014. As of 2014, he continues to dedicate his life to the empowerment of the Latina and Latino and LGBT community. Using queer oral history methods, I captured Palencia’s memories of queer genders, sexualities, and desires (Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012). The analysis is informed by the concept of “intersectionality,” which explores “distinct systems that resemble one another on some dimensions and differ from one another on others” (Collins, 2000). Thus, in this thesis intersectionality includes class, race, and sexuality and how they affect immigration, homophobia, racism, and Transphobia. Roland’s life story is framed by a brief review of the literature on the Guatemalan Civil War, immigration, LGBT “coming out” stories, homophobia, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the formation of the first gay Latino community based organizations in Los Angeles.
Chapter 1: Introduction

“Every so often a scholar has the opportunity to delve into an archive so rich in its character
and complex in its narrative that it is nearly impossible to explain its direct bearing on the
present moment”

– Robb Hernández
(Hernández, 2013, viii)

The above quote summarizes the role Roland Palencia played in my thesis project. I
had the honor of interviewing Palencia, who was born and raised in Guatemala. In the mid-
1970s, he and his family migrated to the United States. He attended Los Angeles High
School from 1975 to 1979 and upon graduation, he enrolled at University of California at Los
Angeles (UCLA) where he earned a bachelor’s degree in History. Shortly thereafter, he help
established Gay [and Lesbian] Latino Unidos. Over time, Palencia played a major role in
creating many community-based organizations in Los Angeles, which focused around
Latinas and Latinos, and gay issues. Palencia has a long trajectory of community activism
within the Latina and Latino and gay community. A basic objective of this thesis is to
document the complex life of one gay Central American, including his migration history and
political contributions.

Roland Palencia’s voice, thoughts, and experiences growing up during the Civil War
in Guatemala, immigrating to the U.S., and participating in the LGBT and Latina and Latino
community have been documented in this oral history. Oral history offers insights into the
complexities of the past and speaks to the uniqueness of each person’s story, as is the case
with Palencia’s story. Palencia has engaged in community and healthcare activism that
includes community leadership, HIV/AIDS activism, coalition building, and film production. I captured Palencia’s story through queer oral history methods, creating evidence of the existence of queer lives through the documentation of the narrator’s memories of queer genders, sexualities, and desires (Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012). Furthermore, not only does queer oral history bring visibility to the narrator, but also to the researcher in the form of documenting my perspective in creating this Master’s thesis.

To provide a context and analysis of Palencia’s oral history, I reviewed literature on Guatemala’s Civil War, immigration, community organizations, and the gay, lesbian, and transgender community. The analysis is informed by the concept of “intersectionality,” which explores “distinct systems that resemble one another on some dimensions and differ from one another on others” (Collins, 2000). Centering work in the experiences of a gay Latino can provide new angles of vision not just on the individual experience, but also on the basic concepts used to describe that experience (Collins, 2000; Collins, 1998; Crenshaw, 1991). Thus, in this thesis intersectionality includes class, race, and sexuality and how they affect immigration, homophobia, racism, and Transphobia. Palencia self identifies as “gay Latino” and I recognize the complexity in ethnic terminology and the implications of the term gay Latino as it is used in a U.S. context. Using the term “gay Latino shows” Palencia’s diasporic reality as well as suggests that individuals like Palencia did not maintain a transnational identity (Arias, 2007). I have chosen to use the term U.S. Central American to refer to an individual born and raised in the U.S. but whose parent(s) are from Central America.
Organization of the Thesis

Chapter 2: “Methodology” discusses queer oral history where the narrator and scholar play an equally important role in creating an oral history project. Palencia’s oral history is then presented in chronological order, beginning with his early childhood in Guatemala and migration experiences, U.S. education and “coming out,” community based activism and professional positions; sex and love, and ending with his role in producing the film, TransVisible. Each chapter begins with the transcript of the interviews that I conducted with Roland followed by an analysis focused on the aforementioned themes.

Chapter 3: “Early Childhood and Immigration” centers on Palencia’s childhood and immigration journey. In tracing his life in Guatemala, the chapter exposes a middle class child’s life during time of war, the division of family, self-awareness of homosexuality, and immigration and legalization in the U.S. It also explores the association of Palencia’s life to the larger experience of other Guatemalans and immigrants, including a brief discussion of Guatemala’s Civil War, and transnational motherhood.

Chapter 4: “Education and Coming Out” describes Palencia’s coming out story while attending UCLA. Revealing his homosexuality to family becomes a site of relief for Palencia and that allowed him to become an activist in the gay Latino community. A close reading of Palencia’s coming out shows that it facilitated his early activism in Los Angeles. The discussion of leadership and stages in coming out furthers our understanding of how Roland’s activism helped to establish one of the first Los Angeles based gay Latino organizations, Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos.

Chapter 5: “Community Based Activism and Professional Positions” discusses the ways that the HIV and AIDS epidemic became a catalyst for activism as well as destroyed
leadership. In particular, the chapter focuses on the founding of *Viva!* and the community work of *Viva!*. The chapter documents the internal and external issues that occurred while Palencia was working in community organizations and explores identity and the weakening of the LGBT people of color movement as a result of the HIV and AIDS epidemic. In addition, the chapter explores the various professional positions Palencia has held over the last 30 years with groups such as AIDS Healthcare Foundation, *Clinica Monseñor Oscar A. Romero*, California Endowment, L.A. Care Health Plan, and Equality California.

Chapter 6: “Sex, Love, and Palencia” discusses Palencia’s personal perspectives on love, relationships, and sex. Due to the sensitivity of the topics in this chapter, the discussion focuses on the narratives on sex within oral histories. Given the responses provided from the interview sessions, this chapter examines queer oral historical perspectives as they pertain to sex and its meaning.

Chapter 7: “*TransVisible*” calls our attention to the documentary *TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story*. Palencia accepted the invitation to help produce the film and his decision to take on the project represents one more contribution to the betterment of the LGBT community. In particular, I discuss participant observations gathered from attending a fundraiser and screenings for *TransVisible*. More specifically, the chapter focuses on the making of the documentary and Palencia’s role. The discussion on *TransVisible* further leads to the examination of race, class, immigrant status, sexuality, and the challenges faced by the transgender community. Chapter 8: “Conclusion” summarizes the findings, the significance of the thesis in creating and documenting a queer history, a gay Latino activist history, and the implications for further research.
Chapter 2: Methodology

“Queer oral history cannot afford to ask questions solely about the past and its narration but also about how public memories in the present continue to a have politically implicated life in the future”

(Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012, p.13)

In the above quote, scholars Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez (2012, p.13), highlights that body-based knowledge concerning memories, desires, and the physical presence of sexual as well as gendered bodies are foundational aspects of queer oral histories. Today, queer oral history has political implications because it “creates evidence of the existence of queer lives” (Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012, p.1). Boyd and Roque Ramírez helped me to identify reasons for conducting queer oral history: First, my intention was to provide research on gay Latinos beyond the much researched topic of Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). I also wanted to challenge the stereotypes about gay Latino men such as gay men living with HIV/AIDS who are often deemed as personally responsible for their conditions because they are thought to have chosen to engage in male-male sex (Ramírez-Valle, Molina, & Drites, 2013).

Initially, my primary research objective was to explore the life of a gay man who has ties to a Central American country because of my interest in learning about gay men and the region. In the early stage of my research, I asked a very broad question: What were the experiences of gay men in Central America? I searched for literature that focused on the experiences of gay Central American men. I found a large body of scholarly literature that
primarily focused on HIV and AIDS transmission among the various gay Central American communities. The literature failed to address their experiences of living with HIV or being gay in the region. As I read further, I had to identify a way to address my research concerns given the limited information on the lives of gay Central American men.

I selected the subject of gay Central American men for two reasons: First, as a U.S. Central American\textsuperscript{1} raised in Los Angeles I found myself wanting to know more about the gay Central American community. During my childhood and adolescence, I had never met a gay man who was from Central America that was openly gay. Secondly, as an undergraduate student at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) I found my interest in the topic of gay men in Central America growing as I double-majored in Central American Studies and Chicana and Chicano Studies. In the Chicana and Chicano Studies courses the topic of sexuality among gay men focused on the experiences of Chicano and Mexican-American men. On the other hand, in the Central American Studies courses, I found that the topic of gay men was not addressed. Therefore, in the Central American Diaspora course taught by Professor Alicia Estrada I decided to write a term paper that focused on the experiences of gay Salvadoran men migrating to the United States. I would continue to work with Professor Estrada and the topic of queer Diaspora among Salvadorans during my tenure in CSUN’s Roland McNair Program. Without a doubt, my undergraduate and academic training played a role in my desire to document the life of a gay Central American\textsuperscript{2} man.

\textsuperscript{1} U.S. Central American refers to an individual born and raised in the U.S., but whose parent(s) are from Central America.
\textsuperscript{2} Central American refers to an individual from or in the Central American isthmus.
After entering CSUN as an undergraduate student I met other gay U.S. Central Americans and gay Central American immigrants, but they were not publicly out or involved in gay liberation issues. Then I met Roland Palencia, a former CSUN instructor who is a distinct individual because he is an openly gay activist who has focused on gay issues as well as Latino immigrant concerns. Palencia was born in Guatemala, yet he identifies as Latino and rarely identifies as Guatemalan. After interviewing Palencia, I learned that he did not identify as Central American. Palencia explained that as a result of his community activism he identifies as gay Latino because he wants to relate to the broader Latina/o community. He also shared that he only identifies as Guatemalan when it is necessary or while he is among Chicanos and Mexican-American friends. For this reason, I will refer to Palencia’s identity as gay Latino. However, in my analysis of Palencia’s oral history I simultaneously emphasize that within these much broader identities his activism is also rooted in Guatemalan cultural, historical, and family contexts and experiences.

Interviewing Roland Palencia

On October 20, 2012, I was introduced to Roland Palencia by my thesis chair Mary Pardo and committee member Marta López-Garza at a fundraiser for TransVisible Bamby’s Story, a film he was producing on a Latina transgender woman activist. I learned that Palencia migrated to the United States at the age of 18. For over 30 years, Palencia has dedicated his activism to a variety of communities such as LGBT, Latina/o, people of color, and the undocumented. I asked him if he would allow me to conduct an in-depth interview with him and he agreed. I acquired permission through the California State University,

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3 Central American immigrant refers to an individual born in the Central American isthmus, but immigrated to the U.S.
4 TransVisible: Bamby’s Story is the title of a film, which documents the life of a transgender woman.
Northridge Graduate Studies, Research and International Programs by completing Human Subjects Research Forms protocol. Contact with Palencia via e-mail was made after we met, in order to arrange a date and time for the first interview session. After the first interview session, the remaining interview session dates and time were arranged via telephone.

I interviewed Palencia over the course of six months. His narrative gave me key insights into the kind of experiences that shaped his community activism as well as the formation of a gay Latino identity. He has been associated and held leadership positions with organizations such as L.A. Care Health Care, *Gay and Lesbian Unidos*, and AIDS Healthcare Foundation. He is an openly gay Latino of Guatemalan origin with a long history of community activism that crosses into gay Latino community. The interviews took place in his apartment, which is located in the community of Los Feliz in Los Angeles. Palencia’s generosity is evident since he allowed the interview sessions to take place in his home. In this setting, conducting one-on-one in-depth interviews was an important choice because compared to other settings the narrator might be more comfortable. When a narrator is relaxed he is most likely to be open and offer insights on various topics and experiences, which might be less likely in a group setting (Slim, Thompson, Bennett, & Cross, 1998, 116). I was able to conduct all interviews in English and spoke in Spanish when necessary. Palencia is bilingual and Spanish dominant, however, he answered my questions in English and intermingled Spanish in some of his responses.

*Oral History*

Oral history scholars agree on the definitions and goals of oral history. Historians Paula Hamilton and Linda Shopes define oral history as social practices that connect the past
to the present and they refer to it as “a powerful tool to discover, explore, and evaluate the nature of historical memory” (Hamilton & Shopes, 2008, p.xi). In addition, Donald Ritchie has written that oral history adds a range of voices to a/the story (Ritchie, 2003, p.13). Oral historian Willa Baum further defines oral history as, “the tape recording of a knowledgeable person, by questions and answers, about what he/she did or observed of an event or events or way of life of historical interest. The purpose is to preserve that account for users, both present but especially future users, and make it available for use” (Baum, 2007, p.15). In other words, the goals of oral history are to:

1. Uncover unknown stories.
2. Give voice to the unheard.
3. Form evidence where there was no evidence or a source of data.
4. Create forums through testimony and witnessing in legal and judicial context.
5. Allow individuals to make sense of their past and connect their experiences to social context.
6. Empower individuals and social groups through the process of remembering and reinterpreting the past.
7. Acknowledge collective memory

In order to accomplish these goals historians have used various materials to produce oral history documentation. During my interview sessions with Palencia, I recorded the interviews with a digital recorder. While listening to Palencia tell his stories, I avoided taking notes because I did not want to give the impression that I was not interested in what he was saying or that I wished to move on to the next question.

Historian Ronald J. Grele (1998) provides recommendations for anyone who is conducting an oral history project. For example, “there is an already adequate bibliography and an already existent body of knowledge concerning interviewing and questioning […] there is no reason why an interviewer” (Grele, 1998, p.40-41) should not be prepared to

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5 Using the following articles I created the list of oral history goals: Hamilton & Shopes, 2008; Perks and Thomson, 2006; and Ritchie, 2003.
conduct an interview. His recommendations helped me to be prepared for the oral history interview sessions. By conducting preliminary research on Palencia, creating questions days before interview sessions, reading books on oral histories, and issues surrounding gay Central American men, I was prepared for the interview sessions. Grele also focuses on accuracy. For instance, Grele discusses that scholars are expected to check sources, provide documentation, and weigh the evidence carefully (Grele, 1998, p.42). By using primary and secondary sources, I learned more about Palencia and what he has done in the LGBT and Latino communities. I located information on the different organizations that he has been involved in. By doing so, I was able to better analyze what he said during the interviews and connect and contextualize his stories with information from other sources, which included news articles and websites.

*Documents*

I collected information on Palencia from newspaper articles, blog sites, videos, and websites including *LA Weekly, LGBT Point of View, Sí Magazine*, and *Blabbeando*. These sources contributed to my data in two ways: It allowed me to reconstruct events that had occurred before my research began. Secondly, the newspaper articles helped expanded on my understanding of Palencia’s personal life and community work. Thus, I was able to corroborate dates, names, and details.

Based on my extended research on Palencia, my first sets of questions were created. In order to ground and organize my questions I used an interview guide to organize my questions into chronological order by life events (Gluck, 2002). After the first interview session, Palencia provided me with documents such as a small biography of himself, an
acceptance speech he gave at Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) Awards on November 15, 2011; a second speech he gave at University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) Chicano Studies Center LGBT Latina/Latino Research Initiative on December 13, 2012; and a term paper he wrote in 1982 titled *Los Olvidados: A Historical Sketch of the Roots of Gay and Lesbian Latinos in the U.S.A.* these documents helped me develop further questions to ask Palencia including questions on his community activism and immigration journey.

**Feminist/Women’s Oral History**

Equally important, I recognized the relevance of the feminist critique of traditional oral history methodology as not serving to document the lives of women. In the 1970’s, “this methodology did not address the basic insights that grew out of the women’s liberation movement, including the notion that the personal is political and the conviction that women’s experience were inherently valuable and needed to be recorded” (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p.1). Feminist/women’s oral histories are seen as a feminist encounters, which validate women’s experiences, create communication among women, and develop historical accounts from women’s point of views (Boyd and Roque Ramírez, 2012, p.5). A key feature and strength in growing the canon of feminist/women’s oral history was that women’s “main task was to ask the right questions in order to uncover new data about women’s lives and activities” (Gluck & Patai, 1991, p.9). Like feminist and women oral historians, I was inspired to develop a historical account from a gay Latino man’s point of view.

Feminist oral history is about “asking why and how women explain, rationalize and make sense of their past offers insight into the social and material framework within which
they operated, the perceived choices and cultural patterns they faced, and the complex
relationship between individual consciousness and culture” (Sangster, 1998, p.88). Therefore,
feminist oral history places women’s voices at the center of history and challenges the
dominant ethos. My objective in documenting Palencia’s life experiences (community
activism, immigrant, and family oriented man) is to illustrate his contributions to
underrepresented communities during the past 30 years. In this way, Palencia’s work in these
varied community spaces challenges dominant stereotypes about gay Latino men who are
often stigmatized as “less than” a man, or depicted as comical characters who exhibit
flamboyant behavior (Guarneros, 2007).

Feminist and women scholars who have conducted oral history projects also critique
oral history methods. In her essay, “Reticence in Oral History Interviews,” Lenore Layman
discusses the individual reticence and patterns of reticence she has encountered in her own
personal experience conducting oral history interviews:

the narrator answered with reticence, a common conversational
ploy to avoid either outright refusal to respond or full
disclosure […] Narrators’ authority lies at the heart of this area
of reticence […] The conventional bounds of social discourse
[…] also produce reticence in interview dialogue […] Such
reticence in interviewers, as well as in narrators, censors and
sanitizes history telling (209-217)

This means that the person being interviewed might not be telling her/his complete story by
holding back details and, therefore, disrupting the flow of the oral history. Essentially,
Palencia recounted incidents that occurred during his life and often included historical

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information that might serve as a distraction and reflect the reticence described in the quote above. I listened carefully to what Palencia omitted to say as he answered my questions, considering that he might be “sanitizing history.” Palencia’s decision on what he wished to speak about was governed by his social identification as being a gay Latino male born in Guatemala and who has lived in Los Angeles since 18, maintained close family relationships, and earned a bachelor degree in History at University of California Los Angeles. Naming was a powerful force in our interview sessions. Palencia intended to record permanently the names and attributes of family, locations, and organizations that he greatly respects. I noticed that Palencia did not want to record the names of those engaging in behaviors, which caused unpleasant experiences in the workplace. “I don’t want to mention who did that” or “who said what,” said Palencia. I assumed that he refrained from naming people in order to avoid getting people into trouble or attacking an individual’s integrity. Layman’s discussion of the narrator’s reticence helped me to understand Palencia’s reluctance to offer details on particular topics.

Finally, oral historian Joan Sangster reminds us that “It is important to acknowledge how our own culture, class position and political worldview shapes the oral histories we collect, for the interview is a historical document created by the agency of both the interviewer and the interviewee” (92). For instance, I am U.S. Central American male who self-identifies as Latino and an individual that has been influenced by my own culture to continue expanding the literature on gay Latinos. I am a first generation college student from a working class family, who double majored and earned a Bachelor of Arts in Central American Studies and Chicana and Chicano Studies. I have to recognize that I have enjoyed some of the good outcomes of the 1960s and 1970s protests, which dealt with improving
educational opportunities for Mexican-Americans and Latinos students. I am also interested in social justice, and I believe in equality and human rights for all. I’m aware of my own privilege as a researcher who is gaining “access to […] memories not as a friend, but as a professional historian” (p.93) because I am using the material for the purpose of writing my thesis.

Queer Oral History

In their introduction of *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History*, Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio N. Roque Ramírez described queer oral histories as:

an agreement between a narrator and a researcher to record memories of queer genders, sexualities, and desires. If there is not a narrator to claim that sexual space of queer historical being and its retelling, and a queer researcher to hear, record, and draw out yet more details, desire, and meaning from it, no queer oral history is possible (1)

Central to Boyd and Roque Ramírez’s argument is the visibility of the researcher within the text. In order for queer oral history to exist both the researcher(s) and narrator(s) are necessary. At the same time, narrator(s) memories and “discussions of sexual consciousness, erotic desire, and gender expression” (Boyd and Roque Ramírez, 2012, p.7) are needed.

According to Boyd and Roque Ramírez, queer oral history methodology faces challenges,

The heavy social stigmatization of queer desires, the active state policing of queer behaviors and public expressions, the
medicalization and psychiatric classification of bodies feeling and expressing queer meanings, and the religious intolerance of queer and non-nuclear family units and forms of spiritual kinship … (11)

The quote above relates to the large body of literature that I found on HIV and AIDS among gay men in Central American because Central Americans who test positive for HIV encounter “stigma [which] amplifies the complexities of living with HIV” (Paz-Bailey et al., 2012, p.36). Compared to any other issue more attention has been given to the effects of HIV and AIDS among gay Central American men (Barrington, 2011; Boyce, 2011; Dickson-Gomez 2009 & 2012). It is generally believed that gay Central American men have faced difficulties in Central America due to the stigma assigned to being gay. This stigma is managed by a sexual system that labels gay men as passive individuals. At the same time, the existence of a large body of literature on gay Central American men and HIV/AIDS is important, but it also “medicalizes” our understanding of gay Central American men. Queer oral history has the potential to counter the medicalized understanding often prevalent in the literature on gay Central American men.

Participant Observation

I also conducted participant observation to add to my understanding of how Palencia carried out his work on producing and promoting the documentary film, TranVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story, a film that is another example of his activism in the Latino gay community and beyond. I conducted participant observation on October 20, 2012 at the reception for
TransVisible: Bamby’s Story at Naya Bar and Lounge⁶ where Palencia introduced the trailer of the documentary and Bamby Salcedo;⁷ May 16th, 2013 at the preview screening of TranVisible: The Bamby Salcedo Story (Palencia & Alencastre, 2013) at The Renberg Theater The Village at Ed Gould Plaza Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center⁸ where Palencia moderated and explained his role in the documentary; and July 14th, 2013 at Outfest: Los Angeles 2013 at Redcat: Roy and Edna Disney/Calarts Theater at Walt Disney Concert Hall⁹ where the documentary was screened, and Palencia explained his role in the documentary and answered some of the audience members questions. I took field notes as I observed his interaction with others and as he spoke in the public settings.

Conclusion

In conclusion, completing an oral history, gathering primary documents, and conducting participant observations are ways to conduct ethnographic research that begins when the researcher poses questions and then finds answers to those questions by listening, observing, and making inferences (Whitehead, 2004, p.17-18). Ethnographic methods fit my research objective because these frameworks permit “women [and men] to express their experience fully and in their own terms” (Jayarate & Stewart, 2008, p.47). At the same time, I also used newspaper articles, blogs, websites, and videos to prepare a biographical file on Palencia. I am using queer oral history methods to record and document the life and experiences of Palencia because I want to add to the voices of gay Latino men, who are missing from mainstream/dominant history. In particular, Palencia has been an activist for 30

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⁶ Location: 3750 W. Sunset Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90026
⁷ Bamby Salcedo is of Mexican origin and self-identifies as a Latina transgender and is an activist in the Los Angeles area.
⁸ Location: 1125 N. McCadden Place, Los Angeles, CA 90038
⁹ Location: 631 W. 2nd Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012
years in the U.S. Central American, Latino gay, and in the Latina and Latino communities.

To identify as gay and Latino has impacted Palencia’s life experiences and in turn has affected the life experiences of others that he has worked with in community based groups.

Palencia’s life experiences are important contributions to the fields of Chicana and Chicano Studies, Central American Studies, Gay Studies, Queer Studies, and Latino Studies in numerous ways: First, Palencia’s story adds to gay Latino narratives. Secondly, the oral history manuscript shows how language, class, gender, and ethnic position bring to light queer visibility. Third, the oral history also illustrates how the narrator and researcher’s discussions on desire, sex, sexuality, and gender expressions can shape an individual and community history in how and what is remember.
Chapter 3: Early Childhood and Immigration (1957-1974)

“… my immigration story is really a gay story.”

- Roland Palencia

DG: Tell me where you are from?

RP: I was born [on June 14, 1957] in Puerto Barrios, Izabal, on the Caribbean coast of Guatemala, Central America, between Belize and Honduras. I grew up in Puerto Barrios as well, which is the biggest port in Guatemala. It was a port built by the United Fruit Company, so bananas [and other agricultural commodities] could be easily shipped to the U.S. market. Bananas were the main export, and that’s why many Central American nations earned the disparaging moniker of “banana republics.” Puerto Barrios is hot and humid and was very ethnically diverse, much less so now as Guatemalans of African/Caribbean descent have migrated to Belize and the U.S., especially Los Angeles. Puerto Barrios’ port had ships coming in from all over the world, including Greece, the U.S., Spain, Scandinavian countries and England. What was interesting [about Puerto Barrios] is that there were no rich neighborhoods at that time [pre-1970s], and I do not think there are now. Most people were either poor, lower middle class or middle class, but the neighborhoods were economically and many times racially mixed. The only upper middle class neighborhood was “La Colonia de los Gringos” where the United Fruit company U.S. employees resided with their families. The Colonia was pretty much a U.S. outpost in a Caribbean town. After the Americans left, it

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10 The United Fruit Company (UFCO) was an American corporation founded in 1899 that specialized in tropical fruit trade in the U.S. and Europe. UFCO controlled massive territories in Central and South America that resulted in ongoing economic and political developments in those regions.
became more of a middle class neighborhood and 100% Guatemalan, but everyone kept referring to it as “La Colonia de los Gringos” even though gringos no longer lived there.

Photograph 1. From left to right: Guillermo Palencia Jr., Guillermo Palencia, and Roland Palencia. (1961)

We were a small business entrepreneurial family. My dad [Guillermo Alfonso Palencia Abadia] was a university-educated man. He attended the University of San Carlos, one of the oldest universities in the Americas, established in 1676. So we belonged to the up and coming middle and entrepreneurial class. We were not wealthy by any stretch of the imagination, but we were comfortable. We owned a bakery that employed about 25 people, with three working shifts as we distributed bread throughout the [Izabal] province region. It was more like a bread factory rather than just a storefront bakery; the business was
downstairs, and we lived upstairs. We were part of the neighborhood ecology; we were not disconnected from the community. Many of our employees were our neighbors, so in that sense it was truly a family business, an extended family at that.

Photograph 2. *Panificadora*, the Palencia ‘s bakery was founded in 1953 in Puerto Barrios, Izabal, Guatemala. The *Panificadora* used to sponsor the province of Izabal’s swimming team. (Unknown date)

My neighborhood was probably 30% to 40% African descent or racially mixed, including Mayan, African, Spanish, Chinese and Indian from the Asian subcontinent. We [my siblings and I] went to a catholic school, *Colegio Cristo Rey*. Many of my classmates were children of [immigrants] who had left China in 1949 because of the revolution, so they [came to Guatemala] fleeing Chinese Communism and some settled in Puerto Barrios. Some of my classmates were also the children of the United Fruit Company executives, primarily White Americans. We also had indigenous people of Maya descent, but not too many in
Puerto Barrios at that time.\footnote{Although Guatemala’s population is multicultural the African and indigenous origin communities are socially excluded based on race and unable to fully participate in cultural, economic, political, and social spheres (Hooker, 2005).} I was around people who spoke different languages, and not everyone looked like me in color, language, or traditions.

I also remember some of the women sex workers. They lived across the street or a block down from us. That kind of openness and social fluidity influenced me a lot. When I came here [to the U.S.] being in a multicultural environment was like second nature to me. It took me a little while though to understand that none of the Blacks in the U.S. spoke Spanish as every Black person in my neighborhood did.

\textbf{DG: Did you know as a child living in Guatemala that there was a Civil War going on?}

RP: I was a very sheltered kid. My mom [Vilma Nelia Duarte Portillo de Palencia] was really careful not to tell us anything because if we told other kids what was going on in our family, and they would tell their families here might have been some problems. She was very careful not to get us engaged at all. The Santo Tomas bay was our backyard; sometimes the bodies would wash off by the beach or the riverbanks. The danger of being perceived as an enemy of the state was palpable. People were even afraid to openly talk about how that person died. Most of the deaths were attributed to “\textit{accidentes},” which became a code word for “somebody got killed by someone else.” When we went to Guatemala City it seemed pretty \textit{tranquilo} [peaceful] in comparison, although I never felt unsafe in Puerto Barrios as we could be out playing late in the evening and we never heard of anything happening to kids. When we left in the mid-seventies the real \textit{grande trancazos} [widespread assaults], started to happen, but maybe I was much more aware by then. But it was nothing compared to the brutality that happened in the 80’s where entire villages were raided, leveled and torched by
the armed forces. But my mom and siblings were already gone by then, and my father had already been assassinated. My Tío [uncle] Charles (Carlos Palencia Abadia), his wife and seven children fled for Mexico in the early 80’s as they were involved in the urban insurrection and their lives were in danger. My 18-year-old cousin Rosa Luxemburgo did not make it; she was disappeared and her body was never found. The pain to my uncle and his family was unbearable. The last time I saw her was when she was eight years old. I have a picture of both her and my dad at a local resort.

As a child, I was not aware that my dad was involved in leftist politics, and I am not so sure that I would’ve fully understand it. He disappeared for months; he would come back for a few days and then he would leave again, all underground. My mom told me of a time when they both sabotaged a local armed forces search mission. Mom and dad carpeted the main road that led to the entrance of Puerto Barrios with tacks, nails and other sharp objects. In regards to his involvement, mom and others would just tell us at that time that he was helping the poor in Western Guatemala, particularly indigenous people. He had pretty much left the family by the time I turned 10 years old. When my mom migrated to the U.S. in 1970 and we stayed behind, we did not have much contact with him because he was already part of the underground guerrilla movement, and secrecy was of outmost necessity. He was assassinated in 1971. In small countries it is not uncommon for family members to be on opposite sides of the political and ideological spectrum. While my dad and uncle Tío Charles, were of a leftist persuasion, their sister, Tía [aunt] Lucita, married a military man, Tío Hugo Reyes. We loved them deeply and both my mom and my dad left us in their care for months while we were out on school vacations. The Reyes cousins were our childhood playmates and our bond was real. They moved around a lot, so we visited them in many cities.
throughout Guatemala. Even now, many of my female cousins from both sides of the family are married to military men. But like the saying goes “blood is thicker than water.” We are very fond of each other. Our childhood bond will never cease.

DG: Your mom migrated before your dad passed away?

RP: Yes, she left to the U.S. because my dad had basically left the family by late 1967 and our financial prospects were dismal. My mom was left holding the bag [bakery business] and raising the children. My dad was a very good businessman, and he was missed when he was not around. Also, my mom was deeply concerned that something would happen to us because of his underground political activities. He was a very handsome and charismatic man, but also a womanizer. His affairs with other women were very well known, an open secret sort of thing. What I remember the most about him is his patience, his intellect, his connection and deep love for people. He practiced patience at home as well. Although it was very common and expected to physically punish misbehaved children, I don’t remember him ever hitting me.

Some of my mother’s cousins had moved to the U.S. in the 1960’s, and after my dad left the family, her cousins on the Duarte side of the family encouraged her: “Vilma come to Los Angeles; just check it out for a few months, and if you do not like it, you can always go back.” She really wanted to explore something else because she did not see much of a future for her or us in Guatemala. She came to the U.S. in January 1970 with my aunt Dora Duarte. Mom got a few jobs, tasted the freedom, the fluidity of cultural conventions, and felt that she could remake hers and our lives. She could walk down the street and feel safe [and]; there was a bigger world for her [here in the U.S.]. She decided that she was not going to go back
What she was going to do was to figure out how she was going to get her green card and bring us to the U.S.; my dad was deeply involved in the guerilla movement, and there was no turning back. And for all intents and purposes they were separated, although they never divorced. My dad was offered political asylum in Germany and Spain, but he wanted to stay and fight. In the end, she left for those reasons: political, economic, family unity falling apart, and she did not see a future for herself or us [in Guatemala].

DG: Were you aware of the concept of homosexuality in Guatemala?
RP: Yes, I was aware of the concept of homosexuality. But it was mostly about men who performed in drag in some of the local clubs. I remember some of the older guys talking about how the transvestites were better looking than many of the women around. I basically knew by the age of five that I was different from the other kids. Although I did not have the language, I knew I did not quite fit. Identifying myself as gay or homosexual was beyond my comprehension and an overwhelming concept charged with deep stigma, nothing a child would consciously identify with. Although I never brought it up during my church confession, I felt that I was a sinner. That’s how dehumanizing some religious beliefs are where they make an innocent child betray his own soul and authenticity. I did not have a boyfriend or anything; that was not part of my experience in Guatemala. My sexual exploration was very minimal until I came to the U.S., as I was pretty ashamed of feeling the way I did. As I began my teenage years, my concept of homosexuality was kind of what people thought in the 1970s: that we were deviants, going to hell, and that one can be cured of one’s homosexuality, basically not a life worth living. I internalized these oppressive ideas, but they were not consistent with how I felt inside.
I remember that I had a classmate from Colegio Cristo Rey. He must’ve been 11 years old, and he was very effeminate and was teased a lot. His parents sent him to prep military school to “man him up.” And I am not sure whether he couldn’t take it or what, but he came back to the Colegio. I noticed that he was very rigid, “straightened up” so to speak. The softness and sensitivity in him had been beaten out of him. Something really sad hit me, “why would they do that to their own child?” The kid came back a lot tougher and rougher. I translated that to [thinking] “I cannot be too obvious because something like that might happen to me.” He was basically quote, “reformed” to act like a “real man”, but I knew something inside him had been killed, perhaps even his soul. It makes me angry and sad just to think about it again.

I remember one time, I must’ve been around 11 years old. I was hesitating diving into the ocean from a pier platform, and I was kind of scared of the deep water, and I hesitated, and one of my uncles said to me, “No seas un maricon [do not be a fag].” I do not know why he said that to me. It could’ve been because I was effeminate, or it could be because a man would just jump and not hesitate. I was deeply disturbed by that experience. And who do you talk to when you think it is you, a child against the rest of the world? I just knew that no one would understand what I was feeling deep inside. These kinds of experiences created a distortion of my true being. When you really think about it, every societal institution is designed to undermine and invalidate us as LGBT people. Institutions have a huge impact in our lives, and every single one of them is set up to demean us, whether it is religious, educational, military, cultural and or even the family institution. None of them are gay affirmative. Even in your own family, technically you are not born or raised in a gay-friendly environment, even when your family loves you deeply, which is the case with me.
But even so, there is something that is so embedded and deep in our queer soul that in spite
of this unified institutional oppression; we do not give up our authenticity and our dignity.
This is a phenomenon going on all over the world now, liberation is in the air, and it’s far
more visible than it has ever been. I think our movement is elevating morality to another
level. It is a morality of justice, fairness and equality, which is going to override the false
morality of sexual hypocrisy and manipulation, prejudice and discrimination.

**DG: You mention that you were aware that you were different from your peers in
Guatemala. Did you have to act a certain way?**

RP: I was a thin and effeminate child, on the soft side, and I have the pictures to prove it! I
was teased a lot. I was a sensitive kid, which in retrospect was a good thing because it
heightened my sense of the injustices going on that I felt were not right. I remember I liked to
hangout more with girls. I have a set of female cousins, the Reyes sisters. I would hang out
with them because I felt they were softer. They also played differently; it was not all about
kicking, pushing, beating each other up or throwing each other around. I did not like any of
those team games at all, like soccer. They were too rough for me. It was not my thing.

The only team sport that I kind of liked was basketball. In Guatemala, basketball was
played more by women than by men, and soccer was the game of men. My aunt Lily
sponsored a female basketball team, and I liked to practice with them. Then, and mostly now,
soccer is still considered a barometer for masculinity, of who’s in and who’s out. I knew that
I did not fit that norm. I was certainly not a tough-looking kid or anything like that. I doubt it
anyone was intimidated by me – [laughs].
**DG:** How did your mom or family react to you just hanging out with girls?

**RP:** I have not asked her that.

I always got a bit hustled by the men in my family, brothers, [and] cousins. They would say, “Sólo te gusta jugar con las niñas” [you just like to play with the girls].”

Generally, people liked me. My personality has always been very malleable and compatible. I did not get into fistfights, and I was kind of reserved.

We lived by the bay [in Guatemala]. We would go out on a canoe into the bay and swim. I also swam here [in Los Angeles] when I was in high school. It was the only sport I liked and I had the body to prove it – [laughs]. The adults in my family liked me because I was helpful, a cordial kid, [and] very respectful. I would do things in the house if they asked me to help. I helped my aunt Lily to run the typing academy. I was only 14 years old, and I was already teaching students much older than me how to type in those old mechanical typing machines. You couldn’t make too many mistakes back then so it had to be perfect.

Now you can just press “delete” and start all over again.

When my mom [migrated] she left me in charge of my younger siblings. I kind of became their surrogate parent. There was that dynamic. I am the second oldest in my family, but I am the unofficial “patriarch” of the Palencia Duarte family. I have been the support system for a lot of my siblings, nephews, nieces, and mom in so many different ways: financially, emotionally, and as a confidant. Ever since I was a kid I played that role. People would tell me things that they would probably not tell others because they knew I would keep it confidential, and I would not judge them. Adult women especially confided in me, whether it was my aunts, the maids or neighborhood women. There is some aspect of my personality that kind of worked and liked that. I was both trustful and also trusted people a lot.
Even as a teen, I was very shy. I would go out with my male cousins who wanted to meet girls. When I was introduced to some of their friends, and they would shake my hand, I would literally shake and start shivering, afraid, as if I was hiding something – kind of traumatic. I was very nervous about meeting people. When I immigrated to the U.S. and came out of the closet, my personality started to blossom. Self-acceptance is the best therapy! I am quite social now.

**DG: Why did you leave Guatemala?**

RP: I left because [my mom] basically brought us here. I did not want to leave [Guatemala], and I actually did not want to stay [in the U.S.]. I wanted to go back; I felt that people were cold, and I could not relate to [the U.S.]. I did not feel what [my mom] felt. I felt that I was restricted. I did not speak English, and I did not care to learn. I was just upset, being treated like an intruder, a foreigner. I had left my friends and cousins, especially my female cousins on my father’s side who I was very close to. It took me awhile to get adjusted. My dad was killed in 1971, and we left in late 1974. Before we came to L.A., we moved from family member to family member. First, we were with my paternal grandmother, then maternal-grandmother, and when she died, we moved in with Tía [aunt] Lili. My paternal grandparents did not have a good relationship with my mom. It’s a long and deep story between them. The situation with Tía Lili was challenging as she had four children of her own, plus the four of us. She was in her late 20’s and raising eight children, most of us pre-teens. Of course my mom would send her money, but it was quite a task. My older brother [Guillermo Anibal] was interned at a Salesian boy’s boarding school at that time, which I attended for a short period, but could not stay because we could not afford it, the bakery business had fallen apart.
by then. I became Tia Lily’s right hand person as I was one of the older ones. I helped to discipline the younger kids, helped around the house, and that is where I learned a lot about being responsible for myself and for others. [My mom] felt that it was not a manageable situation and longed for us to join her in the U.S. She was the only living parent we had by then. She was not returning [to Guatemala]; there was nothing for her to go back to. Her mom (Abuelita Maria) and her husband Guillermo had passed away by then.

**DG: How did your mom inform you that you were coming?**

RP: My mom had been trying to get us to the U.S. since she got to the U.S. and decided not to return. She first brought my older brother Guillermo Anibal, who was almost 18 by that time. I remember she would come to Puerto Barrios every two years or so and say, “I can only take two for now” “Well, then take the girls,” I said. She brought the girls first with her [Nidia Armenia and Vilma Lorena] as Nidia was close to becoming a teenager. My younger brother [Homero Roderico] and I stayed in Guatemala until September 1974. We crossed [the border] without any papers because [my mom] did not want to wait any longer. It had been almost five years since we had been separated from her; she just did not want to wait any longer because I was going to turn 18 sometime soon, and she wanted me to go to high school and learn English before I ventured into the world of work. She knew that limited English meant limited opportunities.

**DG: Were you able to tell anyone you were leaving? Say your good-byes?**

RP: Yes, to our close family. But not to my family who lived in Petén in northern Guatemala by Tikal, which at that time was very remote and only accessible by plane. I do not think we
got a chance to say good-bye to many on my dad’s side of the family. We traveled by bus all the way from Guatemala to Nogales, Mexico because my mom could not afford for all of us to travel by plane.

**DG: What did you bring with you?**

RP: (Paused to gather thoughts) – We didn’t bring a lot. We couldn’t bring a lot. I probably brought whatever I was wearing. I’ll ask my mom on that, because it’s intriguing to think that I have so many things now, but I brought nothing with me, except a longing for what I was leaving behind. We took the bus from Guatemala City to the Guatemalan/Mexican border, then another to Mexico City all the way to Culiacan, great mariscos by the way. Then, we went to Nogales, Mexico, and from there to Nogales, Arizona because it was hard to cross by the Tijuana border. When we got to the Nogales border, the four of us [Nidia, Roderico, Vilmita and I] were taken to a fenced area, and I remember that there was a hole underneath the fence that had been dugged out by a 10 year-old kid for the four of us to get through. Basically, the *coyote* said, “Go!” and in that moment we went to the other side and entered the “first world.” That relatively fragile chain-linked fence separated the third world from the first world. More than a fence, it truly felt more like a wound, a festering wound because of everything that it represented. My mom made it all work. She is so brave, beyond amazing. I can’t think of myself having that kind of courage.

There was a car waiting for us two blocks away from the fence on the U.S. side, with my mom and two sisters inside the car with the *coyotes*. We drove to Phoenix, Arizona where we stayed a night or so waiting for the right time to head to Los Angeles.
All of us traveled together, my mom and the four of us. It had been a long, very long and emotionally heavy journey. I was exhausted, drained, and upset that we had to leave Guatemala, but thrilled that we were going to be reunited with my mom at last. On September 24, 1974 we arrived to the Promised Land, *El Pueblo de Nuestra Señora de Porciúncula la Reina de Los Ángeles*. It was a beautiful autumn day. We were welcomed by the warmth of my aunt Dora who had migrated to L.A. with my mom back in January 1970. They were a dynamic duo.

Our first home [in Los Angeles] was in a primarily African-American neighborhood at that time, bordered by Venice and Washington Blvd, Crenshaw and La Brea, where many more Central Americans settled later on in the 80’s and 90’s.

**DG: What do you remember from your migration experience?**

RP: I remember the amazing *ceviche* from Culiacan – [laughs]. From Mexico City, I remember their tacos, oh my god, I had never eaten Mexican tacos; they were so delicious. I remember Mexico City being a huge city. We went to the Latin America Tower, which my father had visited a few years before and those pictures became a cherished treasure for us. If you got to travel to Mexico at that time, it was like visiting Europe because not many people did it. We also did a bit of sightseeing. I fell in love with Mexico City. I also remember the long bus trip and how sometimes it was very hot; there were a lot people getting on and off the bus, but my mom always made sure we were safe.

I remember the first time I went to a U.S. supermarket. I was impressed by all the choices, the nicely packaged food, and all kinds of vegetables that I had never heard of and
nicely arranged. It seemed as if all of that was for show, as I couldn’t believe that people actually ate all that kind of stuff.

DG: How long was your journey, days, weeks, or months?

RP: Easily a week. It was exhausting. It had to be more than a week. The good news was that when we arrived to Los Angeles in September, the weather was quite nice, late September weather.

DG: You think being a shy child helped you along the journey?

RP: Being a nice child meant I did not get punished as much. I was probably very easy to raise, but I certainly had my moments. I became more rebellious later in my teens. I remember when my aunts and uncles in Guatemala would ask my mom to send us for vacation “we definitely want Rony [my nickname] to come” because they knew I got along with most of the kids, and I would also help out. I was a good child – [laughs]. But that has changed. I have my mean streak once in a while – [laughs].

DG: How did you avoid the border patrol?

RP: The coyotes knew the Migra’s [immigration patrol] whereabouts, so they knew how often they did their rounds. The coyotes were more aware of the Migra than the other way around. My cynical sense is that the border patrol and the coyotes were in cahoots. Either way, it was not much of a challenge crossing the border. I’ve heard horror stories of people being put inside the trunk of a car for hours, herded like cattle in windowless vans, walking
in the 110+ degrees desert with food or even water. Many die in the crossing, and they have the nerve to call us lazy!

Have you ever seen El Norte? People go through rat-infested tunnels. We did not have to do that; it was relatively easy and clean. I guess my mom was able to afford the coyote’s VIP tour – [laughs]. She knew what she was doing, and our safety was her utmost concern.

DG: Has your mom told you the types of jobs she worked in order to save money? Or how much she had to save to bring you all?

RP: She worked three jobs; one was full-time the others part-time. That’s all she did, work. She worked at a novelty custom-jewelry factory where she met Alfredo [whom she later married]. She also worked at a place where she developed asthma, a garment factory where they manufactured women’s jeans and Tampax sanitary napkins. Then she worked at a hotel cleaning rooms and also had jobs taking care of the elderly. Those are pretty tough jobs compared to running a business. Well, running a business is rough, but it seems more professional. That was incredibly tough for her. Our whole family was demoted ethnically, socially, economically, linguistically and relegated to physical jobs. We’ve come a long way since then, but it has been a bumpy road.

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12 El Norte is a 1983 film about two indigenous siblings fleeing Guatemala in the 1980s due to ethnic and political persecution during the Guatemalan Civil War.
Photograph 3. Vilma Palencia in front of Victor Industries, one of her first jobs when she arrived in the 1970’s. This is where she and Alfredo Garcia met. (1970’s)

DG: Seems like a rough shift to go from running a business in Guatemala to more manual labor in the U.S.

RP: She was Doña Vilma, everyone knew her. She hosted charity balls [in Guatemala]. My dad was the president of the Lions Club and the local Red Cross chapter. Yes, we had La Cruz Roja and El Club de Leónes there as well. People knew her because we had two or three bakery sucursales [outlets], in Puerto Barrios. We had three or four cars; most of them used for the business [and] we had three, sometimes four maids, each one with a specific job to do (washing clothes, cooking, cleaning, baby sitting). There were also the bakery workers so we had a lot of help around us. This all ended for me at the age of 12 ½. That world of relative
privilege evaporated, almost overnight. The years of longing for that past, losing one parent to the brutal civil war and another to *El Norte*, plus sexually confusing times and being charged with adult responsibilities at such an early age were about to begin.

**DG: How did you take or find out that your mom was going to marry Alfredo?**

RP: I was not in the U.S. when she married Alfredo Garcia, an openly gay man. When she told us it was like, “This is a friend, he is going to marry me, he has a partner.” I am pretty sure she used the word homosexual somewhere in there. She was getting married to Alfredo so she could bring immigrate us legally.

Alfredo was in a long-lasting relationship with another man, Stuart Lubin, and they were together for over 50 years. They wanted to be our immigration sponsors. [Alfredo] died in 2006 and Stuart died in 2011. [Alfredo] was a proud Mexican-American/Chicano. His family had lived in the American Southwest for endless generations. His mother was actually born in New Mexico before it became a U.S. state in 1912. That was his [Alfredo] linage. Stuart was of Jewish descent and a staunch supporter of the Chicano movement. He participated in the Roosevelt High School student walkouts, as he was a teacher there. Alfredo and Stuart loved my mom and wanted to help her. So, one of them approached her and said something like, “One of us can marry you and you don’t even have to put out – [laughs]. We are not interested.” She still laughs about that. That is why my immigration story is really a gay story.

**DG: Do you know what year she got married?**

RP: Must’ve been 1972.
DG: How did you meet Alfredo?

RP: I met Alfredo through her. I did not have much contact with him because by the time we got here I think Alfredo had already left the factory were they met. He was an amazing [and] a kind man and loved my mom like a sister. Alfredo had a big Afro-[textured] hair — [laughs]. Alfredo did not hide his sexual orientation. He was very flamboyant. He grew up in the ‘60s, so he would wear colorful bell-bottoms pants. We are forever grateful to Alfredo and Stuart.

We came here without papers at first because she did not want to wait any longer. Then we had to go back to Guatemala in 1976 to get our green card, two years after our crossing the Nogales twin cities. I did not see Alfredo and Stuart for another 20 years. They were barely aware of my coming out process. I regret not keeping in touch with them as
much. Sometimes we are not as appreciative about the sacrifice and the commitment of others towards us.

**DG: Did they leave L.A.?**

RP: No, they had a home in West Hollywood, and once in a while we would visit them. My mom would also frequently talk to them on the phone and visited them once in a while on her own. The last time we visited them was in 2005. Stuart died at the age of 80, but he looked great. He was an activist; a very leftist and progressive Jewish man. I remember when my aunt Dora died in 2007; he came to her funeral and told me, “I want you to know that one of the best decisions that America made was to allow your family to immigrate to the U.S.” I was so moved by that. I told [him], “You know Stuart it could not have happened without you and Alfredo.” He said, “It was our pleasure. It was one of the best decisions we made.” Then I only saw him a couple times after that.

**DG: Once they became your sponsors, how did the process of getting papers go for you?**

RP: My mom had already submitted the paper work for our legalization way before we crossed the border in 1974. But they were not coming through, and in 1974 she decided she did not want to wait any longer because she did not know how much longer it was going to take before the U.S. embassy made up their sweet little mind about letting us in. She finally decided to bring us without any papers in late ‘74. We were undocumented students for a couple of years, something that I was very ashamed of for a long-time, another oppressive attitude that I had internalized. By 1976, I was already 19; my mom, siblings, and I went back to Guatemala, not knowing whether we would be able to come back as legal residents.
My mom had to stay in Guatemala with us for five months. Not able to work. We lived off the money that my older brother Guillermo sent us when he was in the army. That’s what sustained us. We went the American Embassy in Guatemala, where they took our fingerprints and all that stuff they do.

Here is my mom with anxiety because of the uncertainty of whether or not we would get our papers. What was she supposed to do if we didn’t? Go through the ordeal of illegally crossing the border again, like in 1974, with no papers. I cannot even imagine what she went through. The good news is that we all got our green cards, and it was one of the most joyful news ever. We all five cried (mom, Nidia, Roderico, Vilmita and I), and we were happy, so it was a good ending to that story. A big dark cloud had evaporated. But at the same time, it was horrendous, the injustice of not knowing. Had I stayed, it would’ve been horrendous for me, especially since I was already coming into my teenage sexuality – I was a late bloomer though. I can’t even imagine what it would’ve been like for me to return and live in Guatemala. Who knows? Married with kids and closeted? Self-hating homosexual or a major activist who was willing to risk his life? Who knows, maybe I would have joined the revolution like my dad and get killed. I have no idea, so many potential scenarios and a good number of them not good.

**DG: Your life would have been so different.**

RP: Completely. We would have probably had a financially successful future because of our connections. One of my father’s uncle, Julio Cesar Mendez Montenegro, was a Guatemalan president. My family on my father’s side was relatively well connected. They had been in Guatemala City for many, many generations, probably since it was founded. I’m sure we
would have had a university education and all the privileges that come with being part of the educated classes. At what price though? At least for me.


**DG:** It is amazing that your mom was able to cross the four of you at that time.

**RP:** I know. I tell her she is “one of the best coyotes ever.”

It is so sick because the U.S. government was directly responsible for aiding and abetting the military dictatorships of that time that unleashed a barbaric war against its own people. The U.S. used many of these countries as proxy wars against Russia, the effects of a cold war. That tragedy resulted in over 250,000 Guatemalans getting killed or disappeared, with millions more joining the diaspora that still continues. People would ask, “Why did you come here?” totally clueless of their own country’s involvement. We think we live in a free society, but a lot is hidden from the American people. And on top of that, you are many
times treated like shit. It took me a long time to reconcile my feelings about U.S. involvement in Guatemala and loving this country. I consider Americans to be tremendously generous, especially with charitable causes. Even though there is mean-spirited and anti-immigrant strain in our body politics, I have experienced tremendous generosity and support in all aspects of my life from personal to professional. For the most part, people want to do the right thing. The way I reconciled that was to make a distinction between a people and its government, although sometimes there is not a clean cut distinction. Now, Guatemala is pretty much a narco state, ruled by gangs who were groomed here in the U.S. Guatemalans who live there are brave, and it’s mind-blowing how they go about their daily lives. We take so much for granted here.
Narrative Analysis for Early Childhood and Immigration

In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s, while growing up in Guatemala Palencia was able to witness and hear how the military force oppressed civilians. Without a doubt the economic, political, and social issues occurring in Guatemala in the 1970s affected Palencia and his family. However, Guatemala had been facing economic, political, and social issues long before the 1970s. In 1904, for example, the United Fruit Company (now known as Chiquita Brand) entered Guatemala. The company acquired large amounts of land for the cultivation of bananas and developed infrastructures such as roads, railroads, ports, ships, and postal service in order to transport the bananas to the market (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009). Also, in 1904 Guatemalan Dictator Manuel Estrada Cabrera approved a ninety-nine year tax-free concession to construct and maintain Guatemalan’s main rail line from Guatemala City to Puerto Barrios to United Fruit Company (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009). By the 1930s, the United Fruit Company became the largest landowner, employer, and exporter in Guatemala.

As the United Fruit Company started to take control of the land in Guatemala, Guatemalans were subjected to diverse political laws and practices due to various executive officials, and U.S. foreign policy and political influence. Between 1931 to 1944, President Jorge Ubico Castañeda passed severe vagrancy laws, which caused land displacements among the indigenous people. For instance, the laws forced indigenous communities to work for local landowners as well as gave landowners the right to assassinate any indigenous individual who was “stubborn or rebellious” (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). Additionally, by 1944 the United Fruit Company owned 42 percent of Guatemala’s land. In 1944, Jacobo Arbenz and Francisco Javier Arana led what is known as “October
Revolution”, which held mass rallies, strikes, and forced General Jorge Ubico Castañeda to resign from presidency (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009).

Between 1945 to 1951, Guatemala held its first democratic election and Juan José Arévalo was elected president. Arévalo began a series of reforms including investments in public schools, passed labor rights legislation, ended the anti-vagrancy laws, “and established a state bank design to help small business owners to have access to credit” (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009, p. 161). In 1950, Jacobo Arbenz won the election and by 1952 and he passed the Agrarian Reform Law, which reallocated land to Guatemalans. The Agrarian Reform Law “was meant to target uncultivated lands […] since the law only applied to uncultivated land, it included a large portion of the property owned by the United Fruit; 85 percent of United Fruit land at the time was uncultivated” (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009, p. 161). The reform conflicted with the United Fruit Company interests. Therefore, the United Fruit Company accused and associated the Arbenz presidency with communism.

However, it is important to specify that there were Guatemalans who supported communism like those who were members of the Partido Comunista de Guatemala (Communist Party of Guatemala). The Partido Comunista de Guatemala founded in 1949, which later became Partido Guatemalteco de Trabajo (Guatemala Labor Party) (Pike, 1955). Then in 1954, a CIA covert operation and anti-communist plan named Operation PBSUCCESS was used to overthrow coup Arbenz (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009). The coup marked the end of reforms and from that point forward the Guatemalan government consisted of military dictatorships.

Opposition to the Guatemalan government turned to armed assaults and revolt. In the 1960s, Guatemalan army started receiving assistance from the U.S. such as training soldiers
in counterinsurgencies leading to the creation of death squads.\textsuperscript{13} Between 1960 to 1996, brutal repression towards indigenous communities occurred because the Guatemalan government associated them with supporting the guerrillas’ forces. Over 50,000 Guatemalans were murdered and thousands more were arrested and tortured. Between 1966 to 1968, Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio also known as “Butcher of Zacapa” massacred campesinos [peasants] during his counterinsurgency campaign (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). By 1970, Colonel Carlos Arana Osorio becomes president of Guatemala. Palencia and other Guatemalans saw that many of the dead or missing during the Civil War period had been dumped into lakes and rivers (Nagata, Valeggia, Smith, Barg, Guidera, and Bream, 2011).

The above events had an impact on the various communities in Guatemala. During the civil war in Guatemala there were many fathers, mothers, and families that joined the guerrilla movement in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s (Luciak, 2001). One individual getting involved in leftist politics was Guillermo Alfonso Palencia Abadia, Palencia’s father. In order to protect his family from the Guatemalan armed forces he left the family. Guatemalans insurgency was due to government and right-wing reign, military and police terror, civilians, tortured, or murder, among many other reasons (Wickham-Crowley, 1990; Smith, 1990). The Guatemalan Civil War and sites of violence caused economic, political, and social dislocations; therefore, Guatemalans migrated to avoid political repression and survival became difficult. The growing violence and instability affected the Palencia family directly. Before the murder of his father Guillermo, Vilma, Palencia’s mother, migrated to the U.S.

\textsuperscript{13} Death squads were created including groups such as “MANO (the National Organized Action Movement), also known as Mano Blaca (the White Hand) because of its logo, NOA (the New Anti-Communist Organization); CADEG (the Anti-Communist Council of Guatemala); Ojo por Ojo (the Eye for an Eye); Juguar Justiciero (Jaguar of Justice); and ESA (the Secret Anti-Communist Army)” (Garcia-Bedolla, 2009, p.164).
Vilma immigration to the U.S. appears to be the result of a series of individual, household, and family decisions. Although Vilma’s story is to some extent unique, as is that of each immigrant, her journey was the result of conditions that led hundreds of thousands of Guatemalans to abandon their homes and seek a living elsewhere during the 1970s and 1980s. First, Central Americans have been coming to the U.S. for decades. For instance, “from 45,000 in the 1950s, the number of legally admitted Central Americans in the United States increased to 100,000 in the 1960s and to 134,000 in the 1970s, of which […] 26,000 were Guatemalans” (Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001, p. 29). Additionally, in her work, Zentgraf (2005) examines the reasons why Guatemalan and Salvadoran women migrated to Los Angeles. She found the reasons Guatemalans and Salvadorans migrated: war and politics, economic reasons, personal, family unification, persecutions, political violence, death threats, and fear of being kidnapped and raped.

Vilma left Guatemala in search of a better future; she also needed to make a living. When Vilma migrated to the U.S. she had already developed a network that facilitated her migration. Vilma had the economic means to migrate as well as distant relatives or acquaintances already living in the U.S. who could provide support.

Transnational Motherhood

In the 1970s and early 1980’s Vilma became an example of what is known as transnational motherhood “immigrant women who work and reside in the United States while their children remain in their country of origin constitute one variation in the organizational arrangements, meanings, and priorities of motherhood” (Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). For example, Zentgraf (2005) writes that once Guatemalan and Salvadoran women made it to
Los Angeles, they would work in garment factories and in service work such as childcare, elder care, housecleaning, and maintenance. Like many Guatemalans, Vilma worked two to three jobs at a time in order to survive living in the U.S., provide for her five children living in Guatemala, and hire a coyote to take her children across the border.

Much of Vilma’s experiences correspond to the literature on transnational motherhood. Nicholson (2006) examines the challenges that undocumented mother’s immigrants endured in Hudson Valley, New York. She writes that these mothers suffer from social isolation because their lives revolves around work; they do not have time to learn English; they obtain low paying jobs, work under unsafe conditions, and feel dislocated from their children.

Working multiple employments, Vilma developed asthma; however, it is common for garment factory workers to develop health and respiratory problems such as musculo-skeletal pain, shoulder and wrist pain, neck and back pain, muscular fatigue, decreased handgrip strength, trachea bronchus, lung cancer, and myeloid leukemia (Metgud, Khatri, & Saha, 2008; Hein, Pinkerton, & Stayner, 2004). Nicholson demonstrates that these transnational mothers are making contributions to their families’ welfare, well-being of their children present and future by working in restaurant kitchens, food preparation and clean up, housekeeping, or on assembly lines in factories. More importantly, Nicholson found that these transnational mothers wanted to return to their children and keep constant communication with their children.

Transnational mothers become resourceful and maintain their caretaker duties by providing for their children and themselves. Both Hondagneu-Sotelo and Avila (2001) and Nicholson (2006) agree that transnational mothers maintain their mothering ties and financial
obligations to their children by regularly sending money, exchanging letters and photos, and placing phone calls. Transnational mothers become caregivers and breadwinners allowing them to provide nutrition, clothes, and schooling for their children, which they are able to do so by working as textile machine operators, assembler, janitors, maids, or private housekeepers (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Zentgraf, 2005). In Vilma’s case, she became resourceful in different ways. She worked multiple jobs and saved money, and provided for herself and her children. She married an openly gay man to obtain legalization in the U.S. Although Vilma was resourceful and figured a way to get citizenship by befriending and arranging her marriage to Alfredo, a gay man, she would be challenged by Palencia’s sexuality. While many women share experiences similar to Vilma’s, the literature has not documented how many openly gay men have married immigrant woman to give them citizenship. Thus, there is an invisibility at the intersections and solidarity among gay men and immigrant women.

Menjivar (2000) analyzed informal networks among Salvadoran women and men living in San Francisco. Exchanges such as borrowing or lending money, accepting rides, or offering emotional support occurred between men and women who were related or unrelated to one another. The latter brought concerns to the women because in exchange for their assistance some men expected sexual favors. Many of the women in the study avoided asking unrelated men for favors, in order to evade sexual advances. When they accepted their assistance, the women would pay in cash for the men’s help, thus, avoiding sexual advances. The study also revealed that the Salvadoran women preferred assistance/favors from other women, in order to avoid gossip and protect their reputation. Simultaneously, these women
were able to expand their network of assistance, which allowed them to access a variety of resources.

Vilma’s circumstances and legal instability prompted her to marry Alfredo in the U.S. Thus, she created a new union and informal ties to Alfredo, in which no se acompañaron [they did not cohabit with one other] (Menjívar, 2000).

Vilma had the opportunity to visit her children in Guatemala after her marriage to Alfredo; the marriage provided her with legal status in the U.S. Timing and context have been critical in shaping the lives of Guatemalan women. Vilma had the opportunity to migrate much like other middle and working class Guatemalan women. Many other middle and working class women remained in the country and started to organize to confront state repression. During the Civil War [1960-1996], state repression included removing “males from homes, extended families, and villages, leaving women alone to protect cultural traditions and provide for children and the elderly” (Berger, 2006, p. 23). Women also faced other forms of violence and oppressive conditions: rape and sexual torture at the hands of military, the rising cost of living, becoming caretakers and caregivers, becoming leaders in human rights groups (Berger 2006). Furthermore, Guatemalan women entered the public sphere and their mobilization led to the formation of organizations like Agrupación de Mujeres Tierra Viva (Living Earth Women’s Group), Grupo Guatemalteco de Mujeres (Guatemalan Women’s Group), Coordinadora Nacional de Viudas de Guatemala (National Coordination of Guatemalan Widows), among many others.
Perception of Masculinity and Femininity

While Vilma was in the U.S., Palencia and his siblings were left under the care of family members, except for the older brother Guillermo who was mostly in catholic boarding schools. The common structure for children of immigrants has been to stay under the care of the children’s fathers, their grandmothers, comadres [godmothers], other female kin, or paid caregivers (Nicolson, 2006; Zentgraf, 2005; Hondagneu-Sotelo & Avila, 1997). Even though Palencia and his siblings were under the care of different female family kin, he took the responsibility for caring for his younger siblings. As Palencia states, “When my mom [migrated] she left me in charge of my younger siblings. I became like a parent. They kind of obeyed me and worked with me.”

Palencia’s considered himself to be a “feminine child” and he was mocked when he did not show signs of manliness. According to Berger (2006), perceived feminine characteristic mark an individual as effeminate. In Guatemala and other Latin America countries homosexual sexual practices fall into a pasivo/active (passive/active) sexual system, which is created by machismo ideology. Thus, to be effeminate implies submissiveness, which is associated with femininity. In general, what is perceived is that “men and masculinity are tied to the defense of the nation and the protection of family, home and the people, while women are cast not as defenders but as reproducers of the nation as wives and mothers” (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1993, p.12). Thus, women’s roles are mostly contained as family members, wives, motherhood, and housewives. Men promote heterosexuality through marriage, family, and fertility (Radcliffe and Westwood; 1993). All the above masculine and feminine roles can be linked to colonial accounts, marianismo, and
*machismo* (Radcliffe & Westwood, 1993). However, because of the civil war gender roles shifted in Guatemala women became more visible in public spaces (Berger, 2006).

**Crossing the Border and Legalization**

Palencia, his immediate family, and most Central American immigrants entered the U.S. illegally, without documentation. Vilma was able to obtain legal permanent residency through her marriage to Alfredo, but she had difficulties attaining legalization for her five children. The Palencia’s were not alone in the struggle to acquire legalization in the U.S. For example, Booth and Walker (2010) as well as Hernandez (2005) agree that in the 1970s new migration policies were developed by the U.S. to deny political asylum to Central American refugees because of the belief that communist ideology was spreading among the Central America isthmus. In addition, Hernandez (2005) and Hamilton & Chinchilla (2001) found that in the 1970s and 1980s thousands of Guatemalans, Nicaraguans, and Salvadorans entered the U.S. because they were fleeing from human rights crimes that were committed by their respective governments. These Central Americans “did not have the benefit of the Refugee Act, which provides political asylum to individuals who flee their homeland because of well-found fear of social or political persecution” (Hernandez, 2005, p. 181) because the U.S. recognized them as undocumented immigrants entering the country for economic gain.

Garcia-Bedolla (2009) also discusses another legal change that affected the status of Central Americans living in the U.S.: the 1986 passing of Immigration Reform and Control Act, which regularized the status of individuals who showed proof that they entered the U.S. undocumented prior to the 1st of January 1982. Historically speaking many Central Americans entered the U.S. after the 1st of January 1982 because of the nature of the wars in
Guatemala, El Salvador, and Nicaragua, which meant a large number of Central Americans were not able to benefit from the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (In the Shadow of Liberty, 1988; Hamilton, 2001; Garcia-Bedolla, 2009).

Ultimately, Palencia was able to obtain his Alien Registration Card in 1977 at the age of 20 after he had returned to Guatemala with his mother. He and his siblings did not know whether they were granted the right to live in the U.S. while in Guatemala. Instead he and his family had to return to the U.S. to find out if they were granted or denied Alien Registration Cards. The journey back to Guatemala and obtaining Alien Registration Cards are significant events because they provide a glance of the unjust process the U.S. legal system maintains towards immigrants as well as the anxiety undocumented individuals endured. Other accounts of experiences during immigration to the U.S. include feeling homesick, discrimination, alienation and rejection, violence, drowning, rape, deportation to native country, and emotional and physical abuse at the hands of coyotes and thieves (Alarcón, 2004; Diaz, Ayala, & Bein, 2004; Kirby, 2001).

Conclusion

The Guatemalan Civil War affected Palencia, his family, and the rest of the Guatemala population. The civil war brought many changes to Guatemala such as migration and immigration; for instance, Guatemalans moved to various regions within Guatemala. Some people moved to other Central America countries, Mexico, or the United States. There was the rise of the guerilla and women’s movement, and polarization of economic, political, and social structures. Palencia early life was for the most part comfortable due to the socioeconomic status of his family maintained by their family business. Owning a family
business brought many rewards to the Palencia’s allowing such as the children to attend Catholic school, association with civilian and social clubs such as the Lions Club and Red Cross, and respect. However, living a comfortable life did not stop his father from getting involved in leftist politics, which would set the stage for Palencia and his immediate family to immigrate to the U.S. Living in Guatemala Palencia encountered innumerable changes in regards to family dynamics and as did many other Guatemalans. While growing up in Guatemala, Palencia started to acknowledge his homosexuality and saw anti-homosexual attitudes in his own family and society. In the next section, Palencia shares his coming out story.
Chapter 4: Education and Coming Out (1975-1982)

“That was my coming out; I went on national television, out with a bang!”

- Roland Palencia

DG: After arriving to the U.S., did you attend public, private, adult, or night school?

RP: I attended Los Angeles High School. I graduated in 1977. That was the first time I had attended a public school in my life. Then I went to UCLA from 1977 to 1982; it took me five years to earn my B.A. in History. Even though I excelled in high school, I wasn’t much of a good student in college. I became an activist and school started to lose its appeal. I regret now not applying myself to my studies.

Photograph 6. Roland Palencia’s graduation picture from Los Angeles High School. (1977)
DG: What do you remember about your time in Los Angeles High School?

RP: There was a hierarchy that was obvious to me. There was a pecking order. We [were] immigrants, we did not speak English, [and] we did not have papers, so it felt like we did not belong there. The way people talked about undocumented immigrants was demeaning. It is like national borders determine your humanity and your dignity, what an odd concept.

DG: How did you hear about UCLA?

RP: I was an ESL [English as a Second Language] student all throughout high school. One of my ESL teachers was Mr. Higdon. He was racially mixed, a White father and a Mexican mother, but he looked [like] a typical Anglo. He could easily pass. He took me under his wing. He shared that he was delivered at home, because his Mexican mother was not allowed to deliver in the local hospital, even though his father was White. This made him sensitive to discrimination, and he decided to dedicate part of his life to help recently arrived immigrant students. He wanted to teach ESL because he felt that it was a way to give back to the community that his mother was part of.

[Mr. Higdon] told me, “I want you to go to college.” I did not know what that was in the U.S. context. I knew of the importance of a university education because my father was a university-educated man, but not in the U.S. [Mr. Higdon] always made sure that I was excelling in school. He connected me with vocational counselors, and they helped me apply [to UCLA].

I visited UCLA and USC. UCLA had their students actively go into inner-city schools and give them a tour of the university. [Mr. Higdon] made sure that I got on that list. A UCLA White student picked me up at home in his car and drove me to UCLA. I went and got
a free lunch. I remember him being totally cool, and really wanted me to apply to UCLA. Looking back, I wish I had gone to a smaller college like Oxy [Occidental College] because I really got lost at UCLA.

**DG: Why did you major in history?**

RP: I thought it would be the easiest thing for me to understand, and with my activism I felt like it was a natural subject.

**Photograph 7.** Roland Palencia delivered a speech against the shah in Meyerhoff Park with members of the Black Student Alliance and M.E.Ch.A. (1979)

**DG: How did you hear about M.E.Ch.A. at UCLA?**

RP: [At that time] there were few Latinos, and once you met one Latino you met all of them – [laughs]. I hear it’s even worse now. Anyway, there were even fewer Central Americans. It was mostly second generation Mexican-Americans. I was one of the few immigrants there,
and I did not feel that the environment was very supportive. It was a bit tough getting out of my high school ESL cocoon though.

DG: How did you come out at UCLA? How did you come out to your family and friends? Did they know what it meant to be gay? What were their points of views on gay men?

RP: I did not come out until 1982; I was almost 25 years old. I was already going to gay clubs since I turned 21, but that was secretive. I was going to a number of disco clubs, as they were the rage. I had to carve out my own spaces, as society did not offer them for me. Nowadays, kids are coming out at 11 or 12 years old. It is pretty young, isn’t it? It has its own challenges, but it shaves off decades of suffering. I would like to think that my generation paved the way for young people to come out at that age and be fulfilled early in life, instead of being tormented for decades. I think that is my generation’s legacy.

In high school, I was really closeted. Even in college I was quite closeted. In 1981, I was running for president of the Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán (M.E.Ch.A.), and eventually, I told them I was gay. They felt betrayed because I had dated a couple of women in M.E.Ch.A., who in turn tried to blackmail me. They told me, “If you run [for President] we are going to ‘out’ you. We are going to tell everyone that you are a homosexual.” I was not ready to come out. When you have this internalized homophobia you think, “oh my god, I do not want people to know.” Then I said, “I have two choices: either I’m out or I go deeper into the closet.” I did not want to hide, so I “came out”, a momentous decision that impacted the rest of my life.
Through friends I found out that the Spanish International Network [now known as Univision] wanted to interview gay people and hear their coming out stories. I went to my mom and told her, “You know I want to tell you that I am going to be on the Spanish International Network. They are going to be talking about gay people.” She said, “Oh that is great, you know there is lots of discrimination.” I replied back, “Yeah, I have a personal reason for doing that as I am going to talk about my own experience: my own “coming out” experience.” She started to cry and then I started to cry. She cried for at least a couple of hours. Then I told my siblings. That was my coming out; I went on national television, out with a bang! My family in Guatemala found out because Spanish International was broadcasted in Guatemala as well, but when I visited them a year later no one talked about it, just made references that they had seen me on television. It was so liberating though. I was so happy, as in “gay happy”, but it was just the beginning as it is a process.

While that was happening, I was also attending a support group at the Gay and Lesbian Center on Highland Avenue [in Hollywood]. It was a small place then, and there I met a Newyorican (Puerto Rican from New York) employee by the name of José Ramírez. Around 1981, José was leading a coming out Spanish-speaking support group. We were primarily gay Latino immigrant men who talked about our challenges and all that stuff, and we also socialized together. At some point we decided to formalize the group; we named the group Gay Latinos Unidos. One thing about [Gay Latino Unidos] was our desire to expand the group to include lesbians, so a few months later we changed the name to Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU). We became a lot more diverse. Then, it was very unusual for men and women to work together, and the Center had a contentious history about Lesbians feeling empowered by that institution at that time. That changed with the AIDS
epidemic though. GLLU members included people from all of Latin America as well as U.S. born Latinos. As it grew and it became a platform for advocacy, and the group transitioned to almost exclusively English. This was the time when HIV and AIDS began to emerge as an issue. We had no idea. We had a lot of energy, and we felt that we found a place called home. We did not have to leave out any part of ourselves, as in being whole and complete; we were Latin American, gay, and immigrants, and where free to speak all the Spanish we wanted. It was a space where we could celebrate and claim the intersections of sexual orientation, ethnicity, gender, being young and so forth.

I eventually became GLLU’s president; I figured that if M.E.Ch.A. did not want me to be its president that I could be a president somewhere else. M.E.Ch.A belonged to a very machista culture, with a hyper male heteronormative tradition. The women had real issues with exclusion as well, discrimination usually comes in pairs and more. But there was certainly no talk about gay people. The fact that I was a Central American was a minus as well. But I started to become empowered by the gay Latino community because the hetero Latino community was nowhere in terms of acknowledging my struggles. So, I decided that M.E.Ch.A. was a group I did not want to be associated with. I was not the only one who turned my back on them. A number of other Central and South Americans, Mexicans and Mexican-Americans who had very little appetite for M.E.Ch.A.’s discriminatory practices and their exclusive nationalistic Chicano pretensions left the group as well.

What was really good about Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos was that it groomed a lot of leaders who provided leadership in newly created organizations and movements, like Oscar De La O; Laura Esquivel, a previous GLLU president, has done extraordinary work

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14 Oscar De La O is a founding member and President of Bienestar.
15 Laura Esquivel has focused on organizing and politically strategizing around the Latino LGBT community.
in the Washington D.C. area and in other parts of the nation. Louis Jacinto,\textsuperscript{16} has documented the early history of LGBT Latinos in Los Angeles through his photographic work. \textit{Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos} had become the mother lode of leadership.

**DG: After coming out, I heard people say that they are okay with it, but there are times when families throw your sexuality into your face during an argument, or family disagreements.**

RP: My family has never done that; part of it has to do with my role in my family. I am considered to be the unofficial “patriarch” in my family because of the earlier and later roles I’ve played. I think that is role that many gay and lesbian Latinos play, specially, when there is an absent father. I became one of the major breadwinners. I’ve always limited my choices in life because of what I felt were my responsibilities to my family, which sometimes I resent. I wouldn’t take homophobic insults from my family very lightly especially when I became more aware and more assertive later in life. My family is very respectful in that sense, but sometimes is not what is said, but what is not said – [laughs].

I think what happens is that heteronormativity is so prevalent in Latino families that the gay part of us is barely acknowledged. It’s all about the kids and who married whom. For me, it was not so much that they would throw it in my face; it is more of the absence of gay conversations. I would have to talk about the subject, and the projects I was involved with. I would say, “Look I’m involved in this film” and talk about the film. I’m not going to say my mom is not supportive, but I’m not also going to say she is 100% comfortable. She comes to events. She likes my friends very much, and she has met and liked some of the guys I’ve

\textsuperscript{16} Louis Jacinto is a Los Angeles photographer.
dated. I think my family is more like they do not talk about it unless I talk about it, but that has changed quite a bit now, even with my mom. She brings it out a lot more now.

I remember a time when one of my uncles visited us from Guatemala; he was just badmouthing gay people really badly. He was pretty much saying that men who had been raped turn gay; and also that if you eat too much chicken with hormones that you can turn gay. To make this sound somewhat scientific, he explained that this was already happening en masse in the entire nation of Costa Rica. As you know, Costa Rica abolished its army in the 1950’s and ranks high in the Human Development Index, so they are not considered “manly” enough because they are not out there killing each other. I love Costa Rica, and I am proud of my Central American brothers and sisters! Sorry, I am digressing, my brother Guillermo and one of my cousins rebuffed him and said, “first of all we respect gay people, and we don’t like prejudice is not cool” kind of thing, and they went from there. I was so proud of them. Talk about allies! Then I talked about how insulting that statement was. He did not expect that because [Latinos] do not challenge their elders. But I basically think that the defense of one’s dignity and humanity should not be restricted by any conventions. Traditions are only as good as when they protect and nurture people.

DG: Why do you think your uncle had that mindset?

RP: He lives in Guatemala and there is not a very strong gay movement [in Guatemala] because of the barbaric repression. Gay people are at the bottom of the totem pole. If I lived in Guatemala, I would be a lot more conscious about coming out to everyone. There impunity for killing anyone and LGBT people are considered disposable.
Narrative Analysis for Education and Coming Out

Much of Palencia’s experience corresponds to the literature on coming out. Coming out is an important development in the lives of lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals. For instance, Evans and Broido (1999) conducted a qualitative study examining the coming out process of White, Asian American, and Latino American gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students. They state that the process of coming out is when an individual identifies as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. They also document the factors that influence an individual to come out. Motivation factors to come out include “a desire to be closer to others, to validate one’s own self-worth, and to stop having to hide” (1999, p. 658). At the same time, a lesbian, gay, or bisexual individual might be pressured by peers to be open about their sexual identity. There can also be some hesitation to come out because lesbians, gays, or bisexuals “believe their attractions are wrong or because they fear reprisals” (1999, p. 658-659).

Similar to the above literature Palencia’s coming out was a development that occurred in stages. As shown in the previous chapter, Palencia was aware that he felt different from his peers in Guatemala and did not have the vocabulary to identify as a gay man. Once he immigrated to the U.S. and was a young adult, he developed and engaged in gay activities by visiting gay spaces. Riley (2010) discusses and reviews the process of coming out for gay, lesbian, and bisexual adolescents. She writes that coming out occurs among adolescents when there is a recognition and awareness of a gay, lesbian, or bisexual orientation as well as revealing ones sexual identity with others. She continues her discussion and analysis on the process of coming out by focusing on adaptational factors to a sexual identity such as “involvement in [gay, lesbian, or bisexual] activities, the development of attitudes towards [gay, lesbian, or bisexual] identity, comfort with [gay, lesbian, or bisexual] identity, the
number of disclosures of sexual identity to others, and the type of sexual identity” (2010, p. 4). She explains that with time one's sexual identity can be develop further as one engages in gay, lesbian, or bisexual activities.

Eventually, Palencia disclosed his sexuality with his M.E.Ch.A. peers resulting in a conflict with them leading him to feel pressured to come out or stay hidden and feel ashamed. Nevertheless, this clash lead Palencia to reveal his sexual identity to his family. Also, as previously mentioned, Palencia reproduced a father figure by taking care of his siblings as children and continues to be supported by his family, even after he came out. Thus, showing that cultural factors such as the importance of family plays a vital role in his life. Examining ethnic/racial differences in coming out, Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) conducted a report on 145 lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth of color. They reported that generally coming out means the development of a lesbian, gay, or bisexual identity. The report reveals that Latino and Black lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals encounter cultural factors such as the importance of family, traditional gender roles, conservative religious values, and homophobia might lead individuals to experience difficulties in the formation and integration of an lesbian, gay, or bisexual sexual identity. Thus, coming out means to be aware of one’s sexual identity and can occur at any age. Coming out is an individual disclosing their sexual orientation and sexual identity, which can be a positive or negative experience for the person revealing their sexual identity and the individual(s) receiving the

17 Rosario, Schrimshaw, and Hunter (2004) described identity formation as “that part of the coming-out process in which individuals become aware of their developing sexual orientation, begin to question whether they may be [lesbian, gay, or bisexual], and explore their emerging [lesbian, gay, or bisexual] identity by engaging in sexual activities” (p. 216). They describe identity integration as “part of the coming-out process by which individuals become more accepting of their [lesbian, gay, or bisexual] identity, resolve internalized homophobia by adopting more positive attitudes toward homosexuality, feel more comfortable with others knowing about their sexual identity, disclose that identity to other, and become involved in [lesbian, gay, or bisexual] social activities” (p. 216).
information. Many have struggled in expressing their sexual identity and coming out is a process and cannot be rushed.

*M.E.Ch.A. and Issues of Homophobia*

The UCLA environment had a significant effect on Palencia’s willingness to disclose his sexual orientation and on the reactions that he received when he did disclose. Sexual orientation is “your reflexive erotic response to opportunities for sex with a male or female partner” (K.R.B., 1995, p. 18-19). Disclosing his sexual orientation with M.E.Ch.A. members, Palencia was confronted with homophobia and prejudice. Homophobia can be defined as “a significant overwhelming fear and disgust held by individuals (homophones) who are confronted with the aspects of homosexuality in oneself, fear contagion of HIV/AIDS, fear of potential sexual advances, or threats to one’s own sexual identity” (Riley, 2010, p. 5). Part of Palencia’s coming out experiences shows a negative aspect of coming out. In his case, UCLA’s M.E.Ch.A. members rejected Palencia because the environment was homophobic and sexist. Homophobia has been a problem in M.E.Ch.A. Blackwell (2011) interviewed Chicanas who were involved in the Chicana and Chicano Movement as well as with M.E.Ch.A. chapters at California State University Northridge (CSUN) and Cal State Long Beach. She concludes that in the 1970s and 1980s M.E.Ch.A. chapters did not have a full awareness of gender and sexuality issues. Also, historian and scholar Rodolfo Acuña, writes that San Fernando Valley Campus now known as CSUN experienced sexism and homophobia in the 1970s. He states,

There was sexism, and there is still sexism, within the movement. However, the degree of sexism could not be
compared to the homophobia of the times. Homophobia was rampant at every level of Chicano Studies and the movement, and even Marxist organizations that were at the cutting edge of the struggle against sexism were for the most part anti-gay, believing homosexuality to be a product of decadent capitalism.

(154)

In the above quote, Acuña reveals some of the issues gay men and women faced in the 1970s. Homophobia and sexism are powerful forces in society. Homophobia at that time made it difficult for some gay students to organize and find support within Chicano Studies, the movement, and M.E.Ch.A. Additionally, González (2003) recognizes that the topic of sex, gender, and sexuality remained unexplored until the late 1980s. Gloria Anzaldúa’s book, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, published in 1987 helped place lesbian feminist sexuality in Chicano history (González, 2003). With Anzaldúa’s contribution to the field of Chicana and Chicano Studies, students and scholars have continued their “work on sexuality and on gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered queer Latina/os [which became] an arena of study as well as a methodology within Chicana/o studies” (González, 2010, p. 178). Years after Palencia “came out” while attending UCLA, Villegas (1996) calls all queer Latina and Latino students to come out of the closet. He criticized closeted Chicana and Chicano activists who were willing to go to M.E.Ch.A. meetings, but who would never be caught attending a meeting for *La Familia*. Villegas wants gay and lesbian Chicanas and Chicano to take pride in one’s identity equally and simultaneously. Many Latino students have encountered discrimination in M.E.Ch.A. as did Palencia. Chapters of M.E.Ch.A. have had difficulties in recognizing their gay and lesbian members issues due to homophobia and sexism. But

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18 *La Familia* – UCLA’s Latino gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender organization.
change has occurred over the last four decades. For example, the Chicana and Chicano Studies Department at CSUN has hired queer professors, M.E.Ch.A. has elected at least three gay chairs, and graduate students have focused their theses around gay and queer topics (Acuña, 2011).

In his personal narrative, Raúl Coronado offered an insightful critical view of National Association for Chicana and Chicano Studies (NACCS), formerly known as National Association of Chicano Studies (NACS). For Coronado, gay men had to create their own spaces within Chicana and Chicano Studies. In 1992, NACCS did not mention gay men in the program until a group of individuals got together to form National Association of Latino Gay Academics and Activists (NALGAA/NALGA), which later became the Joto Caucus in 1993 (Coronado, 2006). Before the formation of the Joto Caucus, in 1990 at NACCS “Emma Pérez delivered an address on sexuality and re-read Chicano nationalism using sexuality as a guide” (González, 2003, p. 24). Her presentation resulted in an outcry and resistance from the men at NACCS. Chicana and Chicano Studies, more specifically, Chicana feminisms, Chicana lesbians, and Chicano gay men have created a space and the language to explore the aspect of sexuality, race, gender, and class within their culture (Coronado, 2006; Yarbro Bejarano, 1999). Over the years, the presence of LGBT and queer scholars in Chicana and Chicano Studies Departments and national conferences has grown. Likewise, Chicana and Chicano Studies foundational literature includes LGBT and queer work such as Cherrie Moraga’s *Loving in the War Years: Lo que nunca pasó por sus labios*, Richard T. Rodríguez’s *Next of Kin: The Family in Chicano/a Cultural Politics*, Adelaida R. Del Castillo and Gibrán Güido’s *Queer in Aztlán: Chicano Male Recollections of Consciousness and Coming Out*, among many others.
Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos

Going outside of academia and into the community, Palencia found a support group, which helped him address issues surrounding Latinos and gay men. Eventually, in 1981 Palencia helped co-establish Gay Latinos Unidos, later renamed Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos, which was founded in Los Angeles. The co-founders of the Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos included José Ramírez, Davis Milhauser, David Gonzales, Juan Villagomez, Ernesto Rojas, Arturo Olivas, and Roland Palencia. According to Lillian Faderman and Stuart Timmons:

… Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU) had formed out of distrust for white-dominated groups; but at the height of the epidemic, members set aside their suspicions and worked closely with those groups. They translated into Spanish AIDS informational material that the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center published, and they marched side by side with predominantly white organizations at AIDS demonstrations and protests […] AIDS became GLLU’s main concern as its energies were put into founding Bienestar (well-being in Spanish), a Latino HIV-care nonprofit agency […] But Bienestar’s establishment seriously shifted the focus of GLLU from an organization that dealt with all aspects of Latino gay and lesbian concerns to one that addressed the overwhelming problem of AIDS (305)
In the late 1970s and early 1980s, *Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos* was one of the few organizations that advocated and organized around gay and lesbian, and Latina and Latino issues (Stein, 2012). *Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos* was at the forefront of addressing the AIDS epidemic in Los Angeles area among the Latino and Latina communities (Ito, 1986). *Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos* also translated Spanish AIDS informational material, marched at AIDS demonstrations and protests, provided a safe space for gays and lesbians, help established *Bienstar*, and *Lesbianas Unidas*, which branched out of *Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos* (Faderman and Timmons, 2006; Alaniz, 2008). In 1983, *Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos* also supported César Chávez and United Farm Workers with the strike and boycott against Lucky groceries. Thus, *Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos* was a pioneering effort to link gay Latinas and Latinos to social justice issues. Important also to note César Chávez spoke on October 11, 1987 at the second National March on Washington for Lesbian and Gay Rights, and Dolores Huerta has repeatedly spoken on behalf of LGBTQ communities (Butigan, 2012).

Conclusion

Palencia was a first generation college student and did not have the role models or advocates within academia to discuss issues gay Latino men were enduring in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s. Palencia met other Latinas and Latinos students at UCLA, but encountered homophobia when he revealed his sexual identity. He became a target for homophobic harassment. Palencia began to redefine himself by rejecting M.E.Ch.A. and finding support outside the academy. M.E.Ch.A alienated Palencia; therefore, he left and helped create Gay [and Lesbian] Latino Unidos. The late 1970s and 1980s, saw the formation of several Latino and Latina gay and lesbian organization such as Gay Alliance of Latin Americans, Latina Lesbian Alliance, Latin American Lesbians, Lesbianas Latina Americanas, Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, Que Onda Queers, Tu, Vida, among many others. (Stein, 2012; Faderman and Timmons, 2006). At the same time, there was an increase in Central American
organizations in the MacArthur and Pico Union area, where *Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos* conducted some of their community work. The Central American organizations included CARECEN (Central American Refugee Center – later renamed Central American Resource Center), CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrants’ Rights of Los Angeles), Salvadoran American Leadership and Educational Fund (SALEF), among many others. In the following section, Palencia’s communicates his experience of working in community-based organizations and in the healthcare sector.
“One thing that became obvious to all gay people from all ethnicities and nationalities, but it later became even more apparent to the white Anglo community, was that their privileges had a limitation if they were gay. Basically, if they were LGBT, society had no respect for them.”

- Roland Palencia

DG: From the very beginning you have been at the local level as a Los Angeles-based activist. Why did you pick Los Angeles to do activism?

RP: I was always amazed at the level of civic engagement here in the U.S., and the difference that that involvement can make. L.A. is the only U.S. city that I’ve lived in, and it has always felt very open. If you are going to be a queer immigrant, this is probably one of the best places to be one. Unbeknownst to me at that time, L.A. was also the place where the “gay identity” was kind of invented. This idea of having our own identity separate from homophobic interpretations was world-shattering. Also, my family lives here. I made a lot of friends and have lost a lot of friends to AIDS. This is the city where people know me. I am not much of an adventurous person to relocate myself to another city and create a whole new life.

I have friends who have said, “I was 16 when I moved to Chicago.” I am like, “What?!?” It never crossed my mind to do that when I was young. I like things to be more predictable because that gives me a foundation, a sense of stability, probably because I had so much unpredictability when growing up.
I tend to live in the same neighborhood, Los Feliz/Silver Lake and at some point in South Los Angeles. To me, Los Angeles is home, more so than any other place on earth.

DG: What was your first political activity?
RP: All throughout high school I [was] the president of the English as a Second Language (ESL) club. People were actually interested in what I had to say, and I felt that I [could] change my environment, even if it was a rather limited impact. That was my first taste of how open this city was. I could be engaged in civic activism, and I did not need to fear for my life because I had the freedom to say whatever I wanted to say. Here [in the U.S.] there is more freedom to speak out, which was not [my] experience coming from Guatemala. As an ESL president, [late 1970s], I represented Latino immigrant students from several countries: Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador as well as Koreans, Thais, Lebanese and Pakistanis. I also became aware of two forces in U.S. society that were in tension with each other: the elitist pecking order vs. the relatively openness of the culture. Those two seemingly opposing forces fueled my activism: 1) feeling that the American promise was still unfulfilled and 2) that there was an openness to fulfill on that promise.

RP: In 1983, I read an article by Larry Kramer “1,112 and Counting.” When the article was published, HIV and AIDS was not the focus of the LGBT community. Life was about enjoying the newly gained freedom and liberation, clubs, bars, parades, private parties, etc. There was a freshness to it. The City of Los Angeles also felt very fresh and not embedded in
some of the cynicism that is now more common. It was a time to blossom and to meet
people. We were unleashed. I do not think that we were paying attention to [HIV and AIDS]
because I do not really think we really knew what it was [or], let alone the tragedy that it
would later become. The last thing you want to think about when coming out of the cocoon
of oppression and feeling young and invincible is that you are going to get infected by a virus
that could be lethal. We were in thorough denial. It was also overwhelming to think that
something like that could be happening. We had no idea that it would become our Holocaust,
a cruel happening at the doorsteps of the dawning of our liberation.

There was also lots of judgment as to who got infected, “it’s those people who go to
those sex clubs, and they are doing drugs and other stuff.” It was a virus and we did not know
how it was transmitted. I look at a 1986 gay pride parade picture, a Gay and Lesbian Latinos
Unidos activity; there are ten people in the picture and only three of us are alive today. HIV
decimated our network of friends, and unlike the White community, which rose from the
ashes and continued on its success, it had the exact opposite effect on us as it drove a stake
through the heart of the LGBT People of Color community and movement. This was a
generation that was very involved in the civil rights movement and who had begun to
connect the dots.

I think of Frank Mediola, a 23 year-old activist, who was a child farm worker. He was
very involved in the farm worker movement with the United Farm Workers union (UFW)
and worked at the Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center, the Gay and Lesbian Center
now. He masterminded the unionization of the Center staff, a very controversial and
confrontational endeavor at that time. He was fierce; he did not care. Cesar Chaves and
Dolores Huerta had trained him well. I was in management, but we were good friends. He
was young; but the maturity he had in terms of being a movement organizer was very deep. Those are the type of people we lost. It was a double tragedy, losing friends as well as comrades in the movement.

The AIDS epidemic energized many into activism, while it decimated the African American male community—the most politically sophisticated faction of our POC movement. It energized the White community and set the stage for the building of powerful fundraising drives and institutions that still exist today. The AIDS activism experience provided the blueprint and was the precursor for the success of the LGBT and marriage equality movements. One thing that became obvious to all gay people from all ethnicities and nationalities, but it later became even more apparent to the white Anglo community, was that their privileges had a limitation if they were gay. Basically, if they were LGBT, society had no respect for them. When you have a certain kind of privilege, it sharpens the indignation because you are not used to being treated that way. I know I felt that way when upon arriving here to the U.S., I was all of the sudden treated like a “wetback”. The way people who were dying of AIDS were treated was horrendous, and it created this energizing movement of: “hey, we have to create our own institutions because nobody is out there helping us.” Of course, a lot of non-LGBT people helped as well. American institutions were simply not there to protect us. On the contrary, the fundamentalist religious so-called “Christian” community was invigorated by our deaths—and on top of that blamed us. They turned an epidemic into a religious crusade. I can’t even understand how they can call themselves Christians. Their judging is like telling a smoker who gets lung cancer “you deserve to die”. That would be cruel and unthinkable. But catching a sexually transmitted virus is considered sinful, so everything they felt free to bash us. L.A. County was mostly unprepared [and]
sometimes unwilling to deal with the epidemic. The political establishment was completely negligent and non-sympathetic, except for a few brave souls. Our President [Ronald Wilson] Reagan said the words AIDS probably once or twice towards the end of his eight year term, very pathetic. Silence was murder. The denial and the callousness were apparent. HIV/AIDS created the blueprint but is rarely acknowledged as the prelude for the success and freedoms we are experiencing now.

**DG: What lead you to be the founder of Viva!?**

RP: I came up with the idea of Viva!⁹ in 1987. It was a response to the fact that we were losing a lot of our creative people, a lot of our artists, people with talent, but also with a distinct vision of our community. I wanted to keep their memories and legacy alive. Viva! means long live, to be alive. Mike Moreno, Betty Flores, Robert Ochoa-Schutz and I formally founded the organization. We were later joined by Monica Palacios,²⁰ Luis Alfaro,²¹ Marcus Kuiland-Nazario,²² Aleida Rodríguez,²³ Beto Araiza,²⁴ and many others. It was an inter-disciplinary group, visual, literary and performing artists joined us. I remember Keith Haring; he had his own art, echoing a sentiment, a sensitivity that resonated with many communities. I really felt that we needed to create art that reflected who we were as a community in our entirety.

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⁹ *Viva!* was “a gay and lesbian arts organization […] that serve[d] both as a support network for local Latino/a artists and a coalition advocating for Latino/a gay, lesbian, and AIDS visibility in other venues” (Román,1995, 354).

²⁰ Monica Palacios is a writer and performer.

²¹ Luis Alfaro is a Chicano performance artist, writer, theater director, and social activist.

²² Marcus Kuiland-Nazario is an artist, curator, educator, and producer of Los Angeles art and performance scenes.

²³ Aleida Rodriguez is a poet, essayist, and artist.

²⁴ Alberto “Beto” Araiza is a performer.
**Viva!** existed for about ten years on and off, but I was only involved for the first few years after its founding. Eventually, it was led by a number of artists and activists, including Mario Ceballos, Beto Araiza and Ari Gutiérrez, who is now the co-chair of the Latino Equality Alliance. *Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos* and *Viva!* were also spaces that created leadership. People like Luis Alfaro, Robert Legorreta, [and] Monica Palacios are well-known artists and cultural icons, and they were all involved with *Viva!*.  

**DG: How did people respond to *Viva!*? Were there any problems, positive, or negative?**

**RP:** We did not have any money; we were all volunteers. We did not have a foundation saying, “Hey, you’re an artist group that works at the inter-sections of issues and communities and here is the money.” We did get some funding from the Liberty [Hill] Foundation though. We also got a grant from the federal government to do HIV and AIDS prevention and education by using theater as an educational medium. We struggled due to the lack of funds, but we accomplished a lot. We engaged people in conversations they would otherwise not have. We had art exhibits, performances, a play that went on for quite a few months, and poetry readings. We presented at gay establishments, bookstores, restaurants, bars, parks and even clothing stores.
DG: How did Viva! educate the community on HIV and AIDS?

RP: We performed skits, kind of guerilla theater. We performed in MacArthur Park. We talked about transmission, prevention, the risks and resources. It was so creative that it [became] part of the environment and the ecology of the park. We also went to East Los Angeles, and places where people were able to convene and watch bilingual performances.

DG: Your experience with UCLA, Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos, and Viva! prepared you for AIDS Healthcare Foundation?

RP: All those jobs were volunteer jobs. I worked at the Gay and Lesbian Center in 1983, and I was there for three years through 1986. That was the only gay professional job that actually paid me. Then I joined the AIDS Healthcare Foundation as an employee in 1992. My activism with GLLU and Viva! helped with my awareness of a number of issues. I always felt that the tradition of being a volunteer, in addition to being a noble tradition, it is also an opportunity to expand yourself, to meet people, test your leadership to learn from others, [and] connect and build a network. The reality is that most of our movement folks are volunteers. Even now, there are very few people who actually work in the movement and get paid. The movement was really created on the back of volunteers, activists who envisioned a different world for us. It’s not sustainable to have a movement of only volunteers though. [Volunteering] certainly gave me that exposure, empowerment and experience.

DG: You were an activist in the community. How did you survive?

RP: I had management jobs. I was able to sustain myself, donate money, time, and energy.
DG: How did your family feel about your activism? How did they respond? Were they supportive?

RP: I did not take into consideration what my family thought, besides there are too many of them! I just did it. Since I came out, I have lived on the conviction that injustice should not exist anywhere. But generally my family has been very supportive. At first my mom was concerned about my safety because of our experience in Guatemala with my dad and what happens to political activists in Guatemala. I do not think she felt comfortable about my sexuality and me being out there telling everyone I was a homosexual. I do not think she is 100% there, but she has come a long way. She definitely felt more comfortable when I was the Executive Director at *Clinica Monseñor Romero* because it was a Latino gig, and I did not have to mention being gay, even though I did, all the time.

My siblings were different [because] they are of a different generation and had some gay friends. They have always been quite supportive. I would take my nieces and nephews to the pride parades when they were little. The kids loved it. They got to be in the parade with the AIDS Healthcare Foundation contingent, and people would welcome them with thunderous applauses because they were kids; they were cute. They would call me every summer, “when are we going to the parade?” No, they would say, “when are we going to the Halloween parade?” – [laughs]. It was not a Halloween parade, but there were a lot of drag queens, so they probably thought it was a parade where people were in customs. They [my nieces and nephews] are also from a different generation. They are very supportive. As matter of fact one of [my nephews] is 28 now, he [served in] Iraq. He is a U.S. veteran [and] became very involved with “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell.” He is heterosexual, but he is aware of how important that issue was for the gay people he met while in the Marines and throughout
his life. I hope I inculcated a sense of justice in them. Many of my nieces and nephews became activists in their own spheres. They are out there making a difference.

DG: You mentioned that your mom was not 100% comfortable with your sexuality.

Why do you think that is?

RP: Her religion informs a lot of how she feels. Many years ago she told me that there was a part of her that felt like it was her fault I was gay. Maybe if my dad had been around, or if I have had a male role model then I would have been heterosexual. Of course, I had to explain to her that would have not have made a difference. She is very proud of me though. She adores and loves me. She is the only person I know that will go to the end of this earth to make sure I was safe. In the end, she probably thought at that time that my life would probably be easier if I was not gay. Parents have conflicting feelings, and they do not want their children to be discriminated against. She was extremely tortured with the whole thing with Matthew Sheppard. She could not believe that level of cruelty.

[Also] I think it has to do with her level of comfort. She goes to church every Sunday and was raised Catholic. She is not extremely religious; and certainly does not follow everything the Pope says, just like a great number of Catholics, including Latinos. I remember when my nieces were young she would give them condoms and tell them “I know you are going to have sex, so here.” My nieces would respond with “abuelita [grandma] I cannot believe you are doing this!”

She and Alfredo were good friends. She knows the deal, but I think it is different when you have a gay child. When you come out, your [entire] family comes out, whether they like it or not. She gets very upset when she hears people making anti-gay comments.
DG: You were at the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF) from 1992 to 1998, what did you do?

RP: At first, I was on the Board of Directors then I was hired as the Chief of Operations and Vice President. I approached this position from an activist perspective rather than […] for my desire to be in the healthcare field. When I joined, in 1992, AHF was a $4 million organization, and when I left in 1998, it had mushroomed to over $40 million. It’s close to $1 Billion now, and it does great work in many countries throughout the world, including Africa, Asia and Latin America. I was in charge of supervising three primary care clinics and one hospice. During that time period, AIDS went from being a death-sentence to a manageable chronic condition. I never thought I would get involved in healthcare, but many of us became activists because of injustices of the lack of [medical] care. Many people with HIV/AIDS had no access to insurance, and even if they did, they were treated like pariahs. Having insurance and getting care with sensitivity became a privilege. So, I got involved in healthcare because of the HIV crisis.

DG: Were you able to help a lot people in the community get healthcare?

RP: We opened a clinic in Downtown Los Angeles and another hospice in South Los Angeles called the Carl Bean Hospice. We were able to create relationships with many community-based organizations. Because of AHF, people did not have to have [money] to access quality and care with dignity.

I was very saddened by the AIDS phobia. The hospices served as a place where [people] could die with dignity. Some people died by themselves in their homes; and nobody

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30 AIDS Healthcare Foundations (AHF) is the largest specialized provider of HIV/AIDS medical care in the nation.
was there for them. Others went to nursing homes where they were not welcomed. Some people went back home to Latin America or where they had some type of family or friends support system; who knows how many others died. You would think dying should happen with dignity, especially because those are your last days on earth.

Epidemic viruses do what they do [and] they do not care who you are, rich or poor, color, race, gender, or sexual orientation. I remember one of our young hospice patients from Mexico who was about 21 years old. In Latin America, LGBT people would tend to move to the big cities or leave the country all together to escape their homophobic families, and look for places and spaces that are more accepting. For many, it did not happen until they arrived in the U.S. So, their families did not know [about their sexual identities]. So, it was a double whammy as families would find out in one swoop that their child was a homosexual and at the same time dying so young, in the prime of their lives. The family would be in total shock, denial, confused and angry. Our staff was trained and knew how to handle that in a culturally sensitive matter as much as they could in a situation that was tragic [and] intense. This was more than a daily occurrence at the hospices. There was a huge commitment on the part of the staff, but also burn out.

DG: What do you think fuels the AIDS phobia? At least in that time?

RP: I think part of it is that some people feel that they have some immunity to it, or are so far from the orbit of where the virus travels. This by the way, was not exclusively a heterosexual phenomenon. Many of us did not start as enlightened about our awareness of AIDS. Anyway, it was thought of as a gay disease and of people who were reckless. Because our Judeo-Christian religious traditions make sexuality sinful, catching a disease through intimate
sexual contact is far more stigmatized than other types of transmission, disease or illness. A public health issue becomes a moral issue. Not a good combination. Sex, especially queer sex, is highly stigmatized.

It is well known now that HIV can be transmitted in so many different ways, including exchange of body fluids, especially semen, infected needle sharing, etc. It’s also no longer a death sentence. There are many resources now than from before and the person can live a relatively regular and productive life. Of course, if you are sexually active, get tested. If you are positive, it is something you want to take care of immediately and get help.

“How do we crack the code?” I go back to the fact that we do not have a comprehensive healthcare system. If we had in every neighborhood active health educators and healthcare institutions, and if having access to care was not a commodity, but a public health issue, we would be able to prevent and to “nip in the bud” epidemics that many times are out of control and become a lot more costly in human lives and in the monetary sense as well. Basically have an engaged healthcare system, instead of the neglectful or passive one. Our jobs as activists are to build sustainable healthcare systems where the default is to have healthy communities, not just react to crises.

DG: You went from AIDS Healthcare Foundation to Clinica Monseñor Oscar A.

Romero.

RP: Yes, I was the Executive Director; the issue there was not so much that I was gay, but that I was Guatemalan, kind of funny though.

Clinica Romero [is a] healthcare [clinic]. I moved the clinic out of a basement to a place that was more dignified. We went from providing 10,000 visits to over 40,000 in less
than four years. I loved that job; I got lots of support from the community. We created all sorts of partnerships and engaged networks of supporters.

I believe in justice for everyone. So, we also created a Korean clinic within *Clinica Romero*. There is a myth that Korean’s are wealthy, and that they do not need public support, which is a gross stereotype. A lot of them, especially, the women who work in restaurants and small businesses, are disproportionally uninsured because small business do not have as many resources; their margin of profit is many times minimal. I know that because I was raised in that environment. Small businesses cannot afford insurance and many of them have economic, linguistic or cultural barriers in accessing systems of care. We created a partnership with KIWA (Korean Immigrant Workers Alliance) to address these issues.

We also created a Mesoamerican clinic and hired trilingual staff who spoke English, Ch’aab’al, and Spanish. About 30 percent of the pregnant women at *Clinica Romero* spoke Ch’aab’al, Q’anjob’al, and K’iché, native Guatemalan languages. We also had a Zapoteco and Mixteco clinic and staff who spoke these languages from Southern Mexico. We did a lot of innovative kinds of stuff, accessible and culturally sensitive programs. We bought real estate in Boyle Heights. And we also got a gift from a wealthy family, who gave us a building in Pico Union dedicated to health education activities. This was brokered by John Gile, Executive Director of Project Angel Food, an HIV/AIDS organization. John knew of my previous work in the community and also knew this wealthy donor family. It was very inspiring. *Clinica Romero* became synonymous with a caring and well-run community-based clinic that took care of vulnerable communities.

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31 Ch’aab’al is an indigenous sign language used by the Mayas in the highlands of Guatemala.
32 Q’anjob’al is a Maya language from the Guatemalan highlands.
33 K’iché is a Maya language from the Guatemalan highlands.
Clinica Romero was also a very politicized environment. A lot of the people not necessarily the founders, but lots of people who later became part of the clinic felt very entitled and wanted to treat the clinic as their personal property rather than a communal service organization. There were many Salvadoran leftist factions who were in conflict with each other. As a Guatemalan, I had an awareness of that because of my family background. I underestimated how much they hated each other though. It was vicious, and many times I got caught in the crossfire. Sometimes healthcare and politics don’t mix very well and one of the two will get the short end of the stick.

People also have a certain comfort when the institution is of a small size and is within their capacity as it might serve their narrow political needs. Once you reach a certain size and become more sophisticated, and complex, they no longer feel they have control. The old guard at Clinica fell that they were losing power and became very reactionary. When we decided to open a clinic in Boyle Heights, many of them got upset because they felt that [Clinica Romero] was a Central American clinic, primarily Salvadoran, and not Mexican institution, let alone Chicano. I was disturbed and shocked by that kind of thinking and I knew that Monseñor Romero would be on the side of the poor no matter who they were. In some ways there was some validity to their concern as there were not many resources for Salvadorans and other Central Americans, and there was a certain pride with the fact that Clinica became the largest Central American non-profit institution in the nation, and by extension the largest Salvadoran institution. It represented the success of what was once an underground, refugee community. Ironically, it became successful because a gay Guatemalan man was leading it, and many Salvadoran narrow nationalists resented that. That particular clique and their thinking set the stage for the later deterioration and almost demise of the
clinic. The good news is that many Salvadorans were in the tradition of Monseñor Romero and wanted to take care of anyone who was poor, regardless. I left after five years because I felt that I had stabilized and increased the wealth and the prospects of the organization. I moved to the California Endowment, a grant making foundation.

DG: While you were at Clinica Romero it is also the same time you were teaching at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) in the Central American Studies\textsuperscript{34} minor?

RP: Yes, I was at CSUN for two semesters. That was all I could take. I loved the students and I connected to their struggles, aspirations, and their activism. I had a very demanding job as the Executive Director at Clinica Romero and to go to teach at CSUN in the northern San Fernando Valley was quite a task for me, but more than anything the faculty CSUN politics turned me off. There was a lot of in fighting among the faculty, and in many cases disrespect for the students. I already had my hands full at Clinica Romero. I really bonded with the students.

It was an eye-opening experience for me [due to] how complicated the lives of the students were. I remember when I was a student at UCLA in the early 80’s, I got grants, work-study, and I had a job. When I graduated I had some debt, but these students were going to be burdened for the rest of their lives. They had complex lives: some had kids at a young age, they were the only breadwinners in their family, their parents were undocumented, they could not get a job, or one parent was on disability. It was a very hard for them to concentrate on their studies. A good number of them had $50,000 plus worth of student loan debt; they had to take two to three jobs just to survive. This created additional barriers on top of their academic challenges. It’s a miracle that many of them graduate and go onto graduate school. I do not remember my life being that complicated when I went to UCLA.

\textsuperscript{34} Although not examined or analyzed in the study refer to Rodolfo Acuña’s *The Making of Chicana/o Studies: In the Trenches of Academe* for further information about the formation of Central American Studies.
I taught community building, a course on creating and developing communities. I taught it because I had founded and developed a number of organizations. I believe institutions provide many benefits as they give people a sense of purpose, serve individual needs and aspirations, create leadership, resources, and a connection to the larger society, plus a sense of belonging while impacting their environment. Institutions are a way for communities to come out of the shadows and to keep our democracy alive. If you take the whole non-profit world out of existence, we would have an armed rebellion here in the U.S. because non-profits and other civic-minded groups are the buffer between people being in the streets or people having certain needs met. Non-profits exist because sometimes the government might not be so responsive, which is what happened during the HIV and AIDS crisis.

DG: Next, you went to California Endowment?

RP: Yes, California Endowment is a foundation, the largest health foundation in California. I was a Senior Program Officer; I was in-charge of five counties: Santa Barbara, Ventura, Los Angeles, San Bernardino, and Riverside. We covered a geographic area that was bigger than many states and with a population of almost 15 million people. My department invested over $25 million annually in that area alone, a miniscule amount compared to the need, but one that certainly made a difference. The California Endowment funds communities that traditionally would not get funded. I got to meet amazing people who were dedicated and passionate about making a difference and creating change.

[California Endowment] was challenging because the needs are so great. There was never enough money to meet all the needs. You had to make choices about who got it, how
much they got, and when they got it. It is really about setting priorities and knowing you are going to include and exclude some things. You have criteria that gives you a sense that the decision you are making is the best decision you can make given what is at stake. It is about priorities and people being in an alignment with your own organizational mission. Sometimes not everyone was happy with the decision we made because there are 20 applicants and you only have enough money for five. Fifteen people are not going to be happy, but it does not mean those 15 people or organizations in the future will not get funding. The people who were smart about fundraising had a long-term view. Just because you did not get it in the first cycle does not mean you might not get it in the next cycle. Just because this foundation did not give you money does not mean the foundation next door will not give you money. If this was your only lifesaver then of course you are in trouble, and your choices needed to be expanded.

DG: You left California Endowment and became Community Benefits Director for L.A. Care Health Plan?

RP: Yes, I’ve been at L.A. Care since 2006, but I had an interlude at Equality California35 from July through October 2011, for about 100 days, and then I came back to L.A. Care. I fund private and public safety net providers who in turn take care of uninsured individuals and families, regardless of their ability to pay. Most of the funding is for infrastructure, as opposed to direct patient care. For instance, we gave $500,000 to a clinic in the Antelope Valley to build a new primary care facility because there was no community clinic in that huge area.

35 Equality California is an organization that focuses on achieving full equality for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Californians through social justice advocates, businesses, grassroots supporters, and legislative leaders.
We have funded Los Angeles County departments and projects such as *Rancho Los Amigos* hospital to create a remote interactive video interpreting services. For instance, you are the doctor and I am the patient, and you speak English but I don’t. We would communicate via remote video. The doctor would ask questions like “Where does it hurt?” Of course I would not understand what you are saying. So, the interpreter, who is remote, would go, “¿Dónde le duele?” Then I as a patient would show you where. It’s very visual. My job overall is about building the infrastructure capacity of the safety net to provide care to the underserved; or even for those who have Medi-Cal, as they have no access to care because many medical providers do not take government-sponsored insurance. These safety net clinics do.

**DG:** In July 2011 to October 2011 your name became known around the state because you became Executive Director of Equality California. How was that for you?

**RP:** (Paused to gather thoughts) – There was a lot of turmoil at the time in our community and within Equality California (EQCA) as well. There was a lot of controversy and heightened emotions in the LGBT community because we had lost Proposition 8. There are a lot of interpretations as to why that happened, but Equality California was largely blamed for it. And due to that perception a lot of people had negative feelings about EQCA. And when I became the head of EQCA later on, I inherited the good, the bad and the ugly, whether I like it or not. People were very angry. I think that what sharpened that anger was that a Black man made it to the White House; so the contrast, the contradiction of how we can elect a Black person to the White House while at the same time the gay community is

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36 Proposition 8 was a California ballot proposition and a state constitutional amendment passed in November 2008, which banned same-sex marriage.
being disfranchised was too much to bear, especially because many LGBT people had worked in Obama’s campaign including myself. Unfortunately, because racism is such a default in our society, the anger was directed at communities of color, especially the African American community, but some was directed to the Latino community as well. No one directed their anger and bile to that level to the White conservative community who are directly responsible for founding and funding the anti-gay industry machinery and who undoubtedly voted against our rainbow community. There was a lot of ugliness like that, unresolved emotions. That was the context I walked into. I did not have a lot of electoral politics or legislative experience, so that contributed to the fact that it was a stormy situation for me and for the organization. The margin for error was very thin.

But the major factor was that EQCA was financially bankrupt, and I did not know that at the time I accepted the job, and supposedly neither did the Board of Directors. Frontiers Magazine reported that [Equality California] had over a million dollars in the bank nine months before I got there. But a week before I started on the job, the Chief Financial Officer called me and said, “We can’t make payroll two weeks from now” and that was two weeks before my start date. I should’ve quit right there and then. I was not applying for the job I thought I was applying for, and the Board had no idea what they had in their hands since they were supposedly clueless about the financial situation. A lot of energy went into addressing the economic and the political crisis that resulted from that. It was a roller coaster. There also were major issues during the transition that was happening behind the scenes before I got there, as there was a group of individuals who left EQCA, staff and Board members, and did everything they could to sabotage the organization, including feeding information to bloggers to constantly disparage us. EQCA was put under the microscope and
under “community probation”. The bottom line is that no one is sure as to what happened to all that money before I got there, as the Board did not know that they were bankrupt and that EQCA couldn’t meet its payroll. So, you have that serious financial and political breakdown, me getting acquainted with a statewide job and the multiplicity of things that needed to happen at once due to vastly unfulfilled expectations. People were resentful and feeling that they had been failed, so there was little margin and tolerance for error. Anyone taking over an organization that is internally, but also externally in perpetual crisis is very hard to run. It needed some time to cool off. There was tremendous criticism about what I did and did not do, all coming from White journalists and bloggers as POC media is basically non-existent, and whatever little there is; it does not have any power in the LGBT community. Therefore, there was no alternative narrative. On top of that, two days after I started, the right-wing nuts began to collect signatures to put an initiative on the ballot to undo the legislative achievement of SB 48, which basically allowed the teaching of LGBT history and other contributions in California public classrooms. In the midst of this financially bankrupt situation we were supposed to build a whole political campaign infrastructure to counteract that, but there was no money, and lots of ill will in the community. The attacks on EQCA and me were incessant; and if you ever wondered, this is how you find out who your true friends are!

I was only there for 100 days, and I had to let go over half of the staff, including half of the management team. In the end, we built a multi-ethnic statewide coalition, the right-wing fundamentalists did not collect all the needed signatures they needed to qualify for the ballot, and some grants started to come in. We also decided not to go back to the ballot to
undo Proposition 8. This also stabilized the organization somehow as we spent a lot of
energy going back and forth on that issue.

This experience gave me insights into quite a few things; one is an awareness of the
personal decisions I make at every step of the way. In this instance, first, I had many choices
including not applying for the job to start with. Secondly, not taking the job when it was
offered, as I should’ve known better as to how toxic the situation was. Thirdly, as soon as I
got the call from the CFO saying, “We are broke.” I should have said, “You know what,
that’s not the organization I thought I was joining, so I’m not going to take the job.” On the
contrary, I really felt that I had made a commitment, and that regardless I was going to honor
my word. But I also felt that it was an opportunity to diversify the leadership in the LGBT
movement. An opportunity to have a person who was not the traditional type hired for those
types of positions. It was an excruciating experience, but it did not crush my spirit. I bounced
back. It has taken me quite a while to processes everything that happened there, but I wish
the organization well. There is definitely a role for EQCA as equality is not yet equal,
whether that is geographically, economically, ethnically, gender or gender identity wise.
There are still lots of unfulfilled dreams as legality provides a certain level of protection, but
one that is unevenly implemented given that its benefits also trickle down depending on
where you are on the totem pole.

DG: Have you ever been discriminated for being a Latino in those
spaces/organizations?

RP: I don’t think it’s outright discrimination, and it’s certainly not personal. It’s more like
the oxygen that is out there, notions that people were raised with; our inability to examine
our assumptions. Had it been pre-1960’s type of discrimination; I don’t think I would’ve even had a chance to be hired in the first place. It became quite apparent to me that when a person of color, who primarily identifies with their own community and not having had a well-developed network in the mainstream community is at a serious disadvantage. Their chances of succeeding are nil as there are no LGBT POC institutions that are a parallel powerful network and act as an “alternative universe” sort of speak that you can rely on and whose resources match those of the White community. There are a lot of assets that we bring to the table, but they are pretty much dismissed such as the vast experience that we bring of belonging to an intersection of communities, the having built institutions from nothing, and so forth. That, unfortunately, has very little currency and in some ways there is very little patience for that, and that is why the leadership of our LGBT movement continues to be quite monochromatic. On the Latino side, there is no systematic attempt to develop queer leadership there either. The Mexican American Leadership and Educational Fund (MALDEF) is one of the few exceptions where the alliance with the LGBT Latino community is quite strong. This is primarily due to the work of my friend David-Damian Figueroa and the tremendous leadership of Thomas Saenz, MALDEF’s President and General Counsel. We as LGBT Latinas and Latinos are a bridge community, but sometimes there are no roads to connect to. That has to change or our movements will be seriously hampered.

**DG: Okay, what about outside in the Latino community?**

RP: Let’s say Clinica Romero, there was not a gay awareness to speak of before I got there, although the organization had done some HIV/AIDS work, but none of it was targeted to the
LGBT community, but primarily women who were at risk. No one personally discriminated against me or ostracized me. However, the clinic had to go through a sensitivity process to be more aware of the presence of LGBT employees and patients. After I got to Clinica, we started to diversify the work force and more people who had already been there for years felt more comfortable coming out.

The same with Equality California; I never felt that I was discriminated against inside the organization. Many actually fought fiercely for me to be there. But there were certainly people on the outside that were quite blatant, clearly bordered on being racist. Some of the bloggers were quiet obnoxious. I remember one particular blogger who was deeply outraged that we had made a special mention in one of EQCA’s mail announcements in July 2011 of the passing of Richard Chávez. Richard, whom I had the pleasure to meet, was Dolores Huerta’s partner and Cesar Chavez’s younger brother, all three icons in the progressive, labor and Latino communities. The United Farmworkers Union (UFW) was one of the first organizations that had openly supported LGBT rights in the early 1980’s, at a time when it definitely not popular to do so, let alone in the Latino community, or in organized labor for that matter. You’ll think they’ll be celebrated as devoted allies. A couple of the bloggers posted their vitriol comments, “Is this Equality California or a Latino organization?” It was weird at two levels: One is that we want to thank our allies that have been in solidarity with us for many years, in the case of the UFW, it was decades of support. Two, we also want to promote more allies in people of color communities. But the moment you start talking about POC ethnicity, all of a sudden, some feel that it’s outside the norm of what is considered to be the “gay movement”. I consider that very homonormative, with very little flexibility, ethnically Eurocentric and quite tribal. Basically, you can’t deviate from the norm and
introduce issues of race as if it was mutually exclusive with being LGBT. We really have to figure this one out, as demography is destiny and our [LGBT] community is getting browner by the day.

Photograph 12. From left to right: Roland Palencia and Dolores Huerta. (Unknown date)

**DG: Do you remember the first time you were discriminated?**

RP: I remember I was in line to get my lunch meal at Los Angeles High School in the mid-70’s, I was chatting with a Salvadoran friend of mine. I had recently arrived, and all I spoke
was Spanish. This guy in front of us turns to me and says, “Quit talking that shit.” I understood “shit” because curse words are the first ones that you learn, so I knew I was in trouble. My friend who understood rudimentary English told me that the guy was very upset that we were talking in Spanish, even though I felt that it was our own private conversation. From that moment on, I felt that there was something stigmatizing about the only language I knew, and I started to resent being forced to speak English. That [experience] also crystallized for me that there was a place that had been carved out for me as immigrant and that there were certain people (points finger up) at this level, (lowers finger) people below that level, and (lowers finger) people even lower than that. That was also the case in Guatemala, but I was not considered a minority there. I also realized that here in the U.S. I was not automatically perched at the top of that pyramid, but that others were. They have a headstart.

The word “discrimination,” “racist,” “sexist,” and so forth are emotionally charged. And although there is personal prejudice that needs to be called out, the most insidious kind of any “ism” is those that are socio-cultural and economically embedded, not just at the level of personal prejudice, but something more insidious and systematic, deeply entrenched. That is how the system keeps some “in” and others “out” in an almost predictable way. This cascades through society, and it also affects our progressive movement, including our LGBT and Latino civil rights movements and institutions that fight for full equality. Those movements are not immune to that as they do not exist in a vacuum. For example, given the dearth of quality education in African American and Latino communities, the chances of these kids working in low-paying jobs, having chronic illnesses, or even ending up in prison are much higher—obviously not automatic—than let’s say someone who has a bevy of
opportunities provided by their richer environments. The tirades of the personal racist or prejudicial person pales in comparison and is a walk in the park compared to the systematic and structural racism that exists as in our educational system because it impacts millions, and because it is an unruly and ruthless non-stop machine. It’s OK to call out discriminatory individuals, but structural racism chops off thousands if not millions of people from participating in our social, economic, [and] democratic system. In essence the system is rigged and is increasingly molded to benefit some, in some cases almost automatically (think George W. Bush), and then people wonder why people with fewer rights and privileges are so exhausted.

But at the end of the day, we have to create a collective (POC) narrative that is empowering and not accusatory, that engages and sparks our collective imaginations, by distinguishing our unique positioning in society of being at the intersections of so many communities and legacies, the automatic alliances that can be synergized and leveraged in ways that we cannot even imagine. It has to be nurturing. And although our movements are now guided by “pay to play” rules, in the end, it’s moral imperatives that win the day. The LGBT community has gone from being one of the most stigmatized and persecuted communities ever to now one that is seen as a model for liberation. Things can change, and I am proud that I was one of the change makers. We, and supporters of LGBT POC communities, have not figured out what our moral—not moralistic—imperative is that connects to that deep sense of the American people’s longing for justice and equality.
DG: How do you think gay Latinos fall into that system?

PR: We have advantages and disadvantages. I think there is more mobility among gay Latino men than heterosexual Latino men, in some ways. I can’t cite statistics, but anecdotally, I would say LGBT people are more likely to go to college than their counterparts due to a variety of reasons. One, we want to get away from home, because even though we are loved, we are rarely understood or fully accepted. At the same time, we have to depend on ourselves as the needed support systems might not be there. I also think that there is an inherent inquisitiveness among LGBT people, as we want to explore other realities and expand into other worlds because the one that we were raised in was extremely limited and oppressive, so we become a bit more exploratory. There is also an acknowledgement, intuition, and craving to want to do something beyond what our families do, as we do not fit nicely into that family structure given the way it is designed now. It is not that we want to reject our families, but we are also not completed by it—at least not until consciousness changes further—and I am hopeful that we can get there. We look for other networks beyond our [family] networks. For instance, I feel that my professional and civic network is far more expansive than those of my male family members. I have met many people who do not orbit in my family circles, and that was even before Facebook. We are exposed to a lot more and this creates an advantage, as we become more fluid in our relationships all around.

The down side of that is obviously that we do not get that family affinity that many of our siblings or counterparts have by default, no extra effort needed. It is automatic for Latino families to think that you are going to grow up, get married to someone from the opposite sex, and have kids, and their children will have children. For some LGBT people that can lead to a problematic situation where they feel discounted, not feeling appreciated, or feel
like they do not belong. Depending on the rigidity of that expectation, it can lead to many problems: mental health, drug abuse, or simply lack of self-confidence. What’s amazing is that in spite of that we maintain our dignity.

Sexual energy is creation whether it is for biological procreation, procreation of ideas or new realities that you want to bring into existence. We are inclined to live on the edge, to live on the borders so to speak. We are suited for the unpredictable and fast-moving economy that is ruling and will rule the world for who knows how long. As economies develop and become more information and knowledge driven, most people will become far more interested in creation rather than in procreation, and although those two things are not mutually exclusive, one will trend more so than the other. You will see it even among heterosexuals where they will only want to have one or two kids at the most. They want their lives to be more about self-fulfillment, designing their lives, being in charge of their destiny, fully enjoying what life has to offer and to be engaged in creative endeavors. In that way, I think we have fundamentally impacted cultural norms.

DG: Since coming out in the 80’s have you met other gay Central American men in your line of work?

RP: When I meet Central Americans that are very Mexican-Americanized, our conversations are reduced to food, family dynamics, political and community topics and yes, gossip. So, if they are English dominant, have middle class jobs, and are university-educated chances are that the Central American has been washed out of us. It does not mean we do not have our own values or Central American values. One of the values would be the political consciousness we share due to the collective experiences of the multi-decade civil wars,
especially those wars of the 70’s through the 90’s. First and second generation Guatemalans tend to blend in a lot more than Mexicans, Cubans or Salvadorans. If you are a Guatemalan of indigenous descent that is less likely to happen, as it is harder to mix in with the mestizo populations, racially mixed Latinos. Can you stop the recording?

[I stopped the recording for about 15 minutes]

The thing about identity is that you have to consciously create it and then keep building on it, and claim it all the time. Most of us do not call ourselves gay Central American. We are most likely to identify as a gay Guatemalan or gay Nicaraguan. The first thing about identity is that you have to claim it and then you have to create groups that claim that identity; so people have this unified entity that crystallizes their sense of being. But in the absence of that, there is really no way to manage or negotiate, [and] expand or explore that identity. What is it about the experience of gay Central Americans that make us unique or not so unique? I think that has been missing. I personally have not intentionally had that conversation. Interesting, isn’t it?

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37 Coming from a U.S. context as discussed and defined/redefined by scholars today, but not discussed in the 1980s and 1990s, the term Central American-American is an identity formation that describes Latinas and Latinos “born or raised in the United States with ancestry from Central America” (Chinchilla & Hamilton, 2013). Although the U.S. is a multicultural nation, the Central American population is invisible in the category of Latina and Latino, which does not embrace, capture, or give full visibility to the diverse experiences of the Central Americans living in the U.S. (Arias, 2003; Arias, 2007; Chinchilla & Hamilton, 2013).
DG: Let’s focus on your identity. I saw the MALDEF Gala Award video. In your speech you mentioned your identity a bit. You said, “I am Guatemalan as Latino.” How do you identify in certain spaces? For example, in your organizations as gay Guatemalan, Latino, or do you shift identities in certain spaces?

RP: I rarely identify myself as gay Guatemalan unless it is a space where it needs to be said, surely when I am among my Chicano and Mexican-American friends. I mostly use gay Latino. It is more expedient. Part of it is that I want to connect to a larger community because we have shared struggles, aspirations, and experiences. This city is also very Latino diverse. Identifying as gay Latino makes me feel like I am part of a larger group. I also do not know or socialize many gay Guatemalans, even now.

DG: For the few gay Central Americans you have met, do you know why they migrated to the United States?

RP: I would say that in the case of Salvadorans and Nicaraguans, and to some extent Hondurans, it’s because of the Civil War and great migration of the 1980’s. It went on from the 1980’s to the 1990’s. For Guatemalans, it started before then, in those two decades [1980’s and 1990’s] when Central Americans migrated. Our families just wanted us to be safe, but I also think that the economic situation just deteriorated. We are both political and economic refugees, but the U.S. only recognized us as economic migrants. I know of some Guatemalan gay men who have left Guatemala because they felt they were persecuted as gay men. I recently met the previous owner of a beauty salon in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, where some of my family members live. This gentleman was physically and emotionally threatened with horrible slurs like hueco and maricon [fag]. His business fell apart and he felt...
that his life was in danger, so he migrated to the U.S. However, some people can’t flee the place. He is one of the few lucky ones.
Palencia has helped make social, legal, and political advances in the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) communities through his commitment to community work and activism. Thus, his life story is part of a larger historical narrative. Harper and Schneider (2003) conducted research on LGBT community work and Community Psychology. They found that LGBT individuals have worked to improve the general health and well-being of LGBT communities through local, regional, national, and international organizations. They also found that early gay and lesbian organizations such as Mattachine Society, Daughters of Bilitis, and ONE helped organized gay civil rights groups in the U.S. and focused in addressing issues of oppression, harassment, politics, and legal discrimination. In another study, Alexander (1999) conducted a study on LGBT identity. He writes that LGBT activists fight for LGBT rights and have help established equal and political rights protections in cities and some states. He also states that LGBT organizations and coalitions have brought LGBT visibility and procurement rights. Hence, LGBT activists have produced LGBT advocacy through organization and community work.

In Palencia’s case, his life experiences are marked by events in the gay community and his activism led to health services for people of color. Also, like Palencia other LGBT activists such as Luis Alfaro, Marcus Kuiland-Nazario, Aleida Rodríguez, Ari Gutiérrez, Robert Legorreta, and Monica Palacios were present at the beginning when leadership emerged in the Latina and Latino LGBT community. In time, he was able to obtain employment in management positions within healthcare. Palencia continued to be an activist and also became a healthcare administrator, which included positions such as Community Benefits Director, Executive Director, Vice President, and Chief of Operations. In his
healthcare occupations, Palencia continued to help vastly diverse communities with medical needs.

**HIV and AIDS**

Palencia’s early activism in the U.S. started as an undocumented student at Los Angeles High School. Activism is the “direct action contesting or upholding one side of a controversial issue” (Hill, 2004, p. 85). While attending UCLA, Palencia became involved in issues surrounding the gay community (as stated in the Education Subsection). *Gay [and Lesbian] Latino Unidos* was established before the discovery of the HIV and AIDS virus. The HIV and AIDS epidemic would cause a change in various communities as well as in the life of Palencia.

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in the U.S. has been socially defined as a disease of marginalized groups, such as gay men. Originally, the epidemic was to be called Gay-Related Immune Deficiency (GRID) or the “gay plague” (Herek & Glunt, 1988). In 1981, AIDS was first identified in the U.S. among homosexual men, which created a double stigmatization for gay men (Devine, Ashby Plant, and Harrison, 1999). Stigmatizations of gay men include labeling them as deviant, sick, or sinful, which causes men to deny their sexuality and experience marginalization (Nay, McAuliffe, and Bauer, 2007).

Further, anti-AIDS courses of actions occurred such as the Center for Disease Control withholding funding for educational programs on safe sex and U.S. Senate prohibiting federal funding for AIDS education (Herek and Glunt, 1988). Palencia noticed and said, “The way people who were dying of AIDS were treated was horrendous. It created this energizing movement of: “hey, we have to create our own institutions because nobody is out there to
help us.” Of course, a lot of people came through. American institutions were not there to protect us. L.A. County was unprepared [and] unwilling to deal with the epidemic. The political establishment was completely negligent and non-sympathetic.” Accordingly, early AIDS phobia started by associating the virus with the gay community. AIDS phobia is defined as “reactions to AIDS [including] panic, disgust, and wishes to stay away from infected people. Some of those who fear infection practice strategies of phobic avoidance and precaution” (Wirth, 2003, p. 309). The HIV and AIDS epidemic has caused individuals to experience AIDS phobia and stigma the gay community further as well as cause the death of many gay men.

Stigma is not new or unique to HIV and AIDS. Stigma can be defined as “a mark of shame or discredit” (Herek & Glunt, 1988, p. 886). For example, Valdiserri (2002) conducted a brief literature review on stigma and HIV/AIDS. He noted that people feared and disclosed disgust with people with AIDS. Fear, negativity, and judgmental attitudes can lead individuals to an increase in HIV risk behavior. Also, Devine, Ashby Plant, and Harrison (1999) conducted a study on AIDS and stigma. They founds that linguistic terms such as immoral, disgusting, and dirty are part of AIDS stigma. They revealed that individuals that experience AIDS stigma have been socially isolated, fired from jobs, and driven out from their homes. Palencia witnessed how there was “… lots of judgment of who got infected, “it’s those people who go to those clubs in New York and they are doing drugs and other stuff.” Thus, stigma needs to be recognized as a leading cause of AIDS phobia. HIV/AIDS related stigma is a problem for all society because it has affected thousands of men and women from all ethnicities (Valdiserri, 2002, Devine et al., 1999).
One of the Latino groups that educated about HIV/AIDS was *Viva*. *Viva* was a gay and lesbian Latino artists association established 1987 (Davalos, 2013; Román, 1995; Quintanilla, 1998; Breslauer, 1991). The organization was originally named *¡Que VIVA!* (Long live), but later shortened to *Viva* (Hernandez, 2013). *Viva* was a self-sustained organization that sold “t-shirts, publications, *calendarios*, cards, candles, and glassware” (Hernandez, 2013, p.4) to maintain itself. Like many other organizations and communities *Viva* often struggled over few resources and at times competed when they should not have had to. *Viva* was one of the first organizations Palencia helped to establish in the Los Angeles area in responses to HIV and AIDS epidemic. Palencia saw how, “HIV was our holocaust; it decimated not only our network of friends, but I also think it drove a stake through the heart of LGBT Color Movement.” According to Robb Hernandez *Viva*:

> … the organization produced a steady stream of public programs, fundraisers, theatrical performances, art exhibitions, poetry readings, and publications. It earned national recognitions, awards, and grants from the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, the City of Los Angeles, and ASTRAEA: National Lesbian Action Foundation, among others […] participated in multidisciplinary, mixed-media art productions that included spoken word as well as comedic performances, with art exhibitions and cabaret showcases […] social events, including anniversary dinners, award shoes, launch parties for *VIVA Arts*
Quarterly, and the popular lesbian of color annual event, 

Chicks & Salsa (2-3)

*Viva!* empowered communities to learn about HIV and AIDS issues, mobilized communities to solve HIV and AIDS problems, and conducted skits to educate communities on HIV and AIDS (Román, 1995; Hernandez, 2013; Davalos, 2013).

Additionally, *Viva!* served as a stepping-stone for Latino and Latina artists in the 1980s because there was a lack of Latina and Latino artist representation in Los Angeles (Román, 1995; Breslauer, 1991). Latina and Latino artists were excluded, misrepresented, or marginalized at art venues in Los Angeles. *Viva!* was able to provide visibility to Latina and Latino artists through discussion, production and presentation of art, and the development of artists through educational and presentational opportunities. In 1993, *Viva!* was awarded the GLAAD/LA Outstanding Community Service Award. In 1998, *Viva!* celebrated its 10th year anniversary. Although *Viva!* dissolved by 2000, the organization helped both Latino and Latina gay and lesbian individuals, and artists by advocating for their concerns through art and performances (Quintanilla, 1998; Hernandez, 2012; Davalos, 2013).

*California’s Proposition 8*

One challenge Palencia experienced while serving as the Executive Director of Equality California was the backlash following the passage of Proposition 8. On November 4th, 2008, Barack Obama was elected into U.S. presidency. On the same day, Californians voted on a number of propositions. More specifically, Californians voted and passed Proposition 8, which amended California’s constitution to define marriage between a man and women, with a narrow vote of 52% to 48% (Ghavami and Johnson, 2011; Maisel, 2011;
Abrajano, 2010; Eden and Sherrill, 2009; Miller, 2009). Many-viewed Obama’s win as a step towards racial equality and a victory in civil rights (Miller, 2009). On the other hand, the passage of Proposition 8 created a shock wave among LGBT members and supporters of same-sex marriage. Prior to the passage of Proposition 8, approximately 18,000 same-sex couples married in California between June 16th, 2008 and November 3rd, 2008 (Ghavami and Johnson, 2011; Miller, 2009). As a result of the passage of Proposition 8 same-sex marriages were revoked and blame was put on the Black community (Eden and Sherrill, 2009; Miller, 2009; Ghavami and Johnson, 2011).

There were two sides to Proposition 8. The Yes-on-8 campaign was in favor of the measure; in other words, they did not support same-sex marriages. The No-on-8 campaign was against the measure and was in support of same-sex marriages. Both sides of the campaign raised millions of dollars with Yes-on-8 raising $38.8 million and No-on-8 raising $44.1 million (Miller, 2009). Yes-on-8 and No-on-8 campaigns had different reasons for why Californians should vote in favor or against Proposition 8 and their campaign advertising strategies included television ads, radio ads, social media, newspapers, campaign ads, canvassing, and celebrities. The Yes-on-8 focused their campaign message on protecting and restoring marriage, and viewed “homosexual relationships a[s] sinful and should not be affirmed in any ways […] should not confer on same-sex unions the status of marriage […] institution of marriage has a specific meaning – a union between a man and woman” (Miller, 2009, p.51). No-on-8 focused their campaign message on Californians not eliminating marriage for anyone, and by stating that same-sex marriage would give legal rights, social affirmation and dignity, and fundamental rights to same-sex couples (Miller, 2009).
Activists and supporters of No-on-8 informed voters that same-sex marriage was a step towards securing rights for homosexuals such as decriminalizing same-sex behavior, prohibiting discrimination in employment and housing, allowing service in the military, and enjoy the rights and privileges of heterosexual citizens (Ghavami and Johnson, 2011). No-on-8 also advised voters that if same-sex marriage was not recognized at the federal level, same-sex couples would be excluded from more than 1,100 benefits and rights including healthcare, immigration rights, parenting and adoption rights, social security benefits, and retirement benefits (Maisel and Fingerhut, 2011; Ghavami and Johnson, 2011). Additionally, some activists and supporters of No-on-8 linked same-sex marriage to issues of civil rights and discrimination (Abrajano, 2010). Hence, for various reasons Yes-on-8 and No-on-8 campaigns targeted Californians voters to either vote in favor or against Proposition 8.

Why did Proposition 8 pass? There are many elements that played a major role in the passage of Proposition 8. To begin with, Obama was the first African-American to receive the presidential nomination in the nation. During Obama’s campaign he viewed Proposition 8 as “divisive and discriminatory” (Miller, 2009, p.50). Obama was vocal about believing in civil unions and not same-sex marriage (Miller 2009). This resulted with supporters of Proposition 8 using Obama’s opinion during their campaign by targeting Obama voters to vote in favor of Proposition 8. Secondly, Californians are split into conservative and progressive voters (Miller 2009; Egan and Sherrill 2009). Conservatives and Republicans supported and voted in favor Proposition 8 with “82% of conservatives and 81% of Republicans” (Egan and Sherrill, 2009, p.3). Latinos and Blacks are considered being more conservative on cultural issues like same-sex marriage. Thirdly, California Democrats voters were divided by religious beliefs and practices (Miller 2009). With that said, the passage of
Proposition 8 was affected by voters “party identification, political views, religiosity, and age contributed to the vote more than race, gender, or personal knowledge of gays and lesbians” (Egan and Sherrill, 2009, p.6).

At the same time, Proposition 8 gained support among racial and ethnic groups due to the “varying levels of religiosity” (Egan and Sherrill, 2009, p.11). Thus, Proposition 8 passed because: 1) the Yes-on-8 campaign strategies, 2) Californians are conservatives or progressives, 3) California Democrats were divided, and 4) Californians are diverse in terms of political affiliation and religiosity. For various reasons Proposition 8 passed; however, as mentioned earlier the Black community in California was largely blamed for the passage of Proposition 8.

In general, Black Americans have a conservative view on homosexuality (Ghavami and Johnson, 2011). In California, Blacks “tend to be more religious than Californians as a whole (Egan and Sherrill, 2009, p.9). Proposition 8 results showed that 70% of Blacks supported Proposition 8 (Ghavami and Johnson, 2011). Abrajano (2010), Egan and Sherrill (2009), and Miller (2009) all agree that the level of religiosity among Blacks in California led them to support Proposition 8. In fact, during the campaign supporters of Proposition 8 targeted the Black community through Black churches and ministries (Abrajano 2010). The supporters of same-sex marriages focused on the issue that same-sex marriage was a civil right struggle. However, for some Blacks same-sex marriage was not parallel to the Black Civil Rights struggle and the situation was not comparable (Ghavami and Johnson 2011). Thus, on the day of election 94% of Black Californians voted for Obama and 70% in favor of Proposition 8 because of religious beliefs (Cillizza and Sullivan, 2013; Abrajano, 2010; Egan and Sherrill, 2009; Miller, 2009).
Largely, the Black community was used as a scapegoat for the passage of Proposition 8 because of the increase in California’s Black registered voters and religious views. Thus, tensions grew between the LGBT community and ethnic and racial communities. The LGBT community and opponents of Proposition 8 reacted with disappointment, dismay, and became outrage towards the Black community because they “seemed to have expected that Blacks would change their views” (Ghavami and Johnson, 2011, p. 400) on homosexuality and same-sex marriage. The expectation came from the belief that Obama, a Black man, who for president would persuade them to vote in favor of same-sex marriage. However, as previously stated Obama was fixed on civil unions and not same-sex marriage. The Black community was singled out as responsible for the passage of Proposition 8, so they were attacked through hateful language, hostility, and racist rhetoric’s (Ghavami and Johnson, 2011; Miller, 2009). Although, the passage of Proposition 8 was a devastating loss for advocates of same-sex marriage, legal action was taken on their part by challenging and arguing that the measure eliminated fundamental rights. On June 28th, 2013, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals dissolved the passage of Proposition 8, which allowed same-sex couples to obtain marriage licenses and resume same-sex marriages (Dolan, 2013).

The events that transpired in the wake of the passage of Propositions 8 shows a few issues: 1) California’s racial and ethnic minorities can sway the electoral outcomes, 2) discrimination against the LGBT communities, 3) homophobia and heterosexism in U.S. culture, 4) the LGBT community political action. Consequently, the Black community was largely blamed for the passage of Proposition 8 and Palencia received some of the backlash while he was the Executive Director of Equality California.
Conclusion

Palencia’s activism influenced the Latina and Latino, and gay community as well as his brothers, cousins, nephews, and nieces. We see that Vilma, Palencia’s mother, is progressive because she gave her granddaughters contraceptives such as birth control pills. Also, Vilma is proud of Palencia, but has some reservations regarding his sexuality. In general, parents have different responses to the disclosure of their children’s sexual orientation. Some parents believe their child is some sort of victim, some are surprised and shocked, or express attitudinal barriers. Other may convey tolerance but not acceptance, express tolerance to rejection, discard their child’s feelings to dismiss children from the household and express fear that the child would face a difficult life (D’Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2005; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; D’Augelli, Hershberge, & Pilkington, 1998). These feelings may be expressed in Latina and Latino households because of religion and cultural factors that lead to the expectation that Latino men will be sexually interested in women at all times (Fontes, 2007).

Palencia contributed to establishing gay organizations such as *Gay Lesbian Latino Unidos* and *Viva!* These organizations helped created safe spaces in the Latina and Latino community to address issues of ethnicity and sexuality. Also, Palencia’s commitment to the gay community was fueled by the HIV epidemic, which is shaped by important social, structural, and culturally oppressive factors that include homophobia, racism, stigma, poverty, and gender inequality (Diaz, Ayala, & Bein, 2004). Looking at the historical facts about HIV/AIDS gives context to understanding the existing stigma on HIV/AIDS as well as the correlation between stigma and AIDS phobia, a double-edge sword for the gay community. Palencia witnessed and participated in the growth of the LGBT community.
through community services, fundraisers, organizations, and leadership. Palencia was able to create a large network through his activism, and he was able to collaborate and advocate with many gay and lesbian activists on LGBT issues. In the next section, Palencia shares some of his personal thoughts about love and sex.
Chapter 6: Sex, Love, and Palencia

“I think [romantic love] is a beautiful and exquisite experience, and I want to have it in my life. It is going to be a different experience at 56 as opposed to when I was in my mid 20’s, or 30’s. I am willing to be vulnerable and put myself out there.”

- Roland Palencia

DG: While you were working in management and actively involved in the community, did you have a personal life? Did you date? Was your activism your social life?

RP: [Laughs] – Activism was my social life and my life’s work. Through my activism is how I met people, people I dated, and people I went out with. At that time [late 1970s and early 1980s], for me it was so easy to meet people. I was younger, cuter and basically 25 lbs. lighter – [laughs]. I used to party a lot. I would go out at least twice, if not three times a week. I would wait in line at Circus Disco38 for an hour or more. At the end of the evening, I would meet someone I liked. There was something in the air about being gay, exploring, and doing something that was not allowed by your family, culture or society. You did [what] felt right and natural. There was something great about rebelling, being authentic, reclaiming yourself, savoring, enjoying life, and having fun, having the feeling and thrill of an outlaw without getting into too much trouble.

38 Circus Disco is a gay nightclub in Hollywood currently located at 6655 Santa Monica Blvd, Los Angeles, CA 90038.
DG: What gay spaces did you go?

RP: I would go to the Different Light bookstore that had book and poetry readings and events in Silver Lake. There were a lot of gay clubs in [the Silver Lake] area as well as street fairs and pride events. On top of that, every weekend just about, I was invited to private parties.

I remember that in the 1980’s, on the summer weekends between 3pm and 8pm, there would be an open-air party in Griffith Park, just up Western Avenue and past a little river/creek, north of where the Trails Café is now. We gathered in the parking lot. There were hundreds of gay and Lesbian Latinos, and an assortment of other ethnicities who were attracted to us. In my 20’s, I would go there every Sunday to party with friends and have a good time. It was a safe space. We created our own spaces, and we were not limiting ourselves to the restricting four walls of a bar, restaurant, community center or bookstore.

DG: Have you been in love before?

RP: Have I been in love before? (Pause to gather thoughts) – I have been in love, but I have not been in love for too long. The longest relationship I’ve had was six months. I do not know why? There was a time when I thought there was something wrong with me, as I did not feel I could sustain a relationship. The strange thing is that I felt so liberated every time I broke up, even if there was some interim pain and drama.

I have been in love, and I want to be in love again. I want to feel romance, but it is not something that is like a necessity, but something that would be beautiful to experience again. There is no substitute for that. I remember when I was with this guy, whom I lived with for six months in Pasadena. There were many issues with the relationship. He left; actually, I asked him to leave because he was into drugs. The relationship was not working out. It was a
very stormy relationship. After he left, I felt like half of my body was gone like I was missing an arm and a leg. Even though it was a stormy relationship, there were many moments of intimacy. I really got to the core of who he was; he got to the core of who I was, in a way that I had not connected with someone before. Despite the turmoil, I was grateful I had the chance to be connected to someone in that way.

I think [romantic love] is a beautiful and exquisite experience, and I want to have it in my life. It is going to be a different experience at 56 as opposed to when I was in my mid 20’s, or 30’s. I am willing to be vulnerable and put myself out there. Stay open and tune in to possibilities. Find someone I can relate to. Be in bed and laugh or cry together, tell each other stories, [and] connect in a profound way. There is no one else you can do that with but a lover. I just signed up for a couple of online dating sites…so there.

I do not know if it is an idea that I have, but I always thought that that my partner needed to fit into my family’s culture. Lately, I am like who cares? I think it is an additional burden we put ourselves when we try to fit a person into something they might not fit in, by having them be someone they might not be. I want to find someone my age, someone who is in their 50’s or early 60’s. Someone who has already gone through life, wants to settle, and enjoy the relationship, not necessarily marry. Not sure I am ready for that. However, life is full of surprises.

DG: Thank you for sharing. Tell me about your first kiss?

RP: Like in where? – [chuckles]. First of all, my first adult sexual experience was when I was 19, here in the U.S., so I lost my virginity here in the City of Angels.
My first kiss was with a guy I dated while I was a cashier at McDonald’s. He was of African American descent and my manager—talk about upward mobility! I don’t remember him being a great kisser, maybe I wasn’t in love with him, although I was very much attracted to him. I am trying to think of the best kisser though. Oh, probably my boyfriend Raymond, born in Visalia, California, whom I met while I was in college through another friend. I was so in love with him. But I broke up with him when I found out he was running around with another guy. That brutally shattered all the idealized and romantic notions that I had about relationships, especially monogamy. Up to that time, I never thought that someone who loved me like he supposedly did wanted to be with someone else. Those two things were mutually incompatible in my view of the world. I was already 21, and I still had those romantic ideas. I told you, I was raised in a sheltered environment. By the way, talking about sex and intimacy when it’s being recorded is a challenge for me as our sexuality has been so stigmatized and distorted, and there is still some prudishness or maybe false prudishness on my part to talk about something that is so intimate and yes vulnerable, plus so much history about my own sexuality as a child. So much easier to talk about community work, the political environment, stuff that is external—okay stop the recorder.

While the recorder is stopped Palencia shares his sexual experiences

DG: The question was your first kiss.

RP: I’m not sure the first kiss was very memorable, but the experience surely was because it was the first time I was with a man. I was 19. I liked that he had a lot more freedom with his sexuality than I did. I was more traditional and reserved. He was exploratory in his sexual practices. My body began awakening to the joys of gay sex. I started to get to the idea that
everyone’s body and that every part of our body can be sensual and sexual, especially coupled with an unrestrained imagination. I goes beyond the kiss, so many parts at the back of your neck, ears, toes, fingers, nipples, and navel. Everything became sensual and sexual, so that is what I enjoyed about my first kiss. It was not just the kiss that I remember, but the whole body experience. It felt very “homosensual”, rather delicious. It was beautiful. Our bodies are magnificent, and I believe that in addition to all the amazing things our bodies do, they were also designed for pleasure, but our judgments have beaten the joyfulness out of it.

**DG: Who was your first boyfriend?**

RP: The first time I used the word “boyfriend” was with a guy named Frank, who was half-White and half Latino, and then Mark. Neither of them were the first men I was with. Mark was African-American, but everyone thought he was Puerto Rican. He was a sweetheart, a writer, and a poet. He worked at a gay bookstore. We were only together for six months (there you go again!), but it did not work out for whatever reason; probably my shit.

**DG: Did you have other relationships?**

RP: I had an on and off relationship with a guy in Denver, Colorado by the name of Miguel, who has passed. His father was a dentist. He was half White and half Latino. He was an incredibly bright and highly educated man. What was amazing about him that he was a political animal and we connected at some many levels. We would have phone conversations for hours and hours, a romance impregnated by community politics. It was a very stimulating relationship. (Paused to gather thoughts) – I cannot think of anyone else I would call a
boyfriend. Just people who I went out with, hangout, and had “homosensual” experiences with.
When I started conducting the oral history, I had very little training. As a scholar, I prepared a number of questions, some focused on sex. Given the vulnerable nature of the topic, my intent was to make sure Palencia felt respected, trusted my intention, and had a sense of control over the outcome of the interview. Palencia’s narrative was richly conversational, and I remember that he appeared to have fun talking to me. I was particularly curious to find out if he was going to be willing to talk about sex. In the oral history we produced, I asked Palencia to explain his first kiss. The conversation started by Palencia recalling the first time he was kissed by a man which happened to be when he had his first intimate experience with another man.

However, Palencia asked to stop the digital recorder. While the digital recorder was stopped we had about a 45-minute conversation where Palencia talked about sex roles, sex practices, and his sexual experiences. Once the recording resumed Palencia recalls his first sexual experience, which he describes as a sensual and sexual encounter. Despite the fact that Palencia tended to submerge sex within narratives of love and affection, it was clear that sex was not a driving force in one of his relationships as he was able to maintain a long distance relationship. When Palencia discussed sex it was most often used to illustrate the bonds he shared with another man rather than to illustrate his routes to erotic pleasure, so Palencia’s narratives of sex were often understood within broader emotional histories. Although, I was not able to record Palencia’s sexual experiences, other oral histories projects have documented their experiences of dealing with the topic of sex during interview sessions.

The literature on sex and oral history provides a useful framework for examining the different perspectives on sex and interview sessions. For example, Boyd (2012) conducted an
oral history project where she examined the topic of sex and lesbians. She observes that when
the omission of sex talks occurs during an interview, it reveals the limitations of oral history
as a method. The production of knowledge about sex roles and sex practices are limited to
what the narrator perceives to be permissible speech. At the same time, Ruiz (2012)
conducted several interviews as part of a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender oral history
project. He writes that the topic of sex is a helpful topic for oral history projects since queer
people are socialized not to talk about it and queer sex is policed and silenced. Also, Ruiz
reveals that talking about sex in an oral history means that scholars are asking narrators to tell
us their secrets; therefore, interviewing about sex can uncover hidden truths about queer
history. In addition, Anderson (2012) conducted a joint interview as part of the “Voices of
Feminism” project at the Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College. Anderson states that the
field of queer history exists because scholars and narrators are willing to speak about violent
past, terrors of homophobia and racism, secret desires, and strategies for survival. Anderson
reveals that as scholars we delve into subjects that other oral histories usually do not like:
sexual identity, sex practices, earliest sexual memories, erotic desires, gendered behaviors,
coming out, and painful memories. Therefore, queer histories are evidence of a scholar’s
tenacity, resilience, creativity, and existence.

Conclusion

In the course of my interviews with Palencia, we covered many topics: family
kinship, family separation and unification, violence, immigration, legalization, education,
community activism, and coming out, eventually, leading to the conversation on sex. Jason
Ruiz reminds me that I must dare to talk about sex with those who tell me their stories and
ask how memory shapes the construction of the past. I have to learn to listen to personal
stories and ask myself how “these stories are constructed and what they mean – both to the
individual who tell us stories of their sexual past and, more generally, to queer history”
(2012, p. 121). Within my oral history a limitation occurred when I was not able to
completely document Palencia’s sexual experiences. While the digital recorder was stopped,
the sexual experiences that Palencia shared with me lead me to the understanding he did not
want his family to know about them. However, stopping the digital recorder taught me to
listen and unambiguously understand Palencia’s personal perspective on sex roles and
practices. And in this way, Palencia as a narrator shared his sexual identity, and also asserted
his control, including and omitting key aspects of the data included in the oral history. As an
ethical researcher, I respected his wishes. In the following section, Palencia shares his
involvement with the documentary TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story.
“Its purpose is to connect and give a more realistic picture of who transgender people are; to show the quality leadership that exists in the transgender community; to empower transgender people; and inspire everyone.”

- Roland Palencia

DG: What are your thoughts on the documentary TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story?

RP: I am the executive producer for TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story.\(^{39}\) What an honor! I love TransVisible. I had never produced a film before. I handled the business aspect of the film: the fundraising, the administrative budget, and accounting. I was in charge of talking to supporters as well. I was not [part of the] production of the film: filmmaking, editing, or interviewing people.

TransVisible was such a joy to produce. At times it was a struggle to raise money. We started [fundraising] in September [2012] and continued fundraising through November that year. We took two months off [December 2012 and January 2013] for the holidays. We resumed fundraising in February [2013] and continued till April [2013]. I am very proud of the movie because it presents Bamby with tremendous dignity, and it speaks to [the audience about] some of my favorite themes, which I think are overarching queer themes. One strong message that we send is that in spite of their tremendous power, homophobic and transphobic institutions do not have the final word about our lives. We get to determine who we are, and Bamby is the most vibrant example of that. On the surface you’ll think people would not

\(^{39}\) TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story is a documentary on the life of renowned Los Angeles based Trans Latina activist and leader, Bamby Salcedo.
relate to this documentary, as Bamby does not fit certain societal norms. However, there is something even more powerful that she has that transcends those societal constructs, something more deeply human. She connects to her authentic self, her dignity, her unconditional love and uses her self-awareness to reclaim her full being and motives others to reclaim theirs. Those forces of consciousness are far more powerful and forceful human narratives than any constrained societal norms they impose on us. Because the documentary resonates at that level, regardless of who you are, people love it. Yes, “out” with the paradigm that restricts, judges, discriminates and destroys, and “in” with what nurtures and liberates the human spirit.

The environment for transgender people has been very slow to change. What do we do in the meantime? Do we wait for the environment to change? No, you have to individually claim your dignity and authenticity and move the environment so that it begins to reflect your humanistic and spiritual values. You cannot wait for society to wake up one day and say, “Okay, we are all fine with transgender people.” [The film] shows how powerful it is to reclaim oneself even while waiting for others to have their own epiphany. As a matter of fact, unless we reclaim our dignity, chances are that society won’t move along. So these efforts are very valuable.

**DG: How did you meet Director Dante Alencastre?**

RP: I met Dante through community work and through a gay male group, 100 Gay Men. I also knew of Dante because of his work [on] documenting the experiences of transgender leaders and communities in Peru. At some point, [Dante] asked me if I wanted to help him produce a film about Bamby. He said, “I really feel that [Bamby] is a story that needs to be told.” I adore and respect Bamby, so of course I said, “yes”!

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40 100 Gay Men is a group that inspires and engages community members and gay men, on the path to personal mastery, leadership and community service through social events, workshops, and conferences.
DG: How did you meet Bamby Salcedo?
RP: I met Bamby through Alianza, an HIV and AIDS Latino coalition. We produced a yearly conference that was attended by over 1,000 Spanish-speaking advocates, service providers and pharmaceuticals. Bamby was a member of the fundraising committee that I led. That’s how I met her. I had known of her previously through her involvement with the conference and her work at Bienestar with the transgender community.

DG: The title of the documentary seemed to change quite a bit from when I got the email for the fundraiser at Naya to the screening at The Renberg Theater.
RP: It was called TransVisible: The Bamby Salcedo’s Story, we dropped the “The” and changed it to TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story. [Bamby] did not like The Bamby Salcedo’s Story because it sounded like the final chapter in her life, and it is not. The documentary was filmed at Bamby’s mid-career and she is going to take off. This film is going to give her a new platform and recognition. It is a good quality film, and it is inspiring. Dante did a fantastic job.

DG: What is the purpose of the film TransVisible?
RP: Its purpose is to connect and give a more realistic picture of who transgender people are; to show the leadership quality that exists in the transgender community; to empower transgender people; and inspire everyone. It shows how our community is very diverse and that leadership can come from anywhere as long as we support each other.
DG: Who came up with the term *TransVisible*?

RP: Bamby picked the term. The [meaning] for *TransVisible* means that Trans people can become visible. The term is about reclaiming a psychological, cultural and political space and the legacy and contributions of transgender people, Bamby being only one example of that.

Participant Observation: TransVisible and Roland Palencia’s Role

As mentioned earlier, I met Palencia on October 20th, 2012 at a fundraiser for the documentary TransVisible: Bamby Salcedo’s Story (TransVisible) at Naya Lounge, an Indian inspired restaurant formerly located on Sunset Boulevard, Los Angeles. Entering Naya, I received a warm welcome by TransVisible financial committee. I noticed that the first method of fundraising was by collecting a donation at the entrance. Walking into the restaurant, I noticed that the interior had red and white décor. The walls, curtains, tables, and seats were white. The carpet and napkins were red. Multiple chandeliers hanging half way down from the ceiling lighted the room. At the front center of the room was the sound system and at far end of the room was the bar. I joined and spent the evening with Dr. Mary Pardo, Dr. Marta López-Garza, their friend Liliana Pérez, Special Assistant to the Speaker of the Assembly John A. Pérez, and Dr. Ana Sánchez-Muñoz.

Later in the evening, director and activist Dante Alencastre and Palencia greeted the guests. Palencia spoke about the various fundraisers that had already taken place and gave his gratitude for the donations everyone had given. Alencastre and Palencia announced and showed the four-minute trailer for TransVisible. Next, Bamby Salcedo was introduced and she gave thanks to the people present at the fundraiser. She also shared a bit of her life testimony by speaking on various obstacles she endured such as prostitution, unemployment, homelessness, and HIV. Afterwards, Alencastre, Palencia, and Salcedo asked for more donations and emphasized the importance of creating a documentary focusing on the experiences of a transgender woman. Towards the end of the evening there were musical performances by drag queens.
After months of fundraising, a preview screening of *TransVisible* took place on May 16, 2013 in The Renberg Theater at the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center’s Village at Ed Gould Plaza. The Renberg Theater is an auditorium that was used for film screening. In attendance were Alencastre, Palencia, Salcedo, Dr. Pardo, Dr. López-Garza, me and 180 other guests. After the screening Alencastre, Palencia, and Salcedo took the stage to answer some questions. When it was Palencia’s turn to speak, he thanked his mother who was in attendance for the preview screening. Palencia quickly spoke about how the film introduced humanity to humanity by telling Salcedo’s courage to overcome life challenges and use her own inspiration to connect to other Trans individuals. At the end of the event, filmmaker and director Alencastre announced that *TransVisible* would be showcase at Outfest: Los Angeles 2013, where the theme of the film festive was “hero.”

I also attended the *TransVisible* showing at the Redcat: Roy and Edna Disney/Calarts Theater at Walt Disney Concert Hall, an interdisciplinary contemporary arts center located in Downtown Los Angeles. The venue seats 200 individuals. The day of the screening the venue was full and the diversity among the audience was apparent to me. A large portion of the audience consisted of transgender individuals. It was the first time I saw a large number of transgender people gather in one place. After the film there was a question and answer segment. Palencia spoke about how the film captures Bamby’s resilience and her own empowerment. Also, Palencia emphasized the leadership shown by Bamby and the other Trans men and women in the film, a leadership that is diverse where race, ethnicity, age are less of an issue.

When *TransVisible* was played at Outfest, it was a slightly different version from what was shown at The Renberg Theater. The film version showed at The Renberg Theater
was a bit longer and the audience was able to see more of Bamby’s experiences with love, kinship with Trans individuals, and transformation from drug addict to community activist. The version shown at Outfest focused more on Bamby and the ways that she overcame life obstacles to become a community leader and a hero to Trans individuals. Regardless, both versions of *TransVisible* captured a variety of themes: family rejection and family bonds, HIV/AIDS, activism, prison, Transphobia, drug addiction, and self-discovery. These issues helped Salcedo become a thriving and beloved advocate for the Trans community. Both versions of the film capture Salcedo’s first-person narrative of being an HIV transgender immigrant activist who is supported by her family, friends, and colleagues. Salcedo’s personal challenges and barriers become the basis of her activism, leading to her positions as an advocate and role model for the transgender community, Latinas, immigrants, HIV positive individuals, youth, and LGBT communities.

Watching the documentary *TransVisible*, I learned that the Trans community issues vary dependent on race, immigration status, health, and class. For instance, Pardón and Salcedo (2013) wrote a report that focuses on the social conditions affecting the lives of Trans Latina Immigrants living in the U.S. They found that Trans Latina Immigrants mainly migrate to the U.S. to pursue a dignified life because in their native country they are unable to make a living, fear for their lives, and endure multiple forms of Transphobia. The same study found that once Trans Latina Immigrants are living in the U.S. They find it difficult to access identification documents, employment, housing, and medical services. This may be due to Trans individuals not being represented in the U.S. census (Pardón & Salcedo, 2013).

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41 Transphobia “is commonly understood as fear, rejection, violence, and discrimination towards a person or a group of people whose gender identity, behavior, and presentation vary from the normalized gender identity of the majority” (Pardón and Salcedo, 2013, p.8).
Trans Latina Immigrants also experience “multiple forms of interpersonal and institutional Transphobia, Transmisogyny, and racism” (Pardón & Salcedo, 2013, p.10).

Also, Ramirez-Valles, Molina, and Dirkes (2013) found that stigma plays a role in the lives of people living with HIV/AIDS in the U.S. According to this study, people living with HIV/AIDS internalized stigma, guilt and shame about HIV status, and report not telling others about HIV infection, which can cause depression, anxiety, and hopelessness. This study also revealed society’s negative attitudes towards people living with HIV/AIDS, and fear of disclosure of HIV and AIDS status, psychological distress, and lack of social support. In another study, Morales (2013) with Latino lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender immigrants living in the U.S. found that they were victims of violence, bullied, and harassed in their native country. The study also reported that the reasons lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgenders migrated to the U.S. were due to being outed, family rejection, torment suffered for their feminine persona, verbal abuse, or rape. Thus, U.S. and immigrant Trans individuals experienced various forms of oppressions due to stigmatization. Bamby’s story given the social stigma and violence transgenders experience, is a pioneering effort that will help to educate and sensitize and humanize the way people view transgender people.

Conclusion

The placement of transgender last in the LGBT acronym is not accidental. Transphobia exists within the gay and lesbian community. Transphobia is due to factors such as heterosexism and heteronormativity, the power struggle between heteronormativity and homonormativity, sexual orientation versus gender identity, and internalized homophobia (Weiss, 2004; Weiss, 2009; Weiss, 2010). Palencia’s recent work moves into the most
marginalized group in the LGBT community. *TransVisible* is a dramatic effort archiving and documenting Bamby’s story, which revolves around empowerment, self-determination, and self-representation as well as creating a space for Trans individuals to speak for themselves and document their histories. The documentary captures the spaces where a Trans Latina interacts and navigates through issues of discrimination and oppression based on race, immigrant status, and sexuality.

Palencia’s investment in the creation of *TransVisible* is built around three main motivations. The first derives from his interest in documenting. The second derives from his investment in Bamby, who is a powerful transformative force in people’s lives. Thirdly, Palencia intended to address the lack of filmmaking about the transgender lives that avoid sensationalizing or medicalizing their stories. Thus, Palencia’s involvement with *TransVisible* shows the continuous pioneering work he continues to carry out with the LGBT community.
Chapter 8: Conclusion

What can be learned from the experiences of Roland Palencia? First, the experiences of a Guatemalan man can vary in regard to class and ethnic background. Specifically, Palencia’s oral history illustrates how a middle class individual can move from a comfortable life within tumultuous political and violent surroundings in Guatemala to becoming part of the working class in the U.S. It shows how economic, political, and social factors in Guatemala can stimulate the decision to migrate to the U.S. Secondly, and most important, Palencia’s oral history illustrates the origins of Latino LGBT activism in Los Angeles, his role within that movement and the ways this activism has transformed society over the last 30 years. The change is partly due to the HIV and AIDS epidemic that fueled the establishment of organizations, fundraisers, and leadership. The City of Los Angeles, for instance, witnessed the growth of activism that led to networking and unity as well as LGBT community struggles for resources in the 1980’s. Approaching professional positions in the organizations with an activist mentality led Palencia to make significant contributions to advancement of the Latina and Latino and LGBT communities.

Creating/Documenting a History

The outcome of this Master’s thesis was unlike what I imagined it to be. To begin, my initial question was simple: What are the experiences of gay men in the Central American region? By experiences I mean their understanding of family kinship, coming out, love, socialization, point of view on gender and sexuality, homophobia, and problems experienced by the gay community. Writing graduate term papers aided in answering these questions. For example, I engaged in research and reviewed literature on a wide array of topics that included
the experiences of gay Salvadorans and Nicaraguan men living under dictatorship, the experiences of gay Central American men’s migration through Mexico, and the health conditions of gay Central Americans in Central America and the U.S. I also reviewed the literature on the lives of Honduran gay men and the transgender community after the 2009 coup in Honduras. Reviewing the literature provided understanding of the experiences and issues gay men endure in Central America.

After carefully analyzing literature that spoke of the challenges faced by gay Central American men, the focus of my thesis changed. It became evident I could not conduct fieldwork in Central America. Instead, I could document the migration experience – from the isthmus to the U.S. – of a gay Latino/Central American man who became an activist in Los Angeles. My research question also changed: what are the experiences of a gay Central American man in the U.S.? Roland Palencia’s name surfaced in conversations about my topic. I was familiar with Palencia from two sources. He was a former lecturer in the Central American Studies Minor at California State University, Northridge and Dr. Suyapa Portillo Villeda, a former Central American Studies professor, tried putting us in contact. Though communication did not happen promptly, I was later able to meet him, share my research project, and set up an interview schedule with him.

In the first interview session, Palencia shared his childhood and early adulthood in Guatemala, and his immigration experiences. This interview session was enriching, in that I learned much more about Palencia. After reviewing the transcription and identifying the central themes, I noticed a shift. Palencia did not identify as Guatemalan, but instead as Latino because of his experiences living in the U.S. and his community activism in Los Angeles. During our second interview session when I asked Palencia how he identified in
terms of social identity. He responded, a “gay Latino.” At this point, my thesis veered further. I eventually learned that as a Guatemalan immigrant, Palencia’s oral history speaks to the way ethnic/social identity may change after Central Americans immigrate to the U.S.

My interview sessions with Palencia changed my perspectives about the focus of the thesis. For one, I was fortunate to find a gay man from Guatemala living in Los Angeles who agreed to have his life documented. Secondly, I learned about the interconnections between his experiences and mine: having strong kinship with our immediate family members and also differences – being from two different generations and being born in different countries. Palencia was born in Guatemala and I was born in the U.S. Thirdly, I was reminded that individuals like Palencia made a difference in communities of color and society through community work. At the same time, while hearing and documenting Palencia’s life, I observed how he was able to succeed. Palencia went from being a working class immigrant, who was teased in school for not speaking English, to being an influential activist. Thus, “Palencia’s social location as a Guatemalan immigrant and a gay man illustrates the ways in which Central Americans contributed to the cultural politics of the city [Los Angeles]” (Hernández, 2013, p.7). More importantly, this thesis captures Palencia’s humanity and community work as an expression of his commitment to social justice and his complex ethnic, racial, sexual, and national identity. Simultaneously, Palencia’s experiences speak to the intersections of multiple communities in the U.S., such as queer undocumented students, LGBT activists, Latinas and Latinos, U.S. Central Americans, and Central Americans.

Prior studies (Boyd & Roque Ramírez, 2012; Anderson, 2012; Boyd, 2012; Ruiz, 2012) have noted the importance of queer oral history in capturing and documenting the lives of LGBT people. An initial objective of the project was to identify the experiences of a gay
Latino activist living in Los Angeles. The current study found that Palencia’s experiences in Guatemala were affected by the Civil War, a result of economic, political, and social inequalities in that country (Arias, 2003; Garcia-Bedolla, 2009; Hamilton & Chinchilla, 2001). This led Palencia and thousands of Guatemalans to migrate to the U.S. Once living here, Palencia was able to help establish *Gay and Lesbian Latino Unidos* and *Viva!*, which served a space to challenge homophobia, racism, sexism, and the stigma of HIV/AIDS as well as provide a safe space and visibility for LGBT Latinas and Latinos (Hernández, 2013; Faderman & Timmons, 2006; Román, 1995). These findings may help to understand the complex life of a Guatemalan immigrant and activist who identifies as a gay Latino.

*Further Research*

This oral history and analysis provides a pioneering effort in the documentation of gay Latino activists in Los Angeles. Future research may build on this discussion of activism, the changing social and political conditions faced by gay U.S. Central Americans and Central Americans. I hope the study will encourage others to use queer oral history methods to document the narratives of Central Americans and make more visible the diversity of Latinos and Central Americans in the U.S.
References


Appendix A: Tropical Guide

Questions for Roland Palencia

Topical guide for queer oral history interviews with Roland Palencia

I. Basic Background Information

A. Family History

What region of Guatemala where your parents from?
What your parents do for work?

How many members in the family?

In what region of Guatemala where you born? How would you describe Guatemala? What was your favorite part of Guatemala?

When did you become aware of your father’s political involvement in Guatemala?

How did your father become a political activist in Guatemala? Was he part of any organization?

B. Civil War

What did you witness?

Were you recruited? How did you avoid being recruited?

II. Childhood and Adolescence

A. Education

What type of education did you have in Guatemala? Home and school?

B. Social relationships

Who were childhood companions? Relationships? What kind of games were played? With whom? Rules? Equipment?

Teenage associations: relationship to boys, girls. Activities. Dating and courtship patterns?

Did you date anyone while living in Guatemala?
C. Family relationships and responsibilities in the home

What kinds of responsibilities were held in the home? Differences between boys and girls.

How did the family spend time with each other?

Who disciplined the children? How?

Were there disagreements with parents? Over what? How resolved?

D. Puberty and sex education

Knowledge about sex: by whom? When? How?

Was there ever a time where you discussed homosexuality in the family? Friends? Peer? Acquaintances?

III. Early Adulthood

A. Expectations about future: direction, expectations about marriage, family, work.

B. Work history

Did you obtain any jobs in Guatemala?

C. Observations

While living in Guatemala did you know of any LGBT spaces?

Did you know and interact with any LGBT Guatemalans?

D. Family

How did you hear about the death of your father?

What thoughts and emotions did you have when your mother migrated to the United States and left you in Guatemala? How did siblings react?
  How did she cross?
  What was her status? Unauthorized or authorized?
  What year did she cross?
  Did she arrive in Los Angeles? How long was she her for?
  Did she send money?

Who took care of you while your mom was in the United States?
E. Migration Experience [Guatemalans immigrating in 1970’s and 1980’s]

What were you doing when you found out that you were moving from Guatemala to the United States?

Were you able to say good-bye to family relatives, friends, and neighbors?

Did your mother go back to Guatemala for you and your siblings, or did she send someone to accompany you during your journey?

Did you take a flight, train, drive, or walk to the United States?
   Who did you traveled with?

Did you travel through Mexico?

What do you remember about your migration experience?

How long did it take to arrive to the United States?

IV. Adulthood and life in the United States

A. Arrival

Date of arrival?

Where did you live once arrive?

Did you live in the Pico Union area?

Where did you settle?

B. Education [1970’s Chicana/o Movement happening]

How did you learn English?

Did you attend public, private, adult, or night school?

Did you earn a United States high school diploma?

How did you hear about UCLA?
   Who encourage you to attend UCLA?
   How did you apply to UCLA? Why major in history?

Were you involved in any Chicana/o organizations? Central American organizations?
C. Work history

Did you obtain any jobs after arriving to the United States?

Did you obtain any jobs while attending UCLA?

D. Coming out

How did you come out at UCLA?

Once at UCLA you came out. How did you come out to your family and friends? Did they know what it meant to be gay?

What were their point of views on gay men?

As a gay man and Guatemalan immigrant what types of discriminations have you experienced?

Did you ever visit gay clubs, bars, or any other gay spaces before coming out? Which ones? How often did you visit? Did you go alone?

Names? White/Latino spaces? Any feminist spaces?

Once at UCLA, did you make a lot of gay friends? What do you remember about them? Do you still keep in touch with them?

Did you date during your tenure at UCLA?

F. Family

After you came out to your family, at any point did they ever throw in your face your sexuality like during sibling arguments or family disagreements?

Have you ever had to sacrifice your personal life for your family?

E. Return

Do you go back to Guatemala to visit? Often?

V. Activism

A. Activist

How did you step into activism? What drew you in?

How old were you when you started your activism?
Did your activism start with gay issues/Latina/o issues/ anti-immigration intervention/Chicana/o movement?

Some gay Latinos/activists moved to San Francisco. Why stay in Los Angeles? Why Los Angeles as an area to be an activist?

B. Organizations and Non-Profits [HIV and AIDS epidemic started in 1980’s]

How did you hear about HIV? Location, time, place, what were you doing?

How did you hear about AIDS? Location time, place, what were you doing?

**Gay and Lesbian Latinos (GLLU) (co-founder 1982)**

What are some of your positive and negative memories of Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos (GLLU)? What was the greatest task/struggle you endured while involved with GLLU?

Organization started in the early 1980’s same time HIV epidemic started.

**VIVA (founder late 80’s)**

**AIDS Health Care Foundation (Vice President and Chief of Operations 1992-1998)**

**Clinica Monseñor Oscar A. Romero (Executive Director March 1999-September 2003)**

**The California Endowment (Senior Program Officer of Greater Los Angeles 2003-2006)**

(Greater Los Angeles Area Regional Director)

Start of philanthropic work

**Equality California (Executive Director July 2011-October 2011)**

**L.A. Care Health Plan (Community Benefits Director November 2006-present)**

**HONOR PAC (Advisory Board Member)**

While working in these organizations did you ever experience discrimination for being Latino? For being gay?

Outside these organizations have you experienced discrimination for being Latino? For being gay?
In your line of work, do you served gay Central American men? If so, what issues are they facing?

What are some of the beliefs and perspectives you have heard that white people/Latinos/people of color/gay individuals have on gay Latino/Central American men?

- Has there been a change on those beliefs and perspectives over the years?
  - 1970’s, 1980’s, 1990’s, 2000’s, now

How do you address Latino issues on HIV/AIDS?

Regarding HIV/stigmas/discrimination/stereotypes, how do you integrate issues of LGBT? How do you do it?

C. Task Forces and Commissions

Los Angeles County Hospital and Healthcare Delivery Commission

Quality and Productivity Commission

D. Awards and Acknowledgments

“Local Hero” by KCET (2001)

The Community Service Award, James Hahn

The Outstanding Contributions to the Community Award, Gil Cedillo

The Community Service Award, Guatemalan Embassy and Los Angeles Consulate

The Solidarity Award, KIWA (Korean Immigrant Workers Advocates)

- Did you collaborate with KIWA?
- Did you have direct involvement with any gay issues and Latino workers?

E. Community

How do you approach someone and talk to them about HIV and AIDS? How do you address the stigmas and discrimination ideas about HIV and AIDS?

When talking about ways of preventing HIV or STIs, do you ever educate individuals on gay sex?

In your view, how is immigration an LGBT issue?
Can you summarize why Latinas/os do not seek health care help?

How was your experience teaching at California State University, Northridge in the Central American Studies Program?

F. Personal Life

How do you view gay identity? Gay Central identity?

How do you view gay Central American life? How do you view your gay life?

Can you think of any experiences where gay experiences have helped you in your personal life, family, and activism?

How do you balance your personal life with your activism?

VI. Documentary

A. TransVisble

How did you get involved with TransVisble? Why that? What influence you?
Appendix B: Photo Album

Roland Palencia dressed as a prince for a school performance. (1963)

Roland Palencia dressed as a “chinito” for a school performance. (1964)
Roland Palencia at 15 years old. Picture taken in Puerto Barrios, Izabal, Guatemala. (1972)

Roland Palencia in school parade as a standard-bearer. (1972)
From left to right: Roland Palencia and Mrs. Logan, science teacher, at Los Angeles High School. (1976)
From left to right: Vilma Palencia, Roland Palencia, Roland’s cousins: Edgar, Lester, and René Gustavo. They are standing outside their formal home and business. (1978)
Roland Palencia participating in Gay Pride Parade denouncing the Central America genocide. (1983)
Members of *Gay and Lesbian Latinos Unidos* posing during Gala at Friendship Auditorium. Roland Palencia second from the left. (1984)
Photograph provided by Roland Palencia. Picture taken during Mexico City Pride Parade. Participants had to walk on the sidewalks. (Late 1980’s Early 1990’s)

Photograph provided by Roland Palencia. Picture taken during Mexico City’s Pride Parade. (Late 1980’s and Early 1990’s).
From left to right: Roland’s nephew Boris and Roland Palencia marching during AIDS Thon fundraiser with AIDS Healthcare Foundation. Boris raised $4,000. (1992)

From left to right: Mike Moreno, Roland Palencia, and Morris Kight. (Date Unknown)
Roland Palencia in New York for the commencement 25 years of Stonewall. (1994)
From left to right: L.A. County Board of Supervisors Gloria Molina and Roland Palencia. (2000)
Roland Palencia receiving the Local Hero Award. (2001)